

**DEFIANCE OF THE FALL!** Zac was alone in the middle of the forest when the world changed. The whole planet was introduced to the multiverse by an unfeeling System... or God. A universe where an endless number of races and civilizations fought for power and dominion. Zac finds himself stuck in the wilderness surrounded by deadly beasts, demons, and worse. Alone, lost and without answers, he must find the means to survive and get stronger in this new cut-throat reality. With only a hatchet for his weapon, he'll have to seek out his family before the world collapses... or die trying. Release Schedule: 6 Chapters a week; Mon-Sat.

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[Defiance of the Fall](#) by [TheFirstDefier](#)

Category: Original

**Genre:** Action, Adventure, Fantasy, LitRPG, Magic, Male Lead, Post Apocalyptic, Sci-fi, Strong Lead, Supernatural, Xianxia

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2019-05-19

**Updated:** 2021-05-01

**Packaged:** 2021-05-02 00:13:18

**Warnings:** Gore, Profanity, Traumatizing content

**Chapters:** 615

**Words:** 1,430,013

**Publisher:** [www.royalroad.com](http://www.royalroad.com)

**Summary:**

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Zac was alone in the middle of the forest when the world changed.

The whole planet was introduced to the multiverse by an unfeeling System... or God. A universe where an endless number of races and civilizations fought for power and dominion. Zac finds himself stuck in the wilderness surrounded by deadly beasts, demons, and worse. Alone, lost and without answers, he must find the means to survive and get stronger in this new cut-throat reality.

With only a hatchet for his weapon, he'll have to seek out his family before the world collapses... or die trying.

Release Schedule:  
6 Chapters a week; Mon-Sat.

### **Prologue - Welcome to the Multi-Verse, v.2**

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

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

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

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

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

For exactly what, Zac still didn't know. He was still half-hoping to run into a neatly stacked pile of firewood secured under a tarp, left behind by some more adroit forester. Zac had been walking around aimlessly now for 15 minutes, and he wasn't really cut out for this so he could really use the backup.

Which is sort of ironic, as his appearance would usually indicate someone who has a good command of the great outdoors. Standing at 5'11 with a set of broad shoulders, sporting a flannel shirt with the arms rolled up to his elbows, he at least somewhat looked the part. But the slightly too even beard, the pudge at his belly, and the lack of wiry muscles coming from manual labor were signs of a far more sedentary lifestyle.

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

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

Of course, they mostly seemed like decent people. David was open and cheerful, and the trip would likely have lost much of its energy had he not been there.

Unfortunately, David's interests diverged with his, him being into Soccer and Hockey and Zac into video games and art. This made it a bit harder to find things to talk about during the long trip up into the woods. But he's still a guy one wouldn't mind having a beer with.

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

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

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

"Maybe I should get back after all..." he mumbled, a slight unease at the situation lingering, adding to his general irritation of being stuck in the woods waving around a hatchet like an idiot. He wasn't really a jealous guy, but also not a huge fan of leaving his girlfriend with a vulture circling around. And it's not like he would magically produce some firewood by walking around in this forest any longer. He adjusted his grip of the axe, and once again readjusted the bangs which by now were a walnut mess of wax and sweat and started veering back towards camp.

He had trekked in somewhat of a semi-circle and should return back to the vicinity of the camp, or at least the road they took to get here if he just kept veering right. After walking along for another 5 minutes, battling the constant threat of shrubbery and mosquitoes, Zac came up to a small clearing.

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

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

**[Initiating System...]**

**[Welcome to the Multi-Verse.]**

.....

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

7/7-19 EDIT: Small rewrites.

No content or story changed, just (hopefully) improved flow and structure.

## Chapter 1 - Roll For Survival, v.2

### A note from TheFirstDefier

**EDIT** If you've arrived here from /WebFictionGuide, be aware that there is a prologue chapter before this one.

So this is the story of Zac I've started to put together, tentatively named Defiance of the Fall. The main setting is the arrival of the system and the subsequent fall of civilization.

I will upload the first 5 chapters shortly which is most of what I have prepared. As English isn't my native language I'm sure I have linguistic blind-spots, and I gratefully take feedback on errors or other things in general.

Please be advised that this is an early version, and some things might change even though I have somewhat bullet-pointed out the story for at least the next 100 chapters. I will mention it in comments if I do some changes. I started the story in 1st person present but changed it after a few chapters, if you find some leftover verbs in wrong tense please let me know.

One thing that I have not decided about is whether to use tables/boxes or plain text when interfacing with the system. I tried boxes here but might just switch to pure text in the future.

**[Initiating System...]**

**[Welcome to the Multi-Verse.]**

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

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

**[Planet 'Earth' scanning complete. Class F mass, class F energy.]**

**[Adjusting...]**

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

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

This was starting to feel less like some extremely elaborate practical joke, or a heatstroke, as everything felt just too real. Zac pinched himself and the sting told him he hadn't passed out either.

Trying to glean any meaning from the ramblings from the odd voice only made him more confused as well. It spoke about Earth, but also used some terms that felt

like it came out of a sci-fi movie or a video game. However, the voice gave Zac no opportunity to figure the situation out, as it heedlessly droned on.

**[Initiating Incursions. Spawning Herald-]**

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

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

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

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

**[Merge unfeasible. Protocol SL-34572 initiated.]**

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

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

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

"SHIT!" Zac screamed, or rather squeaked. The panic was now full-blown, and adrenaline was coursing through his veins. "WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON??"

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

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

**Ur'Khaz**

1-100 000

ROLL

**Zachary Atwood**

1-100

ROLL

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

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

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

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

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

“No no no wait wait, stop, let’s figure out a different solution!” he shouted, waving his arms in a panicked attempt to stop the proceedings. But no matter what he did, the numbers kept spinning. It was as though they were rapidly counting down his remainder of time on earth.

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

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

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

**Ur’Khaz**

1-100 000

ROLL

**Zachary Atwood**

98

Re-Rolls unavailable

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

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

Of course, all hope wasn’t lost as the other individual hadn’t rolled yet. But it didn’t really feel like it mattered when the game was rigged. He once again took a glance at the screen, and his eyes lingered for a second on the roll range of the other entity.

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

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

Hazy memories of his mother hugging him, her long brown locks cascading around him in her embrace. His dad giving him a quiet smile as he opens the door of their apartment to head to work, his eyes sad and tired but full of love. Spending most of his youth plastered in front of the computer, largely ignoring his smaller sibling. College

years drowned in alcohol and partying. First day at his job, and the humbling realization how ill-prepared for adult life he was even after 17 years of school and university.

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

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

**[Congratulations!]**

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

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

Ur'Khaz

91

Rerolls Unavailable

Zachary Atwood

98

Rerolls Unavailable

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

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

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

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

7/7-19 Edit: Rewritten large parts of the chapter. System-messages left untouched. Word count 1154 -> 1555

In the old version, he was a bit overly manic, borderline bi-polar. Of course, it is a stressful situation but I rewrote it to contain a larger sense of confusion and disbelief, rather than immediately accepting the situation and turning to hysteria. So Zac's emotions kind of goes through the stages of grief now rather than ping-ponging between different extreme states.

## **Chapter 2 - A New World, v.2**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readjusting the grip of his hatchet he changed his course and ran straight toward the camp. Suddenly another of the otherworldly roars echoed through the forest, this time far closer than the others he tuned out on his way here. Panic turning into even greater speed he barreled into the camp, a look of frenzy and fear on his face. Greeting him was the familiar sight of the camp; the grey range rover, the two small tents, and the few camping chairs were strewn about.

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

Two of the pairs aligned at the front of the torso with the last at the back. Each paw adorned with four ghastly claws with three in the front and one in the back, with the front set of claws seeming slightly larger than the other two pairs. Its head felt overly large for its body, with a broad base but a long snout, enabling an impossibly

large maw. The mouth reminded him of a crocodile's if a crocodile possessed three rows of teeth. The eyes were small and beady, and had a shine the same color as the vortex he saw earlier.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But before any plans could form the beast was barreling towards him, maw in an open snarl, seemingly unheeding of the small stream of blood trickling down its torso to its stumpy legs. This time Zac was slightly more prepared, putting weight on his right leg and jumping out of the way. He heard a snarl and felt a gust of wind sweeping by him, before he unceremoniously landed in a pile 3 meters away. Quickly scrambling to his feet he saw the monster had barreled past his original position, continuing on for 20 meters.

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

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

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

7/7-19 EDIT: Word count 1110 -> 1477.

Mainly improved sentence structure and flow. Made his realizations about his improved physique clearer.

No change in the story or content otherwise.

### **Chapter 3 - Battle Tactics, v.2**

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

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

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

Finally arriving at his goal, he heaved a few raspy breaths and turned around toward the monster, now roughly 40 meters away from him. Seeing that its prey had stopped moving, it hesitated slightly and stopped. The demonling slightly growled and hissed in a register that sounded much too low for something that size.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The axe hit true and severed the spine, and even dug a bit further. A great spurt of blood and a pained yelp accompanied it. The thick hind legs completely gave out and it thumped down into the ground. But while the Demonling was temporarily stuck, it was no sitting duck. It thrashed wildly from the strike, and one of the remaining four legs managed to hit Zac squarely in the stomach. He was thrown backwards and lost grip of the handle of the axe.

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

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

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

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

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

His body felt a burst of warmth, likely caused by the strenuous activity, and by now the whole left side of the monster was a maze of grisly wounds. Its movements had come to a complete stop, and no more roars or whimpers escaped its maw. The head was still inside between the two halves of the boulder, along with its front two paws. The arms were mangled from the reckless charge into the rock and the subsequent desperate attempts to rip itself free.

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

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

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

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

For the first time since he came back, Zac realized there were no blood or body parts in the camp. Though he hadn't dared think about it at the time, he subconsciously had believed the Demonling killed the others.

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

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

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

But silence was the only thing that met his question.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

7/7-19 Edit: Word count 1325 -> 1605.

Made changes to make the chapter fit better with previous ones, removed discarded mechanics (he saw texts in the periphery in the original version, but he shouldn't have). Also various improvements in sentence structure/flow.

Also changed some parts of the fight that didn't make sense.

#### **Chapter 4 - Alone, v.2**

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

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

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

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

The claws of the beast had raked a long gash on his waist, and three additional but slightly smaller on his left thigh. There was finally the last wound on right calf. While the wounds looked ghastly, it actually did not seem as bad as he feared. The cuts

seemed clean and straight, and the bleeding had somehow almost stopped by now, turning into a slow trickle. He could only hope that it meant that he was getting better, and not that he was running out of blood.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He also noticed from the time that three whole days, not one, had passed since the world went mad. He truly had blacked out hard after tending his wounds. The date only further reduced the chances of his travel mates and Hannah coming back. At least it also probably meant that the monsters kept to their territories and didn't wander

around as much as he feared. He wasn't sure he would be able to handle another of those demon dogs at the moment, even with knowing their weaknesses from the last fight.

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

A distant roar brought him back to reality. This was no time to slack off, he was by no means safe at the moment. He was in the middle of the forest surrounded by crazy monsters, and that glowing pillar still shone in the distance, reminding him that more monsters might come.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finally, he had gotten stronger for some reason with all these changes. Both his speed and power saw noticeable improvements from whatever the weird voice did. It almost felt like he had gotten a power-up like in some video game, which made sense after having seen the floating windows in the dark dimension. He still didn't understand why the prompts were designed to look like some old-school RPG. Was it his mind desperately trying to make sense of an insane situation and adjusted reality for him?

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

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

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

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

He needed to get back home.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

7/7-19 EDIT: Word count 1493 -> 1687. Rewritten and removed obsolete parts and added new. Nothing that impacts the story going forward. Edits to improve flow and structure.

This is the last chapter to be rewritten for now. The first few chapters were actually written over a year ago, and they had a noticeably lower standard than future ones in my opinion.

#### **Chapter 5 - Stranded**

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

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

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

It was a weird feeling walking back to the camper with his backpack. He felt somehow robbed of his momentum. If the car battery was broken he was pretty much stuck in the middle of nowhere, at least for now. Either he had to somehow fix the car with his non-existing knowledge of cars or he had to get back to the nearest town by foot, which was about 80 kilometers away.

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

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

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

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

#### **Active Quests:**

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

#### **Dynamic Quests:**

**Demon Slayer I (Normal): Kill 10 denizens with demonic alignment. Reward: +1 All Stats when fighting enemies of demonic alignment. (2/10)**

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

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

A screen flashed in his view just like when he was transported to the blackness earlier. Zac froze for a second before even registering what was happening. So there was more to this system and multi-verse as he suspected.

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

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

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

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

He also noticed that there were some rarity or difficulty in front of each quest. He currently had two types, Normal and unique. Normal was pretty straight forward, and seemed like normal grinding quests in video games, "kill x number of y..." or "collect 10 ores", which would reward some experience and gold.

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

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

The demon-slaying quest's reward was also somewhat straight forward, although +1 stats did not seem very strong. However, it said Demon slayer I, meaning there might be follow-ups. What if he killed a thousand demons, would he get +100 all stats against demons? He would be a one-man army by then.

The last rewards he had no idea of what they meant. Upgrade outpost to town? What outpost? And why would he want a town in the middle of nowhere surrounded by monsters? As that quest somehow seemed the hardest to complete, he felt there was something more to it, but couldn't figure out what. As for the benefits of being a Lord of Monstertown or a unique building, he did not have the slightest idea.

"Why is there no explanations of things?" Zac grumbled. "There should be a tutorial or something."

**[User does not qualify for teleportation to tutorial protocol. Please explore the system of the multi-verse yourself.]** A robotic voice echoed in his head.

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

**[By accepting Protocol SL-34572, user automatically declined standardized initiation protocol in favor of lottery opportunity.]**

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

[Affirmative. Please explore the system of the multi-verse yourself.] The voice dully responded, and once again went quiet.

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

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

[Protocol SL-34572 is a lottery opportunity. Congratulations user.] The system responded as if reading his mind.

“Well fuck you too.”

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

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

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

## Chapter 6 - Born for Carnage

### A note from TheFirstDefier

A few info-heavy chapters coming up. This one should give a base-line of the “power-ups” in this story. Tables still are a bit annoying to import from word, changes style pretty drastically. Will likely swap to pure text going forward.

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

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

“Status.”

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

**Name**

Zachary Atwood

**Level**

16

**Race**

Human

**Alignment**

**Human (Earth)**

**Titles**

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

**Strength**

**31**

**Dexterity**

**25**

**Endurance**

**27**

**Vitality**

**27**

**Intelligence**

**29**

**Wisdom**

**29**

**Luck**

**44**

**Free Stats**

**30**

**Nexus Coins**

**5100**

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

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

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

Intelligence and wisdom should increase mental faculties. If the world actually had magic and wizards now, these stats would probably make them cast spells better. Finally he had 30 free stats. Quick count showed that he had gained 2 points per level up, if he started at level 1. He held off of trying to allocate any points though, as he still had no idea what he was doing.

The titles, to be honest, sounded pretty bad-ass. They didn't however really feel like something that describe him too well. He neither felt like he was born for carnage or overpowered from the last encounter with the Demonling.

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

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

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

**Ultimate Reaper: First to kill a boss ranked entity solo in world. All stats +5, All stats +10%.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**[Protocol SL-34572 is a lottery opportunity. Congratulations user.]** The robot voice once again droned, this time with a tinge of satisfaction discernable in the tone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finally below the stat points was something called Nexus coins, and he had 5100 of them for some reason. If he were to compare the menu to an RPG, then the Nexus Coins would be the in-game currency.

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

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

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

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

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

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

First he needed his weapon.

## Chapter 7 - Outpost

It had been 4 hours since Zac woke up after getting hurt. Even after moving around for hours his wounds were just dully throbbing and he once again was amazed by the efficacy of his constitution. If his Endurance and vitality grew to 100, would he be able to regrow limbs?

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

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

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

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

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

The next realization he made on the way back to the camp. Since the world in a sense had turned into a game he thought maybe there was some sort of equipment system. But when saying things like "Equip", "Equipment" and "Inspect" gave no response to the system he surmised that there probably was no such thing. An axe was just an axe. Maybe there would be magic gear in the future, but at least for now he had no means to distinguish it. He felt that he had missed something though, as one of his quests would reward him with something called "E-Grade equipment", whatever that was.

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

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

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

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

But before he got further than around a kilometer the road abruptly stopped, and dense forests gave way to a cliff with a drop of roughly 5 meters. The road, heck the whole ground, was simply gone.

The view that instead greeted him was a panoramic view of an *ocean*. At least he thought it was, as he could see no land in sight, and he was still too sore to climb down and test whether it was freshwater or saltwater. He guessed it was salt-water

though from the smell in the air. In either case it was mind boggling as the camp site was hundreds of kilometers away from any body of water of that size.

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

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

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

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

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

For all he knew he was actually on an island, rather than next to a large body of water. Then he would be well and truly stuck in some sort of nightmare-like castaway situation. At least he had a camper which was lucky, as he had no real idea how to build a serviceable shelter. He regretted bloodying it up now though, but hindsight is 20/20.

He knew that finding anyone he knew would likely be a far-off venture now, and he had to focus on surviving this demon forest first. He had already discarded trying to swim towards where the nearest city was before the apocalypse, as he had no idea of how large the water was or even more importantly, what was lurking in the water. If there was demon dogs in the forest, why not demon sharks in the water? No thanks. He had to put some faith in the fact that the system wasn't a complete maniac and had put some checks and balances in the tutorial zones which would keep his family safe.

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

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

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

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

**[Requirements met to create Incursion outpost. Create now?]**

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

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

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

Then again he wasn't sure if he had much of a choice. It either was creating an outpost and hoping that it would somehow help with his situation, or essentially going out into the woods and grind for levels by killing demons, and hope that he would get strong enough to leave that way, before getting himself killed. Seeing as his state was pretty pathetic after just one encounter it didn't feel like an option. What if he met a pack of the demon dogs instead of a lone scavenger?

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

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

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

"What are you doing?"

## **Chapter 8 - Abby the Eye**

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

A bit longer chapter. Not used to writing dialogue so if you have some feedback its appreciated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh well. It makes sense that there were no Stargazers on your planet before the initiation, human. We usually only appear where the system sends us. My real name

is a bit tricky for you to say with vocal cords but sounds something like Veth-Abarak. I am here to assist you in your endeavors regarding your outpost. You are welcome.” the eye continued, somehow making a haughty expression with only the help of an eyelid. “I am sure you have some questions, though the tutorial should have explained most of what you can do.”

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

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

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

“Oh, you didn’t go to the tutorial. I guess tha... THREE DAYS? This world was initiated only three days ago? Don’t you mean months?” The Stargazer started shaking, the pupil shrinking to a... well, not needlepoint, but from a basketball to a baseball in size. “Stop joking with me, how would you be able to create an outpost only after three days, even if you skipped the month-long tutorial?” Veth-Abarak shook and hovered closer to Zac’s face, the grand mist surrounding it disappearing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Cosmic energy is the building block of the multi-verse. It is energy, it is magic, and it is life. It is everything. You couldn’t really see the effects of it earlier as your

world had so little of it, but you will soon see the effects of it on everything around you.” Abby said, almost having a reverent tone mentioning it.

“See how?”

“Some things in nature will be unable to take in the stronger energy and die out. But many things will be like the cultivators, naturally absorbing the energy. Essentially, things will grow big. Both the beasts and nature itself. Many things will also change in unpredictable ways. A tree might gain the properties of metal and be almost unbreakable, a mouse might grow wings and fly, or suddenly be able to spit thunder. It’s quite spectacular.” She explained.

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

“I will be summoned back in 10 minutes.”

## **Chapter 9 - Forced to Fight**

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Was planning on publishing two chapters today, but ate too much tacos and fell asleep. Will have to write more tomorrow.

Zac was gobsmacked.

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

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

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

Zac nodded, a better picture of forming in his head. Remembering the 3-month deadline in his quests he realized that what Abby described would happen in roughly 3 months. Still, there were some things he was unsure about.

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

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

“And go where? Couldn’t go to the tutorial town so you can’t learn skills or choose classes, making you quite weak compared to what you should be. There are monsters everywhere so you aren’t safe anywhere. An outpost can help you get stronger through its facilities, and having a town would be the most effective way to look for your family, compared to manually looking everywhere like a vagabond. Besides, being

the first to create a town has amazing benefits, just like with the titles. The system likes the people in the forefront.” Abby one more went into lecturing mode.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zac wasn’t sure, but it didn’t feel like this was how she was supposed to disappear, as she appeared completely without him noticing. He had been able to sense

something that could almost be anger in the pressure that descended. Had Abby been punished for what she said at the end?

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

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

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

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

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

He sat down at the small dinner-area, and while slowly eating his beans he started mentally browsing through the shop. Zac noticed that the prices were denominated in Nexus coins, which he had 10100 of now. He had gained 5000 coins during the day, likely from creating the outpost.

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

## **Chapter 10 - Preparation**

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

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

Finally, he decided to waste some water for a quick shower in the trailer bathroom, even though the water was limited. After some intensive scrubbing away the blood caked all over him, the filth was mostly rinsed away. He stepped out of the shower and donned another set of clothes, feeling like a new man. When showering he had also noticed that he seemed to have actually gotten more in shape, with most of this gut gone and his muscles seeming, if not bigger, then harder and more compact

than before. It seemed that the stats had some effect on his physical appearance as well. Hopefully, an increase in intelligence wouldn't make his head larger and larger though.

After a quick breakfast, he was finally ready to head out according to plans he had made yesterday after browsing through the shop. There were a dizzying array of possibilities to choose from when building an outpost, even when most of the options were disabled.

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

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

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

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

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

Soon he had walked up the hill, hunkered over to not be spotted by any potential threats. Luckily the hill was filled with lush bushes and even a tall tree at the top, making for some simple protection. Unfortunately the hill wasn't tall enough to give a complete overview of the surroundings as it turned out, with the crowns of larger trees still obscured the distance inland. Still, he could see his trailer and further on the ocean.

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

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

Soon he was almost at the crown of the tree, afraid to continue up any further as the branches seemed inadequate to support his weight. A quick glance around unfortunately realized his fears. It very much seemed that he was on an island without any civilization in sight. However he couldn't be completely sure, as there was actually a mountain off in the distance. It wasn't gargantuan, but still large enough to solidly block any visibility of what was beyond. It looked quite odd to have a steep mountain

right next to the ocean, but Zac guessed that was what happened when the system pressed the randomizer for a world. The good news that there was land in sight in the distance, though it looked like a few scattered islands, rather than a solid land-mass.

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

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

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

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

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

## **Chapter 11 - Upgrades**

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

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

The grunts gave way to sobs as Zac collapsed next to the headless snakes, his whole body shaking. He had messed up, that had been way too close. Not finding any more demons the last two days had made him complacent, barely looking around for threats. The Stargazer had even warned him just yesterday about the world changing due to absorbing cosmic energy, but he hadn't even reflected on what that meant.

There shouldn't have been snakes of this size in the woods where he was, but the energy in the world had not only increased its size and strength but made it more aggressive. Had that been a venomous snake instead of a constrictor he would be a bloated corpse by now.

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

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

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

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

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

He had planned to go over his strategy for the town once more but currently felt intensely unsafe right now, and decided to not drag things out any longer. He brought up the base building interface and bought an **[F-Grade Small Scale Illusion Array]** for 2000 Nexus Coins. Suddenly as if it had always been there a small wooden box appeared in front of him. Zac opened the box and inside were 8 intricately carved wooden poles. They were each roughly 30 cm long and 3 cm thick, in a glossy black coating. One end was sharpened down into a needlepoint while the other was completely flat. The carvings were in a golden hue, and it seemed the carvings were depictions of intricate fractals rather than words or pictures.

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

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

which would hopefully encourage nearby enemies to walk around the camp rather than straight through.

That was the disadvantage of the illusion array, and why it was so cheap compared to many other defensive options. Anyone could simply walk through it if they desired as it provided no stopping power. As soon as someone knew where to look or just was passing by it simply had no value. Also, it didn't work on stronger individuals, as they could sense something was wrong with the cosmic energy in the area. However, it was a cost-effective alternative right now which left Zac with more coins for other buildings. Later he would see if he could get some physical bushes transplanted at the edge of camp to dissuade any roving animal or monster from taking a path through the camp even further.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was time to upgrade.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

So for readers that are used to reading eastern fantasy/wuxia you can see that the multi-verse has some similiar elements, notably in the form of the arrays. There will be more of this further on.

I have been thinking of writing an intermission chapter that would explain some backstory to the system and multi-verse but haven't decided if its the right way to go or not. Would you prefer to read and learn about the world organically along with the MC, or would an intermission chapter with some backstory be good?

### **Chapter 12 - The Warrior-Route**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I guess it's the warrior-route..." Zac muttered and sighed. From the experiences since last week he was plenty reluctant to go choose this class type, but he saw no

different option as of yet. Maybe the system would prepare other options he hadn't thought of yet when he reached 25.

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

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

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

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

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

He cut along the softer belly, and after 20 minutes he had cut all along the length of the carcass, ruining a knife on the hard scales while doing so. His forearms were burning with strain after the workout. He had ruined most of the meat along the way unfortunately, and it didn't seem that there'd be much left over to eat.

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

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

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

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

With the last of the sunlight Zac found a long fallen branch near the campsite with the thickness of about 3 to 5 centimeters which was about 6 meters long. With a few quick swings with his hatchet he cut off roughly 2.5 meters where the branch was the most straight. Then with his improved strength he quickly sharpened one edge into a sharp point, turning it into a makeshift spear. It was likely too malleable to be able to stop anything large like the demonling in its tracks without breaking. However it could hopefully keep some monsters at length if needed. His hatchet was a good weapon, but its length was quite short. It was hard to use while keeping himself out of harm's way.

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

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

Tomorrow he would have to go hunting demons.

## **Chapter 13 - On the Hunt**

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

First of two chapters today, forgot to post yesterday. Next will be up in a few hours.

So the result of the poll was pretty clear, will skip interlude-style chapters unless they are an actual part of the story.

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

He had actually gained a level without noticing while he was asleep from the amulet. It was still hard for him to know how much the amulet was gathering for him, or how much experience killing other monsters gave. There was no experience bar or notifications of experience gain anywhere in the system that could give him a frame of reference. Hopefully he would learn more about it from today's excursions. The two

free points he had he had split between strength and vitality. When he allocated the points he had felt the energy rushing into his cells again, albeit far weaker when compared to when he allocated 30 points.

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

He didn't dare make a beeline for the incursion just yet. He was afraid that there would be monsters there that he still couldn't handle, such as the Heralds themselves. Instead, he was walking around the edges of the island while steadily making his way inland. He had been walking for roughly 30 minutes now and still hadn't seen any monsters. He had seen some animals though. Most were the same as before the change, but some obviously had evolved from cosmic energy. For example he's seen a squirrel as large as a golden retriever. Luckily it seemed very docile, and it immediately escaped into the tree crowns after noticing him.

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

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

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

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

Clearly the taunt worked well as the demon roared and barreled toward him like a runaway train. Zac held his position until last minute before lunging two meters to the side. The demonling zoomed past him and with a tremendous force head-butted the tree.

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

Knowing that time was of the essence Zac wasted no time and immediately was upon the beast. With a fierce overhead swing he severed the spine at the lower back. With his improved Strength it felt like cutting through dry wood, and he easily embedded the whole 15 cm axe head in the beast. With a tug he ripped it out of the body, and with it came a spurt of blood. He had planned on also doing the same at the neck of the beast, but the demonling was immediately woken up from the intense pain.

With a pained roar it tried to turn and catch Zac with its huge maw. Luckily its maneuverability was already bad with all working legs. Now it was even slower with the two hind legs listlessly hanging backward.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Chapter 14 - Zombie Hound**

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Second of the day.

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

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

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

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

The attack proved far more effective than he could have imagined. The blade fell down right between two vertebrae and continued almost unimpeded into the torso of the beast. Zac saw his opportunity and twisted while he tugged out the axe towards the side. He hoped to wreak as much havoc as possible in the demon's insides, destroying both lungs and heart. The axe was quickly completely ripped out of the chest, and a great gout of blood followed it and sprayed all over Zac.

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

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

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

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

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

Zac was about to leave when he suddenly heard a twig snap behind him. Taking no chances he lunged to his right. He just heard the sound of wind while falling, but

suddenly his left shoulder explode in pain. Ignoring the pain for now he got to his feet and finally got a good look at his assailer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The axe howled and swung down toward the demon hound.

## **Chapter 15 - Desperation**

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

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

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

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

From the fight he also realized that the amulet from the gathering array was quite sturdy. The hound had clawed both the little wheel and the string multiple times, and not a scratch could be seen on it. It seemed that a stronger force than some dog claws would be needed to damage it. For a brief moment he imagined decking himself in hundreds of amulets, making him near-invulnerable.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The imp's preservation skills were impressive. As soon as it heard the sound behind it, it jumped over the carcass of the beast while letting out a high pitched screech. It managed to turn around midair with its wings and Zac saw its face. It had four pitch black eyes. One set was placed like a human's, and the other set were placed slightly more apart up on its forehead. It had no nose except two holes, and its mouth was a small circle full of sharp teeth. From the few flaps of its wings it seemed like it was unable to fly, but able to elongate its jump considerably.

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

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

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

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

fire caused the corpse to visibly shrink, as though all moisture was burned instead of the flesh.

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

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

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

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

### **Chapter 16 - Choices**

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

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

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

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

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

With the last strength in his body he managed to stumble back into his camp. As soon as he saw the familiar sight of the metallic camper his legs simply gave out. He fell down onto the ground and let the sweet darkness embrace him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The first was called a **[F-Grade Nexus Node]** and looked like a large hovering crystal from the description. Its function was to access certain aspects of the System.

Nexus Nodes seemed to have more functions depending on how high grade it was, with F being the lowest. The Node was the worst of the bunch in other words. But it gave access to two functions that Zac was extremely interested in. It gave access to the class system, and sold basic skills.

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

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

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

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

That's where the gravity array would come in. It would affect the gravity in a zone, and could increase the gravity up to 10 times. At this point he had 46 strength and was likely stronger than any human that had ever lived on earth. Without this kind of array Zac didn't think he would be able to exhaust himself. He could do push-ups all day without breaking a sweat at the moment.

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

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

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

## **Chapter 17 - Eye of Discernment**

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New week, new chapters.

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

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

The once neat beard of his was now an uneven mess. There even was one patch almost completely missing after a Barghest's claw had cut his face during a particularly intense melee. His hair was even worse, now a mess of uneven cuts. During one of his

fighters he had gotten hair in his eyes, and the distraction had caused him to almost get disemboweled. He had fought the Gwyllgi half-blinded while using one hand to hold his innards in place. After the fight he had simply taken his hatchet to his head and cut off as much hair as he could without scalping himself.

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

Now he was decked from feet up to a throat protector in pieces of leather, all tied together with strings or sinew. It was an extremely shoddy work, making his whole body look like a piecemeal patchwork of different animal body parts. It also took almost 30 minutes to take on and off, as there were quite a few knots he had to tie to get it to stay on during a whole day.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**23**

**Race**

**Human**  
**Alignment**  
**Human (Earth)**  
**Titles**  
**Born For Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I**  
**Strength**  
**59**  
**Dexterity**  
**39**  
**Endurance**  
**42**  
**Vitality**  
**48**  
**Intelligence**  
**29**  
**Wisdom**  
**29**  
**Luck**  
**44**  
**Free Points**  
**0**  
**Nexus Coins**  
**5 562**

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

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

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

It did however make him think about the elite of the multi-verse. He had made over a hundred thousand Nexus Coins just by grinding low level monsters around the first month. Abby had said that the multi-verse was hundreds of millions year old. There were surely some extremely wealthy individuals and organizations. What if they gave every child an A-grade, or even S-grade array from birth? They would be higher level than him before even learning to talk.

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

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

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

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

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

While sitting in the gravity array he had imagined a separate set of veins spread all through his body like his circulatory system. In these veins only cosmic energy flowed. He was surprised that it actually worked, and a stream of his cosmic energy slowly started traveling along the paths he had imagined.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Chapter 18 - Cosmic Energy**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

So quick update, the quests that appeared in chapter 5 have been slightly altered.

The current quests are the same, but the rewards are altered to the following;

1. Unlimited Potential (Normal): Reach level 25. Reward: Unlock class system. (23/25)
2. Off with their heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (1/5)
3. Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect base from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, outpost upgraded to town, status upgraded to Lord. (0/3)

A brief exchange regarding this was also added when Zac spoke with Abby the eye;

**Spoiler:** Spoiler

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

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

If you are interested in reading the reason for the change, read below. It has no impact on story.

**Spoiler:** Spoiler

So the power system of this novel essentially is a mix between classic litrpg elements such as stats, levels and classes on one side. On the other side is the eastern fantasy/wuxia style of cosmic energy, cultivation, arrays etc.

I’ve been going back and forth on how much I’ve wanted to lean on either side. In the final draft of my “system” I finally removed a fair amount of litRPG elements, such as experience bars, boxes above the monster’s names with levels etc. I forgot about the experience mention that was a left over.

Nexus Crystals are a cultivation resource. In wuxia they are usually called spirit crystals.

I also Changed the ratings the System uses for everything from 1 -> 9 to F -> S. That’s why it said category 2 gear, and now it says Grade-E.

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

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

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

Forcing energy into his legs would increase his speed and he had even managed to imbue his skin for a while, making it more durable. There were many different venues

to utilize it, and he likely only had figured out a few. The strengthening wasn't limitless, however. It acted as a multiplier on his base stats, but the multiplier was limited. After some experimentation he had realized he could output almost twice his normal power while circulating his energy into a specific part of his body.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He had however noticed a very worrying trend over the last few days. The beasts in the forest were getting more powerful. The demon hounds were getting even faster, and the barghest were getting stronger. He had actually seen one charge straight

through a tree. The barghests had been completely incapable of such a feat just a week ago.

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

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

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

Perhaps this was a gift from the system. If someone dared leave the tutorial village to kill magical monsters at incursions they'd be rewarded with the cosmic energy and Nexus Coin that generally was given out by far stronger beasts. Like an XP-boost from a MMORPG game.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zac made a beeline towards the western central area from the southern edge where his camp was located. During his excursions in the past weeks he had actually

found the second herald, while last two still eluded him. He guessed that one of them resided in the mountains though, as it seemed that each Herald lorded over a cardinal direction of the Incursion. He hadn't ventured into the mountain as of yet, as he had his hands full grinding monsters closer to home.

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

## **Chapter 19 - Vul**

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

It immediately got up and without hesitation charged upon him.

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

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

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

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

When looking over the hatchet he couldn't help feeling a sour lump in his throat. The axe was in a state of disrepair with scratches all over. The head had become a full two centimeters shorter from repeated sharpening against rocks. Zac knew the only reason the weapon still somewhat held together was that it was made from a solid piece of steel. Still, the shaft had started to bend, showing the strain it had been put under.

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

Zac sighed and continued on his way.

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

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

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

Every day new monsters would appear in the woods, likely summoned through the Incursion. More astonishingly, the demons killed each other far more than Zac killed

them. He had lost count of the times that he had found a demon hunkered over a corpse of the same race, feasting on its carcass. There seemed to be simply no familiar affection between the demons. That Zac was responsible for a small part of the deaths seemingly went by completely unnoticed.

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

The Herald was huge.

**[Vul, Level 45]**

That was all the information that the **[Eye of Discernment]** gave him. Either his mastery over the skill was too low to show more information, or the skill was simply too basic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He gingerly dug roughly half a meter deep holes with some distance from each other, then placed the wooden stakes into them at a slanted angle. He had placed them so that the spear tips were hidden within the bush at roughly 150 to 180 centimeter height. Finally he covered the holes and placed down secondary smaller stumps beneath the stakes, so that they wouldn't tip over from their own weight before they could be used.

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

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

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

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

So now we're caught up to speed after the time skip

"> If you enjoy the story I'd appreciate it if you took the time to fav/follow. I'm not sure exactly how RRL works, but i think it helps the story gain a bit more exposure.

I'm going away two days with my work, but I'll try to upload tomorrow/friday using the draft feature. If i mess up, the 2 chapters for the rest of the week will be uploaded on saturday.

### **Chapter 20 - Fighting the Herald**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

So some things happened, forgot to post the drafts. But here they come. Next in an hour or so, just gotta go through it one last time.

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

All eight of its legs except the front pair were lying in the same side, exposing its back toward Zac. He was currently crouching behind a tree only five meters away from the huge barghest. He barely dared to breathe in fear of being exposed too early.

He couldn't get any closer without entering an open area and getting completely exposed.

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

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

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

The axe sunk into the back of the beast, but it felt like he had tried to chop through reinforced steel when he reached the bone of the spine. His plan had failed, as it ended up as only a flesh wound. His right arm ached from the impact, but he quickly adapted and swung down and created a deep gash down along its side.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Noticing the incoming tree, the Herald stopped in his tracks with his front legs, while he sidestepped away from Zac's direction with the hind legs. Its front legs carved a deep groove for a few meters before it stopped, while it changed angle to point

toward Zac. This resulted in the beast still moving towards the tree, but it instead slammed into it with its shoulders rather than its head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He needed at least one more effective assault.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Backup was coming.

## **Chapter 21 - Hurt**

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

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

Zac numbly got to his feet and continued on. Soon the barghest had managed to run around and came toward him again. The scant cosmic energy in Zac's body

circulated as he suddenly turned toward the demonling and with a growl swung his mangled hatchet down in a mighty overhead arc.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was one of the many camps Zac had created over the last few weeks. Every time he found a tree, a cave, or some other natural formation that could be turned into a secluded resting stop he had stopped and turned it into a camp.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was with a tinge of bitterness he prepared to get back. The three day convalescence unfortunately meant that he had failed in his goal, as the deadline of finishing within a month passed yesterday.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He immediately crouched down and hid behind a tree and some bushes while trying to see what lay ahead. After a quick glance he almost instinctively got up and shouted out to get attention, as what he saw was three people slowly making their way through the forest.

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

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Last scheduled chapter for the week. If you enjoy so far please remember to rate and review.

### **Chapter 22 - Scouts**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Finally we reached 10k views milestones! Lets celebrate with a regularly scheduled chapter!

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

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

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

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

The elders of the clan were even more ecstatic then they learned that the world had been given a D-rank classification. It was no secret that when the system integrated new worlds the huge influx of energy could create all sorts of rare and invaluable treasures all over the fresh worlds. The higher grade the new world was, the more treasures would appear. A fresh D-class planet wasn't top tier, but at least it was above average.

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

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

Of course, Azzun knew that even if some treasure was discovered, it wasn't his turn to enjoy it. They would all enter the greedy hands of their general. Even though the general couldn't be considered a top talent of their clan, he had managed to snag

this great opportunity. He guessed it helped to have a Great Daemon as a great grandfather, who spoiled him rotten.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As if summoned by his thoughts, Azzun heard a subdued rustle, followed by a wet thud and grunt. He immediately drew his weapon and turned around, only to see one of his companions topple over with a crushed skull.

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

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

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

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

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

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

----

Zac stood panting over the unconscious demon, a sheen of perspiration covering his face. The sweat came from pain rather than exertion, as his charge had opened up some of his wounds. He finally dared to use his skill on the demon, which showed **[Azzun, Level 33]**.

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

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

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

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

Just as the world had changed, so had he.

## **Chapter 23 - Do you Understand My words?**

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Another chapter. Please remember to press all the buttons if you enjoy the story so far, rate review fav follow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**25**

**Race**

**Human**

**Alignment**

**Human (Earth)**

**Titles**

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

**Strength**

**59**

**Dexterity**

**39**

**Endurance**

**42**

**Vitality**

**48**

**Intelligence**

**29**

**Wisdom**

**29**

**Luck**

**44**

**Free Points**

**4**

**Nexus Coins**

**14030**

**Active Quests:**

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

**Dynamic Quests:**

**Off with their heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (2/5)**

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

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

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

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

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

Since then he had put all his points from level ups into strength, unless he felt that some other stats was truly lacking. He thought about placing some more points in vitality due to his condition, but discarded that idea after a brief hesitation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zac slowly got up on his knees, disoriented and ears ringing. Somehow the demon seemed to have made the energy in his body go haywire and he actually had exploded like a bomb. The camp was in chaos, with the windows of the car having cracks all over,

the closest had completely shattered. Things were thrown around haphazardly and there even was an indent on the exterior wall of the camper.

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

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

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Good news, bad news.

Good news: I have gotten a puppy!

Bad news: I MIGHT not be able to keep the current schedule while he is this small, as it takes a lot of supervision. I've had to go a bit into my buffer for the last chapters (posted 4 wrote 2,5). I can still write during his naps and plan out story lines while doing walks, so I'm not gonna drop or anything like that. Depending on how this week goes I might skip posting on Wednesdays for a while, to get another day to build up stockpile.

#### **Chapter 24 - Class**

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was a one handed battle axe. It was much longer than his hatchet, reaching roughly 80cm. The head was single-headed, but with a sharp spike sticking out on the other side, perhaps for balance. The edge itself was a half-moon over 30 cm long. Zac tried the edge with his thumb, and was surprised to see that he immediately started bleeding.

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

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

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

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

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

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

After going through the gear he finally couldn't wait any longer, and approached the Nexus Node. It was time for him to get a class, no matter if it was the right choice or not. He pressed his palm against the smooth surface of the crystal, and mentally tried to access the class system.

A new box appeared in his vision with multiple rows.

**[Top 5 Class choices]**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He would therefore definitely choose one of the available classes.

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

He also didn't want to spend his life hunting demons. The Demon Hunter class might very well be the strongest class for him right now, as there still were demons infesting the whole island. However, either he or the demons would be gone in two months, so it didn't make sense to pick this class either.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Chapter 25 - Stronger**

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Zac's Stats pre class in case anyone might want to compare.

#### **Spoiler: Spoiler**

Name Zachary Atwood Level 25 Race Human Alignment Human (Earth) Titles Born For Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I Strength 64 Dexterity 39 Endurance 42 Vitality 48 Intelligence 29 Wisdom 29 Luck 44 Free Points 0 Nexus Coins 14690

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

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

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

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

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**25**

**Class**

**Hatchetman (F)**

**Race**

**Human (F)**

**Alignment**

**Human (Earth)**

**Titles**

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

**Strength**

**92**

**Dexterity**

**48**

**Endurance**

**51**

**Vitality**

**57**

**Intelligence**

**38**

**Wisdom**

**38**

**Luck**

**54**

**Free Points**

**0**

**Nexus Coins**

**14690**

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

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

Hopefully it meant that his power would rise, rather than growing a tail or a third eye though.

He had gained three new titles from getting a class as well. Zac focused on them to get a description

**[Full of Class: Reach level 25 and attain a Class. All stats +1]**

**[Rarified Being: Attain a Class graded as Rare. All stats +1]**

**[Trailblazer: First to gain a Class in world. All stats: +5]**

That explained where the all-around improvements to his stats came from. The first two titles were things that anyone could attain. However the Trailblazer title was another title that only he would get on Earth.

Zac felt a comforting from what that title represented. He still managed to keep his lead, even over the “chosen” cultivators who got help in the beginner villages. Even if he was deemed trash by the System and left to rot to this island, he had defied fate so far and was still on top.

He had to admit that the feeling of power was somewhat addicting. Finding his family was still his priority, but he also craved the feeling of becoming stronger and stronger. He lived for the moment after every battle where he absorbed the cosmic energy, and having the pure unadulterated force of life course through his veins.

He had started to think more and more about where the limits of strength lay. By now he could punch a large rock and it would shatter, and only one month had passed. How powerful would he be in a year? A decade? Just thinking about it made him excited. Of course, he would never let himself forget that to get there in one piece he would have to walk through an ocean of blood.

He didn't linger on the subject as he was anxious to look through his other changes. He thought “Class” and a new window appeared

**[Class: Hatchetman, Grade-F, Rare]**

**Strength +10, +10%.**

**Level: +3 strength, +1 endurance, +1 free point per level.**

**Skills:**

**Axe Mastery (LOCKED)**

**Chop (LOCKED)**

**Forester's Constitution (LOCKED)**

Followed that were rows of blocked out information. At least that showed where the large strength boost came from. The +3 strength per level didn't seem to be retroactive, otherwise he'd have almost twice the strength by now. But it showed that every level from now would give a much larger boost compared to before.

Zac was annoyed to see that he actually didn't get any skills for free as he had hoped. There were 3 skills listed that seemed somewhat intuitive. Axe Mastery and Chop seemed offensive, and Forester's Constitution was defensive. At least he hoped Chop was an offensive skill, and not a woodworking skill.

He didn't quite understand how “Chop” would be better than what he had been doing before, but he guessed he would find out. It seemed that he couldn't get any information about the skills until he unlocked them.

The next problem was how to unlock the skills. Soon he found the method in the quest tab. It showed a new category, which was class quests. Each skill needed a quest to be completed.

**Axe Mastery (Class): Mastery is born through battle. Fell 1000 enemies. (0/1000)**

**Chop (Class): First chop Wood. Then their bodies. (0/10 000)**

**Forester's Constitution (Class): Fight in the forests, be one with nature. (0/30)**

None of the quests seemed very hard to accomplish. The Axe Mastery made no distinction of the strength of the enemies, and with his improved physique he could grind it out in a week or two if he just focused on slaying barghests.

The chop quest seemed to take time rather than being hard, but if he changed his daily work-out routine to chop wood it would be done sooner or later. Chopping wood was a great work-out anyways.

The last quest seemed either extremely easy or rather hard. Just 30 fights and it would be done. The whole island was a large forest so finishing it seemed to be the easiest of the three. It depended on what be one with nature meant. If it was just some random words, great.

If he actually had to somehow merge with nature, or become a tree-hugger it felt far more annoying.

Finally it seemed that he found out everything that he could for now. He had entered the outpost shop as well, but it seemed nothing new was added from gaining a class.

There were a few new skills added at the Node, but they were prohibitively expensive, with the cheapest being 500 000 Nexus Coins.

All in all it had been a fruitful day. He was disappointed that the demon had self-destructed rather than answering questions. There were so many things he needed to know. To be fair, Zac would likely have killed him after questioning the demon in any case. That the demon chose making a last ditch effort to bring Zac with him to hell was a logical choice.

Luckily the gear he gained and the strengthening made the sting less severe. He still looked positively insane from the blood and broken gear, and didn't want to put on the gear while looking like this. He left the camp to patrol the vicinity for a while, and then went back.

This would likely be a new addition to the daily routine. The humanoid demons seemed far more organized compared to the dumb beasts that had come through the incursion first.

Satisfied that there were no enemies nearby, he moved water from the water array into the tanker's reservoir. Finally he ripped the patchwork armor off, and took the first good shower in over a week. It was a risky move, but the grime and blood was making even him crazy, and he needed to get it off. He brought his new axe with him into the bathroom in case he was ambushed while in there.

It took half an hour to scrub the layers of dirt and blood off himself before stepping out of the shower.

Even cleaned up he could barely recognize himself in the mirror. His whole body had undergone a metamorphosis during the last month. Almost all of the fat was gone, leaving only a thin layer covering his muscular frame.

His physique looked *hard*. His muscles were compact and wiry rather than big and swollen like a body builder's. He thought he actually might be smaller now compared to when he worked out at the gym.

Of course he knew that an explosive power was contained in these muscles, and that they were so dense that maybe not even a bullet would penetrate them by now. All over his body were scars of varying size and severity. His tactic of boosting his vitality and taking blows for landing killing strikes had been effective, but it had left an undeniable mark.

He looked down on his rough and calloused hands. It was hard to believe what these hands had done the last weeks. Once he had actually ripped the jaws of a Gwyllgi straight apart when he had dropped his hatchet.

Zac sighed and put on one of his last whole t-shirts and undergarments. He didn't want to use his rags together with his new gear.

Unfortunately the chest pieces of both the males' leather armors had been blasted to shreds so he could only put on the female's armor. He didn't worry about it too much though, as he had a strong suspicion that there would be many more demons in the woods that could supply new gear.

To get adjusted to his new weapon he dragged over a thick log. He reactivated his gravity array, and started cutting the log into firewood, working out and working on his quest simultaneously. It was already late, and he would not go out hunting anymore today. As he was methodically swinging his axe a trace of anticipation could be seen on his face.

For the first time since the world changed, he looked forward to go out and test his might.

## **Chapter 26 - Demons**

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Last chapter for the week. Remember if you like the novel please rate and review. I *think* i might be close to getting onto the bottom of Trending, and a few reviews would help me get alot of exposure. Of course, that might be hubris talking.

Zac woke up early the next day. He had slept outside with axe in hand and geared up, just in case of a nightly raid. He once again set out to scout the vicinity, but nothing seemed to have moved through there during the night.

Zac wasted no time, and set out towards the direction of his fight against the herald. He wanted to scout out the situation before proceeding toward the next Herald.

He still wanted to complete the quests as quickly as possible, but the new enemies had proved that something had changed on the island. Zac wanted to scout the situation out until he knew what that change meant, and decided to start from where he had fought Vul.

After walking for a while he ran into a barghest. A creepy smile appeared on Zac's face, and he brandished the axe.

The beast was aggressive as ever at least, as it mindlessly charged at him. Zac sidestepped to let it run into a tree behind him just to gauge its power.

He was surprised to see that it didn't actually just charge in to the tree as before, it instead bit into it and ripped a good chunk out of the wood out almost impossibly fast. Of course, it still couldn't stop its momentum, and still hit the tree square with its now closed maw.

Zac wasted no time and with a swing completely decapitated the demon. He felt almost no resistance when cutting through the spine of the demonling, and the axe continued down with such ease that he almost cut into his own leg before he could stop the descent. He knew the axe was extraordinarily sharp since yesterday, but he was still shocked how easy it went through..

As he continued on he wouldn't avoid any beasts anymore, rather he'd go out of his way to kill them if he found them. He looked forward to getting the Axe Mastery skill, and wouldn't miss an opportunity to work on his 1000 kill goal.

He had been annoyed when he had noticed that only the Axe Mastery quest progressed from kills, not the Forester's Constitution quest. He would have to figure

out what was missing later. He also confirmed that the Chop quest did not progress from battling, even though it mentioned chopping bodies.

As he was advancing he noticed that the beasts had indeed improved. They were stronger, faster, and more impressively they seemed smarter. It was as if a limiter had reduced all stats, including intelligence. Then it had been lifting gradually during the last week of the month, and as the last day passed the limit had been ripped off completely.

Overall he gauged that the beasts' stats had improved by roughly 50% since four days ago. The danger improved more than that though, as they had started doing feints and use tactics while attacking compared to before. The barghest were of course still dum-dums, but not to the point that they'd mindlessly charge into a wall anymore.

The rewards for killing the beasts hadn't been improved with their improved performance. It seemed that Zac truly had gotten a bargain when hunting during the first month. Zac snickered as he imagined the cultivators in the beginner villages hunting rabbits and boars around the edge of the village for a mere 2-3 Nexus Coins a piece, like in some RPG.

The increase in strength didn't bother him when it came to the fodder demons that was peppered through the island. They had improved, but so had he. Even the empowered demons were defenseless against his new weapon. It felt like proper gear actually had a greater effect compared to attaining a class.

Of course, the effect of a class would show over time rather than immediately it seemed. Also the immediate effect on him was not too large, as he already had such high stats from his titles. If someone with only the basic stats got this class with accompanying titles, it'd likely been a pretty large boost to him.

As he killed another demon with a lazy swing he felt the familiar burst of cosmic energy that came with a level up. He was delighted to see that he did get his class stat points in addition to his two free points, rather than instead of. So every level he now got 7 points instead of two.

He paused a second to go over how to allocate his points again. He had thought about it a bit yesterday, and had come up with a plan. As his class seemed to focus on Strength and Endurance, so Zac would do the same with his free points.

He felt that the skills and class itself might somehow synergize with these stats, so getting them as high as possible would be a good option. Even if he was wrong it would be ok, as both these stats was strong on him in any case.

If vitality helped him heal up after getting wounded, then endurance would protect him from getting wounded. Endurance didn't only help with his stamina, it also toughened his body up. Now that he had a high enough vitality that he wouldn't die from ordinary wounds, he could focus on endurance to make him even harder to kill.

The other option he had considered was to put the put the points in dexterity, making him quicker. However, for most of the fights so far speed had not been an issue or limiting factor for him, so he decided to hold off on that for now.

Furthermore, among the skills that was added to the Nexus Node after he got his class was one that he felt might be able to substitute the need for Dexterity. It was called **[Steps of Gaia]** and cost 575 000 Nexus Coins. It was a huge amount of coins, far more than he had gathered in total.

But it seemed to fit him perfectly. It was a movement-type skill, which he assumed would help him move quicker. It would both help him charge at enemies faster, and also allow him to easier dodge attacks. It also seemed to be connected to the earth and nature, same as his class, so he felt there might be synergy along the road.

He therefore had decided to start saving up for the skill. He believed that it shouldn't take too long to get the necessary coins, as his speed of killing beasts had improved significantly with his gear and higher stats.

Finally he decided to put 1 point in strength and 2 in Endurance and kept going. A while later he reached the area where he fought the Herald. The aftermath of the battle was evident, with crushed trees and rocks all over. He still hadn't run into any humanoids, and the forest was largely like it was before.

Zac slowly crept toward the spot where the Herald had fallen, alert of his surroundings. He was surprised to find that the carcass had been removed from the spot, as had the poles he had planted.

He could only guess that they had been moved back to the base. He wasn't sure as he hadn't seen it, but he assumed that the base were either right at the incursion, or in the mountains. If it was closer to the other sides he felt that he should have run into more of the humanoids by now.

Unless there only were a scant few of the humanoid demons, of course. But Zac's intuition told him that he wouldn't be that lucky. The System had screwed him over pretty consistently, and he saw no reason that it would stop anytime soon.

He stopped for a while to decide what to do now. He hadn't really accomplished anything so far, except for killing some demons. He didn't need to ponder for long however, as he suddenly heard subdued voices in the distance.

Zac properly hid himself inside a few bushes as the voices drew closer. He was disappointed to find out that he couldn't understand the words. So much for a universal translation system.

It was a surprisingly smooth and melodic language, specked with vowels flowing like a river. He had assumed that the language of demons would be harsh and perhaps even guttural.

*'Wait, is that racism?'* a stray thought entered his mind, making him lose focus before setting his sight on the approaching party.

The party looked somewhat similar to the one he had killed earlier, except that this party was comprised of four individuals rather than three.

There were 3 males and one female. The two males looked like a mix of rangers and warriors, dressed in leather armors and wielding a sword each. The female walked in front and seemed to be the lookout, as she was carefully scouting the surroundings and had a bow slung on her back.

The final man was unarmed but seemed to be a leader, or at least of higher status. The quality of his gear seemed to be a notch above the others, such as a chest plate made of the same black metal as his axe handle. It was engraved in the same manner as the handle as well, but more intricate.

Zac had a feeling that these engravings had some sort of effect, like magically imbuing the gear with sharpness or defense. He had found no ways to use the engravings so far though, and hoped he might get an idea from the unarmed man.

Another reason Zac surmised the well-equipped man was of higher status than the other was that he could sense a formless pressure emanating from him. It felt like he was looking at a dangerous beast rather than an unarmed man.

While Zac was well hidden he decided to slowly recede further into the brushes. This party seemed both deadlier and more alert compared to the last one.

His actions were in vain however, as the female suddenly grabbed her bow and an arrow in a fluid motion and without hesitation fired it straight in the direction of Zac.

Zac tried to get out of the way, but there was no time as the arrow slammed straight into his side.

## **Chapter 27 - One Against Many**

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New week, new chapters!

Didn't have time to properly go over this chapter a second time, so some minor changes (nothing big) might happen tomorrow or so.

If you enjoy the story please remember to rate, and if you have the energy review.

EDIT: This chapter is now edited as of 12h after originally posting. 1400 words - > 1600 words. The changes are meant to better illustrate the speed/power of the combatants. The direction of the fight has not changed, however.

Zac almost lost his breakfast as the arrowhead slammed straight into his gut. It punched through the wired leather armor and continued into his body. Luckily most of the force had been spent going through the armor, and with Zac's high endurance it only proceeded two centimeters before stopping.

This kind of wound wouldn't really faze Zac anymore after constantly getting hurt from his fights. However, he still hesitated for a second after ripping the arrow out. Fight or flee? He hadn't prepared to challenge the party like this.

However, he soon discarded any thought of fleeing. He didn't like the prospect of having another arrow slam into him, this time in the back of his head while running for his life. The ranger seemed to have some detection skill, as she could spot and shoot him while he was hidden in bushes a few hundred meters away. He needed to kill the archer at least before fleeing.

He threw the arrow away and pulled out one of his smaller knives from its sheath. Zac wasted no time and threw it straight at the archer, and it flew with at least the same velocity as the arrow that had hit him.

The female demon seemed to have been prepared, and with an almost impossible nimbleness jumped out of the way and proceeded up into a tree like a forest elf. She moved like a specter and in just a few seconds she was gone from his vision among the leaves

Zac tsked in annoyance, and charged at the party while trying to use trees as a cover from the archer. The force of his steps made deep indents in the ground as he charged forth like a runaway bull. The three remaining demons were obviously ready for the fight, as they spread out intending to encircle him.

Zac could sense that all of them were using some skill, as he could feel the cosmic energy react to their bodies. An illusory red gas started floating around one of the combatants, giving him a more sinister feel. The other underling pointed down on the ground, but Zac couldn't see anything happening.

Zac couldn't see anything happening with the leader either, but the sense of danger increased substantially.

As Zac was furiously approaching he quickly used **[Eye of Discernment]** on the trio, and got some basic information about his enemies.

**[Metisis, Level 38]**

**[Gormer, Level 39]**

They were roughly 5 levels higher compared to the last party he had attacked. That meant that they should have at least 15-20 higher stat points including the bonus stats from their classes, compared to the last group of demons.

He was also surprised to notice that the third man, the unarmed one, had somehow resisted his skill. There was only a blur above his head. This made Zac even more wary of him. He had even managed to identify the herald Vul, who was far higher level compared to himself.

Zac furiously circulated cosmic energy in his body, and ran straight toward the weakest enemy, Metisis. When he was just over 50 meters away from them an arrow came whizzing down from the tree tops. This time Zac was prepared and slammed it away with the broad side of his axe head.

The force of this arrow was far higher than the hastily one she had shot before. When the axe and arrow collided he was actually pushed back a bit, his feet making a groove in the ground. Luckily the axe was apparently made from excellent materials, and wasn't damaged one bit.

Zac pushed ahead once again, the last 50 meter distance gone in just a few seconds.

Just as he was a few meters away from his target, he pushed all the cosmic energy he could into his right leg. He instantly kicked off with all the power he could, and shot like a bullet straight at the other demon, Gormer. The force of the push created an explosion in the ground, even leaving a small crater.

They had not expected the speed that a 98 strength powered push could give, and Gormer barely managed to lift his hooked sword before Zac chopped horizontally with all the strength he could muster.

The axe moved like a lightning, but when it entered the weird gaseous substance it felt like he was trying to push through water. A good part of the momentum was somehow sapped out of the strike, and his force couldn't properly come to bear.

Zac wouldn't let this opportunity go though, and with a growl redoubled his efforts, and the axe continued on and slammed into the demon right under his left arm. The leather armor could afford almost no resistance against the sharp edge of Zac's axe as it embedded itself firmly in his chest. He couldn't push it clean through though, as the weird strength sapping effect seemed to be even stronger within the body of the demon.

Zac immediately ripped his axe out which produced a tremendous sprout of blood. He planned to turn around to meet the other two demons head on next. He didn't believe he'd get a second chance for a surprise attack like this.

But before he could do anything, he suddenly felt something ensnare his feet and he completely lost his footing. Zac fell headfirst on top of the collapsed dying demon. Gormer seemed intent on revenge even with one foot in the grave, as he weakly held on to Zac to keep him from fleeing.

While Zac struggled to get free he took a quick glance down at his legs. They were ensnared by a handful of purplish wiggling roots, which somehow seemed alive. They seemed to be a skill or magic that came from the other demon underling.

Perhaps they had planned to ensnare him when he got closer, and then attack him from three directions, securing an easy kill. Unfortunately for them Zac had preceded them with his lightning fast blitz.

Zac had no time to analyze it any further, as the leader had moved to position close to him. Shockingly he no longer was unarmed, but hefted a monstrous great sword that was almost as long as he was, and over 20cm wide.

He had mocking eyes and a sneer as he lifted the sword above his head. Zac could once again feel the movement of cosmic energy, and knew that the leader was using a skill. Dark arcs of power spread from his arms into the large blade.

The dying demon's strength was no match for Zac, and he frantically ripped himself free from his grip. But he only managed to get himself up to his knees when the large blade started falling down on him. It was poised to cleave him in two unless he did something.

Zac pushed his power to the limit and gripped his axe with both hands and swung upward with all his might, hoping to intercept the sword.

With a tremendous clangor that echoed through the vicinity the axe and the great sword connected. The force actually created a shockwave that blasted outwards.

Zac was slammed down into the ground again from the force creating a small crater. Even with his superhuman stats he couldn't handle the power of the sword. Luckily for him he at least managed to get the leader demon off-kilt and change the trajectory of the strike. It actually slammed down in the gut of the dying Demon. The might was so strong that the torso of the underling veritably exploded, instantly killing him. That wiped the smirk of the leaders face and seemed to enrage him instead.

Meanwhile, the dark lightning from the demon's skill passed into Zac's axe when they collided, and burrowed into his arm. A blazing pain ran through his whole body, and his muscles spasmed uncontrollably.

That was actually the only reason Zac survived, as a great spasm jerked his head some distance away. Another arrow slammed down right where his head had been before.

This arrow was different than the other, with a jagged arrowhead and being pitch black. It whizzed down with a great force and actually completely embedded itself into the ground, right down to the feathers. The extreme penetrating power was evident from that shot, likely from a skill.

It was only thanks to being bombed with black fireballs by the imps that Zac was able to retain consciousness. He pushed the pain away with all the resilience he could garner, and with a quick swing cut through the roots that ensnared his feet. The roots were far sturdier than they looked, and it felt like he cut through steel wire rather than wood.

Still it was no match for his power and the sharpness of his axe, and he was free in no time. He rolled a way as quickly as possible, trying to gain some distance before the leader swung down again.

He got to his feet just as another batch of roots closed in on him. This time they came as a swarm from the ground under the other demon. Zac whirled his axe back and forth in a frenzied manner and cut them down as they came, stopping their advance after a while.

The battle reached a short lull as Zac stood panting, while facing the two Demons. He tried to survey the treetops but couldn't locate the female archer. Her existence was like an annoying fly in the periphery that made him unable to fully concentrate. Even worse, this fly could kill him with one strike if he wasn't careful.

Fighting one against many truly was a pain in the ass.

## **Chapter 28 - Melee**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

Part 2. For those who read the last chapter right after release, it has been slightly edited with 200 added words. The bulk is the same, but I tried adding some OOMPF to the fight, to properly show the effects of their superhuman strengths.

Tomorrow is 1 month since i started posting here on RRL. I'm really thankful for the support and feedback I've gotten in comments and PM's.

I'm hoping to enter the Trending list tomorrow, **and you can help by rating/reviewing**. It would help me immensely in getting some more readers and interest in my story. If I actually enter the trending list I'll release two chapters instead of one tomorrow. I'd do something bigger, but I haven't really been able to build up a stockpile as of yet. Each chapter takes quite some time to write for me still.

Zac was a bit unsure of how to proceed. He knew that one should maintain the initiative in a battle, but he didn't want to just charge over like a stupid barghest.

His enemies made the choice for him. The leader started advancing on him, anger smoldering in his eyes. Both his hands gripped the great sword, which was angled down toward the ground.

The other man was stationary, but mumbling something in their own language.

Zac could only put his game face on. He was still hurting all over from the dark lightning, but he pretended he was fine. With his axe in his hand he got ready for round two.

Zac really didn't want to meet the great sword straight on. The leader seemed to have roughly the same level of strength as he did, and even if he managed to parry the strike, he was afraid that he would be shocked again from the skill. He would have to fight around it somehow.

Luckily a weapon of that size was unwieldy, and the trajectories would hopefully be telegraphed.

Zac took out a second knife, leaving him with only one remaining. He launched it at the weaker enemy, and started to rush forward.

The demon deflected the knife with a couple of roots even though the force from Zac's throw was immense. The demon obviously was some sort of earth- or tree-mage, and the roots were far sturdier than something coming from a normal tree.

The demon was interrupted in his chanting though, which was Zac's main goal. If he actually had managed to hurt him, all the better.

Wasting no time he rushed toward him, trying to avoid the leader and his great sword. The great sword whizzed in a wide upwards arc, seemingly trying to cut Zac's in two.

Zac pushed forward with his legs and jumped forward into a roll to avoid the swing, but somehow the leader changed trajectory mid swing, and still managed to nick Zac in the side. The cut drew blood but wasn't too deep, and fortunately the black lightning didn't emerge again. It seemed the leader couldn't continuously use the skill.

Zac ignored the pain and quickly got on his feet and charged at the underling. The leader was right behind him, so he quickly swung his axe downward, hoping for a quick kill.

A thick group of roots shot up in front of the demon, and meshed together into a wooden shield to intercept the swing. Zac's stats were overpowering though, and he slammed through the roots easily. Wood chippings flew everywhere like small projectiles from the strike. Unfortunately for Zac, the brief pause in the swing had allowed the demon to reposition and he could avoid the swing.

Zac felt an intense danger from behind and he didn't dare hesitate. He jumped forward and crashed into the underling instead of swinging his axe again, pushing them

both a few meters away and bringing both of them to the ground. As he jumped forward he felt the wind move right above where his head had been, from a swing of the leader.

The demon spit out a mouth of blood from the impact, but managed to wheeze a few words. A handful of vines shot out of the ground and stabbed into Zac's chest and legs, trying to bore further into him.

The pain was excruciating but he could only ignore it and hope that his endurance was enough to protect his innards from the roots. With a roar he slammed down the axe. With his overbearing power he completely destroyed the head of the demon, and even created a crater where the axe head hit the ground.

From jumping over until killing him had taken less than a second, giving the leader no time to stop him.

The roots that the demon had summoned didn't disappear, but they seemed to have stopped moving.

As Zac was jumping away from the body, another arrow soundlessly hit his leg, completely punching through it. The sharpness must have been extraordinary as it didn't seem to slow down at all even with Zac's high defense.

Zac Screamed in pain, but could only ignore it for now. The leader was upon him with another swing that almost ended him.

Zac was prepared for the swing as they drew huge wide arcs. He lunged forward after dodging in order to get in closer as the swing had passed. It seemed that the demon had ample battle experience though, and kneed Zac right in the face as he got close. The knee was imbued with the dark lightning, and this time it zapped Zac straight in the head.

Getting a knee in the face was bad, getting electrocuted in the head by demon lightning was worse. The power of the leader was huge, and Zac was flung away from the strike. The impact nearly broke his neck, and Zac was blinded by the pain.

But he roared and charged in again as he landed. Another arrow whizzed down, but Zac managed to hunker down so it only ripped a flesh wound on his back. He needed to turn the fight into a close combat brawl, which would render the great sword useless. It would also hopefully stop the intermittent arrows from coming, as the ranger would be hesitant to hit her leader.

He decided to meet the great sword head on in order to get in close. The demon had just used the lightning attack, and hopefully he needed to wait or charge it up again. The axe and great sword met again in a stupendous clash. The trees in the vicinity actually was actually moving slightly from the even stronger shockwave, and an incoming arrow was pushed away before even coming close.

When Zac was standing he could better utilize his strength, and this time he wasn't pushed away. Shock was evident in the demon's eyes, and he tried to create some distance. But Zac wouldn't let him so he pushed forward and he grabbed the leader's legs, and they both fell over with a thump.

Zac wanted a repeat of his last kill, and swung down his axe. However, he was still a bit fuzzy from the shock, and in the heat of the moment accidentally next to the leader's head.

Zac refocused and started another swing, but the leader was fighting back. He punched Zac straight in the face and tried to push him away. The fist had the force of a wrecking ball, and a loud thud echoed out.

Zac got even groggier, but his constitution was no joke so he could endure it. He also had been swinging an axe constantly the last month, and muscle memory helped

him. The half-moon edge swooped down toward the demon with superhuman force. As he had been pushed away he couldn't reach the head, and instead aimed for the heart.

Zac noticed a surge of cosmic energy entering the armor from the demon mid-swing, and the runes on the chest plate lit up. The wheels were already in motion, so Zac could only bear down and hope for the best.

Just as the edge was about to slam into the armor, a golden sheen enveloped the leader. The axe hit the barrier, and it felt like he had slammed axe into himself rather than his enemy. The armor had somehow redirected the force back toward himself, and he flew up in the air from the rebound.

He slammed down right next to the demon, arms and legs akimbo. The demon quickly whipped out a dagger and tried plunge it in Zac's lungs just as he landed. He managed to barely edge away in time, but the dagger still drew a nasty gash along his ribs.

The demon kept stabbing down at Zac, trying to turn him into a sieve. The second stab hit straight into his arm making Zac scream out. He tried to push down the demon again and wrestle the knife out of his hands with his own free hand, but the demon's strength was at least equal to his.

In a last desperate attempt, he could only pray his constitution wouldn't fail him. He let go of the demon's hand holding the dagger, and intercepted the hand that was holding back his axe.

The demon immediately plunged the dagger into his gut, once more unleashing the black lightning. The blazing pain once again erupted in Zac's body, but by now he had somewhat acclimatized to the attack.

He ignored the spasms in his gut, and ripped away the demon's hand and finally managed to swing his weapon down full force at the demon's neck.

A loud bang was heard as the axe slammed into the ground, creating a large crack. A second, smaller impact was heard as the demon's decapitated head fell down onto the ground a few meters away.

Another arrow whizzed down from a nearby tree toward his head. But Zac had expected this, and dodged the attack. The ranger had shot a steady stream of arrows at him during the melee, most at least grazing him. Luckily he had been in such close proximity to the demons during the fight that she had only dared aim at his extremities.

He finally saw where the arrows came from, and as all the other demons were dead he finally managed focus and locate the elusive ranger. He spotted her up in a tree not far away from the fights.

With a steely gaze that spoke of death he got on his feet and started running towards her.

## **Chapter 29 - Inscriptions**

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Hopefully chapter 1 of 2 today.

Zac was kneeling next to the body of the female ranger, panting with exhaustion.

The hunt luckily had ended quite quickly. She had immediately tried to run when Zac started approaching, jumping from one tree to another. Her speed up among the branches had actually been slightly higher compared to his own down on the ground.

She likely was a Dexterity based class. She even had the time to shoot a few arrows while fleeing. Zac was fully focused on keeping up, so could only manage to deflect the projectiles if they headed straight toward his head or chest. That was

because he simply held his axe right in front of his throat, moving it slightly upwards or downwards to intercept the arrows.

Suddenly, as she had tried to jump to a branch on another tree, Zac had used a sneak attack with his last dagger. As she was mid-air he flung it with full force, punching a hole in her back.

She didn't immediately die from the attack, but she did fall down from the tree tops. And before she managed to get back on her feet, Zac was upon her. He ended the fight with a swing without any words. He didn't want another suicide bombing incident on his hands, after all.

It was lucky as well, because if that dagger didn't hit, he'd likely have been forced to flee instead. He didn't want to try throwing his axe, as it was his most important tool for survival on the island. Then the enemy would have a detailed description of him and his power.

He grabbed her bag and found some cloths he assumed were for bandages. After a quick sniff to make sure that it wasn't actually doused in some chemical or the like he used it to bandage himself up. His whole body had holes punched in it, from everything between arrows and roots, and the bandage was only enough to treat the worst ones.

He was still bleeding, but it seemed that the wounds hadn't hit any major arteries or organs. By now normal puncture wounds usually stopped bleeding by their own after a few hours. He could still tentatively put weight on the leg, but he wouldn't run a marathon. His whole body felt like he had been used as a punching bag, mainly from the black lightning of the leader.

Unfortunately the ranger's bow had snapped when she fell down from the tree, so he didn't bother taking it with him as he planned to leave.

He did take the quiver and remaining arrows though, as they had survived the fall. He also skipped taking the armor, as his axe had destroyed the whole thing.

After dragging the body into some thick bushes, he turned back toward the location of the fight with the others. After slowly waking back for a bit he was there.

A barghest had found its way to the corpses from somewhere, but surprisingly it didn't eat the corpses. Zac had seen those demons eat everything, including members of their own race before, so it was interested that this barghest only dared to sniff and growl anxiously at the corpses.

It reinforced Zac's suspicion that these demons were not wild animals, rather beasts reared by the humanoids. They were a good tool to use as a meat shield to weaken and tire the enemy. Of course, they didn't seem to work too well in the complicated terrain of the island. Zac edged to the beast and killed it with one strike as it was distracted by the bodies.

He didn't bother with it anymore and walked over to the leader. He was most excited about the gear on him, and it was largely intact. The fractals had protected the demon from Zac's strike on the chest, and the finishing blow had been on his head, which kept all the gear in good working order.

Zac, who was getting more and more adroit in undressing corpses, nimbly loosened the clasps and buckles, and dragged the chest plate from him. He also gingerly touched the great sword, afraid that he would get zapped again.

Fortunately there was no charge left it seemed, and he picked up. The sword was actually lighter than he expected. Of course, he was a bit unsure of his current strength, so making exact measurements was hard.

He carefully looked through the weapon for some hidden function. The leader clearly had been unarmed one second, and in the next holding this monstrosity. It must have come from somewhere.

Zac suspected the sword might be able to grow and shrink at command, and it simply was too small for him to notice before. Or the sword might be able to turn invisible.

After a quick rundown he couldn't figure it out, and he did not want to delay too long here in case reinforcements arrived. He quickly stripped all remaining items from the leader, including a pouch, a few runed bracelets, and the large knife.

He put all of it inside a backpack, then proceeded to do the same with the other two fighters. He left their weapons and armors though, as he simply was overburdened as is. Just bringing back the sword would be arduous with his battered body.

Finally he dragged the bodies away and looked over the battlefield. A discerning eye would quickly notice that a battle took place here, but Zac couldn't be too bothered anymore. This was the second scouting party he had killed, besides a herald and a throng of demons.

The humanoids would have to be crazy to not know that someone was hunting them by now. They had seen the trap used to kill the herald, so they knew it wasn't a beast either.

He wasn't too sure why they weren't scouring the island for him. He guessed they either had limited resources or was preoccupied with something else. Who knew, maybe there actually was a city with humans hidden in the mountains that waged war on the demons.

He put the axe into his belt and hefted the great sword over his shoulder and turned back. He had been out for half the day, and either had to turn back soon or sleep in one of his hideouts.

He decided to head back, as the fight had given him some insights about the inscribed items that he wanted to try out in a safe environment.

Zac started heading back, heading a slightly altered path. Even if he was hurt it wasn't to the point that he couldn't hunt some demon dogs on the way back. The worst part was his leg, and luckily the demons always came running so he didn't have to chase them.

He soon ran into one and with a swing of the great sword completely split the barghest in two. The sword continued with its momentum and slammed into a tree, cutting clean through it.

The power was great, but it felt too unwieldy for jungle warfare. More importantly, Zac noticed that killing the barghest with the sword didn't improve his quest for axe mastery. On second thought he felt it made sense that the kills had to be made with an axe to complete an axe mastery quest.

As he continued on he had to continuously swap weapons every time he ran into a demon.

Finally he arrived at his camp as the suns were starting to set. After the customary sweep he entered the camp. He threw some lumber into the fire pit and lit a small fire, and got some more dried meat. He was starting to run low so he'd have to hunt something edible tomorrow as well.

His wounds had actually turned a lot better during his hike back, as he hadn't sustained any new wounds from the lesser demons.

A quick glance at his status screen showed that he had gained roughly 10 000 Nexus coins in one day. It made sense, as he had more than doubled the speed of killing

barghest with his upgrades. Furthermore, the demons seemed to give out roughly a thousand Nexus Coins each.

Zac was somewhat surprised to find out that he actually had gained nexus coins and cosmic energy from the demon that the leader accidentally killed. He had somewhat felt the rush of energy during the fight, but at the time had been preoccupied with getting zapped by demon lightning.

He also felt that he almost had gained half a level from the intense fights. Risking your life really was the most effective way of getting stronger with the system.

His Axe mastery had progressed as well, currently showing a (69/1000) progress. Most of the kills had been barghest while traveling, with a few of the more agile Gwyllgi peppered in every now and then. Zac felt that if he put his mind to it then he could kill roughly 100 lower demons a day, which would allow him to complete the quest in another 10 days.

He decided to put the 10 days as a deadline. He would also match the quest for Chop, so he'd chop a thousand times a day. Zac figured it'd take somewhere around two hours per day to get it done. He had no real idea as of yet what to do with the last skill, as it still showed 0/30.

He turned his gaze toward the day's pile of loot after being finished with his meal. He had gained a whole new set of gear and a sundry of miscellaneous items in the backpacks. At the battle site he hadn't had time to properly go through everything so he planned to do so now.

The two underlings had had small leather bags that were attached to their belts on their back. In them were nothing of value. It held some gauze, flint, a whetstone, a small knife that seemed to not be for battle and a small water bottle. It felt like it was some basic ordinance.

Both the bottles had some very rudimentary inscriptions on them so Zac wondered if they had some special function. He poured the water out, but was surprised that the small bottle held far more water than it should.

It took almost two minutes for all the water to pour out. Zac was amazed that some inscriptions could do something magical like this. He felt no cosmic energy movements around the bottles, and it looked normal when he peered inside.

The magic bottle gave him a new idea about the sudden appearance of the giant sword. If a bottle could somehow store large amount of water, then it wasn't impossible that the leader had some similar gear that could store items.

## **Chapter 30 - Experimentation**

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Thought I'd actually get into Trending. Guess I misunderstood some aspect of it. Well I prepared another chapter so might as well release it anyway

If you enjoy the story I'd appreciate some reviews. Apparently that's what's needed for me to get to trending and some exposure.

Zac eagerly filtered out all the gear that had belonged to the leader and started to go through them. His first guess was the inscribed bracelets as they were the only things except the sword and chest plate that had fractals engraved.

He looked over them multiple times, and tried pressing different parts of the bracelets, but nothing happened. He tried putting them on and focusing on them, but there still was no response. He could only helplessly put them aside for now, and continue to look through the other gear.

Zac picked up the pouch and opened it up. Strangely the insides were pitch black and he couldn't see anything. His heartbeat sped up and he felt that he had found the jackpot.

He first took one of the small knives and plunged it halfway into the darkness, then pulled it out. There was no damage on it at all as far as Zac could tell. He planned to do the same with his finger, but as soon as he barely put it into the darkness he felt a burning sting.

His fingertip had been singed clean off, and blood dripped down over the pouch. Maybe flesh couldn't enter he surmised. So he tried the same with a piece of dried meat, but this time it reacted like the knife.

'*Maybe it's live things...*' Zac thought. He had no critter to try this theory out though, so it would have to wait.

The next task was how to activate the pouch. He had noticed some hints when he had fought earlier. When he had slammed his axe into the chest of the leader, he had felt that cosmic energy had entered the armor from the demon.

Zac had always only circulated the energy internally, and wasn't sure how he'd push it outside. He tried circulating some energy into his fingers, then tried to push it out from the tip. The only result was that the concentration of energy got too high at the fingertips, and they started rupturing.

He tried many different things for a few hours until he finally gave up. Zac guessed that there was an inherent problem with how he handled the energy. He had followed an image of a circulatory system of his blood when he had started bending cosmic energy to his will. Of course he hadn't imagined it to have outlets where it could flow out.

He started mulling over how to improve his system. He tried imagining a hole at his palm where he could let cosmic energy flow out.

But as he changed his energy circulation a blazing pain erupted in his hand and it looked that a bloody stigmata had appeared where he had imagined his exit.

A cold sheen of perspiration appeared on Zac's forehead from the pain and he had a sinking feeling. Just a small change like this and the pain had been this bad. If he wanted to improve the system on his whole body, how bad would it hurt?

He knew that the circulatory system he had devised in no way was an optimal method of using cosmic energy, it was just something he had whipped together. He had planned on getting some skill or method for it later when he had the opportunity. But he hadn't imagined that the pain would be this bad.

He was even more dismayed when he noticed that the hole he had created in his hand was continuously leaking cosmic energy and draining him of power.

Zac could only reluctantly change his circulation pattern back, bringing forth another wave of torment.

He sat for a full thirty minutes feeling lost at what to do. He was afraid that he had somehow crippled his future prospects. The more he thought about it the more he felt that it was extremely important to be able to project energy. The skills the demons had used all had projected energy in different ways. The mysterious mist, the black arcs of lightning and the root control. They all relied on manipulating cosmic energy outside of the body.

If he was stuck with this defective system where all the energy was stuck inside his body, would he even be able to use the skills he got in the future?

He needed to find a way to rectify this, even if he had to take the torture of rewriting his pathing. However, the hole he had made didn't work, and even if it did

he was hesitant to use that method anymore. He didn't want to haphazardly get himself deeper and deeper in the hole by making a crappy patch-work circulation method.

He went over to the Nexus Node once more to scour through the skills, in case one of them actually was a circulation skill or something similar. Of course, he subconsciously knew that wasn't the case, he had looked those skills over many times by now, and knew there were no such thing there.

The skills available generally could be categorized into offensive, defensive, movement and support as far as he could tell. The **[Eye of Discernment]** would fall into the support skill.

But as he moved his hand away from the crystal he suddenly froze, struck with a realization. All things connected to the system had one thing in common; the fractals. He still had no idea how to make sense of them, but they were present on the array flags, the weapons, and even the skills used them.

And it just so happened, he knew a pattern that was the exact size of his body. It was the fractal pattern that he had seen when he chose his class. Many details of it was muddled at the time, but the parts he could make out made a full circuit.

When he got the idea he couldn't let it go. The more he thought it over, the more it made sense. He could still remember the pattern clearly, and it flowed through every part of his body. It was a far more complicated system compared to the one he had devised himself, but he saw no reason that it wouldn't work.

As for the parts that were hazy and blurred, they might show themselves at a later point when he leveled up or completed quests. At which point Zac could use the new information to improve on the existing pattern.

The only problem was the massive undertaking to change the circulation. Just adding and removing a small hole in his hand had felt like putting the palm in an imp's fire. He wasn't even sure he'd survive such an undertaking.

But at the same time he didn't dare wait. When he first devised the energy circulation he made some small revisions quickly after. At that time he hadn't felt any pain whatsoever, and assumed that the circulation pattern was just a mental aid for using cosmic energy.

Zac was afraid that it might mean that the pattern gets harder and harder to change, as though it was fusing with his very being. It was still possible for him to change it, but judging from the pain it might be impossible soon.

Zac was no stranger to pain by now, and wasted no time. Ideally he would have wanted to wait until all his wounds were healed, but he had a sense of urgency. He started with his left hand to try if it even was viable to reform the patterns.

A blazing pain far worse than when he opened the hole engulfed his hand. It felt like his whole arm was dipped in burning acid. His whole body was covered in sweat in just seconds, and his eyes were completely bloodshot. Still he pushed through, and kept imagining his crude system in his hand slowly transforming into the fractal he was given by the Hatchetman class.

After what felt like an eternity the transformation was done. His hand was a mess, almost looking as if it had been pushed down into a blender. But where there once was a simple pathway for cosmic energy, now was a sophisticated pattern that had substituted it.

Zac tried moving his fingers, and while it hurt it seemed there was no permanent damage. He then tried to circulate cosmic energy through his arm and into his rewritten pathways.

It was a weird feeling. He had thought his circulation had been smooth all this while. But after pushing the energy into his hand it felt like the energy came from cramped pipes in his arms into the open ocean in his hand. The level of smoothness of handling the energy was incomparable.

Zac knew he had guessed correctly by now. The class change had provided him with a complete pattern to utilize his cosmic energy. It would likely tie in with his skills as well he reckoned.

He also knew what that meant, and with a shudder started converting the rest of his body.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

For this chapter I actually hired an artist to show how the new cosmic energy pathway looked after the upgrade.

**Spoiler:** Spoiler

JK im poor

## **Chapter 31 - Infusion**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

I'm really thankful for all the ratings and reviews I've gotten the last few days.

Unfortunately it didn't get me into trending as I thought it would, but it did get me into top 800 which is great as well

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The suns were starting to rise over the small campsite.

Zac sat naked, except a pair of ragged underpants, in a cross-legged position by the now died out fire. The ground all around him was red with his blood. There was not one spot on Zac's body that wasn't damaged and bloody.

He had relentlessly continued to improve his circulation pattern the whole night, and he was almost completed by now. It had felt like he had been thrown into hell and had been tortured for an eternity. He had wanted to stop so many times, but had summoned a willpower he didn't know he had to keep going.

Of course, that didn't mean that he had stoically endured the pain like some battle-hardened warrior. Luckily there had been no one around to see him scream himself hoarse, roll around on the ground and cry until snot ran down his face.

Right now only the part around his brain remained to be changed. In the class pattern it was a dense web of fractals that covered his whole head.

Zac hadn't stopped due to changing his mind, but the pain in his head had made him pass out for a few minutes after he tried it the first time. He was currently steadying himself for another try.

He shakily got up and snatched all the remaining dried meat he had left over. He felt severely drained, and needed some energy before trying again. He also filled his water bottle from his array and poured it over himself to clean away some of the blood. The sting of cold water over his countless cuts jolted him properly awake.

Finally he sat down again to complete the fractal. He was afraid if he didn't complete it now he wouldn't dare to sit down and do it in the future. The pain was to the point of creating a mental scar, and he needed to do it immediately to get it done.

He started changing the pattern a small bit at a time, afraid that he'd pass out again if he improved too large a chunk in one go. Still, the pain was barely within the realm he could tolerate. It felt like a spike was stabbed through his eye right into his head, and then started grinding around in there for good measure.

Zac arduously pressed on, tears flowing like a waterfall. Finally after an hour the last piece was changed, and the fractal was whole and connected. Zac suddenly puked out a mouthful of blood, but immediately after felt very refreshed.

He still had an acute bloodloss and was hurting all over, but his body still felt lighter and better. He tried circulating some cosmic energy and was chocked at the improvement. To compare it with before it felt like previously he had breathed and blinked manually when pushing cosmic energy through his body, and now it was an automatic and natural process.

It was as if the energy knew what he wanted to do, and followed his will automatically. It also seemed that he absorbed energy from the surroundings faster, and not by a small margin. It wouldn't help with his level, but it would help him to heal and restore his energy reserves faster.

Finally done with the fractal he closed eyes and had a dreamless sleep.

Zac woke up again roughly three hours later. While he felt drained and still hurting, he didn't bleed anymore. With his improved stats he only needed to sleep a few hours a day to feel rested, and he had no problems skipping sleep entirely for a night or two. The combination of high endurance and vitality showed its value once again.

He had initially planned on scouting out the actual incursion today, but decided against it. He wanted to be in optimal condition for whatever waited for him at the end of the rainbow. He needed to find something to eat as well, and it felt safer to grind out some lower beasts while he was incapacitated.

His wounds from yesterday's battle had also improved significantly, with only the leg still smarting.

There was one thing he had to do before setting out though. An important reason why he had tortured himself during the night was the inscribed gear.

Zac was relieved to notice that he could project energy easily now from his upgrade. He couldn't actually see the cosmic energy with his eyes, but he could sense it. It was a weird feeling, it was as though he had gotten a new sense since starting using cosmic energy, and with his upgraded pathways the sense only seemed stronger. The cosmic energy was floating like an invisible mist above his hand that projected it, not showing any signs of dissipating.

His first goal was to check the pouch, as it contained the most mystery for him. He picked up the small pouch and carefully infused some energy into it. He was shocked to notice that the pouch actually suddenly absorbed all the dried blood on his hand.

He didn't have time to think it over though, as he suddenly saw a large space in his mind. The space was roughly 3 by 3 meters, and was filled with an assortment of items.

There was another sword inside, also with inscriptions. But this one had a far more normal size compared to its monstrous brother. There were some random tools, a water bottle and a flagon made in silver in one corner. The flagon seemed to have similar fractals as the water bottle, albeit a bit more intricate.

There was also a large reserve of luxurious dishes and fruits in another corner.

More surprisingly there was an actual table, a parasol, a rug, and two ornate chair in the space. Zac dumbly stared at the furniture, not knowing how to react. Was the demon invading another world, or was he out on a picnic?

He didn't dare take any of the food, as he had no idea whether the food demons ate was edible for humans. While it looked perfectly normal, who knew if they used cyanide as a spice?

The final items in the corner were a few books and a small pile of crystals. Each crystal was uniform in shape and roughly the size of his palm. He couldn't understand the language in the books at all, and could only put them aside for now.

The crystals were more interesting, and he tried mentally extract it from the pouch. Suddenly the crystal appeared next to the pouch. Zac grabbed it in the air and started to examine it. It wasn't translucent, but rather a milky white, and cool to the touch. It seemed to emit a faint white light as well.

More interestingly, Zac could feel that the small stone was packed with cosmic energy. It was as if his senses were telling him that he wasn't holding a small shiny crystal, but a shining sun of energy.

He remembered that his quests had something called Nexus Crystals as a reward for completing, and guessed he was holding one right now. More impressively he had roughly 100 of them in his pouch.

Of course, Zac knew that there was a distinct possibility that this was an F-Grade Nexus Crystal, rather than an E-Grade crystal like the ones that the quests rewarded. It would be odd if he got 100 crystals from just one enemy, if he only got 10 for conquering a whole incursion by himself.

He tried absorbing some energy from the crystal, and a pure stream of energy quickly entered his body and energized him. His slightly depleted body was quickly energized, and he was happy to notice that the absorption continued even after his body was "satiated". That meant that absorbing the crystals would work toward gaining levels, and not only be a tool for recuperating after a draining battle.

Zac sat and absorbed the crystal for roughly 30 minutes before he stopped. After scrutinizing the crystal it seemed that he had absorber roughly a quarter of the stored energy. So completely absorbing it would take roughly two hours. Furthermore, absorbing just one crystal seemed equivalent of killing roughly 10 barghests and absorbing their energy.

That meant if he only sat down and used these stones to cultivate it would actually be more effective compared to running all over the island killing demon dogs with all his might.

Of course, he wouldn't get any Nexus Coins, but still.

These crystals would be a huge asset for him. There were always time he couldn't be killing beasts. Like when cooking, chopping wood and even moving between the demons while out hunting. If he could keep absorbing these crystals during all this down-time he could double his leveling speed.

Next he walked over to the great sword and tried infusing it with cosmic power as well. However, it was as though the energy was blocked when trying to enter, which stumped Zac. After a brief hesitation he cut his finger and dripped a few drops of blood on the runes before trying again. He had remembered the pouch absorbing his blood, and could only try the same method again.

This time he felt no resistance, as the blood was absorbed into the sword. Information once again entered his mind, this time the usage of the sword. It seemed that the sword could increase and decrease its weight, albeit the effect was quite limited. That might have explained why he slammed into the ground so helplessly in

the first clash between him and the leader, he might have maximized the weight for the overhead swing.

Next he did the same procedure on his axe. Infusing it with energy had no earth-shattering effect. It had a weak auto-repair and sharpen feature. As long as he infused some cosmic energy into it, it would gradually fix nicks in the edge and re-sharpen.

It didn't improve the lethality, but it was convenient for him who didn't have proper facilities for weapons maintenance.

He finally turned to his last inscribed gear, and with the same procedure tried to activate the bracers he had nabbed from the leader. To his surprise, nothing happened when he tried activating them.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Shoutout to @Heckswrench who gave me the idea at chapter 17 for the circulation upgrade being less than smooth. I'd originally have planned that he'd just be given it from the class, but felt this to be more interesting

### **Chapter 32 - Vanity**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Woop woop trending! I guess I was just a bit impatient. A **big** thank you to all of you who helped put me there.

Now with this extra traction to the story it's time to enter **Phase 2**: Announce a 3 day break from chapters, and then never come back. Except from occasional update promising new chapters shortly.

Jokes aside. I'm going to be playing Path of Exile's new expansion that launches in 40 minutes. I have tried building up a decent stockpile so I can play alot during next week and still publish chapters, but honestly I might miss one.

Zac tried everything he could think of to activate the bracers, and by the end they were completely drenched in his blood. Still, there simply was no response from the items. They might just as well have been normal iron hoops.

Struck with realization Zac had an odd expression as he turned his eyes toward the almost comically large sword. Then he summoned the furniture out of the pouch. They had an elaborate ostentatious design, and the two chairs almost felt like thrones.

The bracers were fake. That was the most likely answer he could come up with. The demon had wanted to look impressive, bringing luxurious furniture and foods, a heroic great sword and a dashing breast plate. Perhaps he had wanted to give an even more extravagant impression, so he equipped himself with these fake bracers.

*'The female archer was a beauty...'* Zac reflected wryly. Had this demon tried to turn the scouting mission into a courtship outing?

That would explain why he never used the bracers during the battle, even when they were in a bloody dogfight.

It seemed crazy to Zac that the demon would be so indifferent to the dangers of invading an unknown world, but he also knew he himself was an anomaly. He both had the highest level in the world and a bunch of titles, making him extremely strong for only one month having passed since the integration into the multi-verse.

Had a normal human, or even a group of humans, met the demon they'd likely have been easily butchered. The demon leader hadn't expected that his life was in jeopardy on this seemingly deserted island.

Zac didn't expect that the demons would underestimate him for long though. Killing Vul could be explained with him tricking it into killing itself on the poles. But now 7 demons had died in a short while, a few of which were pretty strong.

He left the furniture where it was, as they were pretty good-looking after all. He also needed to free up some space in his new pouch in any case.

As half the day had already passed, he hurriedly set out. He was mostly decked in the demon leader's gear now, not including the great sword of course.

He was starting to get quite hungry, and needed to find some prey. Luckily for him it seemed that the thick energy in the atmosphere was great for the animal population.

The native animals grew much faster, and bigger, compared to before. From what he had seen in his hunts some were already stronger than the barghest, and used them as prey. Most didn't seem to be quite there yet though.

It was a bit troubling though for the world in general. The animals seemed to grow strong faster than humans did. Either they were more suited for absorbing cosmic energy, or the System helped them somehow.

Not long ago he killed a human-sized rabbit. Would he have to fight a train-sized snake in the future?

He soon found a small critter while walking, and tried throwing it into his pouch after catching it. He was surprised to see that it didn't work, nothing happened as he tried to put the struggling squirrel inside.

Zac could only surmise that putting living beings inside didn't work. He was a bit confused why the critter didn't get zapped like the tip of his finger, but it didn't feel like an important distinction.

There was no need to kill the critter, as the demon had stored both beverage and food inside the pouch with no problems.

When he was a good distance away from the camp he found a hole created from a fallen tree. He threw in all the food and drink the demon had stored, and also the two bracers. He was pretty sure they were fake, but he didn't want to keep them in the camp on the off-chance their function was tracking their location. Like a revenge-killing tool.

He wasn't worried about running out of food on the island, as it was teeming with wildlife, and many trees were bearing fruit as well. He filled the pit quickly after throwing it all in, and with his strength he was as efficient as an excavator.

With the unnecessary things in the pouch thrown away, he continued on his journey. He was still hurting from both the fight and the conversion, so he simply killed barghest at the outskirts of the island.

He also managed to find a supersized boar that would last him a good while, even with his enhanced appetite. He was surprised to see that the animal actually gave some nexus coins and experience now. However, he only gained a miniscule amount of energy, and only 21 Nexus coins.

It also gave progress on his Axe Mastery class. It seemed that something had changed lately with the beasts. The boar was quite a bit stronger than a normal human, but it wasn't quite at the level of a barghest. It also didn't seem too much stronger compared to the snake he had killed a month ago, yet the snake had given no currency for the kill. Neither had any other animal he had killed for leather or food.

Perhaps something had changed with the passage of the first month for the animal kingdom, just as it had with the incursion. Zac didn't mind, as it only meant that there were more targets to practice on now.

It was a marvelous feeling fighting with his new and improved circulation pathways. Being able to use magic items and project cosmic energy wasn't the only benefit. His powers hadn't really increased, as there still was the limit of how much cosmic energy his muscles could take in. But the energy flowed far more smoothly through his body, making it effortless to switch between attack, defense and movement seamlessly.

He also seemed to use up less energy while fighting, as somehow the new pathways were more efficient. He wasn't too surprised from that, as he had surmised that his usage before had been inefficient since the start. He had noticed how much energy was wasted pushing it into his muscles, compared to using his skill **[Eye of Discernment]**.

Higher efficiency meant he'd fare better in a protracted battle. Maybe he wouldn't have been so haggard after killing Vul if he had this level of endurance.

He kept killing demons and animals for the rest of the day, only returning to camp when the suns had practically set. His pouch was full of various large beasts he had killed. He thought he might as well stock up on dried meat in case something happened.

He also wanted to try just leaving some slabs of meat in the pouch, just to see how well they kept.

The fruits that the demon had kept in the pouch before were things he had never seen before, meaning it should have brought them from his home planet. They still looked pristine as though they were just plucked, so Zac hoped that the pouch would also work like a portable freezer.

That would come in handy in case of the weather changing. The weather had been great since the world changed, with only a smattering of clouds in the sky every now and then.

It seemed the trees didn't suffer from the lack of rain. On the contrary, the forest had kept growing and mutating at an astonishing rate. Zac assumed it had to do with the cosmic energy in the atmosphere. It might work as a substitute for both sunshine and water for all he knew.

The island felt tropical by now, like the island was a primordial forgotten vestige at the edge of the world, where dinosaurs and other prehistorical beasts could be found.

That meant that there might come a tropical rain season. Zac really didn't hope that was the case, seeing as everything got bigger and more extreme since the integration into the multi-verse. What would a torrential downpour powered by cosmic energy look like?

It took the better part of the night to skin and clean the beasts. He simply threw the skins on top of the car, not really bothered whether they dried properly or not. He didn't really have any use for skins anymore, as the pouch and better armors kept him covered.

He was somewhat disappointed to see that he was unable to absorb cosmic energy from a Nexus Stone while doing other tasks. He first tried putting it in a pocket while he was cleaning a carcass, but he couldn't sense the stone when he did.

Having it in one of his hands was too unwieldy, and slowed down his progress on the meat considerably. Finally, he stuffed the crystal in his mouth, hoping the contact to his body would make it possible to absorb the energy without occupying a hand.

The only result from that was that he almost choked himself to death on the energy rock. After a few more experiments he could conclude that he only could absorb cosmic energy from one crystal at the time and that he had to completely focus on the

absorption for it to work. As soon as he tried to multi-task while absorbing a crystal the absorption simply would stop.

Disappointed, he could only put aside the crystal and keep it for a later date. He was planning on saving some of them in any case, as he wanted to give them to his father and sister when they met again. They were nifty, but only of limited use for him. But for people of lower levels, they'd be a great tool.

If they could be used to help his family protect themselves better it was worth saving, even if it meant slowing down his own leveling speed slightly.

### **Chapter 33 - Infection**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Oh wow, this has been crazy, top spot on trending! A big welcome to all the new readers. I'm really thankful for all the ratings, reviews, and feedback in pm's and comments.

There are some changes and (minor) rewrites in the story that has happened during the weekend, but as it's kind of long I'll put it in the bottom.

New week, new chapters!

Zac awoke at the dawn of light, and after preparing an assortment of tools in his pouch he set out. Today he would properly gather intelligence. His wounds were largely better now, just a bit red and sore.

He made a beeline for the incursion this time, heading straight toward the center of the island. Large parts would be uncharted territory for him here, as he had stayed somewhat at the outer edge since the start.

He had a theory that there should be a fourth kind of beast somewhere on the island that he still hadn't seen.

There were four heralds, and at least one herald was a pack leader of its race, the barghest. But he had only encountered imps and the Gwyllgi apart from the hunkering demonlings.

There should be a fourth type of beast as well somewhere based on this, and Zac guessed that they either were located around the incursion or had moved their territory into the mountain.

Zac kept a rapid pace, moving at a speed that could be considered a sprint for a normal human. Still he made no sound as he passed through the forest, instinctively knowing where to put his feet to soundlessly proceed.

During his travels he noticed that his third class skill, Forester's Constitution, had finally had its first progression either during last evening or this morning, now showing 1/30. The problem was that he wasn't quite sure what he did to progress it. The system gave no ping or notification when his quests progressed, leaving him with no information on when it happened.

A log of his actions would have been very convenient, as then he wouldn't have to estimate his nexus coin gain from monsters or how much energy they gave all the time.

After he had moved for roughly 10 hours he finally slowed down. He was far closer to the incursion now than he had ever been before. This close he started to notice some jarring changes. For lack of a better word, the forest was *infected*. The red light of the incursion suffused all the surroundings, and the trees looked different, almost sickly.

Some had weird growths on them, others seemed to completely have lost all their leaves even though the summer was in full swing. The grass on the forest floor was turning a purplish color. There were also many young sprouts of a pitch black tree Zac had never seen before, which seemed to thrive in this odd environment. The very air seemed to be different as well, having an almost astringent taste. It didn't seem to be a problem for Zac luckily, apart from feeling uncomfortable.

It seemed like the red pillar was slowly transforming its surroundings, likely to better suit the invaders. This made Zac even more anxious to complete his quest, as he didn't know if this effect was reversible, and whether it would spread outwards. He didn't want to create his town on a desolate island that smelled a bit like farts.

He also was astonished at the amount of beasts he saw. It seemed that all the demons preferred to stay in this environment, and the forest was packed with monsters. He shuddered at the thought of this horde of beasts being unleashed upon a human city. Luckily they were stranded here on this island.

It also made him realize that it might not have been more beasts spawning during his month of grinding, it was enough that a few strays would leave the central area of the island for the edge of the island to be refilled.

What would've looked like hell for many, Zac saw as a treasure trove. He almost drooled at the prospect of grinding here, but he had a mission today. Most human cultivators would likely have trouble killing one barghest since they had their upgrade, but Zac had no trouble facing multiple at a time by now. He might get a few bites and scratches if there were too many of them, but that wouldn't be anything new for him.

Those plans could only wait though. He needed to gauge the magnitude of the invasion to make a proper plan. There was a lot to do in the coming month. Of course, he wouldn't hide from the beasts either, so everything that entered his path was met with a swift swing of his axe.

By now he was only a couple of kilometers away from the Incursion, so he started to slow down and focus fully on stealth. He did not want to enter combat again this close to the enemy base, who knew what kind of forces that they had.

The incursion was in a valley which stretched toward the mountain, and Zac gingerly moved toward the edge to see what was happening inside.

As he almost was at the crest he saw a solitary demon sitting next to a tree, currently napping. Zac was again shocked at their bad discipline, and it felt like the whole invasion was handled by a group of undisciplined children rather than an army. If he thought that the horde of barghest around the valley would be enough protection and give prior warning of an attack, then he was sorely mistaken.

After slowly looking at the vicinity to ensure there were no more scouts around he approached the demon soundlessly. He didn't bother to identify him, afraid he would sense the scrying. When he was 10 meters away he switched gears to a sprint, brandishing his axe.

The demon woke in the last moment, and made a terrified expression. He didn't have any time to activate any defenses or shout for help though, as the axe descended and cleanly decapitated him.

Zac quickly grabbed the head and put it on top of the body again, before hiding again. He had already scrubbed his face with some dirt, giving him a greyish complexion similar to the demons. With his gear already of demonic design he should probably pass as a demon from a cursory glance from a long distance. Of course if anyone took a second glance he'd be found out instantly, so he didn't want to try it out.

He stayed next to the corpse and wormed closer to the edge. This part of the valley ended with a steep cliff, meaning that Zac would have to scale down 20 meters if he wanted to enter. But it also meant that he got a good view of the whole vale.

If the other parts of the wood had started to shift into a demon forest, then the valley looked like it was imported from another world. It was as though even the sky was different up above, feeling washed out and grey.

There should have been a great deal of vegetation just like the rest of the island, but it was sparse and looking sickly. There also was evidence of a large amount of felling, as he saw hundreds of cut off stumps. The combination made the valley look completely desolate. The ground was partly covered with smatterings of purplish black grass, but most was just black stone.

The demons clearly needed lumber for something. But for what Zac couldn't tell so far. His eyes kept going over the valley, until finally looking over to the huge red pillar.

Zac could finally see the terminus of the incursion for the first time since he had arrived. It was a huge crystal that reminded Zac of his Nexus Node at his base. However, this crystal was red, and at least 3 meters tall.

The very air around it pulsed from the power the crystal emitted, and Zac could feel the huge energy that it released all the way from his hiding place. It continuously shot out the light that formed the large pillar that had been a constant part of his life the last month. The glow was so strong that he couldn't see anything what was happening behind it.

Next to the pillar was a building and Zac could see a few demons milling about.

Zac planted himself within a bush, and while gnawing on some meat he had brought in his pouch he started waiting. After waiting for a full 3 hours he felt confident that there likely were limitations to the invasion.

He had not seen a single being appear from the crystal, nor disappear into it. Either they only came at certain times per day, or they couldn't go back and forth between the island and their home world. The demons at the small building seemed to be guards left there just to make sure nothing happened to the crystal.

They were mostly milling about or even taking naps in the shade of the house.

Of course, Zac would have to stay for a good while longer if he wanted to confirm that the gate was closed, and he didn't have time for that. However it made sense that they could only enter at certain intervals, from how the demons had appeared on the island.

The first wave assault had been the demonic beasts, and they arrived as soon as the world was integrated. The second wave was the humanoids who arrived after a month had passed. At the same time some limitations lessened on the beasts, making them stronger.

If the crystal only opened once a month, it would explain why Abby the eye had told him to finish the quest either within one month or within two. It stood to reason that the difficulty would take another noticeable leap within a month.

Zac was not sure if he would be able to handle that, as he was not powering up as quickly anymore as before. He had already gotten his class now, and gaining levels took more time now compared to earlier. The increase in strength he could gain within 30 days would likely be smaller compared to the one before, meaning that he really should try to end this invasion sooner rather than later.

As nothing really happened on this side of the valley, he decided to keep venturing further in. He moved along the edge of the valley in a roundabout manner toward the mountain.

The incursion and valley was located between the middle and the north of the island, while the mountain took up almost all of the northern quadrant. So Zac soon had travelled across the whole island, starting from his campsite in the far south.

Daylight was starting to wane, but Zac had already prepared himself to sleep outside today. While he was advancing he was keeping a lookout for possible temporary places to spend a night unnoticed. He had found some potential spots, but hadn't bothered to prepare them yet.

During his travels he had killed four more demons. They were quite sparsely placed, making Zac more and more convinced that they were not too concerned about invasion in the immediate vicinity.

Soon he had walked along half the valley, and he could now see what was hidden earlier behind the red glow.

There actually was a town down there.

On a second look a town would be a slight misnomer. The buildings were quite large and rectangular, reminding Zac rather of barracks than civilian domiciles. He noticed that the missing trees had been processed into houses and fortifications. There were a few structures that seemed more refined, maybe for the officers and generals of the army. Those buildings did use both stone and lumber in its construction, and had a quite elegant atmosphere.

The whole settlement was surrounded by a wall that was a few meters tall and at least thick enough to have watch towers and a large amount of guards patrolling. Zac couldn't fathom how they set up such a large wall in only a few days. He could only explain it with magic, as even hundreds of individuals with Zac's strength would have to work for months of gathering stones and setting up the wall.

Finally, in the middle of the town a grand structure was being erected at a speed visible even from his great distance.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Changes:

1. The size of the island was earlier 20-40 km. But I removed it and changed it into "huge". First of all 20-40 km is too small, he'd be able to run across the whole thing in an hour with his stats. Secondly he shouldn't be able to gauge distance with a glance, I mean who's able to do that for stuff like kilometers (miles).

2. Abby the Eye has had a makeover. A commentor enlightened me that beholders are a copywrited monster of the DnD wizard people. I'd always thought beholders were of mythological origin, kind of like minotaurs and vampires.

As I do not want to steal someone else's monster Abby had to change. She is no longer a beholder, she's a Stargazer. She is still an eye, but her looks have gone from a floating human eye into something a bit different. In my opinion I actually believe it turned out for the better as I really like the new look. Her new description is in spoiler below.

#### **Spoiler: Spoiler**

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

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

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

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

3. There also has been various improvements to oopsies throughout the text. A big thank you for pointing them out to me. I have been a bit inconsistent in replying to some but not others, but know I am thankful for it. I read all the comments, and when an error is pointed out it is fixed.

4. I have a new name, but the same old sloppy work ethics.

### **Chapter 34 - Conspiracies**

Ogras Arh'Rezak was already starting to tire of this whole enterprise. The humidity of this baby world was far higher compared to what he was used to, and the two blaring suns forced him to keep squinting through the day. The terraforming was helping, but it would still take a long time until the climate got to the point that was comfortable.

He somewhat regretted exhorting his ancestor to let him lead this invasion. With his status in the clan, he still would have been entitled to any good items they could seize on this world, even if he stayed at home.

But he knew this invasion was his opportunity if he wanted to stay alive. If he could find enough goodies for either himself or the clan he'd be safe until he was strong enough to protect himself.

But who would have thought that The Ruthless Heavens placed them on a godforsaken island? It had rendered his tactic of unleashing his packs through the portal seem like a joke. There had already been voices of disagreement in the clan to such a cowardly tactic, but Ogras had only sneered at their snide remarks.

While most baby worlds were disorganized and paralyzed from the huge changes, some were quite dangerous. There were many anecdotes of new planets resisting and even sometimes completely massacring all the different invaders.

Of course, it was usually the forces behind the other incursions on the planet that were the real enemies, rather than the weak natives.

In any case, he wasn't about to stick his neck through a portal before increasing his odds of survival, even if it was considered cowardly.

His seven elder brothers had been heroic warriors, always charging into the fray, leading any charge in skirmishes. And now they were all food for the maggots. Some were killed by their enemies, and some died from machinations of their own clan members.

The path to power was ruthless, and even among kin benefits preceded loyalty. There had been a large amount of dissatisfaction towards his branch of the clan for a long time. His great grandfather was originally a normal soldier who managed to rise to his great power through a few lucky encounters.

His prowess had allowed his progeny to enjoy great benefits and resources, even matching that of the main branch's youth. Ogras suspected that was why his siblings kept dropping dead one after another. He had voiced such concerns to his ancestor, but

being a warrior for the clan his whole life his thought patterns had become rigid. He had bled and fought for the clan for over a thousand years, and couldn't imagine that they would backstab him and his kin like that.

That's why only the two of them were left, not counting his great aunt who disappeared to become a wandering warrior two hundred years ago. That was also why he kept this ridiculous persona going, pretending to have become a pampered wastrel not interested in cultivation. The fewer of his clan members believed that he was a threat, the lower was the chance that he'd wake up with his throat slit.

That's why he walked around in his gaudy outfits and surrounded himself with useless sycophants. It was another type of armor. And if he could further his ambitions while it looked like he was just being spiteful and stupid, then all the better.

He had almost laughed out loud when the news of the death of Kevoran arrived at his desk. That little prick from the main branch was one of his largest contenders for any potential goodies that would be found on this planet.

While Kevoran was afraid of his ancestor, only the youths and unevolved were able to go through the portal. So his attitude had progressively gotten worse with each day since they arrived. Ogras had used a snide remark as a basis for ordering him to go with a scout's squad to canvas the whole island, in order to solidify his position while Kevoran was gone.

Who knew the idiot actually would get himself killed? It was a bit of a shame with Kaela dying as well, as her scouting abilities were top notch among the youths in the clan. But the death of Kevoran more than made up for it. Ogras could kiss the assailant on the mouth if he found him. Just before decapitating him, of course.

Ogras wasn't overly concerned about the little rats that were hiding on this or some neighboring island. He estimated the number of enemies to be somewhere between 10 to 20, judging from the number of beasts killed. They certainly had to be some elites on this world to be able to kill even his imps and two scouting parties this soon after their world changed, but it didn't matter.

He was well aware of the rules by which The Ruthless Heavens worked. As long as he stayed safe in his palace, then his mission would be a success in roughly two months. The portal would stabilize, and the area would be within his jurisdiction.

The native's group would have to infiltrate his army base, kill their way through the army, and then kill him in order for their quest to succeed. No matter how strong they were they still were only weak natives, and such an assault was suicide.

If they had actually been truly strong they wouldn't have been forced to use trickery to kill his poor Vul. They would simply have slaughtered all his four pack leaders and stopped the invasion before it even started.

Therefore he would simply stay in the base. Even if everyone thought he was a coward he didn't care. He had already planned everything out. He didn't plan on staying for too long in this world.

Initially, he had planned to stay here for a long time, protected from his clan by the limitations of the gate. It was an advantage for him that he could finally cultivate in peace here without anyone finding out, as the suppression would keep his real prowess hidden in any case.

But something had changed this. The mountain contained treasure.

More exact, it contained a Nexus Crystal mine. Even Ogras had been shocked when he heard the news. Of course, it was only a small F-Grade mine, but still, the wealth it contained was staggering. It could at least rival the whole accumulated fortune of some of the elders in the Clan.

With that kind of wealth he could obtain a Fruit of Ascension. It would save him decades on his cultivation time and would leave his competitors among his generation in the dust. Normally, for a clan of their limited power, using such a luxurious treasure on an F-grade cultivator would be considered far too extravagant. But for him it was a matter of life and death.

The supreme elders and clan leader usually turned a blind eye to killings within the clan as they believed it created stronger and more ruthless members among those who survived.

But if someone showed enough promise they would protect their seedlings from the shadows, as they were potential future powerhouses that could bring their clan to greater heights.

And if he just so happened to pilfer enough crystals for him to cultivate in solitude for a decade or so he could come back one advancement, maybe even two, stronger. Then he'd be the hunter instead of the hunted.

Ogras was giddy as he looked over the report containing yesterday's haul from the mine. Hesitated a bit and then with a swipe removed a few lines of the report, and added back a new tally. This time the extracted amount of crystals printed were 1000 lower compared to before.

Unfortunately, he wasn't the only one who had this kind of idea. There had been quite a few children with good heritage that had come with him into the incursion. Everyone was hoping to find the lucky break which would allow them to stand out among the masses.

It was tacitly approved by the elders that the young elite would have a feeding frenzy when they arrived at the new world, as some healthy competition was good for strengthening. As long as enough benefits were lugged back they did not really care that some didn't make it all the way.

As Ogras was pondering about his next steps the door to his temporary study opened, and a man decked in an extravagant armor entered.

This time Ogras was angered for real, as such conduct was a blatant disregard for his authority. Still, he wouldn't break character for something minor like this.

"Insolence! How dare you enter my chambers like his! I will have my grandfather flog you when we return!" Ogras roared as soon as the man was inside the door.

"My apologies" the man answered with a face that spoke of no regret. "I wonder what steps you have taken to capture those responsible for my cousin's death."

The man in front of him was Rydel Arh'Rezak, one of the heirs to the main branch just like the departed Kevoran. Different from him though, Rydel was one of the most heavily nurtured youths in the clan, and also one they had spent the most Nexus Crystals to allow to retain as much power as possible when going through the incursion.

The more power you retained in an invasion to a baby world, the better your survival rate would be, and the better your position would be when contending for resources on this new world. But The Ruthless Heavens never just gave anything for free. It charged an exorbitant amount of Nexus Crystals if one wanted to keep more of their strength when passing through. And of course there was a limit, or the purpose of the incursions would be lost.

Clan Arh'Rezak wasn't overly wealthy, and could only pay up to a point for each daemon going through. Any more and the risk of the invasion turning unprofitable would be too big. The rest would have to come out of their own pockets.

Most of the soldiers couldn't afford it or only got a few levels extra, but the scions of their clan of course got some special benefits under the table. Either from their elders or even from the clan itself.

Maybe not even Ogras himself was a match for Rydel, though he had a few hidden aces in case they ever came to blows. And it might actually come to that, as Ogras had a strong suspicion that Rydel had been sent through the portal to both keep an eye on things, and if possible, neutralize him. That would eliminate any threat of a branch family becoming too strong in the clan.

"The crystal mine isn't going anywhere, and it would seem a waste to attach such large manpower to quickly excavate it. Also, a large portion of our mages are occupied building your... Palace. In my opinion, it would be more pertinent to..."

"It doesn't matter what your opinion is, Rydel. The clan decided I was the most suited for this task, so my orders are what goes. Now leave my study, and remember your manners in the future or there will be repercussions!" Ogras practically screamed, looking very much the part of a fool enjoying his new found power.

Rydel only sneered and performed a barely acceptable salute, and left the study without another word.

Left silently brooding behind his desk, Ogras prayed that the natives and Rydel would find and kill each other, solving all his problems at once.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Another Daemon POV, this time with the big boss himself. Hope you enjoyed

#### **Chapter 35 - The Fourth Beast**

Zac sat perched on a branch in a large tree eating an apple he had foraged earlier. The tree was one of the few in the vicinity that still stood tall and unaffected by the corrosive effect of the incursion, and its dense branches provided natural insulation from prying eyes. He had chosen this tree to be his temporary shelter to spend the night yesterday.

He had spent two nights close to the incursion now, trying to gain as much information as possible. Yesterday he had kept scouting around the demon city and up toward the mountain.

He had made some interesting discoveries. First of all, he had realized how the third skill quest progressed. It was based on time. It seemed that he had to be out in the forests fighting roughly 18 hours for the quest to progress by 1 point. That meant that he had to spend most of his time awake fighting every day. He didn't mind though, as he was planning on doing that anyway.

But it also meant that it would be an extremely close shave to actually manage to complete it before the 2-month deadline. He had already decided he didn't dare to wait, he'd kill at least the two remaining heralds as soon as possible. He didn't want to repeat what happened with Vul, being incapacitated and missing his deadline due to waiting until the last moment. He needed time to recuperate in case he got hurt from the fights.

He had also found the fourth type of beasts that the demons had brought through the portal. They were magic monkeys. Or rather they were called Stone Monkeys by his [Eye of Discernment], and did not look quite as demonic as the other three animals.

They were roughly up to his chest in height but had a bulkier build. They were an anthracite grey and surprisingly no fur. Instead, it looked that they had plates of rocks covering most parts of their bodies, forming almost a natural armor. The aspect that made them look somewhat demonic was their shining red eyes.

The stone monkeys were the most well-rounded of all the demon beasts so far. The barghest was all brawn and no brain, the gwyllgi high speed but low strength, and the imps were incredibly dangerous but also incredibly frail.

The stone monkeys were strong, agile and also durable. Even more annoyingly they seldom moved alone. They seemed to be united in one large group, and Zac suspected that the fourth Herald was the pack leader. He hadn't seen it, however, as he didn't dare venture too far into the mountains as it was crawling with monkeys.

That meant that the final Herald apart from the monkey was either a juiced up gwyllgi or imp, depending on which of the two he had managed to kill with his lucky roll for survival. He wasn't sure which he preferred to be alive, as both felt like they'd be a pain in the ass to fight.

It seemed that the monkeys stayed in the mountain due to their affinity with rocks. Zac often saw them perched and completely immobile on outcroppings as though they were gargoyle sculptures. Their natural habitat was likely in mountainous regions back at their home planet.

He had been happy to notice that each stone monkey gave a lot of Nexus Coins upon killing them. However, he still would rather farm the less lucrative barghest after his only encounter with the monkeys.

Zac thought he had finally managed to single out a solitary stone monkey. It was far away from any demon activity and seemed to be randomly walking around close to the foot of the mountain. Zac had planned to fight it to test it out.

What followed had truly exceeded his expectations. As soon as the monkey noticed Zac it didn't try to fight. Instead, it screeched at the top of its lungs and started fleeing back up the mountain. While it was faster than a normal human, it still was no match for Zac.

Within a few seconds he had caught up to it, and a brief struggle erupted. The monkey's fighting style was a full-on brawl, and it was a whirlwind of punches and kicks in a disorganized and confusing manner. It also had a pair of sharp teeth which it tried using when an opportunity arose.

Zac estimated the Strength of the beast to be somewhere in the 60's, almost on par with Zac's before he got his class. Its other stats were quite good across the board, even its intelligence seemed higher compared to Earth's normal primates.

Of course, even with its strong stats, it was no match against Zac. He had grabbed an arm with his free hand and threw the monkey down on the ground. A quick swing and it was dead. The stone plating on the monkeys was quite hard but offered little resistance to his weapon.

The problems came after. The screech of the monkey had pulled a swarm of his brethren over, who all had seemed extremely enraged upon seeing their fallen comrade.

Thus Zac had been beset by an avalanche of angry fists and kicks coming in from all directions. Every swing of his axe had maimed or killed a monkey, but they were endless and fearless. Finally he had escaped, only because the monkeys seemed loath to leave the mountain and enter the forest. They had stopped right at the foot of the mountain, angrily roaring at Zac.

Zac was completely exhausted by then, both physically and his cosmic energy. Even new and improved pathways had barely managed to sustain him in his escape. He wasn't sure that he'd make it out if that onslaught had started a bit further up the mountain. He'd be drained and then finished off.

The upside from that experience was that it had been the most efficient farming of currency and cosmic energy he had ever done, except from when he killed the

heralds. In that free-for-all brawl, he had gained a level and over 10 000 Nexus coins. He wasn't sure about how many he had actually killed during the escape, but it seemed that the monkeys each awarded around 350 to 400 nexus coins.

The individual gain wasn't at the level of the imps, but there was a horde of monkeys but only a scant few imps from what he had seen so far. Of course, there still were many locations on the island he still hadn't ventured to, and they might be a cluster of imps somewhere.

If the monkeys weren't so territorial and had such teamwork, he'd never want to leave the mountain again. He'd gain enough Nexus Coins to buy the movement skill [Steps of Gaia] in no time. But he deemed it too large a risk to farm these beasts, at least for now. He would have to venture up the mountain again soon though, as the Herald was probably hidden somewhere in there, maybe in the form of a monkey king.

He'd wait until he had his class skills first until he ventured back into the mountains.

He had also figured out the general composition of the demon forces. He estimated that there were somewhere around 5 000 demons on the island in total. Their current activities could generally be divided into three parts.

The first part was the construction of a giant palace in the middle of the town. It still wasn't finished, but Zac was amazed by the design even before seeing the finished product. It looked like medieval eastern architecture had been fused with nature. The structure was made both from stone and trees.

And by trees, he didn't mean chopped down lumber, but actual trees. There were dozens of mages that reminded Zac of the root mage he had killed, who grew large black trees out of the ground. They then somehow forced it to grow in shapes that would constitute rooms and walls. It took less than an hour for a few mages to grow one of the house-trees into its final size. There were also mages who summoned rocks out of the ground. Under their care the rocks seemed like clay, allowing the mages to form them to their will to form a natural feeling to the walls and other stone features.

The palace was only three stories tall at the highest point, but it was expansive, featuring multiple buildings, beautiful gardens, sky wells, and courtyards. The gracefully curved roofs were made with tiles, with their eaves hanging out a few meters from the structures. The most central building in the complex had two layers of eaves, giving it an even grander feeling. Zac supposed that was either the general's living quarters or some type of throne room. Surrounding it all was a black hedge roughly 2 meters tall. It felt decorative rather than providing any protection, as anyone would easily get through or above it.

The only thing that took away from the grand structure was the dull colors. The palace was mostly in shades of black and grey, giving it a very foreboding feeling. The only flashes of color were splotches of red in some details, the shade reminding him of the shining pillar.

The second group moved back and forth between the town and a cave in the mountain. He wasn't exactly sure what they were doing there, as they held no equipment or the like when moving. They likely had magic pouches just like him, obscuring any hint of what was going on inside. He didn't dare sneak in, as there seemed to be activity inside the cave at all times.

His two guesses were they either were mining, or there was some sort of huge area beneath that they explored. He hadn't seen anyone hurt or wounded when walking back from the cave at least, so it shouldn't be full of subterranean monsters at least.

The last group, and also the smallest, was small parties heading out of the town and in different directions of the island. They looked like small search parties, but not like the ones he had encountered so far.

It seemed that the demons had learned their lessons from their two missing groups, and had improved the power of the parties. They all held at least five demons, but that wasn't all. Accompanying them was a varied amount of beasts. They all had a few Gwyllgi running around to the front and the sides for the party, seemingly acting as scouts. There was also a couple of barghest that moved in the front, filling the role of meat shields. A few parties even had an imp or two subserviently following the demons.

Zac felt like he was no match for a party like this, there were too many variables and things that could damage him at the same time. He hadn't tried fighting those parties, staying far away as possible. Now that he knew what he was up against, he realized he really only had one advantage.

He knew a lot about them, but for them, he was still an enigma.

## **Chapter 36 - Determination**

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

In case you missed it, I've started a [link](#) in case you enjoy the story and wish to support it. Some Q/A posted earlier about it.

After observing the demons for two days Zac also was certain that they were real living, breathing beings. He had always had a sneaking suspicion that they might be puppets, or NPC's if you will, created by the system to give a challenge to Zac and earth.

But the last two days he had watched them go about their day. They had worked, they had joked around and played cards. He had seen a few start a fierce brawl until a leader ran up and broke them apart. In essence, they were alive.

He hadn't really thought about it properly before, but they were just like him. Did they even want to be here, or were they forced by the system just like him? Could he just keep regarding them as the enemy, and killing them simply a means to an end?

But Zac soon had soon steeled his heart. The world has fallen, and chaos reigned. They were invaders on the island, HIS island. From everything he had seen and hypothesized since the integration in the multiverse he knew he couldn't go soft and hope for a peaceful solution.

Even if that somehow was possible before, he already had pulled the trigger and killed a bunch of their kind. Any opportunity for negotiation was already out the window. He would sooner or later have to decide how to act if he ever managed to reunite with humans again, but for now, the only diplomacy he'd deliver would be with the swing of his axe.

He couldn't and wouldn't give up on his goal of finding his family, and he knew that he had to become powerful to accomplish that. He had to become a true Defier as Abby called it, someone defying fate and breaking through his limits. Just his small island was fraught with danger, and this was only a small corner in this world. He had no idea how the rest of the world looked since the system merged it with multiple others, but he held no illusions that it had become some sort of paradise.

If he had to sacrifice these demons to reach his goals, then so be it.

Besides, Abby had warned him of not completing quests given by the System. It could have unexpected and horrific consequences it seemed. It meant that people like

Zac were almost like slaves to the System, forced to play its games. Unfortunately, he was incapable of doing anything about it, and could only play along.

Zac started heading back to his own camp after his second night at close proximity to the incursion. He had seen what he needed to see and now needed to get back. Being away from his camp from prolonged times filled him with anxiety, especially with the new larger war parties roving through the island for some reason. If a party found his camp while he was gone he would be forced to hide in the tree crowns and caves until he finished the quest, and he had no desire to do that.

Still, he made himself stop at the demonized part of the forest and farm out barghest and gwyllgi for a good 10 hours before continuing on. He could never stop fighting and killing in order to progress his skills. Besides, the density of beasts in the central area was so high that he was gaining coins and cosmic energy at a furious rate.

The only difficulty was that they were in such close proximity with each other's that often one or a few demons would hear the sounds of battle and join the fray. He got a few gashes and cuts from the onslaught, but nothing that would impact him.

Eventually, he left the area and started heading towards the south. Finally late at night he started to arrive at more familiar parts of the island. He had seen signs of the demon parties on the way and had made a hasty retreat in order not to get entangled with them.

After a while he finally arriving back at his camp he kicked off his shoes and sat down on his comfortable newly acquired throne. In the beginning he had felt isolated and afraid as he was stuck in his little camp, fretful when hearing roars in the distance. Now it felt like a safe haven, a home.

Even with the dried viscera from the exploding demon, the still somewhat visible aftermath from the first fight with the demonling, and the bloodied indoors of the camper, he felt his heartbeat and breath calm down just from entering through the illusion array. In this little bubble, he didn't need to be a walking slaughterhouse wreaking havoc on the demon population, he could just be.

He just sat on his new chair and closed his eyes. He felt the luxurious rug between his toes, and the wind caressing his hair. For a second he could forget the hellish existence he had led lately.

A bestial roar in the distance woke him up from his revelry. Zac sighed and got up on his feet. He still didn't have the luxury to relax, there were things to do.

His scouting excursion had given him most of his answers, but he was struggling with coming up with a plan that might work. From his guesswork, he believed one of the heralds was somewhere up on the mountains, while the other was still unaccounted for.

Finally he had to kill a general, and Zac guessed he would be the big boss. It likely was one of the fancier-looking demons in their city, but he had no idea as of yet how to actually get to him, or how strong he was.

He held no illusions that he would be able to take the straight-forward approach and kick in the gate down and charge his way through. He'd be punched full of holes before he knew what happened.

There was the possibility of sneaking in during the dead of night and assassinating the general. But Zac felt that this was unlikely to succeed as well. For one he didn't know who the general was, but more importantly, he didn't have the skill-set to pull off such a caper. He wouldn't have any problem scaling the wall or climbing into a window in the palace.

But doing so soundlessly and without any of the numerous guards noticing was the real challenge. While the scouts at the edge of the valley had been very

lackadaisical about their task, the military command seemed far stricter in the actual town.

There were guards in the towers and in the walls around the clock, with changes at intervals Zac couldn't figure out. It seemed almost randomized. He saw no chance to sneak in during a guard change. Furthermore, most of the vegetation had been cut down in the vicinity of the town, making a stealthy approach nigh impossible.

Zac had even considered tunneling into the town, but that felt much too risky. If a demon party found his entrance he'd be stuck inside. Besides, he had seen that the demons had multiple stone mages who built the palace. They might be able to detect him even when underground with some spell.

He had also toyed with the idea of trying to destroy the crystal. But he eventually gave that up as well. For one it contained such extreme amounts of energy that he was afraid it would explode and obliterate the whole island if he managed to crack it.

But more importantly it seemed that the demons were not worried in the slightest about the crystal. They just left a few men there and then left to build their town further north. If the crystal was instrumental to their invasion they'd surely protect it far better, as it seemed to be no effort for them to erect walls quickly.

Zac could only put it aside for now as he had gotten nowhere the last two days. He would focus on what he could do for now.

He had missed a few days of cutting wood while outside and had some catching up to do. His killing speed on this 3-day expedition had been astonishing, mostly due to the sheer number of targets in the center of the island. As he rhythmically swung his axe down, he mentally brought up his quest panel.

#### **Active Quests**

##### **Dynamic Quests**

**Off With Their Heads (Unique):** Kill the four heralds and the general of an incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (2/5)

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

##### **Class Quests**

**Axe Mastery (Class):** Mastery is born through battle. Fell 1000 enemies. Reward: (548/1000)

**Chop (Class):** First chop Wood. Then their bodies. Reward: (1240/10 000)

**Forester's Constitution (Class):** Fight in the forests, be one with nature. Reward: (3/30)

He still hadn't gotten any new active quests since finishing the class quest. He was starting to suspect that the active quests were locked to certain areas and events. He wouldn't get anything like an upgrade class quest for some while he suspected, as he just had gotten his class. Meanwhile, maybe the demon slaying quest he got was tied to the island, and he'd have to leave it for another area to get another.

Either that or he was missing something about the quests. Perhaps they simply were quite rare. The one he completed did give him a title after all, and those were permanent upgrades.

Zac kept cutting wood long into the night, before finally sitting down for a few hours of sleep. He still stayed outside, as he didn't want the walls of the camper to dampen any sounds of a potential demon war party heading his way.

The next day he woke up early and immediately headed out. He had decided to stop killing any demons close to his camp. He was afraid that a complete lack of beasts around a certain area would alert the demons. He headed toward the center, this time toward the eastern part.

He was planning on grinding beasts while looking for clues about the fourth elusive herald. Ur'Khaz had been killed in the south as it occupied the same space as him, and he had killed Vul in the western area. The monkey king was likely somewhere in the mountain to the north and that left the eastern quadrant. He thought that he would try gather some more intel while finishing up the class quests.

He went back to camp when the night approached and chopped wood for a few hours. He was lucky that he had found the pouch, as he was starting to accumulate a ridiculous amount of firewood. He had decided to leave most of it in a few dry spots around the island. Just for safety he'd construct a simple roof with some branches and leaves to protect the lumber from a downpour. The lumber was proof of his effort, and it felt wasteful to just throw away.

He kept this routine going for a few days. His intense activities left him with less than 4 hours of sleep, yet he felt refreshed when he woke up. He wondered if he'd get to a point where he didn't have to sleep at all if his vitality and endurance got high enough.

Suddenly, as Zac slammed down his axe into the head of a barghest, a huge surge of cosmic energy entered his mind, causing him to almost black out.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Another long chapter. Seems I've almost cranked out a bonus chapter through 4 consecutive long chapters.

### **Chapter 37 - Monstrous Power**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Last chapter of the week, hope you enjoy!

As I've written earlier I've started a page. Big thank you for the early adopters who already have pledged! Today I added some goals with rewards. Nothing huge, but something I at least dare promise I'll be able to deliver.

While having some difficulty staying conscious Zac finished off the other three beasts that had arrived due to the noise of the fight. Luckily the surge of energy soon dissipated.

He quickly retreated after the kills, not wanting to keep battling any more barghest for the moment. After running for a few minutes he reached one of his hideouts, another construction high up in a tree.

As he sat down on the bedding on leaves he could finally focus on the new things in his head. Just as he suspected he had completed the quest for Axe Mastery with his last kill. His speed of killing had far surpassed his expectations. He had given himself a 10-day deadline but had finished it in just below a week's time. It was mostly thanks to the high density of monsters in the central part of the island. The monsters were everywhere, and he didn't have waste a lot of time traveling looking for his next target.

Zac closed his eyes to go over his new skill and was surprised to suddenly find himself standing on the edge of a cliff. Jolted by the change in scenery he immediately opened his eyes, only to once again see the familiar sight of his hideout.

It had only been an illusion or something created in his mind, but it had felt so real he had thought for a second he had been teleported somewhere. Zac calmed his breathing and slowly closed his eyes again.

He once again found himself to be standing on the desolate cliff. As he looked around he found that the cliff was a part of a seemingly endless canyon. It stretched further than Zac could see and the bottom was shrouded in a thick mist, giving the impression of being bottomless. The illusory world itself was a dull grey, as though all life had been sucked out of the area.

The most shocking sight wasn't the canyon however, it was the enormous axe that was embedded in the ground a few hundred meters away from him. It was at least 50 meters tall and exuded a pressure that almost made Zac collapse just from standing in the vicinity.

The axe itself was simple and unadorned with a straight wooden haft. It was a double axe made in seemingly ordinary steel with curved edges. Even though it looked simple Zac felt that he was gazing at a supreme treasure just from the towering aura it exuded.

As soon as Zac's eyes landed on the edge of the axe he stumbled backward, his face turning a ghastly white. It had felt like he was being split in two from just looking at the edge.

After regaining his bearing he tentatively looked up at the axe again, careful to avoid looking at the edges. But as he did, his vision once more changed.

The bleak dead world changed to one that could best be described as a paradise. Golden clouds hung in the sky, and there were fantastical buildings upon them. A network of translucent bridges connected the sky cities, and flying contraptions could be seen gliding about.

Zac himself was floating far up in the sky, seemingly unencumbered by gravity. Facing him was a vast celestial army. The army shone in a splendor of white and gold, and the generals radiated a terrifying power that Zac wouldn't even be able to begin to grade. A few groups of the army were circling pillars as large as skyscrapers, and it took Zac a moment to realize the huge structures were actually supersized array flags, like the ones he had in his camp.

There were even titans among the ranks of the humanoid army, the shortest standing being at least 100 meters tall. Their muscular frames looked strong enough to carry mountains.

The army gave Zac a holy feeling, but it also emitted a monstrous killing intent, which largely seemed to be focused on himself. The very air seemed to vibrate with resentment.

Zac was terrified, as he instinctively knew that each and every one of these warriors would be able to end him without breaking a sweat. He tried to turn around and flee, but he couldn't move even his eyes.

A sigh escaped for his lips, making him realize he was not just an incorporeal being spectating, but inhabiting a body that was out of his control. It seemed he was viewing the scene through the eyes of someone else.

His eyes suddenly looked down on his body, seeing a muscular frame covered in simple linen clothes. His feet were bare and dusty, looking as though he had walked all day without any shoes. Suddenly an axe entered his vision. It was hefted in his right hand and looked identical to the enormous one he had seen in the first vision at the canyon.

The hand holding it was extremely rough and calloused as if it had been holding and swinging the axe for an eternity.

His vision went back to the army, who now seemed to be preparing to attack. The air was rife with runaway power, almost to the point that the cosmic energy would liquefy.

Thousands of warriors started infusing cosmic power into the towering array flags, who started to shine in a white light that superseded even the pillar on his island.

Suddenly two enormous gates appeared above the army, summoned by the arrays. As the gates started to open an even stronger power started to leak out. It felt like a god's punishment was held within those gates, and if they opened he would be destroyed body and soul.

But even against this force the being Zac inhabited didn't react. He simply lifted his axe, and with a grunt swung it down in a vertical arc.

It was as though the world turned white with that swing, and nothing existed except its almighty arc expanding outward. Nothing could withstand it. The celestial soldiers were dismembered without managing to even muster up a defense.

The pillars shattered, and the Titans roared and tried to defend against the wave with their superior physiques. It was to no avail as they crumbled when the wave passed through them.

Some of the leaders frantically summoned awe-inspiring amounts of cosmic energy to muster up defenses that left Zac in shock. Others ripped open tears in the air itself to escape, shock and horror visible on their faces. But the blade arc pushed through and crushed the defenses like dry twigs, annihilating the last remnants of the army. Soon after even the void was split apart and dismembered body parts were thrown out of jagged rifts, and Zac could see it was the leaders that had tried fleeing through the void.

Zac's vision started to blur, but the last thing he saw before everything faded was a hideous scar on the ground that stretched to the horizon. It looked like the world itself was maimed, and vast amounts of cosmic energy bled through the gash.

Zac's vision returned to the canyon and the huge axe. Only now he understood it wasn't a canyon, but the rift caused by that endlessly powerful axe-swing. The once celestial vision he had seen during the battle was gone, replaced with the empty desolation of a dead world.

Zac's emotions were in turmoil after the battle. He had become steady as a rock after over a thousand battles on the island, but he wasn't prepared for what he had seen. Who was that man, and why was that army trying to fight him?

Was that how a war in the multi-verse looked? If so, then earth was well and truly screwed. If someone arrived on earth with only a fraction of the power of the man with the axe, then there was nothing the earthlings could do. It would be like ants trying to stop a tank.

Furthermore, he didn't understand why he was shown this vision. He had just gotten the skill Axe Mastery and suddenly was transported here.

As he was pondering what it all meant the gigantic axe started emitting a blinding light. When he turned his eyes over to the weapon the light intensified and suddenly the axe was gone.

In its place was a large fractal that shared the same general outline as the axe. It also emitted extreme pressure, making Zac feel as though he could somehow be cleaved in two from this pattern as well.

The fractal didn't stay still for long, and suddenly started to shrink. When it had shrunk into the size of his palm it suddenly shot toward him like a bullet. Aghast Zac tried to dodge. It truly felt like the monstrous axe was charging at him.

It was to no avail however, and it slammed right into his forehead. Zac froze, not daring to move an inch.

Luckily the release of death didn't arrive, and he found out he was completely fine. The fractal hadn't cut him but somehow entered his head instead. He could now sense its existence in his mind, and it hovered there now seemingly inert.

Finally, he bit his finger making a small bleeding wound, and willed himself back to reality. He opened his eyes, still sitting in his small hideout. He was shocked to notice that he was completely soaked in sweat and drained of cosmic energy. It also seemed that hours had passed, rather than minutes as it had felt like, since the suns had moved quite a distance in the sky. But as he looked down on his finger it was whole and without any wound.

It seemed that the experience had truly been an illusion. He was already somewhat sure of that but had cut his finger just to be certain. He knew the System was no stranger to teleportation from how it sent away Hannah and her friends, and needed to know if he was in actual danger if it happened again.

For a final test, he tried to enter the mystic space once more, but nothing happened. It seemed it was a one-time opportunity he had received. He was at least happy to notice that the mysterious axe fractal actually had remained in his mind, as he could still perceive it outside of the illusion.

He was quite sure that the new fractal was the axe mastery skill that he had received, but he had no idea how to utilize it as of yet. He had initially planned on heading back to camp to finish his Chop quest as well, but he changed his mind.

He believed he saw those scenes for a reason and wanted to go over it while the memories were still fresh. So instead he rested his back against the tree trunk and once again closed his eyes.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Some action after the somewhat slow chapters! New stuff to explore next week.

Thank you to new patrons E. Castle, M. Kim, B Roberts, P. Iskra, and EnigmaticOne!

### **Chapter 38 - Insight**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New week new chapters!

REWRITES has happened to Zac.

Demon Slayer I Title: 1% Increased damage against Demons -> +1 All Stats when fighting enemies of demonic alignment.

Reasoning?

**Spoiler:** Spoiler

I honestly couldn't figure out how it would work, and I'm somewhat surprised that noone has asked so far. What does 1% damage mean when he chops some demon in his gut? Does it penetrate 1% deeper? It didn't make sense to have such a value when things like Damage points on attacks, HP etc doesn't exist in this novel. It wasn't really thought through and needed to be changed.

Instead +1 all stat gives a small all around boost when fighting the demons.

I can't remember all the places this is mentioned, and Search function might have failed me. If you find a discrepancy please notify me.

Zac's instincts told him that what he had seen had been important. So he tried to burn every feeling and impression to his memory.

The immense pressure that emanated from the axe and the terrifying sharpness of its edge. The world-ending power of the seemingly casual strike by the barefooted man. He had just swung once, but somehow everything he had wished to cut was cut, and nothing could escape him. Even the people who fled through portals hadn't been spared and were somehow killed in another space.

He tried to figure out why he was shown this vision. He could only assume it came from the System, as he couldn't imagine who else would, and could, show him such a thing.

He did not believe it was something as fantastical as a glimpse into his own future or a prophecy, rather felt it was far more likely the System was trying to show him something else. The only thing he could come up with was that it was sort of a training video. The illusion showed him what axe-mastery at a great, or maybe even the highest, proficiency looked like.

If that was the truth he wasn't disappointed anymore that he didn't get a rare or epic mage class. That army had even called upon the gates of heaven to attack, but it couldn't even withstand one chop. That axe master had also conquered the disadvantage of being a melee class. Everything in his vision was chopped and dismembered, no matter how far or fast they fled.

Of course, Zac knew that even if that was a real event that had happened, it had nothing to do with him. The power levels of those warriors did not seem as simple as having an E-grade or even D-grade class. It felt like a level so far off that it might just as well be a dream.

But still if he could glean some sort of truth or secret from the vision he'd likely benefit greatly from it. It also gave him a wake-up call about how formidable the forces out in the multi-verse were. He had known that there would be powerful people out there, but he hadn't imagined it being to this degree. That axe wielder would be able to cleave his whole island in two. That was not something that should be possible for a human being. That was the realm of the gods.

So it seemed actual beings with the powers of gods were out there. If one of them got angered with him or someone else from earth there might be irrevocable repercussions. There were already demons on his island, and there might be other forces on the planet as well. It seemed the restrictions were weakening as well, and sooner or later any old monster might be able to waltz through one of the incursions.

If he wanted to keep himself and his close ones safe he had to keep pushing forward until he himself was one of those gods.

Of course, he had to survive this island first before starting fantasizing about deifying himself. He refocused and started looking at the new fractal in his mind. He didn't really understand how it worked, but it felt like it was housed in an actual space in his mind, rather than it being just a memory.

It was a very weird feeling, as it was akin to noticing your body had secret compartments.

Unfortunately, no matter how he looked at the fractal he couldn't glean anything from it. He tried driving cosmic energy through it but it had no effect. Since it had entered his mind its heavy aura was gone, and it seemed dead or deactivated.

Zac sighed, feeling slightly disappointed. He had essentially been shown a pretty cool action scene, and was left with a pattern he couldn't use. He knew he was likely missing something, but could only return to his camp for now.

As he walked back he kept pondering about the vision he had seen. He wondered if he'd ever get to the point of that man in his vision.

He looked down on his axe and with a half-smile he swung it down just like the man in the illusion. Of course, no earth-shattering wave of destruction erupted from the swing. Only a slight swooshing sound was the result of the swing.

But after he performed the swing he stopped. The attack just felt *wrong*. He couldn't put it to words, but it was as though the attack was bland and flat compared to the one in the illusion. And he wasn't talking about the earth-shattering power, but something else.

Even though his swing and the axe-man's had the same trajectory it felt like man's swing was real and his the illusion rather than the opposite. Like the man's swing was a forest and Zac's just a picture of one.

His swing was missing something, and it was not form or technique, but something more intrinsic. If he hadn't seen that scene he never would have figured it out. He would think that a swing was just a swing.

He imagined the intense pressure he had felt when standing in front of the huge axe, and tried to incorporate it into the axe. It was easier said than done of course, and Zac kept swinging away while walking back. He even used some demon beasts as practice targets to try to get the feel.

He also tried incorporating cosmic energy into the fractal while swinging, but it also didn't do anything. He was still missing that feeling that would make his swings feel full instead of empty.

He tried to discern what made the axe-man so strong and made him effortlessly defeat the army. It wasn't speed. His swing had been slow to the point of almost feeling lazy. It hadn't been sophisticated or complicated either, but simple and unadorned, just like his axe.

But the swing was sharp. Anything it attacked was cut. It didn't matter if it were the huge titans, the awe-inspiring defenses of the top cultivators in the army, or even the gates of heaven. Everything that the axe waves hit was split in two.

However, what had made the largest impression on Zac was the heaviness the swing had contained. By that he didn't mean that the axe grew heavy like the great sword, but it felt like the axe had contained an unstoppable force when falling down. It had felt that the weight of a world was contained in that swing, and it had an unbending determination and intractability contained in it. Anything that tried to impede its path would be destroyed.

Zac didn't understand how he could know these things. They should be subjective opinions and personal impressions, but it felt like those impressions were rather inviolable truths. That the man's attack contained these abstruse elements felt as true and real as that the sky was blue.

Zac also somehow knew there was a multitude of other aspects hidden in that seemingly simple swing, but they seemed too far away and elusive for him to grasp onto. He decided to focus on the power and forcefulness for now rather than the sharpness as he felt the heaviness the most clearly in his mind. He was afraid of trying to study both aspects at the same time would be too hard for him to handle.

Zac tried to bring this sense of force and weight into his swing and started to bring more and more cosmic energy into it. His energy started to naturally flow along his pathways, and the whirling sounds from the axe started to sound slightly deeper.

Just as he started to feel that he started to grasp something a blue box suddenly popped up by itself.

**[Dao seed gained - Heaviness]**

Confused, Zac stopped swinging and brought up his status page.

**Name**  
**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**28**

**Class**

**Hatchetman (F)**

**Race**

**Human (F)**

**Alignment**

**Human (Earth)**

**Titles**

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

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - Early**

**Strength**

**136**

**Dexterity**

**57**

**Endurance**

**77**

**Vitality**

**66**

**Intelligence**

**46**

**Wisdom**

**46**

**Luck**

**64**

**Free Points**

**0**

**Nexus Coins**

**134780**

Zac was shocked when he saw his Strength. He had gained close to 30 points in Strength without gaining any levels.

There were two other changes to his page. The first was that he had a new title, Child of Dao. The second was an entirely new row was added next to the titles, called Dao.

Zac had heard of the concept of Dao somewhere, but couldn't remember the details. It was a part of eastern mythology or religion, but he didn't know exactly what it meant. But from context it felt like it was akin to insight or the like.

He had started to gain insight into the weight behind the man's swing, and he gained a Dao seed.

He began with checking his new title.

**[Child of Dao: Third in world to attain enlightenment and create a Dao seed. All stats +5, All stats +5%.]**

The description gave Zac a start. He was only the third in the world to gain the Dao seed. Since the integration into the multi-verse he had constantly been at the forefront, be it with achievements or levels. But he had actually been bested on this aspect.

He didn't know if someone had surpassed him in level since level 25 and gained a seed the same way as him, or whether there were other ways to get them. But it was a reminder that there were billions of people in the world. He had his lucky encounters, why couldn't others have theirs?

Besides, he knew he wasn't a born warrior, and it had taken him an enormous amount of effort to get where he was today. Perhaps there were geniuses that simply were perfectly suited for cultivation and the new world order.

The lost opportunity made him feel a bit depressed, and he swore at himself for all the time he had wasted. Had he gotten to this point a few days quicker he might have snagged a better title.

If the third spot got 5 points in all stat and 5% increase, what did the second and first place get? Perhaps as much as 10 points for second spot and a whopping 15 points for the first?

But Zac steadied his mind quickly, as he knew he couldn't get greedy. The number of advantages he had accumulated would probably make anyone on earth green with envy if they knew.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

So Zac has inevitably come in contact with the Great Dao.

Here's the thing. It doesn't necessarily need to be called Dao, I was thinking about calling them Truths, like Seed of Truth, instead. But I thought it was pretty funny that the cultivation system is based on Eastern religion and he is a westerner so I left it as Dao.

What do you think? Seeds of Dao or Seeds of Truth?

Also, if you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall, please check out my A big thanks to new patrons C. Pettersen, A. Brink, and Julian!

#### **Chapter 39 - Guidance**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

A lot of response to the question yesterday! There obviously both is a team Dao and a team Truth. There also were good alternatives such as Path and Law. I will ruminate on this for some more time as changing something like this around will impact the novel far into the future.

I'm also thinking about changing Dao of Heaviness to Dao of Thiccness Mass.

Next Zac wanted to check out the Dao seed. Soon he managed to open a new screen in the system.

It didn't have a lot of information, just a list in the same manner as the titles.

**[Dao seed of Heaviness - Early. Strength +10, Endurance +5]**

While the menu or information wasn't very spectacular, the stat bonuses were quite good. As Zac's main stats were Strength and Endurance this seed's bonus was a perfect gift. Perhaps a reason why he learned the Dao seed so smoothly was due to this.

It also made him understand the importance of Dao to the system. He just gained a seed of the Dao of Heaviness, and it was only an early seed. Both things indicated that he had just taken the first steps to understand this concept, but it already gave a boost worth a few levels.

What would it give if he managed to improve it to a higher level, like the Late stage? And what happened if it stopped being a seed and turned into the real thing? The boost it gave would likely be astonishing.

Zac felt that the seed and the fractal in his mind were somehow connected. He gained it while trying to emulate the powerful feeling in that axe swing after all. He once again turned his sight inward and gazed upon the axe fractal again.

He couldn't tell exactly how, but he sensed that the pattern of the fractal somehow subtly changed. It also no longer seemed inert as it was before, but emitted an aura that gave Zac the familiar sense of weight and intractability.

It was the same sense of heaviness that he somewhat managed to instill into his swings while trying to emulate the axe-man. Now that he could contrast it to the aura in the illusion, he understood that the Dao of Heaviness was only part of the whole picture, and the suffocating aura of the axe was something far greater.

Still, it was a step in the right direction. His seed was only at the early stage. There surely were ways to improve upon it, and perhaps someday his axe aura, or Dao, might be as mighty as the one he saw.

Now that the fractal felt active again, he once more tried to circulate cosmic energy through it. This time it actually worked, and the fractal lit up.

Suddenly his vision changed, and fractals started appearing. Some shone up like glowing footprints in the ground, and others were lights forming arcs and trajectories around him. The lights seemed to have no effect on its surroundings, not lighting the ground or trees up in the slightest. Furthermore, when Zac moved his head the lights moved with him and slightly adjusted. Meaning it came from the system in the same manner as his different menus.

It felt like he was wearing augmented-reality goggles, giving him an extra layer of reality that only he could see. At least he assumed only he could see the lights and the menus, as they only seemed to respond and change in reaction to Zac's movements and commands.

He tried to touch the fractals that formed the trajectories, but it was like trying to touch a rainbow. Furthermore, as he moved his hand the lights adjusted and moved as well. After adjusting to his new vision he tried stepping on the glowing footprints and moving his body according to the illuminated trajectories. He found himself swinging his axe in a slanted upwards motion. The movement felt smooth and natural, and it felt like he was able to bring the full force of almost his whole body into the swing.

He kept following the glowing instructions and found himself performing a multitude of attacks. There were not only normal swings, but every part of the axe was used. From the butt of the haft to the spike on the back-side of the head, everything was used in an array of methods to maim and kill enemies. It even showed how to use the rest of his body, such as grabbing with his off-hand, footwork and tackles.

It couldn't be said that the fractals in the air taught him actual Skills, but rather basic guidance on how to properly move and handle an axe.

Every strike had one thing in common, it contained the mass and intractability of his Dao. It made him realize many aspects of his weapon of choice as well. An axe differed from a sword in that it was balanced toward the head, whereas a sword was

closer to the handle. This gave an axe a higher forward momentum and higher destructive power.

To master the axe he should focus on the part where it excelled, meaning this power and forcefulness. Its disadvantage was that it wasn't as flexible as a sword was. The bladed area was also far shorter with an axe, so some precision was needed for a killing strike. At least until he could swing his axe in the fantastical manner of the man in the vision.

Zac kept going through various motions as he moved toward the camp. He was entranced by the beautiful simplicity in the moves, and the power they managed to bring out.

Suddenly he stumbled and fell down, shocked to notice that he was completely and utterly drained. He hadn't completely recovered his energy from his vision earlier, and it seemed like using the axe fractal consumed large amounts of cosmic energy.

At least Zac finally felt he had figured out how the **[Axe Mastery]** skill worked. It wasn't what he expected, but he was still very happy with the result.

He initially thought he would get a bonus to stats similar to the Demon Slayer title, like bonus stats while wielding an axe, and perhaps generally get imparted some knowledge about axes. The reality actually trumped his expectations, and the rewards were twofold.

The first part was the vision, which Zac now was certain was showed to him so that he could plant his Dao Seed. The other part was this guidance system that could help him improve his form and fighting abilities. It might have been more convenient if the System crammed his head full of these things, making him master these aspects immediately.

Perhaps that wasn't possible, as it was related to the Dao. Or perhaps the system didn't want to just hand things out willy-nilly. The guidance system was a god given in any case as Zac had missed the tutorial and sorely needed some guidance.

Of the two he felt the Dao-vision was the most valuable. One might be able to gain those seeds by themselves by meditating or being an expert on a subject, but Zac's intuition told him that it wasn't that easy. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been the third, but the 3<sup>rd</sup> millionth, to attain a Dao Seed. The world was full of experts, after all.

He decided on the spot to use the time he earlier spent on cutting wood on practicing his axe-form in the future. That time would be freed up as soon as he finished the second class quest in any case.

Zac sat down to recuperate and devoured some meat from his pouch, before continuing back home. It was dark when he returned to camp, as usual, this time due to his new skill rather than grinding monsters all waking hours.

Still, he couldn't rest, as he was too excited about what his other skill would be like. He started cutting wood in a furious speed, lumber flying left and right. After roughly 90 minutes he slowed down and caught his breath. He was only 10 swings away from finishing the quest for the **[Chop]** skill, and he wanted to be in rested condition just in case.

He drank a mouthful of water and steadied his breath before once again hefting his axe and swinging the 10 final strikes.

This time cosmic energy didn't enter his mind, but information. This time the impartment was akin to when he bought **[Eye of Discernment]** from the Nexus Crystal. Zac was a bit disappointed that he wouldn't get another vision that could give him another Dao seed or the like, but he knew that was a rare opportunity he gained.

The skill was another fractal, and the usage was similar to the identification skill. It needed him to circulate cosmic energy through his energy pathways in a specific manner, then imagining it entering this fractal. The difference was that while **[Eye of Discernment]** placed the fractals inside his eyes, the new one was on the top of his right hand. It wasn't a physical manifestation, rather it superimposed itself on his pathways.

This was different from his eye skill, which was isolated fractals in his eyes. The **[Chop]** skill's fractal seemed to actually merge with his Class-pathways. It didn't look out of place or messy, but it felt as a missing piece of a puzzle was added.

When Zac rewrote his pathways there were many parts that looked blurry and missing. It seemed that from his new skill that they were slots for his skills. Maybe even other skills, like **[Steps of Gaia]** that he was eyeing in the store, could be slotted into his pathway gaps.

He tried doing the same with his ocular skill, but it was a closed circuit fractal, giving no opportunity to integrate with his pathways. The axe mastery fractal was in an enclosed space in his mind, and he had no way to connect it to his pathways either. Unfortunately, he lacked any more skills to experiment with. He actually had enough Nexus Coins to buy the cheapest skills by now, but he didn't want to burn his hard earned cash for an experiment.

He wasn't sure what benefits there were to slotting it into his pathways compared to simply having them like his identification skill. He would have to test it and find out.

Even though it was late at night he couldn't wait, too eager to find out the effects of his new skill. Even if he realized it would be nothing like the great spells he saw in the vision, he had already fought against someone with an impressive skill. It was the demon leader with the great sword, whose furniture now adorned his campsite.

The black arcs of lightning had almost gotten him killed a few times. From the simple name of his own skill he realized that it might not be as extravagant though. But he did get it from a rare class after all, so it shouldn't be useless.

He planned to try out the skill by using it a few times, then finding a demon beast to test it on, so he left his camp in search for a decent target.

As he walked some ways from the camp he made a new discovery. A skill screen had been added to his various prompts. It hadn't been there when he bought the identification skill, which is why it had taken him all day before trying it. He surmised it must've activated when he got his class skills.

#### **Normal Skills**

**Eye of Discernment - Proficiency: - . A glimpse into the unknown. Upgradeable**

#### **Class Skill**

**Axe Mastery - Proficiency: Early. The seed of Dao is planted. Upgradeable**

**Chop - Proficiency: Early. There is greatness in simplicity.**

The screen showed scant information, but it did give Zac a few answers to things he had been wondering about. The class skills seemed to have proficiency, and both were at early stage. His Dao seed was at early stage as well, and he guessed that if he progressed in **[Axe Mastery]**, the seed might follow.

**[Chop]** would likely simply get stronger if the proficiency increased. His identification skill had no proficiency, and it seemed that it wouldn't get stronger. He

had wondered about whether he could improve his skill and get more information about enemies, or even be able to identify items.

It was, however, upgradeable. He saw no hint of the requirements, but it was good to know that he could improve the skill into a better one. [Chop] wasn't upgradeable, which was a bit disappointing. He could only hope the description was true, that there was greatness in simplicity.

If he went by his knowledge from video games, then he'd likely need to raise proficiency to the max before somehow upgrading [Axe Mastery] into a higher tiered skill. As that option wasn't available for [Eye of Discernment], he could only hope to find out some clues at a later date.

Of course, even if he wouldn't be able to upgrade [Chop] he'd still try to max out its proficiency. Who knew if the System would reward a Title, or new class quests if he did. The system did like it when people put in effort, after all.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

A bit chapter longer than usual. As I read through it one last time I wasn't satisfied with some parts so I took some time to rewrite. I ended up with the longest chapter yet with over 2100 words. Tomorrow's chapter will be a bit shorter tbh.

Also, if you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall, please check out my  
A big thanks to new patrons T. Wolf and Guisarme!

PS. My bad about the oopsie with double chapter yesterday. For some reason, my scheduler moves my publish time 2 hours when I save drafts, so I thought I forgot to schedule and put it in manually.

#### **Chapter 40 - Chop**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

#### **REWRITE ANNOUNCEMENT**

Its somewhat long and over multiple chapters, so I put it in a spoiler. Nothing affecting the main storyline.

**Spoiler:** Spoiler

Added/changed text in italics.

Chapter 8 - Abby gets more informative!

*Abby shook her eye and continued "From what I've heard only 5-10% of the population turn out to be cultivators in an F-energy world. And most of those people are younger, as their minds haven't turned too rigid yet. Of course, this is for you humans. The Multi-verse consists of myriad races and civilizations and many races have natural advantages compared to you humans, who are notoriously average."*

Chapter 23 - More on knives!

I got a quite angry review lately, but it brought up some good points. He for example questioned Zac's possession, and usage, of knives when fighting. Zac got his first knives after killing the 3 first demons (including Azzun), and the knives are mentioned there. But i expanded a bit on the chapter where he go through their gear.

*He didn't really care for the sword and left it to the side, but was delighted with the small knives. They were small and straight with edges on both sides of the blade, giving them excellent balance. He felt they were used for throwing and battle rather than skinning animals and the like.*

*They would be a great addition to his arsenal, as he was sorely lacking any ranged attack. Every time he wanted to kill an imp he had to hurl his axe on it or a*

*bunch of rocks. But this would be a deadly alternative which didn't force him to throw away his main weapon. He already practiced throwing rocks and the axe for some time every day, and swapping to daggers shouldn't be too large an adjustment.*

Chapter 24 - Class choices slightly re-vamped!

I still get angry comments daily on this chapter (its the one where he gets his class), and decided some changes after going through the comments. I still stand by his choices, but I generally agree he was too dismissive of the Demon Hunter class after having been very (in my opinion) pragmatic until that point.

Demon Hunter rarity demoted to Uncommon. Adjustments at various points in the chapter to accomodate for this. Some explanation of why he didn't choose this class added, so it feels like it makes more sense.

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

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

It also brings up that Zac doesn't know if the extra bonus vs demons is as valuable for him as choosing a class with higher rarity.

Chapter 32 - More on Nexus Crystals!

I clarified the usage restrictions of absorbing energy from the crystals. I listed some experiments already, but added the following conclusion.

*After a few more experiments he could conclude that he only could absorb cosmic energy from one crystal at the time and that he had to completely focus on the absorption for it to work. As soon as he tried to multi-task while absorbing a crystal the absorption simply would stop.*

As he walked away from the camp in the dead of the night he was going over his future path of development. He couldn't just focus on training with the new guidance system all day due to the third class skill requiring large amounts of time battling in the forest.

On the way from the camp he tried using [**Axe Mastery**] in an actual battle with a barghest. He was disappointed to see that the trajectories wouldn't actually assist him in battle, and completely shut off right before the battle started. It seemed it was purely a training mechanism.

Finally he arrived at a small clearing some distance from the camp. He didn't want to accidentally ruin his home in case the skill had any unexpected effects.

He started with using a small amount of energy and channeled it through his new fractal as he swung the axe. The energy transformed as it ventured out through his hand and into the axe. As he swung down he could see a translucent edge formed by cosmic energy.

It was like the axe head had gotten a bit larger, as the translucent edge ran a few centimeters in front of the actual edge, and its length was roughly 10 centimeters longer compared to the actual steel edge. The edge created from cosmic energy looked like a copy of his axe's actual edge, with some faint fractals added along its length.

It wasn't spectacular but he used a minuscule amount of energy in the strike. He tried using the skill once more, but this time he put far more cosmic energy into the

skill. The translucent blade grew quite a bit larger, now stretching noticeably outward. The blade was now over one meter long, making his once short-ranged axe have almost as long a range as the great sword he had commandeered. Luckily the edge didn't grow downward along the haft, but rather outward. Otherwise it would be hard for him to swing it without maiming himself.

It was out of Zac's expectation it would grow to this size. As he continued putting in more power into the skill it kept growing, but Zac soon felt that he was starting to lose control over the skill. Suddenly the cosmic energy blade simply dissipated, leaving no trace of ever being there.

It seemed that there was a limit of how large he could grow the blade without it starting to become unstable. After some experimentation he knew that he could keep the blade stable at roughly one meter. Any larger and it would quickly become unstable. The longer he made the blade the shorter duration he could keep it.

It seemed that this was all that there was to the skill. He tried shooting it away like a ranged attack or boomerang, but nothing happened. It was firmly lodged to his axe. Of course, the proficiency was only at early stage, and it might get more functions at higher levels.

Zac was still quite pleased with the skill, even though it wasn't as flashy as the black lightning of the demon leader. It wasn't fancy but he could immediately imagine a few uses for a skill such as this. For one he could surprise an enemy. He or she might have thought that they dodged his strike, but instead they were well within the range of his skill blade.

It was also a brutal instrument when fighting against multiple enemies. If he pushed it past its point of stability he could wield a huge blade and slash at multiple people at one, at least for a short duration before the skill broke. With his monstrous strength he believed that he could create a great deal of carnage in that brief window in time.

Of course, that would be a last resort attack, as cramming that amount of cosmic energy into one skill use would greatly drain him.

There was one thing he didn't understand with the skill. He had gained his Dao seed from managing to incorporate this intangible force of heaviness into his strikes while he was walking back to the camp, but he was utterly incapable of doing the same with the skill.

He tried using a few Dao empowered strikes, and they did have an air of weight to them. It wasn't as tyrannical as the axe-man's of course, but it felt like these strikes should be harder for someone to block compared to normal strike.

But when he tried incorporating this feeling into **[Chop]**, everything got jumbled and he didn't even manage to produce the blade. He saw no reason that they shouldn't work together but guessed that he had to practice some more before being able to use it as he wished.

The last thing for him to test out with the new skill was the sharpness. It was somewhat pointless if he got a larger edge if it wasn't sharp. Sure, with his strength he'd do damage anyways without a sharp edge, but if the translucent edge was dull he might as well swing around a tree trunk.

He charged up a meter long blade and swung down upon a rock almost as tall as him. With a clang the cosmic energy blade cut halfway into the stone. Satisfied, Zac let the blade dissipate.

It seemed that cutting through things would use up the energy faster compared to simply having it summoned, but even while not cutting things it continuously drained

him slowly. Of course he could likely keep inputting more and more energy and the blade would remain. But it seemed to be a wasteful use of cosmic energy.

Zac felt that the skill was best used as either a finisher or surprise attack, not in a long protracted battle. He would only be able to use it continuously for a few minutes at the most before being completely drained.

The sharpness seemed to be roughly the same as with his actual axe. It did seem to model itself after his axe's edge after all, so it made sense that they would share some features. He wondered if the sharpness improved if he got a higher grade weapon in the future. He was sure that his weapon was a low F-grade blade, as he had looted it on some random demon after all. It couldn't be too valuable.

He then brought out a sword from his pouch to test whether he could use **[Chop]** with other weapons, but it at least didn't work with swords.

He was planning on testing some more but a snap of a twig in the vicinity stopped him in his tracks.

Zac got a sinking feeling, as he had made sure that there were no beasts in the area before trying out the skill. He quickly slunk down into nearby foliage and started to retreat toward his camp, taking great care to not make a sound.

Only the gwyllgi among the demons seemed to be active during the night, but he had never heard those beasts make any sounds while moving through the forest. That meant that the snap of the twig was more likely to be one of the war parties moving about.

He swore at himself for his carelessness. He had been on a high from his new boosts and wasn't as careful as he should be. Even when grinding beasts his biggest priority had always been keeping a lookout for these parties. He always kept moving and didn't fight close to his base as he didn't want to attract attention to that area.

Now he was quite close to his camp, and his swing into the stone had made a sound. He soundlessly passed through the layer and entered his illusion array. He could only hope it was a large critter that was lumbering around in the dark.

Zac held his axe at the ready, vigilantly gazing into the woods. His hopes were soon dashed as he saw one of the roving war parties moving close by. The demons conversed in their language with subdued voices, seemingly arguing about something.

The core of the party consisted of 6 demons and an imp. They generally seemed to be average soldiers, with none of them wearing expensive-looking gear. There also were a few gwyllgi and barghest surrounding the party.

Zac didn't dare to move even though he knew that his camp just looked like an empty area with some extra dense bushes. His illusion array was effective on the eyes, but he had no idea whether there were skills that could sense the array. He had tried it with his **[Eye of Discernment]** without finding anything, but it was also the cheapest skill that the Nexus Node offered.

Suddenly he saw a gwyllgi was slowly coming extremely close, moving some ways from the group. If it kept moving the direction it did, it would enter the bushes he had moved to the edge of his camp, and soon after enter his array.

Zac's fears came true as it trotted forward and entered his camp through the dense bushes. Zac was ready and with lightning speed he grabbed the hound's neck as soon as it was through the array, and with a twist broke it. With his strength he could probably rip its head right off, but he didn't want any blood to spill.

He slowly dragged the corpse into the camp and flung it to the side. Luckily the array also had sound dampening, so no one should have heard anything. He resumed his vigil against the rest of the group, and it seemed no one among them had noticed the

missing beast. The gwyllgi often moved some distance from the parties acting as scouts, so it would likely take some while before they noticed their missing beast. Unfortunately, they had stopped just 50 meters away from the camp.

They still seemed to be arguing about something in hushed tones. One of the demons seemed nervous and kept pointing toward where Zac had tested his skill. The others seemed unconvinced and dismissive.

One of the demons rolled his eyes at the nervous one and started to actually walk toward Zac's camp. The nervous demon entreated him, but was just met with a dismissive wave of his hand. He started fiddling with his pants and stopped at a tree just half a meter away from the edge of the illusion array.

The demon was actually relieving himself. He looked around the area while he did so. His eyes stopped a second on the camp. It should look like a normal clearing to him, but the demon slightly furrowed his brows. Soon they smoothed out and he casually looked away again and continued with his business.

But Zac's heart started beating rapidly after scrutinizing the demon's face.

*He knew.*

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall, please check out my

A big thanks to new patron S. Tian!

#### **Chapter 41 - Apex Predator**

Zac didn't dare hesitate and furiously chopped his axe down through the array while the demon still had his pants down doing his business.

As Zac suspected the demon was ready for the strike, and without hesitation, he lifted his sword to meet the oncoming attack. Unfortunately for him Zac's strength was in another league, and with the addition of the Dao of Heaviness the force of the swing simply broke the poor demon's arms and continued unimpeded into his head.

It looked like that the array didn't hold up to scrutiny when observed at such proximity, or maybe the demon simply used some ocular skill more powerful than his **[Eye of Discernment]**. The demon had noticed something was wrong but didn't want to alert anyone to this fact until he was back at safety in his group. But some discreet facial tics had foiled his plans.

After the swing Zac quickly grabbed two of his knives from his pouch and hurled them at the war party just as they were shocked by an axe appearing out of thin air and killing their comrade.

One of the knives punched a hole through the imp, instantly killing it, but the other missed the demon he was aiming for. He'd trained his throwing skills diligently since his embarrassing throw that completely missed the target in his first battle against a barghest. Together with his increased stats in Strength and Dexterity, his aim was quite good by now, but he still couldn't always hit his targets when throwing in rapid succession.

He threw another dagger but the demon dodged it, as it was ready for the attacks now. The barghest were stupid however, and a knife instantly slammed into its torso, maiming it badly. He had a decent stock of knives by now since killing the scout demons surrounding the valley with the incursion, and could keep throwing them for a while.

He didn't have any time to kill the other barghest, as he saw one of the demons starting to conjure a fireball. Aghast, he didn't dare to hesitate, and hurled a dagger at the mage. He couldn't have him burn the camp down, or even start a forest fire. Every demon on the island would know a battle was happening here.

A magic shield stopped the dagger in its tracks, so Zac had no choice but to charge out of his array toward the demons. There still were 5 demons and a couple of demon beasts against him. Fortunately he killed the imp immediately, otherwise he'd have to worry about those fireballs. They were still extremely deadly, even with his improved constitution.

Suddenly as he was approaching spikes shot out the ground. They looked like thin stalactites, so it seemed one of the demons was a rock mage. Not expecting the attack one of the spikes managed to stab into his gut before he could react.

His breastplate was high quality work, but unfortunately it only covered his upper torso. Therefore his only protection on the rest of his body was the common leather armor which barely impeded attacks. He broke off the one impaling him and then destroyed the other with a swing.

An arrow crackling with electricity zoomed toward his head as he was getting rid of the stone spears. He had to dodge before properly removing the tip of the spike from his stomach, making it do some extra damage while he rolled away.

As he got back to his feet the fire mage already seemed ready to fire his spell. But to Zac's horror he wasn't actually aiming at him or the camp, but straight up. The demon intended to use it as a signal flare while the others impeded him.

Zac desperately infused all the cosmic energy and heaviness he could into his arm and threw his axe with a grunt. The axe sounded like a propeller as it ripped through the air at the mage. The magic shield that stopped his knife shattered like a mirror, and the axe head slammed into the mage's chest, instantly killing him.

Lucky for him the ball of flame snuffed out as soon as the mage died, just like how it did with the imps he had fought. There would be no signal flare or forest fire this time at least.

But Zac didn't have time to breathe out in relief, as a barghest slammed straight into him. The demonic brutes could charge straight through smaller trees, so the force completely winded him. Had he been prepared he could have used the inscription on his chest piece, as his chest armor held one charge where it could nullify an attack. But Zac himself had to activate it and he wasn't prepared for the body slam.

An arrow shot into his stomach as he was pushed backward as well, piling on to his misery. Luckily his endurance was up in the high 70's by now, and it didn't get far into his body before stopping.

However, the arrow released a lightning shock right into his intestines, making him unable to breathe for a second. Zac coughed out a mouthful of blood but didn't dare move the arrow, remembering that leaving the weapons in the wound when stabbed was safer. He could only break it off and ignore it for now. Instead, he punched the barghest which caused it to crash hard into the ground.

A flash of pain erupted on his back, and he noticed a gwyllgi had approached soundlessly from behind. Normally these beasts were of no concern, but he also had to worry about the mage and archer. There also were two more demons who still stayed put. One of them carried a two-handed sword, and with his muscular build looked very much like a classic warrior.

But the other's gear gave Zac no indication of her means of attack. He assumed she was some sort of mage, as she held a tome in her hands.

Zac growled in annoyance and kept the barghest down on the ground with one hand and grabbed a knife out of his pouch with the other. With a quick stab he tore its throat out. It was still alive but wouldn't be for long. He just barely dodged another arrow coming at him right after his kill, but simultaneously an earthen spike tore straight through the dying barghest and headed for his head.

Just as he was about to dodge a splitting pain in his mind made him completely blank out, and as he tried to dodge the incoming spike he realized his body didn't respond.

But with a muffled roar Zac used all his will-power to force himself to move. He succeeded in breaking the odd restriction and managed to move his head away somewhat away from the stone spear. It still tore a huge gash in his left cheek, doubling the length of his mouth.

Breaking free from the binding left him with a pounding headache and a bit woozy, and he had to shrug his head to reorient himself.

A quick glance at the enemies showed that one of the demons who earlier had been staying put was puking blood while looking at Zac aghast. It was the one who was holding a tome looking mysterious. He didn't have time to think about what kind of skill she used, as he was beset from both behind and the back.

A gwyllgi charged at him again, but this time he was prepared. With a quick stab blood gushed out of its chest, and it crashed into the ground. He took another arrow, this time to his leg, but it was a worthwhile price for another enemy down.

He grabbed the dying gwyllgi by its neck and used it as a shield while charging toward the group. Their distance wasn't big and he was upon them before they could send another salvo of earthen spears and arrows.

Zac ran toward the downed mage in order to get his axe back, but the warrior demon who had stood rooted until now placed himself in his way. From his bulging muscles he seemed he focused on the Strength attribute, which actually made Zac relieved rather than anything else. If it was one thing he was confident in it was his supreme strength.

The warrior roared and swung his sword toward him. Zac didn't dare use his knife to intercept, and could only use the beast carcass as a club. He swung it at the warrior, trying to angle it so that he would hit the flat of the blade rather than the edge.

The corpse and the sword clashed, and the corpse exploded in a mangled shower of blood and viscera, drenching both Zac and the demon. But it did its job, and the sword was deflected once. That was all he needed, as he crashed into the demon with all the strength he could muster.

The warrior was flung away like a ragdoll, not being able to muster any resistance in the slightest. He fell down a few meters away, and whether he was alive or dead was unknown. The demons seemingly hadn't expected that outcome of the collision, and he managed to immediately snatch up his axe before they could react.

Zac then made a beeline for the archer. At these close quarters, the archer had actually dropped his bow and instead held a short sword and a blade respectively. Zac would have expected him to make some distance like the last archer he fought. But perhaps he either actually focused on blades, or didn't dare turn his back on Zac while fleeing. Both the blades were crackling with the same lightning as the arrows he had shot at Zac earlier.

Zac ignored an earthen spear stabbing into him and pushed on toward the Rogue-looking demon. He wanted to make short work of him and swung a horizontal swing intended to cleave him in two.

However the demon almost seemed to have no bones in his body, and curved his torso to avoid the swing, and then retaliated by trying to stab Zac's heart and throat. Zac was out of position with the swing and could only desperately protect himself with his free arm, really wishing he had a buckler right about now.

The knife heading for his heart plunged into his bicep, and the short sword changed trajectory slightly to avoid hitting his arm as well. It at least managed to nick

his throat, and a small gout of blood spurted out. But at least it hadn't hit an artery. The electric shocks hurt as well, but with Zac's Endurance he could grit his teeth and simply force his body not to spasm. These arcs of lightning couldn't compare to the black lightning he had tasted earlier as well.

He turned his hand to readjust his edge and tried to swipe the demon on the way back. The demon once again deftly repositioned his body so that he would be able to avoid it, but this time Zac wouldn't be denied. Just as the axe blade was about to miss the demon's throat a translucent edge grew out a meter and cleanly decapitated the ranger.

Zac didn't really want to show his ace while there still were 3 demons alive, but he had to kill the ranger. The ranger was the only one he wasn't sure he would be able to catch if they started to flee. And if they were sane they should. He had decimated half their force in almost no time. His wounds looked grisly but nothing that would stop him from continuing his onslaught.

With his new skills and power-ups he truly felt like the apex predator of his island.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall, please check out my  
A big thanks to my new patron NorkNork!

#### **Chapter 42 - Exodus**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Last chapter of the week, enjoy! Early release cause I'm heading out and don't trust the scheduling function.

Added a Paypal donate option for those who want to throw money down the drain at me, but doesn't want to bother with

With only two demons left, not including the knocked out warrior, Zac charged toward his next targets. The two demons briefly looked at each other in the eye, and both launched an attack before fleeing.

The tome-wielding demon's attack was an almost invisible ripple in the air, whereas the earth mage erected a large wall. Zac once again threw his axe just before the wall completely obscured the two fleeing combatants, and then he crashed straight into the wall.

The wall was hastily erected and couldn't withstand Zac's momentum, and he blasted through it like a wrecking ball. Just as he did the ripple hit him, making him nauseous and disoriented. But the attack wasn't as strong as the earlier one, and he soon managed to dispell the effects.

A quick glance at the demon who used the ripple attacks showed her dead with an exploded chest, with his axe stuck in the ground some distance away from her corpse. But before he could continue on to kill the earth mage he felt an intense amount of danger as he heard a whistling sound. It was the sword-wielding warrior who Zac had punted earlier.

Somehow he had gotten up and snuck right behind Zac without him noticing, and his two-handed sword was bearing down on his throat. Zac had no time to dodge and could only put his hopes on the spell on his chest. The familiar golden sheen of the armor's skill immediately enveloped him, just in time to intercept the large sword.

With a crash, the warrior was flung backward once again, and this time Zac could hear the sound of bone breaking.

The earth demon was still running and Zac couldn't let him get away. He barreled after him and threw a knife at the back of the mage. A block of rock rose up behind him intercepting the dagger, but the scare made the mage stumble.

Zac immediately rushed to the fallen demon, and ferociously stabbed down at his throat. However, a layer of rock appeared on the mage's skin, creating another layer of defense. The knife simply couldn't cut through it.

Terror was still evident in the demon's eyes, and it stuttered some words in its own language. Zac ignored it and brought out the huge greatsword from his pouch. He increased the weight to the max through the inscription on the blade, and slammed it down on the body. It was cruel, but he wouldn't risk letting the mage somehow alerting the army of what was going on.

Over 130 Strength and a heavy greatsword resulted in a ruptured lump of flesh on the ground, and even a crater was created.

Zac didn't waste any time, and immediately ran back toward the last demon. He found him limping away from the scene of the battle, his sword discarded where he fell. He soon noticed Zac approaching with fear and hatred evident on his face. Suddenly he completely disappeared, shocking Zac.

He wondered if the demon used some sort of teleportation skill which would allow it to escape. He furiously ran toward where the demon disappeared and looked around for any clues.

Zac saw a glimmer in the distance and immediately threw a dagger at it. Suddenly the background looked like it was distorting, and the warrior reappeared, the dagger lodged in his arm. Zac ran over, and with a swing of the great sword ended the fight.

The last demon had used an illusion skill like his array, or something similar. That was also how he snuck up and almost decapitated him earlier. Zac was a bit surprised a meat head-looking warrior knew such a skill, as that felt like something that usually belonged to rogue-like classes.

It made him realize he couldn't rely on his gaming experiences for everything. The system was quite omnipotent, and anything was possible.

With the demons killed there was no hurry anymore, so Zac quickly treated most of his wounds and then gathered up all the corpses and their gear in his pouch. This also made sure none of the demons pulled a ruse on him and played dead, as nothing living could enter the pouch. He also retrieved his daggers and axe, and while doing so he was attacked by the last barghest and gwyllgi from the roving party.

With their masters dead they went back to their ordinary hyper-aggressive behavior. Without any demons shooting various things at him he finished them off easily, officially eradicating the war party.

The fight had gone above his expectation, and he was almost like a fox let loose in a hen house. His stats were getting increasingly scary for his level. Furthermore, the fight had also made him realize something. Not one of the demons he had fought thus far used any Dao while fighting. They had used battle tactics and skills, but the indefinable quality of Dao, such as Zac's heaviness and force he could imbue into his strikes, were missing. Perhaps gaining a Dao seed was something uncommon, or at least hard, making it a rare boost reserved for the elite.

He was also very satisfied with his new skill **[Chop]**. It worked just as he hoped, providing a great method of sneak attacking. He wasn't sure if it was designed to be used this way, but he felt it was the most effective method in this type of combat.

Zac had wanted to use the skill a bit more to test it out in battle, but unfortunately, he spent a good deal of the battle without the axe in his hand. He really

hoped he would be able to pick up some back-up axes, or even throwing axes, soon. Unfortunately Azzun had been the only demon so far who fought with an axe.

Even though he luckily stopped the signal flare and finished the battle quickly Zac didn't feel relieved. The fight took place right by his camp, making him realize it was just a matter of time before he was exposed.

He spent the next hour going over the scene of the battle, meticulously removing any traces of battle that he could. He was forced to crush the earthen spikes into rubble, but the wall was crumbling by itself for some reason. Perhaps it was erected so hastily that it couldn't properly stabilize, sort of like his [Chop] blade when making it too long.

When finally done it wasn't readily apparent a battle took place outside his camp. There were sections of overturned earth though, as Zac had to hide the blood and viscera somehow. Hopefully a day or two in the sun and wind would make it appear more natural.

Finally Zac returned to the camp and properly stitched himself up. He had already removed the arrow-head, but the ugly gash in his face was still open. He prioritized hiding the scene of the battle and had only kept his mouth closed in hopes that it would help the wound close by itself.

After taking a look in the mirror he saw it was already slowly starting to close. He knew that it would leave an ugly scar though, permanently disfiguring his face.

*'Well, better ugly than dead I suppose'* Zac thought with a sigh. Besides, that scar was only the latest in a litany of wounds on his body accumulated over the last month.

Finally he closed his eyes to sleep for two hours before getting up. His wounds were getting better. Most of the wounds had been quite shallow thanks to his high Endurance, and he felt healed enough for another day of battle.

While cleaning up the scene during the night he made a difficult decision about his future. He would abandon camp, at least for now. The risk of returning home after a day of monsters grinding and finding himself in an ambush started to feel too high for comfort. He would only return if absolutely needed.

He started to pack up anything of use to bring with him. Luckily he acquired another magic pouch from the battle, although its space was smaller than his first. It was half-way packed with various rocks and plants. It seemed that the demon parties were roving the island to collect samples of various things. Zac didn't know why, but he felt they didn't do it to compose a botanical encyclopedia.

His guess was that it was for healing remedies or poisons. Even before the world changed plants with healing properties existed, and if they got crammed chock-full with cosmic energy the effect might be far greater. Maybe the demons had some means to test whether the local flora possessed any value, so they collected it to be tested. That would explain why it was only a few samples of each type in the bag.

He left the rocks and herbs in, as he didn't require a lot of space. The herbs might come in handy in the future after all. He filled the other half with spare gear and the two luxurious chairs. He kept the table, rug, and parasol in his original pouch. He had grown fond of the furniture and didn't want them seized by the demons if they found his deserted campsite.

He also tried storing the nexus crystals and the array flags, but it didn't work. He wasn't surprised, as he already knew he couldn't move them too far from the camp either. He once tried it earlier, as he had wanted to use the gravity array as a trap device. But when he moved the flags too far away from his designated outpost the flags started to vibrate ominously.

Apparently, they would self-destruct if they were moved too far. They were bought by the System as an outpost improvement, so the System restricted them somehow. Maybe he could purchase non-restricted versions in the future in the shops he had seen in the outpost store. He could only leave them where they were and hope that the demons didn't destroy them. Most of the things would be pretty cheap to purchase again, but losing the gathering array would hurt.

Finally he tried to store his new pouch in his old one, but it didn't work either. Perhaps one couldn't place a magic space inside a magic space, as it would violate some law of space or whatever. He could only carry the two pouches next to each other on his belt.

Having packed all his essentials he paused as he looked over the camp briefly, some sadness welling up in his heart. He probably wouldn't return here until the demons were dealt with. He now had both brought a demon here for interrogation and also fought a large battle right at the steps of his camp. The risk of staying here was too large.

He could buy defensive arrays, but he held little assurance that something that only cost around a 100 000 nexus coins could keep a whole demon army at bay. Besides, they simply needed to siege him by leaving a hundred men outside, and sooner or later he would run out of resources and also fail his quests.

With a sour feeling he set out, moving toward the western part of the island, where he fought the Herald. After arriving at the vicinity he dumped the bodies and tried to stage the area to look like it had happened there. He wasn't too optimistic that he'd fool anyone though, but he didn't want to waste time with burying them. They'd know the party was dead one way or another soon anyway, and he hoped to move their attention to this part of the island.

The corpses were left on the ground without any of their gear and weapons, as it was all pilfered by Zac.

Done with the task he set out again, this time heading for the mountain.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

A comment in the last chapter asked about it, and it might be a good reminder. It's currently the 11th day of the second month in the story.

Next week Zac kicks it up a notch!

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall, please check out my

A big thanks to my new patrons Argetsword and Reinmar!

#### **Chapter 43 - Stone Monkeys**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New week new chapters!

Zac moved through the forest with determination. He felt that he couldn't look around for information or clues anymore. He simply couldn't find the last Herald, and he was making no headway regarding the General either.

The general was likely holed up in the city, and the last herald either stayed in the cave or in the city as well. He had traversed the whole island while grinding for his quest skills, and hadn't even seen a trace of the alpha beast. The city and the cave were the last two options that he could come up with.

He needed to progress his quests, and the monkey mountain was the only way he could as he saw it. The other option was entering the cave, but he felt it was too risky for now. There was a lot of foot traffic to and from that cave, and it seemed they

placed great importance on it. He had no idea of the topography inside either, meaning he might be stuck in a large cave with no other exits.

The mountain was a safer bet. While it was somewhat close to demon activity, the cave was located at the foot of the mountain towards the southeast. If he kept his activities to the western part and the central area of the mountain he should be able to act unconstrained without any demons noticing. That was as long as another war party didn't happen upon him of course.

But the mountain sported a complicated terrain with a multitude of outcroppings, caves, and paths, making it convenient to escape even if he was found out.

He soon arrived at the mountain and stealthily started making his way forward, looking for targets. He was planning on thinning the herd for a few days while looking for the monkey king. Since the stone monkeys had a strong sense of camaraderie he was afraid that the monkey Herald would be able to summon hundreds of monkeys with a shout.

But if those animals were already dead he'd be able to fight the boss without any interruptions. He had already seen that no reinforcements came through the crystal, so every monkey he killed was one less to worry about in the future.

There were a lot of monkeys in the mountain, but nowhere near the seemingly endless amount of barghest that were skulking in the forest. He soon found a group of roughly 50 monkeys that sat huddled together and seemed to be sunbathing. They were completely immobile and staring up at the sky. It was a group like this that had almost ended Zac's life just days before.

Zac didn't prepare any tricks or traps for this fight, and after a quick survey to make sure not another group was in the vicinity, he charged into the pack. He charged up [**Chop**] through the fractal in his hand to the limit of what he could control, and with a great arc decimated three monkeys with one swing. Apart from being a good skill for surprise attacks, it also was excellent when fighting large groups of weaker prey.

Between the haft and the elongated blade of his skill he had a far greater reach compared to a normal axe wielder, and everything within two and a half meters of him was a zone of death. Enraged screams erupted from the pack of monkeys, and they started to frenziedly throw themselves at him.

This time he wasn't in as dire straits as the last. His strength and endurance had increased considerably, and the skills increased his efficiency against large packs of enemies. Last time he often wasn't able to completely kill a monkey with a swing, only managing to hurt or maim it. But with [**Axe Mastery**] he learned better ways to handle his weapon, and with [**Chop**] he managed to hit more targets at once.

He was like a harvester cutting down his crops, as with every swing a few monkeys perished. The rock plating on their bodies offered almost no protection against Zac's inhumanly powerful swings, and rock chips and body parts kept flying in all directions.

The battle only lasted for a minute but almost every monkey died. Terrified by the onslaught some of the smarter monkeys had desperately fled when Zac had killed half of the pack. Zac couldn't be bothered with hunting them down, as he was quite exhausted and panting. The fight had been fast, but it also had been furious. Keeping his [**Chop**] skill active at maximum capacity for a whole minute also drained him of a lot of his cosmic energy.

Exhausting himself had been worth it though, as the fight gave him another level. Of course, he was quite close to leveling up already before the battle. Zac pulled up his status screen to allocate his points while he moved away from the battle.

He quickly allocated 2 points in endurance and 1 in strength, but as he was about to close the status screen he noticed that all his stats improved again after the allocation. He quickly stopped and took another look to see what changed.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**29**

**Class**

**Hatchetman (F)**

**Race**

**Human (F)**

**Alignment**

**Human (Earth)**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500**

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - Early**

**Strength**

**145**

**Dexterity**

**59**

**Endurance**

**84**

**Vitality**

**69**

**Intelligence**

**49**

**Wisdom**

**49**

**Luck**

**67**

**Free Points**

**0**

**Nexus Coins**

**157096**

He had once more gained another title, this one called The Big 500. He focused on it and a prompt explaining the title appeared.

**[The Big 500: First in world to reach 500 total attributes. All stats +2]**

*'And the strong get stronger'* Zac thought wryly. It seemed somewhat unfair that the System rewarded those with the most attributes with even more attributes, but no one said that the System was fair.

Just look at how it sent the talented people to some tutorial, deeming the rest as trash and leaving them here to fend for themselves.

It wasn't a large boost, but it did cheer Zac up after the Child of Dao title. It also reminded him of his strong points. He might not be as smart and talented as others, and he might not be able to cultivate. But even if the cultivators came back with a bunch of skills and knowledge he could still beat them up with his pile of attributes if needed.

He found a secluded spot between a mountain wall and some bushes and sat down to recuperate. With the assistance of the mother-daughter array and a Nexus Crystal it only took him 45 minutes to restore his cosmic energy to its peak. He felt the pinch when using a crystal for recuperation instead of cultivation, but he didn't want to waste any time so close to enemy territory. A crystal lasted for roughly 2 hours, so his reserve of crystals would be enough to keep a breakneck grinding pace for weeks if needed.

As soon as he was topped off on energy he kept looking for the next group. He didn't dare look while recuperating, as he never knew when he'd be stuck in an avalanche of monkeys. Soon he found another gathering of the beasts, this one slightly larger than the last. He didn't know if these groupings were families or packs, but he was thankful that they were spaced out a bit in this manner.

After another recon of the surroundings, he once again started a slaughter. There was not much of a difference between this fight and the last, and it soon ended. He was a bit worse for the wear, but blunt hits from their stone fists did not impact his body overly much. He had over 80 endurance by now, and he gauged the monkey's strength to be somewhere in the 60's. They still hurt, but it would take some while for him to take actual damage.

The only real dangers the monkeys could muster up was either from their sharp teeth or from simply tiring him to death with numbers. But with the reach of his weapon infused with **[Chop]** no monkey maw really managed to get close to him, and he carefully checked the surroundings before every fight for hidden backups.

Zac kept this rotation between fighting and resting going, slowly making his way toward the central area of the mountains. Zac figured the Herald should be somewhere on one of the peaks. Unfortunately, the mountain had a number of peaks rather than just one, so he was planning on checking them one by one, and killing the monkeys in-between.

Zac had already known grinding monkeys would be lucrative as each monkey gave almost as much cosmic energy and Nexus Coins as four barghest. But with his improved stats and skills, his grind speed skyrocketed, shocking even himself. As the suns set Zac finished up his last battle for the day, which had actually rewarded him a second level, bringing him to level 30.

Done with the fighting for now he retreated to a small cave he found while traversing the mountain paths. It was secluded and seemed to have once housed a bear or some similar animal from the shed fur in the corners. But from the dust gathered it seemed that no one had been here for weeks.

Zac guessed that this cave was moved here with its inhabitant from wherever this mountain came from, and that the stone monkeys killed the bear when it ventured out for food.

The cave wasn't huge but provided Zac with sufficient space to practice using the **[Axe Mastery]** guidance system before he finally sat down and rested. He also spent over an hour on trying to gain another Dao seed. He was trying to actualize the other aspect he had sensed the strongest from his Dao vision, sharpness. If he got another Dao Seed he would gain another power-up and speed up his farming even more.

But no matter what he did or how, he couldn't take even one step on the path. When he had tried to imagine the one for heaviness it went very smoothly, and he couldn't quite figure out why the difference in difficulty was so huge. He could only speculate that he either simply had no talent for the Dao of Sharpness, or that the System restricted Dao seeds somehow.

Perhaps the skill could only reward him with one Dao Seed. If he wanted more he had to work on it by himself by arduously practicing and meditating on it. He knew that it would likely have taken him years to figure out the feeling for the Dao of Heaviness if it wasn't for the vision essentially imprinting the Dao in his mind. He more and more realized the value of that vision as he kept trying to meditate on the Dao by himself.

Finally, he gave up and called it a day. But he would dedicate some time every day for meditation as well he decided. At least until someone told him it was a waste of time. It had been a long day, and Zac was exhausted. He wiped his sweat and then crept into a small crevice that secluded him even further, and fell into a deep slumber.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

[Captain Zac is climbing a mountain, why is he climbing a mountain?](#)

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall, please check out my

A big thanks to my new patrons Sanairb, R. Jones, R. Nal, Andrew, E. Egilsson, R. Milner, I. Wiarda, N. OHara, Z. Cocks, Lorraine V

The bonus chapters will be released within roughly 24 chapters of a goal being met.

**Chapter 44 - Peak**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

BONUS CHAPTER 1/2. First small goal reached on , big thanks to my supporters!

New goals will be added in July together with Tiers.

The second bonus chapter will arrive in 8-10 hours

Zac woke up just at dawn and decided to meditate briefly before getting ready. He wasn't sure whether it helped him gain insight and progress his Dao Seed, or help gain a new one. Even so, he felt it was a worthwhile endeavor. He was starting to get worried about his psyche. He had bathed in blood and battle constantly for weeks, and it had taken its toll. He felt he almost shut off all his emotions as a coping mechanism to not go insane, but it wasn't a permanent solution.

He needed to adjust his state of mind to be able to endure. He knew that even if he survived the island, his life wouldn't likely change much. He still had to defend his island from new invaders for three months even if he managed to kick out the demons. At least if he understood his quest Incursion master correctly.

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

Since the quest still hadn't progressed after over a month he believed it would start up as soon as the demons and the Incursion were dealt with. If it meant that he

only needed to worry about the critters on the island for three months afterwards, then everything would be well and good. But Zac held no hope that the System would be so nice about it, and would likely send some trouble his way.

As he was looking through his quest panel he also noticed that the Forester's Constitution quest unfortunately hadn't progressed from his day of battling Monkeys. There were some solitary trees rooted on the cliffs, but it seemed the system made a clear distinction between a mountain next to a forest and a forest.

He closed the menus and silently stared out over the tranquil view. The mountains were quite a bit calmer compared to the forest, as the stone monkeys didn't have the tendency to incessantly roar like the barghest did. It almost felt like he was just camping again, which made him think about Hannah.

To be honest, he hadn't really been thinking about her and the others a lot lately, as he was focused on surviving and getting stronger. As he was reminiscing about her he realized he had missed an important clue about the tutorial. The four of them hadn't returned to his camp after the month-long tutorial had ended. He didn't reflect over it at the time, his mind occupied with the newly arrived demons and his class acquisition.

As he saw it that could have two reasons. First, they were all dead, and the system didn't bother to teleport back corpses. Second, after finishing the tutorial they were not teleported back from where they were snatched up, but somewhere else. Perhaps to human settlements or the like.

He could only pray it was the second reason. He wondered if they were looking for him, or if they just assumed he died. Had Hannah moved on?

Zac sighed and looked out over the sunrise. What obligations did he have to a new girlfriend when the apocalypse came? They had only been together for a few months when the world was integrated into the multi-verse. And even if he managed to find her again it would likely take a long time. Could they still even be considered a couple? He couldn't find any easy answers and simply tabled the matter.

There were monkeys to kill.

He ate a quick breakfast and headed out. Today he was planning on scaling one of the peaks to look for the Herald. As he traversed the mountain he made an intriguing discovery. The further up he climbed, the more concentrated the cosmic energy felt.

He was clueless if it was related to altitude, or something about the mountains themselves caused the phenomena. But he realized that it might be very valuable in the future. He wasn't a cultivator, but even he felt invigorated by the density of cosmic energy in the surroundings.

Perhaps he could rent out the mountains to cultivators in the future at exorbitant rates. He could only assume that cultivating in this kind of environment would be far more effective compared to doing it at a place with a normal density of energy. It could be a great source of income if he got a town up and running in the future. There was something about the thought of becoming a post-apocalyptic slumlord that gave him a comforting sense of normalcy.

Zac spent half the day killing monkey packs and scaling the closest peak, with his efficiency in monkey dismantling starting to reach a sublime level. There were some surprises where unexpected backup that Zac had missed entered the fray, but it generally only resulted in more Nexus Coins for himself. The scariest moment was when a monkey somehow managed to sneak up on him, biting him in his inner loin. Just slightly to the left and the monkey would have eaten his precious jewels.

He reached the peak midday, and after a brief survey could conclude that this peak wasn't the home of the Herald. The air felt quite fresh up here, and Zac decided

to have his dinner with a view. He sat down between some rocks to look more inconspicuous and retrieved some fruit and dried meat from his pouch.

His experiments with food and the pouch was a great success. Everything he put inside kept even better compared to a refrigerator, the fruits and slabs of meat still looking pristine after over a week. He didn't dare start a fire for some barbeque this close to the demon town though, so he could only stick to his dried rations.

As he ate he looked over the mountain range. His view from the peak afforded him a unique vantage, and he made some new discoveries.

There were a total of five real peaks, of which he sat on the western-most. The peak he occupied was slightly off on its own, whereas the other four were a bit more clumped together.

Between the four peaks there seemed to be a secluded valley that wasn't visible from down below as it was located a few hundred meters above sea level. The mountain range itself had some sparse vegetation, such as some windswept shrubbery and small trees, but the valley seemed quite lush with an abundance of leafy growth. Zac even thought he could discern a small pond or lake, but couldn't be sure as a large part of the valley was covered in a mist.

The valley certainly looked intriguing, like a secret little paradise hidden from sight. If he was on a treasure hunt he'd bet all his doubloons that any riches the island had to offer were hidden there.

More importantly, it also seemed like a good resting place for a Herald.

The only thing making him unsure was the fact that the monkeys seemed to like the rocky outcroppings and cliffs of the mountain. It would be a bit odd if their leader preferred to stay in a forest instead.

The great elevation also allowed him to finally confirm that he was indeed on an island. He hadn't been able to see anything behind the mountain range before, and knew there might have been land on the other side as well. But steep cliffs gave way to the ocean at the end of the mountain range, looking almost as though the mountain had been sliced clean off. Perhaps the System simply had chopped off part of a larger mountain range and slapped it onto the edge of the island. It was quite the sight, with a drop of at least 100 meters down into the waters below.

Zac finished his meal and made his way back down the mountain slopes again, and started trekking eastbound for the other peaks. He kept killing every monkey pack in his way, bringing a storm of carnage to the mountain. He was somewhat surprised that there still wasn't a more concerted effort to catch him by the monkeys by now, as the monkeys seemed to care greatly for each other.

But they stayed in their groups still, and made perfect targets for him. He even gradually dared to attack larger packs as his confidence grew. Initially he skipped the gatherings that were too large, but by now he felt confident enough to attack most packs.

Zac thought that he would actually gain another level this day, but he was forced to suddenly stop fighting during the evening. It wasn't because he was hurt or lacked targets, the problem was his axe.

His war-axe possessed a self-repairing and sharpening feature through its inscriptions, but it seemed it couldn't properly keep up with Zac's recent activities. During his barghest-genocide it had no problems staying in good shape, but here it was dull and blemished after only one day.

Zac realized that the tough rock plating on the monkeys' bodies was the problem. His strength and endurance provided all the power he needed, but it was his weapon that failed him. He was quite confused about the whole thing though. When he fought

the monkeys he always used his skill **[Chop]** to create the translucent enlarged edge to cover his actual axe head. Still, his actual axe was worse for the wear.

It seemed that the skill didn't just copy the edge of his weapon, it rather projected it. That was a disadvantage he hadn't expected, but then again it still was an extremely powerful and diverse skill for being the first attack skill the class offered.

With no other option he could only find a refuge for the night again, and instead spend greater time on practicing with **[Axe Mastery]** and meditating. He briefly considered whether to keep going, using one of the large swords in his pouch as a weapon instead. But he eventually decided against it.

For one he couldn't use his skills with a sword, and there also was another reason he hesitated. He wanted to use other weapons as little as possible in general.

When he picked his class it generally looked like the options were based on his activities. Since his stats, skills and experiences all were centered on the axe he wanted to upgrade in this direction when he got the opportunity to upgrade the Hatchetman class. He was afraid that he might miss out on a good class upgrade if he kept using too many various weapons and not fulfill the prerequisites.

That's why he also really wanted to find more axes, so he wouldn't be forced to use knives as much for throwing or as back-ups. He even toyed with the idea of stalking the roving gathering parties on the island to find someone with axes, and then take them out. But ultimately it still felt like an unnecessary risk. That he managed to kill the party at his camp so smoothly largely could be attributed to the element of surprise. He felt that he could likely wipe out most of the parties by now, but he couldn't guarantee that they wouldn't be able to send out a warning signal like the flame mage had tried.

Zac finally found a decent cave and settled in. As he was practicing his axe technique he was pondering whether he already had to change his plans. The reason was the huge amount of Nexus Coins he was racking up. A day of killing the monkeys resulted in roughly 100 000 nexus coins. That amount took him almost a week to gather when desperately hunting barghest.

He currently had 347 000 coins, and only needed two days to gather the necessary coins for the movement skill **[Steps of Gaia]**. He felt his current weakness was that his speed was lacking. If he could move faster he wouldn't have to keep throwing his axe at people, but instead simply run up to them.

Allocating his free points in Dexterity was an option, but he felt it wasn't the correct one. He had already decided to focus one or two stats and let his titles take care of the rest. He already had 59 Dexterity, which should be considered a lot for anyone not having Dexterity as his or her main attribute.

Besides, after observing the demons he fought he realized they did the same thing. They were specialized in one or two stats as well. The mages didn't have overbearing Strength or Dexterity and likely focused on Wisdom and intelligence. Instead, they used things like magic shields and earthen walls to protect themselves from attacks.

Zac felt that this was the way that people powered up in the multi-verse. Focus on the attributes that best empowered him, and have skills shore up the shortcomings.

He knew he likely had survived the mentalist mage's binding during his last bout with the demons due to his high Intelligence and Wisdom. But he assumed that normally a warrior would have a skill to protect their mind instead of wasting their free stat points on those attributes.

The only problem for Zac was that he didn't have a ready source of skills except the Nexus Node. But the choices there seemed quite limited, and he hadn't gotten any

new Class skill quests yet. If specialization was the way to go it also meant that he had wasted some stat points in the beginning by putting them into Vitality and Dexterity.

Of course, without the points in Vitality he might be dead by now, but not being optimized left a bad taste in his mouth.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall, please check out my

A big thanks to my new patrons Random Information and M. Davis!

#### **Chapter 45 - Monkey Captain**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

BONUS CHAPTER 2/2. First small goal reached on , big thanks to my supporters!

New goals will be added in July together with Tiers.

Finally Zac reluctantly decided to not get the skill for now. He wanted to find and kill the third Herald first.

He really wanted the power-up, but he also realized he was working against the clock here. He was already somewhat surprised there wasn't a monkey army hunting him in the mountains after his activities. It wasn't a small number of stone monkeys he had killed in the last two days after all.

He was also getting closer and closer to the area where the demons were active, and they could notice his activities at any moment. The mountains were getting filled with sites of desolation, with hundreds of monkey carcasses adorning the hills by now.

He was afraid that if he spent another two days grinding monsters, and then one day to travel to his camp and back to get the skill, his window of opportunity to kill the Herald would pass.

After all, the cave where the demons worked all day was quite close to the easternmost peak. It wasn't unreasonable to assume they would wander around the peak as well, looking for more of whatever they wanted in the cave.

He needed to find the Herald quickly and kill it. He decided to spend the day moving toward the valley and kill any packs that were in the vicinity of it. Then he'd finally try locating the Herald early the next morning.

After he woke up he briefly meditated, and after confirming his axe was back to tip-top shape, set out toward the cluster of peaks. He gained a level on the first pack he encountered, bringing him to level 31.

He soon arrived at the foot of the westernmost peak of the four clustered mountains. He planned to scale it halfway up, which would lead him to the entrance of the valley. Then he'd make a circle around the peaks to kill off any packs close to the valley.

That would both let him scout out the four peaks for anything out of place, and also kill any potential back-up that the Herald could call for. If the herald was on one of the peaks rather than in the valley he hoped there would be something different about it to give him some hints.

As soon as he started climbing the first peak he started to notice an increased resistance. The packs grew slightly larger, and there were stronger monkeys in the packs. Monkeys in the wild usually had an alpha who led the group of primates, but he hadn't really seen that so far in the groups he had killed. Zac simply assumed that the Herald was the big boss of everyone, but it didn't seem that simple.

But now there was a monkey with bulging muscles standing a head taller compared to the others. Zac used [**Eye of Discernment**] on it, but it still was only

called a Stone Monkey. The other Heralds both had names, so he could only assume this was not it.

The alpha monkey maybe could be considered a captain, and the Herald was the general. Just the fact that the packs were getting stronger felt like a good indication that he was on the correct path. It showed the Herald likely was nearby as he hypothesized.

Zac hesitated for a second, before doing his customary sweep of the surroundings.

The monkeys in general seemed stronger compared to the outer packs, so he needed to do some preparation. Close to the pack he found a narrow path up in the mountain, with sheer wall on both sides. It seemed that the rocky formation cracked in two sometime in the distant past, which had created this path. That would hopefully only let a few monkeys charge in at the time. It would slow down his assault but he wanted to play it safe until he could gauge the strength of these juiced up monkeys.

The next part was to lure the monkeys over, and Zac simply picked up a boulder the size of a head. With a grunt he threw it straight into the clump of monkeys, and with its huge momentum it smashed a poor monkey's head in.

The monkeys angrily roared and flooded toward him. Zac slowly backed away and placed himself some ways into the crack. He planned to kill a few and then back further in to make room for the corpses.

The battle started as intended, with Zac quickly reaping the lives of a dozen monkeys in quick order. But as he retreated further in he noticed a very bad sign. The monkeys had no problems climbing the sheer rock walls.

Zac wanted to slap himself in his scarred face. He should have realized that rock monkeys were good at climbing rocks. He had simply forgotten about the nimbleness of their primate brethren as the stone monkeys always seemed to sit immobile among the rocks rather than climbing them.

Just as he berated himself he heard a loud roar from the back rows of the group of monkeys. Suddenly all monkeys in front of him threw themselves to the ground in perfect harmony, and taking their place was a rock hurtling toward him. It was twice the size of the one he had thrown, and he didn't have time to react before it slammed into him like a truck.

Zac was flung backward from the momentum and spit out a mouthful of blood. It seemed the monkey captain wanted revenge for his earlier throw.

Before he could get up multiple monkeys hanging on the walls jumped down on him. Rather than trying to pummel him like monkeys used to, it seemed that they tried to pin him down. They gripped his extremities with all their might and tried to keep him from getting up.

Unfortunately for them his strength was 160 by now, and he could lift the monkeys like they were children. He ignored the monkey clinging to his axe arm and furiously swung the axe, killing the monkeys who were gripping his legs.

As he finally was getting up after getting rid of all the monkeys another projectile was flying into his direction. This time it was a sharp stalactite, and Zac couldn't understand where the monkey captain had gotten it. He managed to deflect it in the last minute with his axe, but the force made him fall back a few steps.

He immediately jumped into the fray, now fighting both monkeys on the ground and those hanging on the wall. He madly flailed the axe around, the only thing keeping him safe was the great reach of **[Chop]**.

He soon got the answer from where the monkey captain found its stalactite. As he was desperately defending against the deluge of rabid monkeys he saw the captain grab onto the rock wall. Its fingers actually carved into the wall, and suddenly he dragged out another stalactite straight out of the wall.

It actually looked like the monkey could use a skill, or at least an early prototype of one. It wasn't as fancy as the spikes the earthen mage had used, but he was shocked that a dumb animal could do it. It seemed that skills, and perhaps even exploring the Dao, was not something exclusive to humanoids.

He didn't have time to reflect on it further before another projectile came flying toward him. He saw it coming this time and grabbed a monkey to use as a shield. The monkey absorbed most of the blow, but Zac was still pushed back somewhat.

The monkey captain seemingly was able to keep generating these projectiles, as he once again moved his hand toward the wall. Zac didn't want to keep this status quo going. He wasn't really hurt apart from some bruising so far, but if he didn't do something soon he might run out of energy or get hit by a lucky projectile.

He stopped his retreat into the crack and instead started to furiously push forward. He was a whirlwind of carnage as he pushed through the horde of monkeys. He wanted to finish off the leader first and then whittle down the others.

Monkeys started to climb around and charge Zac from the back, but with his 90 Endurance he could shrug off the strikes for now. The only time he stopped his onslaught was when some monkey managed to grab his legs and risked pulling him down on the ground again.

The leader threw another large rock at Zac, seemingly trying to impede his advance.

Zac saw the projectile approaching this time, and swung down his axe in a fierce vertical strike to cleave it. He had expected the two pieces to slam to the sides of him, but was sorely mistaken. The only result from his strike was that two boulders hit him instead of one, slamming him back once again.

Zac could only redouble his efforts and ignoring his cosmic energy expenditure kept utilizing [**Chop**] to the max.

Finally, as he was 3 meters away from the captain, he couldn't be bothered getting in close with it, and overcharged the skill, increasing the length of the blade with a full meter extra. With a roar he swiped in an upward arc, and the captain was split in two. He could only maintain such a length for a second, but one second was all he needed for one quick kill.

After that, he simply planted his back against the wall and kept killing until there was no monkey left willing to fight. There were a few monkeys who kept screaming at him from the distance, but Zac hurled another rock at one, instantly crushing its head. Then finally the last remnants of the pack finally fled.

Zac was truly exhausted and hurting from the fight, but he forced himself to get up and move away from the battle. The sounds carried far in the mountains, and he didn't want to be around if either the Herald or some demons heard the noise.

He kept sneaking up the mountain and soon reached the entrance to the hidden valley far up in the air. He didn't dare enter yet, but instead opted to hide between some rocks and recuperate from the battle. The melee reminded him that just because he had gotten the [**Axe Mastery**] skill he still was by no means a master fighter. His planning impeded him rather than helped, and he would probably have been better off just charging in as usual.

It felt like he had been fighting for his life on the island for an eternity, but in reality he had only been on the island for roughly 40 days. Before that he'd just been

a desk jockey, completely oblivious to any fighting tactics. He had made a few real beginner mistakes in this fight, and could only strive to do better in the future.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

That's it for bonus chapters! Next chapter in 12-13 hours.

### **Chapter 46 - The Hunt for the Herald**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Back to regular releases. Remember, if you enjoy the story please take some time to rate and review! It will help me stay on trending and getting exposure for a bit longer.

As Zac stood at the edge of the valley he was shocked by the density of cosmic energy. The amount in the air was already quite a bit higher in the mountains compared to down on the ground, but in this secluded vale it was a whole tier higher still.

The density made his suspicion that the Herald hid in the valley much stronger. He was sure that the Monkey King would prefer the increased amount of cosmic energy if even the monkey captains were able to use skills and maybe even cultivate.

The amount of cosmic energy made Zac worried that there might actually be demons here as well. While he had observed their activities for a few days he didn't really see any demons enter the mountains further than the cave, but that didn't mean that there weren't cultivator demon's stationed here.

He refrained from entering the valley at the moment, as he still wanted to thin the herd of monkeys in the mountains first. A large enough roar from the valley might be able to call for reinforcements from all four peaks after all.

The fight against the pack with the monkey captain was a bit shaky, but it was mostly due to his mistakes. The monkeys on the peaks were slightly stronger compared to the ones he had fought earlier, but not to the point that they could stop his onslaught. He only needed to kill the leader and then it was carnage as usual.

There was one more pack he needed to kill on the mountain peak he had climbed. It didn't have any captain, but the monkeys in general were slightly bigger even compared to the last pack.

Zac entered the fray after having restored his energy and made short work of the pack. He made the interesting discovery that none of the monkeys dared to enter the valley, even when they were fleeing for their lives. Perhaps the valley was the private residence of the Herald, and they had strict orders not to enter.

Or perhaps something even scarier than Zac lived in the depths of the valley. He supposed he would find out later.

Zac kept his momentum going moving toward the next peak. He didn't try any fancy tactics anymore, he only tried to knock out the leaders of the following packs by throwing a boulder at them. He didn't even bother with the throwing knives, as they had trouble penetrating their stone armor. No matter whether the throw succeeded or not he simply charged straight into the throng of stone monkeys, swinging away.

At midday he reached the third peak, having mostly cleared out the two earlier ones apart from a few who managed to escape. This peak was the easternmost, and also the one closest to demon activity. The cave that the demons found so interesting was located not too far away from the foot of the mountain.

Zac was unsure whether he dared to start a battle here, as it might attract the demons below. While the distance was quite great between his location and the cave, he was afraid the sound would carry all the way down. The monkeys got quite loud and agitated during the fights after all. He decided to find a hiding spot with good vantage

before deciding anything further. As he was somewhat ahead of schedule, he decided to wait for roughly an hour to gauge any activity in the area.

Weirdly enough there was no monkey pack close to the entrance of the valley. Instead, the monkeys were stationed on the outer side of the mountain peak. This differed from the other two peaks so far, and Zac wanted to figure out why. He soon found his answer, as he was surprised to see a monkey captain hurl a large rock at a demon war party that approached the peak or the valley.

It hit one of them, and with a wail he was flung away from the impact. The demons screamed at the group of monkeys angrily, waving their weapons. But the monkeys were a stoic wall that wouldn't let them pass. After another minute of posturing, the demons could only turn and leave the mountain.

Zac was confused as he slunk back to the inner side of the mountain. Weren't the monkeys the pets of the demons, like the other demon beasts? How did they dare deny the demons access to the mountains?

Zac started to get nervous that the monkeys actually weren't the fourth monster race, but rather some native beast. The System did say it merged Earth with other planets due for integration, and they might be from another one. That would mean that there actually wasn't a Monkey Herald, but instead two Heralds he couldn't find.

He felt that shouldn't be right though. Everything pointed toward them being a part of the demonic invasion. Perhaps the monkeys had a higher standing, and could actually boot the lower demons from their territory.

He knew he wouldn't get any real answer from just mulling it over, and continued on toward the fourth peak. The weird power dynamic between the monkeys and demons actually helped him out in the end, both removing the threat of demons in the mountains and not having to battle any monkeys that close to the demon activity.

He arrived at the fourth peak and after an intense melee finally finished killing all the packs close to the valley. As it only was evening still he decided to head into the valley after all. Initially he planned to wait until next morning, but due to the inner side of the third peak being free from monkeys he saved a few hours of work.

He took his first steps into the valley, vigilant against any hidden monkeys or other beasts. But after a few minutes of walking it seemed that the forest was deserted. It was odd, as the forest itself felt like a paradise on earth. The air was fresh enough that his cells felt invigorated just from breathing, and the foliage was lush and healthy. The earthy smell of the area calmed Zac's heart, inviting him to sit down and relax.

However, not even critters were present, making the forest eerily silent except for the occasional rustle from the wind. This stillness felt quite jarring to Zac as his life had been accompanied by the sounds of the forest constantly since the world changed. From critters in the bushes to the calls of the birds. Even the deep roars of the barghest.

That all these sounds were gone didn't feel natural, and his vigilance only increased, instead of having a soothing effect on him.

As he walked he noticed that he didn't recognize most of the trees or plants in the valley. Now he wasn't any botanist, he only knew of the staple flowers and trees. But he felt he should at least recognize some of the vegetation if it was from earth. There were a few trees he assumed were maples but the leaves were as large as his torso.

He didn't know if the forest had mutated or evolved from the extremely dense cosmic energy in the area, or whether this forest came from another planet, but it felt like the old earth wasn't able to produce a forest feeling so vibrant.

He was debating whether he should collect samples from the various flowers and herbs like the demon parties did, but soon decided against it. He had no immediate use for them, and the valley would still be here if he managed to kick out the demons.

He soon arrived close to the small lake he glimpsed from the mountain peak. With how pristine the rest of the forest was he had expected that the lake to have clear beautiful waters. While it didn't look or smell stale, it also wasn't clear.

The lake was a mysterious shimmering blue, and he could barely see a decimeter into the water before everything was obscured. The water itself seemed to be packed with cosmic energy, as though the lake consisted of liquefied Nexus Crystals.

His body almost instinctively reached down to drink a mouthful of the enticing water before hastily stopping himself. It seemed like such a good natural resource, but still, there were no animals or monsters around, which was very eerie. Perhaps there was something lurking in the depths, prowling on anything stupid enough to come too close to the shore.

He couldn't let the water go to waste though, and tied a string to one of his magical canteens. He then threw the canteen into the water, and waited some time before dragging it out. It now contained the cosmic water, but he wouldn't try it before he could feed it to some beasts and see its effects.

Feeling uncomfortable by the mysterious lake Zac continued onward toward the center of the valley. The mysteries of the azure pond would have to wait until another day.

He was almost at the core of the valley by now and slowed his pace. If the Herald was in this valley then it would stand to reason that he was somewhere in the center. Slightly nervous he gripped his axe for comfort, as memories of the struggle with the last herald still haunted him.

Not far ahead it seemed that the forest gave way to open fields, so Zac crouched down and slowly made his way to the edge of the forest. What met his eyes from his hidden vantage point shocked him.

It was a large field, filled with shrunken and desiccated fallen trees. There were signs of bushes and flowers having existed as well, but they too looked like they had been baked in an oven. The only thing still standing tall was a solitary tree in the center.

It wasn't very large, only being roughly 5 meters tall, but it was spectacular. The trunk and branches had a crimson hue and a smooth exterior. The leaves weren't red or green but a pristine white, making it look like crystals adorned the branches.

It was a spectacular sight, and Zac didn't for a second think that this was a normal tree. It was something created with a lot of cosmic energy. The tree virtually hummed with power, making Zac wonder if it actually was alive.

Zac guessed that this tree was the reason for the desolation in the vicinity. The tree seemingly had absorbed the life or cosmic energy out of everything in its surroundings. Perhaps it even had killed all the animals in the forest as well, explaining why it was so quiet. It was a scary thought that the tree wasn't satisfied with the huge density of energy in the air, and needed to drain its surroundings to be satiated.

It took Zac a second to register that something else was next to the tree. A monkey, roughly two meters tall with a build somewhat slimmer compared to its brethren, sat cross-legged with closed eyes under the tree. What made it stand out apart from its build was its color. If the other monkeys in the mountain were made of anthracite rock, then this monkey was made of lava. Red shining streaks ran along every part of the monkey's otherwise black body, emanating a heavy pressure.

It was the monkey king.

## A note from TheFirstDefier

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall, please check out my

### Chapter 47 - Collision Course

The lava monkey didn't look aggressive or violent like the normal monkeys, but rather harmonious. Even if it seemed crazy, it really looked like he or she was meditating under the peculiar tree. It was quite picturesque, the red streaks of the monkey matching well with the crimson trunk.

The good news was that it looked like he found his Herald. The bad news was that he had no real idea on how to improve the odds in his favor. He saw no method to sneak up on it, as the dried husks of the vegetation on the field wouldn't provide enough cover.

He didn't dare use **[Eye of Discernment]** to see its level either, afraid it would notice him like the Imps. That it stayed in this forest with higher cosmic energy concentration, rather than in its natural habitat of the mountain peaks, was telling Zac that the monkey king possessed some sensibility for cosmic energy.

He debated whether he should charge in blind, or wait for a better opportunity. Finally he decided he had to go for it. Finding the Herald sitting by itself with no backup in sight could only be considered a perfect opportunity.

He also discarded the idea of creating crude traps as he had for Vul, the barghest herald. If this monkey could meditate it likely was too intelligent to run into spikes like an idiot.

The only question was whether this monkey was of roughly the same power as Vul or not. When the limiter was lifted at the turn of the month he had concluded that the beasts improved roughly 50% across the board.

He himself had improved far more than that though. When he fought Vul he had only 59 Strength, and now he was at 160. On top of that, his gear had improved considerably, and he already gained a class and improved pathways. He felt that even if he met an improved Vul today he wouldn't have to rely on traps to kill it, and it wouldn't be a desperate struggle either.

But the monkeys were far stronger compared to the barghest. Would the monkey Herald be far stronger compared to the barghest Herald as well?

There was only one way to find out. He slowly repositioned himself to arrive from the east, which would at least let him approach the back of the Herald. It might give him some time to close the distance before it could react.

He steeled his nerves and slowly ventured out of the protective cover of the foliage, and entered the dead zone surrounding the magical tree. He took great care not to step on any of the dried twigs or branches that covered the ground, not wanting to alert the monkey of his approach.

But even though he made no sound it seemed to be to no avail, as the monkey snorted and slowly got up on his feet. Zac held no hope that it was just a coincidence, and immediately pulled out two daggers out of his pouch and threw them at the monster in quick succession.

The monkey turned around in a lightning-quick manner, and with two casual swipes slapped the incoming daggers away into the ground. As the edges collided with its hands sparks flew, but no wounds could be seen. Zac wasn't surprised as the daggers were barely any use on the normal monkeys, let alone on this super-powered one.

Afterwards he gave up any idea of stealth and thundered straight toward the monkey, with his axe at the ready.

While charged he used the **[Eye of Discernment]** on the monkey, which gave him a terse line of information.

### **[Cindermane, Level 58]**

That line removed any last doubts whether this monster was a Herald or not. A solitary Named beast around level 50 fit the bill perfectly. It was a full 13 levels above Vul, who had been level 45 when they battled. He didn't know how levels worked for beasts, but if it was like for himself it meant it should have almost 100 more attributes in total. Together with the removed limiters, he realized he might be in for a tough battle.

Cindermane didn't stay put, but charged toward Zac as well. As he did the red streaks on his body lit up and started to emit a fiery shine like lava. They clashed a few meters away from the red-white tree, with Zac doing an upwards horizontal swipe aimed at its torso.

The monkey actually dared to intercept the strike with its bare paws, which lit up completely to look like magma. A tremendous clash erupted when their attacks collided, the dead plants in the surrounding being pulverized by the shockwave.

Zac was surprised to see that his strike didn't immediately overpower the Herald. With his recent improvements he started to believe there was nothing on the island that could have a comparable level of points in the Strength attribute.

The Herald was pushed back from the force however Zac didn't emerge unscathed out of the initial collision either. The hands of the monkey did not only look like lava, but they were also as fiery hot as well. The air around them was wobbling due to the heat, looking like a mirage. The axe edge actually showed clear signs of heating up where it collided with the monkey's palm.

Zac knew he couldn't fight a protracted battle, as the monkey would destroy his weapon if they kept clashing like this. Using **[Chop]** wouldn't help either, as the damage was transferred to axe anyway.

Angry at being pushed back Cindermane roared and stomped the ground, causing multiple spikes to erupt beneath Zac. They looked similar to the spikes of the earth mage, with the distinction that they seemed blazing hot and far more numerous.

Zac managed to destroy most of the spikes with a chop, but one managed to stab into his leg. A blinding pain erupted in his thigh, causing him to involuntarily scream. A sickening sizzling sound could be heard and Zac smelled the fragrance of grilled meat. The spike was actually barbecuing his leg.

Ignoring the pain he grabbed the burning hot spike with his free hand, ripped it out of his leg and threw it away. As he did the Herald took the opportunity to grab the ground, dragging out a stone the size of Zac from seemingly nowhere. Its molten fingers penetrated the boulder and soon the whole rock was glowing a sinister red.

With a roar it tried to slam the stone down right on Zac, who could only ungainly dodge. Not daring to hide any of his cards any longer he infused his strikes with Dao and started swinging away against the Herald.

Cindermane possessed either great reflexes or combat experience, as he kept dodging or deflecting the strikes. Zac tried to grab onto the monkey with his free hand in order to throw it down on the ground, but as soon as he got a grip on its arm the red streaks lit up and the arm got searing hot. Zac instinctively let go with a scream, and the monkey took the opportunity to try to claw out his throat.

Zac saw no choice but to activate his armor, and the golden sheen protected him from getting killed. He wouldn't give up even with his lifesaving device used up though, and wildly kept swinging at the Herald, unheeding of any cosmic energy expenditure. After a few exchanges the monkey king managed to get a stab in with one of its hands,

pushing a centimeter into Zac's arm. The finger burned even hotter compared to the spike, and Zac couldn't refrain from screaming out in pain again.

However Zac's every strike was overwhelming. He used every trick [**Axe Mastery**] had taught him and weaved a net of destruction with his axe. Marks started to appear on the monkey's hands, and it looked like it wouldn't be able to block his strikes forever. It was lucky as well as the edge of the axe was starting to shine with a red sheen from all the collisions as well. Not much longer and Zac feared that the inscriptions on it would be ruined, which meant that it wouldn't auto-repair any longer.

He also had pushed the Herald back toward the tree, and they were currently fighting under the white leaves.

The monkey became more agitated as they approached the trunk, and furiously fought to force Zac away from the tree. There clearly was something special about it, and the Herald didn't want to risk it getting damaged. The Monkey suddenly emitted a penetrating screech, its whole body lighting up.

It spat out a white-hot ball of magma straight at Zac's chest, forcing him to jump out of the way, and away from the tree. As he dodged he also saw that the lava spit wasn't the only thing that changed from that scream.

Like a scene out of a horror movie suddenly an endless number of bodies rose out of the ground, pushing the dried trees and bushes to the side. It wasn't zombies, but a vast number of stone monkeys, all looking larger and stronger compared to normal ones. With a quick glance he could make out at least 40 monkey captains among the reinforcement.

The monkeys had been lying dormant under the ground, and the roar called them to action to create a trap. He didn't know why it waited so long to unleash them, but he knew that he had run out of time. In just seconds he would be overrun with stone spears and boulders. He would have problems contending with just the monkey horde, but if he had to watch out for the spells from the Herald as well he'd surely die.

A desperate idea grew in his mind, and he didn't have time to go through pros and cons before trying it out. He was currently two meters away from the tree trunk, and with an exaggerated roar he swung his axe in a horizontal swipe. As he did the familiar blade of [**Chop**] rapidly grew out, soon longer than he could stably maintain for any longer duration.

Cindermane screeched and hastily jumped to intercept the huge edge from cutting down the tree. Zac's premonition was correct, the tree truly held a great importance to the monkey.

The Herald couldn't properly grab the translucent edge with its awkward positioning, and the edge cut into its whole body horizontally across the chest. A deep grisly gash was carved onto its body, but its great Endurance prevented it from getting cut in two. It still was badly hurt and bled profusely as it fell down on the ground.

Just as he was about to finish it off with another swing a boulder slammed into him from the side. He fell over away from the Herald and he barely managed to get to his feet before another hit him again, forcing him even further away from the dying lava monkey.

Unreconciled he once again charged a great edge and swung it at the prone monkey king. But it still had some energy left and pushed itself out of the way.

He knew his window of opportunity had passed. Boulders and stalactites were approaching from all directions, and the only way to kill the Herald was a suicide dive. As he only needed to kill it for a quest he had no reason to die just to bring it down to hell with him.

Zac didn't hesitate and turned around to run. He could only hope the huge wound he inflicted upon it was lethal and that it would bleed to death. The lava monkey wouldn't have it though and used its last powers to shoot a few molten spikes his direction as well. Zac could only strike away what he could and endure the rest.

Just after a few seconds he had already gotten hit by another two boulders and was stabbed by three more stalactites. Then the army of monkeys was upon him.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

This chapter is dedicated to everyone who has complained about cliffs in the comment section

. Looking at it from the bright side; If goal wasn't met this week, this would have been the last chapter of the week.

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall, please check out my A big thanks to my new patrons A. Smith, D. Taller, and J. Murphy!

#### **Chapter 48 - Simian Haranguing**

Finishing off the Herald was suddenly the last thing on Zac's mind, and he was horrified as he saw an avalanche of monkeys approach him from all directions. He activated [**Chop**] and frenziedly waved it in front of him, decimating any monkeys that would impede his escape.

The assault was slowing him down though, and finally the enemies were upon him, punching and kicking with wild abandon. Every time a punch or kick hit where the lava spears pieced him earlier it hurt enough for him to almost pass out.

Zac couldn't care about his cosmic energy expenditure anymore, and with a roar pushed as much cosmic energy as he could into the fractal on his hand. An enormous blade over 5 meters tall blazed into existence, and Zac swung the axe in a mighty horizontal arc.

The edge managed to stay active for less than a second, but the brief window carved out a large pocket in the swarm of monkeys. The swing killed at least 20 monkeys, and he even gained a level. He couldn't bother about that at the moment though, as the short respite in attacks allowed him to rush out of the field and into the foliage.

Blood was running freely from Zac's mouth as he was shakily running through the forest, away from the magical tree and Herald. The monkeys wouldn't relent though and swarmed all around him, jumping between the trees or running on all fours on the ground. Had it not been for his wounded leg he might have been able to maintain some distance after a mad dash. But now he was stuck in a quick jog, but even that was taxing.

He constantly was pelted with kicks and punches, and the occasional mouth trying to bite into him with their sharp canines. A rock whizzed by his head, and instead hit a monkey square in its chest. It appeared the monkey captains had problems with keeping the pace and throwing the projectiles simultaneously at least.

More good news was that the Herald was either dead or too wounded to join the pursuit, as there were no molten spears attacking him anymore. But that was about all the positives that Zac could list while he was mindlessly running.

He already was lost and could only run in a straight direction. Since he was in a valley between the peaks no matter what direction he ran he would sooner or later arrive at the mountains.

He desperately swung his axe back and forth to maim and kill his attackers. He didn't dare to use [**Chop**] anymore as he was already running low on cosmic energy and there still were at least 100 monkeys following him.

He instead infused the attacks with his understanding of the Dao of Heaviness to add some impact to his strikes. It was the first time he was using it so freely and for a prolonged time, and he was starting to feel a headache coming on.

Soon he couldn't even use his Dao in order to empower his strikes as he was afraid of increasing the pounding in his head.

He kept going, and with every few steps he killed a monkey, but they seemed endless. Zac's whole body was hurting, but he couldn't stop. Another boulder came hurtling toward him, this one with proper aim. He was already mid-swing against a monkey and couldn't reposition in time, so he could only lift his left arm to block it.

The small boulder slammed into Zac and a sickening pop could be heard. Zac was pushed back and his arm hung limply by his side. Something was protruding oddly at his shoulder and a blazing pain radiated through the arm. After a quick glance he realized that his shoulder was dislocated.

Zac grit his teeth and ran straight into the first monkey he saw, slamming his dislocated shoulder straight into the chest of the monkey. A blinding pain almost made him pass out, but it also temporarily dispelled the pulsing headache from overusing his Dao.

While it still hurt Zac could move his arm again. He had used the monkey as a wall to slam the ball of his arm back into its socket. As a thanks Zac gave it a quick chop which decapitated it, and then kicked its headless body into two oncoming stone monkeys.

This couldn't continue for long, as Zac had less than 10% of his cosmic energy reserves remaining while the monkeys showed no desire to relent. Thankfully the lush forest soon gave way to rocky outcroppings and cliffs, showing that he was approaching one of the peaks.

Due to the haphazard escape he wasn't sure which one of the peaks it was, but a quick glance outward showed the familiar forest of the island. That meant he wasn't running north at least, as he'd only be seeing ocean then. He was thankful, as he was afraid he would have been forced to jump down the steep cliff, praying to survive the 100-meter drop into the ocean.

Zac kept running, and he planned to escape into the forest down on the ground. The first time he fought the monkeys they had stopped at the foot of the mountain, and he could only hope they'd do the same again.

But almost immediately as he ran he knew that plan wouldn't work. As he passed a small crest a larger view of the island came into view, and he could see the incursion and the demon town. The position immediately made him realize he was on the easternmost peak. If he ran right down this peak he'd be in prime demon territory. Straight out of the frying pan and into the fire.

He stopped for a second confused as what to do which allowed a few monkey captains to drag out new projectiles out of the ground and hurl them at Zac.

He slammed one of them away but the other hit him with a deep thud, eliciting a bloody cough. Even with his 90 plus Endurance, it felt like he couldn't take many more of those throws. He couldn't remember how many he'd tanked by now, and it felt like his body was on the brink of collapse.

He sluggishly swung his axe and killed a monkey who was foolish enough to get close and looked around for options.

In his vision he saw a cave entrance slightly hidden behind some shrubbery and boulders. After a brief hesitation he changed course for the cavity. If he continued on along the mountain path he'd arrive at where he had spotted the demon party earlier,

and the risk of running into the monkey packs was great. He couldn't return either, as he wouldn't last running to another peak.

He didn't really want to enter the cave, but he knew that it was his only hope. Right now he couldn't see any other method to shake off the monkey horde. They seemed truly consumed by rage, which made sense as he had killed well over a hundred of the assailants by now.

Either the cave was a small dwelling for an animal, or a part of a larger network of tunnels. If it was the former he'd make a last stand, and at least the enemies would only be able to come from one direction. If it was the latter he might actually survive by fleeing into the tunnels.

There were roughly 10 monkeys in the way, and Zac grimly summoned **[Chop]** for one last charge. His arms and legs felt like they were coated in lead, but he determinedly swung his axe while he advanced.

The monkeys could offer no resistance against Zac's reignited spirit, and he soon was at the mouth of the cave. A rock slammed into his back just as he entered, making him realize he couldn't just stand at the entrance and fight it out. He would be sniped to death. After a quick glance inside it seemed that the cave actually was just the entrance of a bigger cave system.

The monkeys seemed to have no problem following him into the tunnels, as they charged towards the entrance without hesitation. Zac suddenly was afraid that he would be in even worse straits if he let them enter. They were stone monkeys, who knew what advantages they'd have inside a cave.

Out of options he could only do something stupid and desperate. He put away his axe and brought out his great sword. With a furious slam he hit the roof of the cave entrance, causing huge cracks in the roof and making rock chippings fly in all directions. He didn't stop and slammed twice more with all the strength he could muster, and finally an ominous rumbling could be heard.

The roof of the cave started to collapse, and Zac desperately ran further into the cave. Falling rock and debris pelted him, and he was forced to leave his sword behind in the chaos. After a minute the rumblings stopped, and the cave was completely blocked for at least 20 meters of debris. It would take even the strong monkeys a good while to excavate the entrance, if they even wanted to.

His hope was that the monkeys would give up and go back to the valley, but he wouldn't dare put his life on the line for it to be true. So he hesitantly ventured further into the cave to create some distance. His body was hurting all over but he wouldn't let himself sit down, afraid that he wouldn't be able to get back up in a short while if he did.

The caverns seemed to be a confusing maze of interconnected tunnels and chambers, and Zac saw no change after 30 minutes of slow walking. The caves weren't completely pitch black at least, as there actually was growing moss on many of the walls which gave off some luminescence. He didn't understand why they would create light, but he assumed that the moss was mutated by cosmic energy.

The tunnels were actually full of cosmic energy, almost at the level of the valley. The high concentration on the mountain peaks seemed to only be a result of some of the interior energy leaking out. It would be strange if something didn't change with the subterranean flora if they were consistently bathed in cosmic energy of this magnitude.

Finally satisfied with the distance from the entrance he had created, he stopped in a quiet chamber which at least wasn't completely dark due to the glowing moss. He sighed and thumped down on the ground with a grimace. It was pitch black apart from the blue scattered lights from the moss but he didn't care. He did have a flashlight he

had brought from the camper if he needed proper light, but he didn't know how much charge the batteries still had. He instead brought out a Nexus Crystal from the pouch and started absorbing.

It didn't help in healing his battered body, but it did help in recovering his depleted energy. Together with his amulet, he was absorbing energy at a great rate, and after only four hours he once again was full of cosmic energy.

That didn't mean that he was in prime condition though. His head still hurt from overusing his Dao, and his body screamed in protest as soon as he moved slightly. He could only stay put for a bit longer in order for his Vitality to do its thing. He had nothing in his bag that could help against his wounds that were mainly blunt-force trauma as far as he knew. He did put some ointment on the burns from the herald though, even if he wasn't sure whether aloe was effective against burns from magic monkey fire.

Finally done with everything he rested his back against the wall and sighed despondently. Today did *not* go according to plan.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall, please check out my Beware that charges on signing, and then on the 1st of the month.

A big thanks to my new patrons K. Ahmadi, and S. Tjetland!

#### **Chapter 49 - Spelunking**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

50 Chapters (including prologue)! 500k views (soon™)! Over 300 pages!

It's been a great ride so far and I'm determined to improve and make Zac's adventure a better and better read.

Some announcements: Tiers are coming **MONDAY**, with early access chapters. Details on that on the page. **NO EARLY ACCESS CHAPTER WILL BE POSTED UNTIL MONDAY** though.

I got some less than positive responses to the last chapter, and I've put together some of my thoughts below. Nothing that has an impact on story or anything like that.

#### **Spoiler: Spoiler**

I am (with a few exceptions) thankful for all the positive and negative comments I receive on the story, as it shows that people are invested in what I put out. I generally try to avoid the more negative comments as I feel I simply can't make everyone happy with what I do.

Regarding the last few chapters I have planned everything out and I hope the storyline and ending of the demon arc I've cooked up will be a good read, and also explain things that might seem dumb now.

But as the responses were long and generally well-meaning I will put my reasonings here. I will list some complaints I have received lately and how I reason regarding them.

The fights are always desperate, what's the point of high stats?

The way I try to write it is that the fights are always desperate because he is constantly pushing himself to quickly get stronger and maintain his lead. Before he struggled against 3-4 demons, now the struggle is against a hundred empowered monkeys and empowered lvl 58 heralds.

The way I've devised my power-system is that a level gap is supposed to be hard to breach, a bit like cultivation stages in XianXia novels. The stat rewards per level increases, the stat rewards from the Dao will be stronger, and level ups in skills will

make the enemies more formidable. A level 10 defeating a level 20 might not be to crazy, as only 20 stat difference might not be unbridgeable. But a level 100 defeating a level 110? There might be hundreds of stat difference between the two.

The struggle will continue, but the enemies will either be stronger and more numerous. This will change up a bit in the future when he is reintegrated to the world, as he currently is far stronger than any other human.

Some feel chapters like the last one is wasted filler space, but I feel it is necessary to portray Zac's first steps and struggle from a normal everyday guy into a powerhouse of the multi-verse as this is what this first arc is all about.

So much exposition and paragraphs wasted on Zac's thoughts and planning.

The setting currently doesn't have a big cast or different views, making it impossible to give life to the novel through interactions and dialogue. I have instead focused on Zac as a person and try to let the reader understand his reasoning and personality through his inner dialogue. In the beginning of the novel I used some inner monologue in italics, but moved over to doing more of the exposition instead.

Personally I like reading stuff like that in litRPG as I feel that the genre should have more planning and going over stats and skills compared to the more action packed xianxia. But others might get bored, and I get that.

Why aren't the demons hunting him down or at least putting in more effort?

Honestly, why should they bother? They believe its just one or a few enemies skulking around in the jungles, and nothing that can impact them overly much. It seems extreme to send out thousands of soldiers into the wilds just to catch one castaway. As Ogras mentioned he just has to sit tight for the 3 month duration to pass, and they essentially have won. The impetus lies with Zac.

----

Of course, all the problems in the novel can also be explained that I'm a novice writer who has been doing this for less than two months

"> If I ever decide to chunk this webnovel up and publish it into books (though I personally feel that books aren't always ideal way to read webnovels due to their sometimes absurd length) I will work on these rough edges and hopefully present a harder, better, faster, stronger reading experience.

I hope that this makes sense, its fricking hot here in Europe at least, and I've been keeping cool with beers for a few hours now.

And as always, please fav and rate if you enjoy the novel

">

Since Zac felt somewhat refreshed from absorbing the Nexus Crystal he held off on sleeping, and instead decided to take a quick glance at his status screen.

Name Zachary Atwood Level 32 Class Hatchetman (F) Race Human (F) Alignment Human (Earth) Titles Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500 Dao Seed of Heaviness - Early Strength 164 Dexterity 59 Endurance 92 Vitality 69 Intelligence 49 Wisdom 49 Luck 67 Free Points 3 Nexus Coins 485286

The last few days had actually brought in almost all the coins he needed for the movement skill. Getting his skills and Dao boosts had increased his daily earnings tremendously. Of course he knew that this was the limit for now. The only targets more lucrative compared to the monkeys on the island were the demons and imps. But he

held no illusion that he would be able to charge into 50 of them at a time and start a massacre as he had with the monkeys. He would be blasted to smithereens in no time.

Next, he opened up his quest menu to see the progress of his quest

**Off With Their Heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of an incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (2/5)**

He was quite disappointed to see that the monkey king apparently survived the slash. Of course, there was the possibility that it wasn't a Herald, but he felt that the chance of that to be quite slim.

He had gained a level right at the start of the pursuit, and he sensed he wasn't far away from reaching level 33 either. It was a shame that the System didn't provide the same type of service as many games, restoring both health and mana at the level up. Then he might have actually have had a chance of turning things around and finishing off the monkey king.

The whole experience was quite a let-down and the first real setback except constantly getting hurt. He constantly went over things he could have done differently in order to actually kill the monkey. But soon he threw those depressing thoughts out of his mind, as he knew he had to work with what he got, and try to continuously improve.

As he waited for his body to get better he planned to meditate some on the Dao. He wished to both improve his current Seed of Heaviness, and get another seed, the Seed of Sharpness. These two forces were those he sensed to be strongest in the axe in his vision, and he felt that getting both of them was the first step on the path of true axe mastery.

Besides, the Dao of Sharpness might also be of some use for his throwing knives. Since **[Axe Mastery]** came with no manual how to progress the Dao or his other skills he could only fumble around in the dark. This time literally.

Unfortunately, he could only focus at the large axe fractal in his mind for a short while before his head started hurting again. It seemed that using Dao was still impossible after his overexertion. Zac wondered if there was something like mental energy or soul power that was used when pondering on the Dao or using it in battle, but he hadn't been able to sense anything of the sort thus far. He only knew his head hurt and felt swollen like a bad migraine.

Helplessly he could only go to sleep. He would have preferred to take a look around the area, but his body didn't really listen to his commands anymore. Besides any sound carried through the tunnels and amplified, and it was completely quiet apart from his breathing. There should be no monsters or creepy crawlies around at least this part of the subterranean system.

Zac woke up some time later, not being able to tell exactly how long he was out. His watch had broken long ago, and his cell phone ran out of charge as well. He had learned to tell the time somewhat accurately with the help of the suns, but down in the caverns this was useless.

Judging from the state of his body he felt that he had been out somewhere between 3 and 5 hours. He was still bruised all over but at least he could get by. He got up on his feet but stopped before setting out.

He was a bit unsure how to proceed from here on out. After some hesitation, he decided to look around the caves for a bit, and then find an exit. Nothing had really changed apart from the monkey king being hurt. The general and other herald were still unknowns.

The caverns were the last place apart from the city that remained uncharted on the island. There was a real possibility that the last Herald hid somewhere in here as he hadn't even seen the shadow of it before. If he could find something out while he was stuck here anyway it would be great assistance to his quest. One of his fears was that he would fail his mission and get punished by the System, not due to a lack of trying, but because he simply couldn't find his targets.

Since the System wanted him to kill these targets he felt that he should have been provided with some navigation and targeting method. But if mentally complaining about the system had any effect he'd long have solved all his problems.

But he also put a time limit on himself. He hadn't given up on killing the monkey king, and would certainly try again. The reason for his failure was the horde of monkeys interrupting. He was quite certain that he would be able to kill him if he got him alone.

That's why he didn't try to rush back. For one he wasn't sure how to get out, and besides, he believed that the monkey army would be on high alert for his return in the short run. It was a shame, as the monkey king was currently an easy target with its wounds. But he still had half a month until his 2-month deadline. He didn't need to risk it all just yet.

Zac took a glance at his axe, confirming that it was almost completely repaired, and continued further into the caves. He still used only the glowing moss as a light source as he didn't want to alert any enemies. Besides his eyes were getting accustomed to it by now and he could somewhat make out his surroundings.

Just before he ventured down he carved a small Z beneath the glowing moss to mark his passage. He could still track his progress in his mind, but better safe than sorry.

The tunnels he progressed through led steadily downward, and it felt like he was walking toward the foot of the mountain. That also meant that he was closing in on the cave system the demons explored so he was careful to not make any excessive sounds. He even ripped down some moss from the wall and tied it to the bottom of his feet to mask his footsteps. It was the non-luminescent kind of moss, of course, as he didn't want his feet to become beacons for the enemy.

As he descended he sensed that the ambient cosmic energy was steadily growing stronger. Not only that, the tunnels started to change as well.

From being dark and dour, apart from the occasional weak blue luminescence from the moss, the caverns were turning into a vibrant fantasy world. Thick vines with purple flowers started to grow out of the ground, large glowing mushrooms lined the tunnels and the lights from the moss grew stronger and polychromatic.

Zac had never taken any hallucinogenic drugs, but it almost felt like he was high as he walked in these psychedelic tunnels. After walking along dazed for a few seconds he suddenly started, and then started to collect samples of all the various herbs and mushrooms. He was careful to not let anything touch his skin, just in case it was poisonous.

He still had no method to discern if they were of value, but he felt that at least some of the magical plants should be of some use. It seemed quite clear that they had grown due to the high density of the cosmic energy, so they might have some magical properties.

Zac started using the vegetation as a basis where to head when he reached crossroads. He simply chose the one with a higher density of subterranean growth, as that passage should have a higher density of cosmic energy.

He was starting to get very curious why there was so much energy in the mountain, and he believed that the demons were so interested in the cave for the very

same reason. There should be something in the depths that either contained or produced an immense amount of energy, to the point that it leaked out into the whole mountain range and valley.

If the demons removed it and took it with them then Zac would lose a potential goldmine. He added the task of finding out what created the energy as well before leaving. If it was something small and portable he would try to steal it. If this much cosmic energy could be poured into a couple of arrays he wouldn't have to worry about the demons ever again.

Zac had walked for almost an hour when a sound made him stop in his tracks and shrink into the wall. It was light hurried steps that echoed through the tunnels not far ahead. They didn't seem to be coming toward him, so Zac slowly ventured forward, careful not to make a single sound.

The steps slowly were becoming a bit more distant, and Zac hurried up until he reached a crossing. He carefully looked around a corner toward where the sounds came from to see what made the steps. And just before it turned another corner, he could briefly spot a small imp trotting along.

Zac's heartbeat started to speed up, as seeing the imp opened up a possibility. Perhaps the imps' main area of activity was underground, which would explain why he had encountered so few up above ground. And if it was, then their herald was likely down here as well.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall, please check out my Beware that charges on signing, and then on the 1st of the month. If you plan on donating it might be better to wait until Monday.

A big thanks to my new patron D. Adamsson!

#### **Chapter 50 - Crystals**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

tiers are up! If you want to support me and the novel, or just want to read ahead, check it out! Read up to **10 chapters** ahead of what's posted on RRL. As today is the 1st you will not get debited a second time until August if you sign.

Also, it seems I'm slowly falling down from trending. I finally understand how power-hungry politicians feel. So please rate and review to help keep me in power

**EDIT: It seems second goal will be met this evening, and I'll publish 3 extra chaps here on RR and on over the following 36 hours.**

Zac waited for a bit to make sure no other imp or demon was incoming before he ventured the same path he saw the imp take.

He surreptitiously glanced around any corners or crossroads, but even after a minute he still hadn't seen any signs of the imp or anything else of interest. Either the imp was a lone explorer in the caverns or it was out of the way for some reason.

A scratching sound stopped his train of thought and Zac moved to the next intersection to see where the sound came from. He finally found the small imp again and it was just 10 meters away from him, currently digging through some moss. After it removed a top layer it sneakily put something inside, and then carefully put the moss back on top. It got up and turned around, and suddenly found itself staring right at Zac.

Zac didn't hesitate and instantly killed it with a dagger. He walked up to the corpse and put it in one of his pouches, before walking over to where it dug around earlier. Initially he had wanted to follow it back to wherever he came from, but he had

been too careless and immediately got spotted. He'd have to get better at sneaking in these tunnels unless he wanted to get mobbed down.

After removing the moss he actually found a small stash of Nexus Crystals. They weren't polished and uniform like the ones he had taken from the demon leader, but rather looking like uncut raw gems. Some were as small as a fingernail while the largest was slightly larger than his own crystals.

It seemed like the imp actually was hiding away its wealth in this uninhabited part of the cave system like a cultivating squirrel. So it looked like it wasn't heading to any other imps or demons, but rather away from them. Perhaps daylight robbery was a real problem amongst the imps, so hiding their cultivation resources was imperative.

The imp's actions raised a few questions. First of all, could imps cultivate? They seemed to have some inherent proclivity for magic, as all of them thus far were able to shoot those nefarious fireballs. But it felt like all of them more or less were of the same strength, making him believe they couldn't get stronger.

There seemed to be some fundamental differences between the imps and the demons or himself. They didn't have levels when he inspected them with **[Eye of Discernment]**, and it didn't look like they had classes either as everyone used the same attack. That's why Zac placed them in the same group as the other beasts in his mind.

So what was the use of the crystals? The most likely explanation he could find was evolution. He had seen all kinds of mutations and evolutions in the flora on the island caused by the cosmic energy. Who's to say it didn't work with the fauna as well. Perhaps the crystals could help a normal imp to evolve into something greater, like the Heralds.

It was a bit worrying, as normal imps were deadly enough. If suddenly a throng of them evolved into super-imps wouldn't they burn down the whole island? He could only hope that evolving wasn't that simple a matter for now.

The second thing on Zac's mind was the crystals themselves. Where had it found them? If there were a bunch of them it would explain many things, such as why the density of cosmic energy was so high in the mountains. It could be due to the proximity of a large amount of Nexus Crystals, whose energy bled through into the surroundings.

It would also explain the unceasing flow of demons coming into the mountains. A mountain full of Nexus Crystals should be the equivalent of a multi-verse gold mine.

That, unfortunately, meant that the demons were continuously pilfering the resources that Zac would need to continue to improve and build up a town.

Zac was sorely lacking in Nexus Coins right now. He could barely improve himself, let alone build up a whole town. His gains lately from killing monkeys had been tremendous, but it was nothing compared to the costs of creating, and running, a town.

For example, there was an array called **[E-Grade Medium Scale Town Defense Array]** that was a combination of a defensive shield and some attacking functions. It looked like a good all-around addition for a newly established settlement. But that array alone cost 5 million Nexus Coins, and furthermore, it wasn't free to operate.

There were defensive turrets and anti-siege weapons as well, each costing over a million coins. There was just no way for him to grind that kind of amount of coins. Even if he got twice as strong and murdered monkeys without rest or sleep it would take years before he got all the basic structures of the town.

But if he had a large number of Nexus Crystals he might be able to pay all this, and maybe even more. He didn't have any means of selling the Crystals for Nexus Coins at the moment, but there were things such as shops and auction houses in the outpost store. If he purchased one of those he was sure they'd accept his crystals for some coin.

Of course, it all hinged on him actually getting the crystals. Driven by a renewed sense of purpose, Zac headed back toward where he came from. Since the imp went out of its way to hide the crystals out here, there shouldn't be much activity in the surroundings as well.

Zac made a mental note of the area since he might need a base of operations down here. As he carefully proceeded through the paths the ambient cosmic energy kept increasing, now starting to reach the density that he had felt in the valley with the monkey king.

After continuing on for roughly 10 minutes he heard some shuffling further down the path. Zac immediately stopped, a glint of greed and anticipation on his face. Every demon he found down here would probably make him wealthier. He imagined looting magic pouches packed to the rafters with crystals, a creepy grin slowly starting to emerge on his face.

Unfortunately it wasn't a walking nest egg he encountered, but a white crocodile.

At a second glance he realized it wasn't actually a crocodile, but a supersized salamander. It had a thick build and was roughly four meters long. It was mostly white with some purple markings. Zac thought that subterranean species normally possessed no eyes, but this didn't seem to apply to this specimen. It lazily ambled through a subterranean tunnel, swiping up various mushrooms and herbs with its mouth along the way.

Zac didn't know if it was a guard animal for the demons or just something that lived down here. He shrank into a side corridor to hide as he didn't want to bother with this huge beast at the moment. The beast seemed oblivious to his existence until it suddenly exploded into motion just as it was next to the side-tunnel Zac hid in.

Its maw opened showing a line of large translucent teeth looking like huge salt crystals. The beast tilted its head and charged straight at Zac's torso, but he was accustomed to this manner of attacks from the countless barghest he had fought.

Channeling his cosmic energy he grunted and punched the lizard in its head, slamming it into the wall of the tunnel, creating large cracks on the stone surface. That type of attack was usually enough to kill barghest by now, but it only seemed to enrage the salamander. He didn't want a prolonged fight though and swung vertically with a maxed out **[Chop]**, cleanly decapitating it.

A surge of energy entered his body and he saw that he gained roughly 800 Nexus coins. That was even more compared to some of the weaker demons, surprising Zac somewhat. It had been pretty quick for its large size, but it felt like less of a challenge compared to a demon.

As he was mulling it over a sizzling sound interrupted his train of thought, and he turned his head toward the sound.

Smoke rose up from the ground next to the chopped off head and a sizzling sound could be heard. He went closer to take a look, and was appalled to see that its saliva was highly corrosive. The sounds came from its tongue touching the ground, and it had already corroded a small hole where its saliva dripped down. Zac realized even a flesh wound from a bite might cost him a limb when fighting these salamanders.

It was a shame he couldn't use his eye skill on it as it was already dead, but it didn't matter much what the system called the animal. He went over to the headless carcass and observed the body. At least the blood wasn't corrosive as well, otherwise, the huge pool of blood forming beneath the body would have carved out a new path among the tunnels.

Zac barely managed to cram the beast inside his smaller pouch after chopping off the tail as well, and then moved on. He didn't want to leave a carcass out in the open that was clearly killed with something sharp. He still didn't know what the relation between the demons and this animal was, and he'd just have to lug it along until he did. Or found somewhere to dump it where it wouldn't be found.

Zac continued on, diligently marking crossroads with a Z. By now he was starting to fully acclimatize to the cold light of the moss and various other plants and had no problem discerning his surroundings.

After a while, the tunnels started to change once again, as he saw spots glimmering between the pieces of moss on the walls and ground. He walked over to the closest spot that shone and saw that it was a crystal.

His heartbeat quickened and he quickly pried it out with a knife. The stone was far harder than he expected, and the extraction taxed even him with his huge Strength. But he only increased his pace with a widening smile adorning his face, and soon he held his prize in his hand. The crystal he pried out truly was a Nexus Crystal, roughly half the size of the ones in his bag.

As he looked around the walls he saw glimmering crystals embedded all over the walls.

He was *rich!*

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall, please check out my

A big thanks to my new patrons T. A. Westfield, C. Wisdom, and ElJako98! Also a big thank you to the old supporters who kept going with me for another month, hope you enjoy the extra chaps!

“>

If I missed someone I'm sorry, the notifications are a bit wonky due to resubs.

#### **Chapter 51 - Stench**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Wow, the next goal was reached in two hours after I posted the chapter. Guess there'll be no sleep for this Defier, only writing.

BONUS CHAPTER 1/3. Other two tomorrow.

tiers are up! If you want to support me and the novel, or just want to read ahead, check it out! Read up to 10 chapters ahead of what's posted on RRL. As today is the 1st you will not get debited a second time until August if you sign.

After a bout of excitement Zac suppressed his giddiness and refocused. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't start a mining operation at the moment. He had things to do.

Besides, it likely was more effective to let the demons mine the crystals, and then commandeer it when it was all extracted and gathered. They shouldn't have sent their most powerful warriors to mine, so an assault wouldn't prove to be too difficult. He longingly took another look at the glistening walls and then kept going.

This obsession with wealth was something new he had started to develop. He hadn't really cared too much when the world still was normal, and he just was a white-collar worker. He was happy as long as he had enough to live a comfortable life.

But lately he was running toward corpses like it was Christmas morning and the bodies contained presents. It was a weird type of callousness that translated corpses into loot. He had always enjoyed the grind in video games, waiting for that rush of

seeing some glimmering unique or valuable item drop. He was starting to get the same feeling in real life as well. Just the thought of finding a magic pouch full of crystals made him want to forget about the Heralds and go on a treasure hunt instead.

But he knew he couldn't, at least not for now. As he walked, he started to gradually hear rhythmic sounds of metal hitting rock. It was still far in the distance, but Zac presumed he was hearing mining operations.

He hesitated for a bit, but then reluctantly decided to go in another direction. There was no real need to see the miners at the moment, and he wouldn't risk getting exposed this early just to steal a peek. What he currently wanted to explore was whether the thrifty imp was a loner who had snuck into the caves, or whether it was part of a larger group.

As he crept along the paths the sounds of pick-axes hitting rock didn't diminish, rather it was a constant drone in this part of the cave system. This made Zac realize that the mining operations were on a larger scale than he had expected. After walking for 30 minutes the sounds finally started to diminish, letting him know he was moving away from the mining operations.

Suddenly he heard another sound and he stopped in his tracks. It was the familiar sound of light scuffling on the ground that the imp had made, but this time it sounded like it came from multiple sources. It was accompanied by some clanking and subdued inane chatter that didn't quite sound like a language.

He gingerly crept forward, careful not to make a sound. He wasn't sure how sharp their senses were, and he didn't want to find out. Zac took a quick peek around a corner and saw that the tunnel led into a cavern that was roughly 10 by 10 meters large. The roof was also higher compared to the usual 3-4 meters of the tunnels.

The first thing he noticed was that he didn't have to be careful of the imps smelling him out, as a wall of overbearing stench hit him as soon as he looked around the corner. It seemed that sanitation and hygiene were alien concepts to the small humanoids, as that level of smell could only come from a buildup of waste and excrement.

What entered Zac's vision could tenuously be called a camp. Moss had been ripped from the walls and placed on the ground to make simple bedding, and in the middle of the room was a handful of lumber together with vines making a fire whose black smoke polluted the cave. Luckily for the imps there seemed to be some cracks in the roof which kept the cave ventilated, otherwise they might have killed themselves accidentally by inhaling all that smoke. Piles of food waste and other unmentionables were strewn randomly about the camp, and in a corner there was a large rotting carcass of a smaller version of the salamander Zac fought earlier.

There were roughly 20 imps that inhabited the disgusting campsite, and it looked like they were turning in for the night. Zac was a little fuzzy about the exact time but felt that it should be somewhere around 4 to 6 am. He had assaulted the Herald in the evening, and after his escape spent a few hours on absorbing energy, then a few hours of sleep.

From what he'd seen from his travels across the island the imp's weren't nocturnal and guessed that their sleep schedule had gotten messed up from living in this subterranean cave.

Most of the imps were already lying on the ground snoring away, while a few lazily milled about. Two had a small scuffle over a moss bedding, and after a short while the victor lay down while the loser skulked away. It seemed the beddings closest to the fire in the middle were the most desirable, and the losers had to pick some spot further out.

Zac waited and only 15 minutes later the whole group was fast asleep, and they didn't bother with sentries or the like. Perhaps that was what the bedding arrangement was for. If they were attacked the weaklings in the outer rim would be attacked first, and their death wails would be the warning alarm for the others.

Zac deliberated whether to attack or to go around the camp. He felt that such a large group of imps indicated that the caves might very well be the main area of the imps. The imps he encountered in the forests had been mostly solitary, but here he immediately saw two dozen of them.

That meant that the likelihood of the herald being down here had gone up by quite a few points. He didn't want a repeat of the battle of the monkey Herald, where it summoned a throng of subordinates to wear him down. And being attacked by hundreds of imps seemed far more deadly compared to the monkeys. He'd be blasted to smithereens in no time.

But he also was still quite unclear about things down in the tunnels. He only possessed a shaky grasp of the layout down here so far. But soon he came to a decision and brought out some rags from his pouch. They had once been a shirt of his but were ripped up for bandages long ago. He wrapped the rag around his mouth and nose, and then brought out a large dagger he had taken from the last fight with the demons.

The rags were a small defense against the smell. He was already getting nauseated just smelling it from a distance, and he did not look forward to experiencing the stench point blank. He crept forward, with his dagger at the ready.

He soon arrived at the mouth of the cave, and the overwhelming stench almost made his eyes tear. He forced himself to ignore it and moved over to the closest imp. He bent over, and with quick movements put his padded hand over its mouth and simultaneously cut a huge gash over its throat, almost completely decapitating it.

The imp had no time to scream or struggle, and after a few shudders it was dead. Zac stopped for a second to survey the surroundings, but they were all still fast asleep. He kept going and moved to the second one, repeating his actions.

In short order he killed 8 of the imps without alerting anyone, and he moved to the 9<sup>th</sup>. He was approaching the innermost circle of beddings now and was quite close to the fire. As he did he reflected that the only thing that smelled worse than imp excrement was hot imp excrement.

Zac was starting to wonder if a stench could physically hurt someone, as his eyes were tearing up from the stink. If he was forced to sleep in a camp like this he'd rather sleep on the edge of the cave at risk of getting eaten by a salamander, compared to sleeping next to this putrid flame.

The smell was so bad that he couldn't properly focus and he accidentally hit the sleeping imp with his foot as he approached. He quickly bent down and finished it off, but not before it managed to release a high pitched screech.

Zac knew he wouldn't be able to sneak around anymore, and immediately swapped out the dagger for his axe. He activated **[Chop]** and with three quick swings another five imps were dead before they managed to properly wake up.

By now the surviving imps were up, and all of them charged up a purplish-black fireball without hesitation. Zac managed to kill another two before they were done charging, but afterwards four fireballs slammed into him. The cave was simply too small, and he had no time to dodge them. Normally he would have used his chest piece here, but he wanted to save it unless it was a true life-and-death scenario. He might meet a Herald soon, so he needed all the tools at the ready.

Zac could only grit his teeth as the nefarious flames hit him, sticking to him like glue. He knew that the fires would die out when their owners did, so he wasted no time

and charged at the remaining four imps. They screeched and started to flee towards a tunnel opposite where Zac came from, but Zac wouldn't give up.

Ignoring the impractically large consumption of energy, he elongated the [Chop] edge and managed to hit two of the fleeing imps, bisecting them in an instant. Their two compatriots didn't care and only started flapping their wings more fervently in order to escape.

Zac fished out a throwing dagger out of his pouch, and as he followed he threw it into the back of one of the two imps. He took out another dagger, intending to quickly end the fight. But as he prepared the throw a huge white maw suddenly emerged out of a side-tunnel, snapping shut over the imp in a lightning-quick manner.

It was another salamander that emerged from the tunnel, contentedly chewing on the small demon. It lumbered forward toward the other imp that Zac had downed and gobbled up it as well, knife and all.

Zac wasn't in a mood to fight against the salamander unless needed, as he liked the idea of these huge lizards walking around in the tunnels and helping him out by whittling down his enemies. Therefore he quickly receded into a side-tunnel in order to avoid its approach. The huge monster soon came to the entrance looking toward Zac's direction, and seemed to be hesitating for a few seconds. Zac didn't understand how they kept sensing him, as this time he had fled even further back, but he could only get ready to kill this white giant as well.

Finally it turned around and ambled away, toward the now deathly silent imp camp.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 52 - Odor**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

From Stench to Odor, Zac's adventures in the Smelly Caverns continues!

**BONUS CHAPTER 2/3.** Last bonus chapter tomorrow.

tiers are up! If you want to support me and the novel, or just want to read ahead, check it out! Read up to 10 chapters ahead of what's posted on RRL. As today is the 2nd you will not get debited a second time until August if you sign.

Zac let out a breath of relief as he saw the beast lumber off. Not that he was afraid of fighting it, but the enemy of his enemy was his friend, even if the monster itself didn't know it.

Zac moved some distance away and applied some more Aloe cream on his burns. His skin looked grey and sickly, but not like a desiccated corpse's like it had the first time he fought an imp. His endurance was quite a bit higher by now, and while the fireballs still hurt like hell it took them longer to drain his body.

Zac felt he was at the cusp of leveling up, and continued onward through the tunnels. It didn't take long until he found another cave with sleeping imps. This time it was a bit smaller, with only 15 imps. This group also seemed to be a bit more vigilant with one imp standing guard. It seemed to barely understand the concept of being a lookout though, as it was leaning against a wall half-asleep. Occasionally it would rouse itself, but only to scratch its butt then go back to dozing off.

Zac saw no way to get next to it without being spotted, even if it wasn't too vigilant. He really wished he could get the skill the crafty swordsman used, and turn invisible for the approach. Even the lackadaisical imp would notice his approach and warn the others if he tried to sneak up on it.

Seeing no alternative he took out another throwing knife and threw it at the guard. It hit straight in the middle of its torso, almost instantly killing it. It slumped down into the ground with a small whimper and then stopped moving. Zac froze, waiting for any reaction from the rest of the group.

However, they snored away contently, oblivious to their impending doom. Satisfied Zac ventured in and repeated his grisly assassinations. This time he managed to keep going unnoticed until only 3 were left before they were alerted, but Zac finished off the last stragglers with a few quick chops.

The kills in the second cave gave Zac another level up, bringing him to level 33. He put in 1 point in Strength and two points into Endurance, bringing the attributes to 171 and 99 respectively.

Zac soon trudged on, continuously looking through the seemingly endless tunnel system. He found a few more imp camps on the way. Not all the camps were sleeping though, and he skipped the ones who were awake for now. He was forced to eat four fireballs earlier which hurt quite bad, and didn't want to imagine how getting bombarded by twenty of those infernal balls would feel.

After traveling for an hour he felt that he should be below sea level by how much he had descended. Of course, it was hard to get an exact feeling when everything felt the same. But it opened up a new avenue of escape for him. He had been pondering whether he should build a raft to leave the island if the demon quest didn't pan out.

But the thought of being stuck at sea on a crudely built raft and no knowledge of how far he was from land soon quenched that idea. Besides, who knew what kind of monstrous things lurked in the depths after the integration into the multi-verse.

The caves felt like a safer option. Even if he found no way out, he could always back-track to the island. The only downside was the claustrophobic feeling of these tunnels. The tunnels were quite beautiful right where he was, but he guessed it was due to the high amount of cosmic energy in the surroundings. If he left this area the tunnels would likely be far more dour and oppressive.

As he continued his exploration he started to smell a very acrid odor, differing greatly from the earthy scent of the vegetation or the putrid stench of the imp camps. Intrigued he decided to find the source and started to slowly follow the smell.

After a few twists and turns, he finally managed to find the right direction. It seemed that none of the stats really improved his senses overly much, so his plethora of titles hadn't given him eagle eyes or a super sniffer. He, therefore, made some wrong turns before being able to tell what direction the smell came from.

As the smell got stronger and stronger he saw that the tunnel was starting to change. There were signs of mining activity in the area, with holes in the walls peppered about. Most of the greenery had also been ripped out, leaving only some of the luminescent moss for some lightning. It looked like the source of the smell was man-made rather than something natural.

He started to take greater care for any potential enemy or trap cropping up, but still decided to continue toward the source of the smell. As he peeked around a corner he saw a few imps milling about near the mouth of a large cave. He couldn't properly see what was going on inside the cave due to the distance, but it was well lit up and he could see a purplish smoke wafting about inside.

It would be impossible to approach without alerting whoever was in the cave, so Zac retreated to find another entrance. After twenty minutes of looking around, following his nose, he found another cave mouth, but this one was guarded as well.

He turned toward the last path he found that had a stronger smell compared to the others and tried his luck one last time. This time he was lead to a dead end, the

path simply stopping after a while. The acidic smell was extremely strong though, almost to the point of making Zac lightheaded. After looking around for a while he found a small crack in the wall behind some luminescent moss.

He ripped down the moss and another light shone from the wall, but this time it was light bleeding through a small crack. It appeared he was right next to the cave, but with a thin layer of rock in between.

He tried to look through the crack but it was too small for him to see anything, so he brought out one of his thin throwing knives from his pouch and started to carefully carve out the crack. It was a slow process as he didn't want the sounds to alert anyone inside, and it took almost half an hour until the hole was large enough for him to be able to see through.

He eagerly glanced inside, and what met his eye made his heartbeat speed up. The cave was one of the largest ones he had seen so far, being a full 30 meters across. The first thing he noticed was the large cauldron in the middle of the room, and it was the source of the smell and the purple smoke he had seen. It was almost as tall as Zac was, and held in the air by a crude rock and lumber contraption.

The source of the fire confused Zac, as it didn't produce any smoke. He only saw a handful of the raw Nexus Crystals placed seemingly haphazardly on the ground, and above them a blue-white flame was steadily emitted, heating the bottom of the cauldron. Zac made a mental note, because if he could burn crystals without creating smoke he would be able to provide warmth and cook food without having to worry about demons finding out.

Next to the cauldron were various mounds of resources. Zac recognized almost all of them as the various herbs and plants he had seen while walking the tunnels. There were mushrooms, vines and purplish grass neatly separated into their own piles. He also identified a few plants that he had seen above ground in the transformed area close to the incursion.

On a stool stood an imp, slowly stirring the contents of the cauldron with a large wooden ladle. At least he thought it was an imp, but he couldn't be sure as because it was almost as large as an adult human. But it shared many features with the imps such as its purplish skin and bat wings.

In contrast, its skin wasn't mottled and irradiated like it seemed like with most imps, but rather smooth and clear. It also wore a proper, albeit simple, robe. The most advanced clothing he had seen on an imp thus far was a dirty rag used as a loincloth, while most of them were simply naked.

It lacked any horns or ears, and as it turned its head to grab a mushroom to throw into the pot he could also see its face, making him sure he was dealing with an imp and not a demon. It had the extra set of eyes placed in its forehead, just as the normal imps.

He had found his fourth Herald. He couldn't see any other explanation than that. It looked far too different compared to its brethren, and its intelligence seemed to be on another level if it cared about things such as clothing.

Zac didn't dare to use **[Eye of Discernment]** to make sure though, as even the normal imps could sense it when he used the skill on them.

The Herald wasn't alone, unfortunately. There currently were a group of roughly 10 imps milling about in the cave. They were sorting a pile of resources and moved them to their respective mound close to the cauldron. When an imp made a mistake it was ruthlessly slapped in the head with the boss's ladle, eliciting a scared whimper.

Zac decided to wait for a while in order to let them finish their task and then hopefully leave. Between this group and the ones just outside there simply were too

many imps for comfort. But before they were even halfway done with the task a few imps entered the cave and dumped an armful each of various plants.

Meanwhile, the herald kept throwing some plant or mushroom into the pot every now and then, constantly stirring. Zac started to feel that the cauldron had to be a magic item like his pouch, as it never seemed to flow over, even after Zac had watched the Herald throw things into it for an hour by now.

It looked like the imps wouldn't leave the cave in the end. Zac deliberated whether he should wait some more or fight. By now he was more or less completely restored from his escape from the monkey Herald, apart from being covered in tender bruises. Finally, he opened up his quest page to make sure of the progress of his dynamic quest, slowly reading through it.

With all preparations done, he threw his worries and doubts out of his mind and hefted his axe.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 53 - Blitz**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

**Daily regular chapter.** Last bonus chapter tomorrow.

tiers are up! If you want to support me and the novel, or just want to read ahead, check it out! Read up to 10 chapters ahead of what's posted on RRL. As today is the 2nd you will not get debited a second time until August if you sign.

The wall separating Zac and the cavern was less than a decimeter thick, and wouldn't be able to hold against him kicking it down. Luckily there were no crystals embedded that strengthened its integrity as well. He moved his axe to his left hand and gripped a throwing knife in his other.

After a few deep breaths, he put all his weight on his left leg and kicked forward with all the power he could muster. A deep thud echoed out and a large part of the wall completely crumbled. Zac shouldered his way through the newly created crevice, not caring about the few cuts he got from the sharp rocks.

He immediately threw his dagger with full force at the Herald, hoping for a quick conclusion. Unfortunately, it didn't work, as the blade seemingly combusted by itself and turned to ashes as it approached the large imp.

Zac wasn't surprised, and without hesitation pushed forward. He managed to kill two of the smaller imps with daggers on his approach, and then he was instantly within 10 meters of the herald.

The boss roared angrily and lifted the ladle, using it as a staff. A huge wave of pitch-black flames rolled outward toward Zac. Anything it touched turned to ashes immediately, even a few unfortunate imps that were incinerated since they stood at the wrong position in the cave.

A golden sheen enveloped Zac completely, and he jumped through the wall of flames. He could hear a peal of eerie laughter and a snap, then he was through the flames. He didn't hesitate and pushed all cosmic energy he was able to gather into the fractal on his hand, creating a five-meter blade which whooshed toward the herald.

The blade slammed into an invisible barrier and started sizzling, causing extraordinary pain somehow transmitting into Zac's mind. But Zac's power wasn't for show, and after a brief struggle the blade pressed on, slamming into the Herald's body.

Zac expected the Herald to be bisected, but with a shocked expression saw its seemingly simple robe light up and protect its body. The robe couldn't remove the huge momentum from the swing though, and the monster was shot into a close wall like a rocket.

Zac rushed after it and was almost upon it to end the fight.

The Herald spat out a mouthful of purple blood from the impact and screeched angrily at Zac. Its four eyes started blazing ominously, and once again summoned flames. This time nothing in the cave was safe, as black insidious waves billowed in all directions from floor to ceiling. The Herald was like a demonic sun that radiated nefarious flames that wanted to consume the world. The mounds of resources instantly turned to ashes, and the few leftover imps perished as well. The only thing that could stand the onslaught was the cauldron which seemed completely unaffected by the flames.

Zac had already used his armor's one-time defense inscription, and could only grit his teeth and force his way through the sea of fire. The fires would extinguish as soon as the Herald died, so he placed a bet that the fight wouldn't last long.

The scorching pain that enveloped him was far worse compared to the normal hellfire of the smaller imps, and it caused him to scream and stumble. The swing that was supposed to cleave the Herald in two lost much of its power and his aim got off-kilt. But he at least managed to slice one of the Herald's arm clean off spraying blood everywhere.

He shakily prepared to swing his axe once more, but the Herald had had enough. With a few flaps of its wings, it desperately tried to flee, leaving a trail of burning blood in its wake as it escaped through the flames. Every flap of its wings caused the flames to erupt in the air, creating a natural barrier from chasing it.

Zac couldn't afford to let yet another Herald to flee his pursuit, and charged most of his remaining energy into **[Chop]** once again, and furiously swung a five meter edge after the fleeing imp. But the imp was quick and he saw that his edge wouldn't reach even when maxed out.

That was extremely bad news as the whole cave was still covered in the black flames, and they were quickly consuming him whole. If he didn't kill the Herald he would likely perish before getting out of there. Anger and desperation filled Zac's mind as he maniacally tried to increase the reach of the blade.

"REACH!" he roared as the edge was moving horizontally in the imp's direction.

Suddenly, the blade detached from his axe, and continued outward like a wave. It moved as fast as his swing did, and soon reached the back of the fleeing Herald. It proceeded and penetrated the imp without any resistance from the magic robe, Splitting its torso and wings in two.

The body various body parts of the Herald fell to the ground, and Zac thankfully saw the flames covering the cavern quickly snuff out. He didn't have time to go over the battle scene, as a gang of screeching imps entered through the entrances. Now that the hellscape had subdued, the back-up could finally enter without being incinerated.

Zac was in no mood to fight these little demons, and threw out the huge salamander carcass to block the incoming fireballs. With the newfound room, he placed the Herald's cauldron in his magic pouch and dashed out the same way as he came.

He kept running through the tunnels to create some distance from the area controlled by the imps, elated with the result of the fight. His bet had been successful.

He had planned to avoid a drawn-out fight with the Herald, and thrown everything he got on it from the start. With how dangerous the small imps were he knew that the Herald would be a true terror if allowed to fire off its attacks. He hadn't

even taken time to use his **[Eye of Discernment]** on the boss, afraid it would slow him down a fraction of a second.

He had also learned his lesson from the fight with the Monkey King, ending the battle before reinforcements could arrive. Certainly, last time he had been tricked into thinking he killed all the backup until they sprang out of the ground like mushrooms. But that only showed that anything could happen in a fight, and the longer it dragged on the more variables could crop up.

With his blazing speed the imp boss only managed to shoot two attacks before he was killed, and only one of them had managed to hit him.

Zac touched to his scalp as he ran and grimaced as he felt that all the hair on his head was singed clean off. After a quick confirmation, the same held true for his eyebrows and beard. He didn't have a mirror with him but he could only assume he looked like a beggar monk by now.

His felt body felt drained and burned, and he stopped as soon as he felt the distance was enough. He had consumed almost all his cosmic energy during the fight, and the hell flames the imp spewed out burned his vitality or soul as well, making him feel truly wrung out.

He sat down on some moss, brought out a bottle of water, and opened up his status page.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**34**

**Class**

**Hatchetman (F)**

**Race**

**Human (F)**

**Alignment**

**Human (Earth)**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500**

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - Early**

**Strength**

**175**

**Dexterity**

**59**

**Endurance**

**100**

**Vitality**

**69**

**Intelligence**

**49**

**Wisdom**

49

Luck

67

Free Points

3

Nexus Coins

545716

The battle had only given him one level, compared to the almost 3 from the last Herald he killed. He currently felt he was roughly halfway to level 35. That showed just how much harder it was getting to level up the higher his level became. The only reason he kept leveling quite quickly was that his killing speed had improved faster compared to the increasing level requirements.

Before doing anything else he quickly opened his quest page as well to make sure whether what he killed was actually a Herald or not.

**Off With Their Heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of an incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (3/5)**

It was indeed the third Herald he killed. He sighed in relief, elated with finally having moved his quest forward. He had been looking for this boss for weeks and started to worry whether he would find it in time to complete the quest. But this part was finally solved.

He already knew where the last herald was located, and it was badly wounded to boot. The last missing piece of the puzzle was the general. Zac still had no idea how to locate and eradicate him or her, but one step at a time.

However, the good news didn't continue.

Zac closed down his quest page in order to allocate his points into Strength and Endurance as usual. This time something went wrong, however, and he was unable to put his free point into Strength. He put two points into Endurance without a problem, bringing his total to 103. But no matter how many times he tried, he simply couldn't allocate his last free point into Strength. Zac started getting a sinking feeling in his stomach, worried he might have screwed up quite badly.

It looked like he had reached his cap for Strength. This was extremely bad news as his main stat was Strength, and he automatically got 3 points allocated every time he leveled up. Would he be able to level up at all? Would he just lose those 3 points if he gained a level? What if his Dao Seed improved or he gained a new Title?

He didn't believe that 175 Strength was the limit of what was possible in the multi-verse. Those titans he saw in the vision should have had thousands in Strength from the aura they emitted. Therefore the problem came down to how to increase his limit.

Zac pondered for a few minutes and came up with a few ways that might work. The simplest method, and the one he desperately hoped was true, was that the cap would increase with a set amount of points every time he got a level. Then his problem would be taken care of. If the increase per level was low he could simply allocate his free points into more Endurance or a third stat.

But if this wasn't the case his problem got a lot thornier, because the only other method he could think of currently was getting an upgrade. Both his Race and Class were currently F-Graded. If he upgraded one of them, his limits might get increased as well.

The problem was that he had no idea how to do that. Usually, in games, you got a class upgrade when you reached a set level. Unfortunately, Zac didn't know whether this was at level 35, 50 or even 100.

As for Race, he was even more clueless. He had seen no indication anywhere what to do about race, and the only hint he had gotten that it was actually upgradeable was that the grade got added when he attained a class.

It might take a long time until he found a solution to this problem. The thought of losing tens of levels worth of attributes while he waited for getting an upgrade made Zac truly sick to his stomach.

Zac's vision started to close in on him, and his thoughts were getting scattered. Suddenly he puked out a large mouthful of blood and bile, before falling down on the ground.

*'Something else is making me sick as well'* Zac realized, just before passing out.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

This chapter is dedicated to those that didn't approve of the min-maxing strategy. Zac wishes he listened to you!

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall, please check out my

#### **Chapter 54 - Luck**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

BONUS CHAPTER 3/3. The final bonus chapter for a while, now we return to normalcy

tiers are up! If you want to support me and the novel, or just want to read ahead, check it out! Read up to 10 chapters ahead of what's posted on RRL. As today is the 2nd 3rd you will not get debited a second time until August if you sign.

Zac woke up woozy and disoriented, and his innards felt like they were on fire. A sheen of sour perspiration covered his whole body and he was weakly shaking.

If he didn't know better he'd think that he had caught a bad case of the flu. However, he felt that he should be immune to things like the flu or a common cold since his constitution improved.

His next guess was poison, and it felt far more likely. He was somehow poisoned during his fight, and it started taking effect on him after he left and settled down. His first guess would be the cauldron. He just barely touched it when he put it in his pouch, but he did breathe its fumes for a good while.

And it felt far more likely that a creepy imp was concocting poisons down in a subterranean cave rather than a healing potion. If so he felt that he scored an amazing weapon by chance. If just the run-off fumes were this poisonous, he didn't even dare imagine what the liquid inside would do.

It didn't help him with his current predicament of course. The most advanced healing tinctures in his possession were some aspirin and aloe cream meant for sunburn, neither likely to be effective against demon poison. He did have the mysterious azure water from the pond, but he didn't dare drink it in case it only made things worse. He could only hope to slowly flush it out by drinking lots of normal water.

He had no real appetite at the moment but forced himself to drink a large amount of water. He tried eating some rations as well, but his stomach started churning threateningly at the mere smell of food. He arduously moved some distance in the tunnel as well, as a pool of his puke had turned the area quite putrid.

Zac took out a Nexus Crystal and started absorbing it after he found a new resting place. Being full of cosmic energy couldn't hurt in case something happened. He actually felt that his body was getting slightly better as he was absorbing the energy, but it could be his mind playing tricks on him.

After a few hours he had absorbed all the energy he could. If he continued it would turn from restoration to cultivation, and he didn't want to gain any experience before he made sense of his situation.

The poison had interrupted his train of thought, but he was still met with the same problem, his capped Strength. If he returned to the mountain it would only take a day or so of furious monkey slaying to reach level 35, something he was loath to do before he knew his options.

He decided to slow down leveling speed for now, and even stop pondering on the Dao. He even took off his gathering array amulet and put it into his bag in order to not even passively move toward the next level.

He'd focus on his axe technique instead as that was the only safe option left. Lost over what to do he opened up his status screen again, staring at the free attribute point. He knew he likely would have to gain a level to see what would happen, risking throwing away his Strength points. But for now, he wanted to look for another method at least for a while.

His conviction of focusing on only one stat had taken a hit from reaching the Strength cap. For now it was only Strength, but Endurance would be there sooner or later as well if he threw all his points into it now that he couldn't put anything into Strength.

His eyes lingered on the other attributes, hesitating over what to do. Finally, his eyes landed on Luck.

It was an attribute he had completely put aside since the beginning, as he didn't want to hinge his survival on something as unreliable as luck. But by now he was a walking juggernaut. The last fight was risky, but he had completely overpowered the Herald. The Monkey King wasn't his match either and only survived due to his reinforcements.

By now he could put some points into luck, as his basic survivability was taken care of. He might not be exactly sure how it would help him, as he couldn't quantify it. But since he desperately needed a solution to both his Strength-predicament and finding the general, getting some more Luck couldn't hurt.

Satisfied with his plan he placed his remaining free point into Luck, but once again was stopped from actually allocating it.

"God damn it..." he muttered under his breath. "System, could you explain what's going on?" he entreated while looking up.

It was the first time in a month he had tried to communicate with the System, but he was still ignored like the last times. Maybe the System lost interest in the world soon after the integration and left everything on auto-pilot before leaving.

He felt that the situation with Luck wasn't the same as with Strength. He only had 67 points in Luck at the moment, a far cry from the 175 point cap. All his luck came from titles, and he never allocated any points into it so far, and Zac realized that might be the only way to increase his luck.

Luck had a major difference from the other attributes. All the other stats could be improved even before the integration into the multi-verse. Strength and Endurance were the most obvious, but even things like Intelligence could be slightly improved with active training and a good diet. But there was no way to train up your luck.

If this was true then getting the titles gave an even greater advantage than he thought, as they improved an attribute that should be static. He still didn't understand how the Luck stat worked, but it might help him win a battle against someone equally strong but less lucky.

He suddenly wished that Charisma existed as an attribute as well, as getting that stat to over 60 points might have turned him into a handsome hero instead of his current look of a bald creeper.

With a sigh he allocated the last free point into Vitality, hoping it would speed up his recovery a bit. There was one last thing left that he needed to check out. He brought up his skill window to take a look.

Normal Skills

Eye of Discernment - Proficiency: -. A glimpse into the unknown. Upgradeable  
Class Skill

Axe Mastery - Proficiency: Early. The seed of Dao is planted. Upgradeable

Chop - Proficiency: Middle. There is greatness in simplicity.

**[Chop]** had improved as he suspected. In his fight with the Herald, he'd actually shot out the edge like a projectile, something he hadn't been able to do before. The desperation in the fight helped him breakthrough from Early to Middle stage of the skill.

He truly hoped he didn't need to be on the verge of death to improve his skills in the future, but it seemed that pushing oneself to the limits was effective in improving not only levels and titles, but even skills as well.

As he was done with everything he could do for now, he closed his windows and helplessly closed his eyes.

It took a whole day before he could move about again, and another until he felt strong enough that he dared resume exploring.

He set course for the area where he had heard sounds of mining a few days earlier. As he approached he heard some shuffling ahead. He hid in an unlit side-tunnel, getting ready for a battle in case the imps discovered him.

To his surprise, the two imps weren't alone but accompanied by three demons. They did not seem like miners, as they all were holding weapons and carefully looked around. They all seemed to be warrior classes as none of them held staves or tomes or the like, and Zac's eyes lit up when he saw one of the demons actually held an axe of exactly the same make as his own.

He originally planned on avoiding the fight as he didn't want to rack up a body count, but now he charged at them as soon as they were within a few meters. With a **[Chop]** two of the demons instantly died, not even having a chance to react. Zac grabbed the remaining one with his free hand and threw the terrified demon down on the ground. With a mighty swing, he ended him as well, leaving only the imps standing. The imps barely managed to start summoning their fireballs before one was decapitated and the other was kicked into the wall, the force breaking most of its bones and killing it.

Zac looted the corpses then threw them into his pouch. He didn't love the idea of carrying around a bunch of corpses, but he also didn't want to just leave them lying there to be discovered. As if answering his prayer a salamander lumbered into view a few minutes later, and Zac tried throwing one of the demons at it.

It quickly snapped up the body and with a few disgusting chews had eaten him whole, the saliva creating a sickening sizzling sound as its acidic nature quickly melted parts of the body before even swallowing it.

Zac continued to throw bodies at it, and it actually managed to eat the whole party except one of the demons. But it grabbed him with its mouth, and after a glance at Zac turned around and returned to wherever it came from. It looked like the salamanders truly weren't a part of the demon's forces.

Zac continued forward, now holding an axe in each hand. He was delighted to see that the **[Axe Mastery]** skill still worked while dual-wielding the axes. But after trying it out for a bit he felt it was very hard and unwieldy to use. He preferred using only one axe, and having a free hand seemed more convenient for him. Even using a dagger in his off-hand felt more natural.

He reluctantly put back his second axe in his pouch and continued on. He might just be lacking experience, and he would have a lot of time to train his axe-work if he couldn't level up for a while. As he walked through the shimmering tunnels he finally started hearing the droning sounds of tools hitting the hard walls.

Zac knew by now the effort it took to mine the Nexus Crystals. It had taken him quite some effort to dig out only one crystal from a wall, and that was with maxed out Strength. It seemed as though the dense cosmic energy empowered the rock that encased the crystals, making it far harder than it normally was. It was no wonder that new demons kept streaming down into the tunnels from the demon town.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 55 - Hey There Buddy**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

tiers are up! If you want to support me and the novel, or just want to read ahead, check it out! Read up to 13 chapters ahead of what's posted on RRL. As today is the 2nd 3rd you will not get debited a second time until August if you sign, giving you early access for weeks!

Zac wished he had a mirror to more sneakily look around the corners, but could only work with what he got. He rubbed some dirt on his face and singed scalp to cover his skin, and then wrapped some of the vines around his neck and head. Somewhat satisfied with his camouflage, and carefully peeked around a corner, mostly hidden behind a huge mushroom.

The tunnel Zac peered into contained five miners, and he was surprised to see that most of them used different means to extract the crystals.

Two were using basic pick-axes to gradually chip away at the walls. But each swing only made some tiny chippings fall, proving that their strength was nowhere near Zac's. If he used one of those pickaxes he would likely be able to slam a decent hole in the wall, even if the rock was strengthened.

Another two of the miners were actually mages, and they simply held their hands to the wall. It took some time to see what they were doing, but he saw that a Nexus Crystal slowly was emerging out of the wall after a while. Apparently, the rock was even resistant to spells, as the earth mages Zac encountered so far usually had a far easier time manipulating stone.

The last miner was slamming away at the wall with a mace, and his Strength was overbearing. Every slam created a reverberating thud that made stone chippings fly.

The miners were all demons who looked well fed and cared for and didn't really look weaker compared to the scouts he encountered. He had hoped that the demons placed their weakest in the mines, which would make Zac's next actions more

convenient. But the Strength of the mace wielder seemed to be even higher compared to the demon with the great sword and black arcs of lightning.

Next to their feet, they each had a sack of extracted Nexus Crystals. The mace-wielder's sack was filled the most and the mages were second. It was all these sacks that were the goal of Zac. He had decided to scout out the demon activity in the cave for a bit, and steal as many Nexus Crystals as he could. He wanted to see if the crystals could help him in evolving his race or class before biting the bullet and gaining a level to see what happened. He knew he was grasping at straws, but he was really out of options.

Zac based his guess on two things. First the monkey packs. The higher density of energy the packs stayed in, the larger they became. The packs closest to the valley sported the largest monkeys, and a few even evolved to the point of using skills. The second clue came from the imp that was hiding crystals in a stash. He guessed that it maybe wanted to use the crystals for evolving as well.

If the beasts could use cosmic energy to evolve, then why couldn't he? So he wanted to steal a large amount in order to experiment. Perhaps there was a method of usage that would evolve his body, but not improve his level.

Zac slunk back into his tunnel, moving further on. His target wasn't these half-filled sacs. Moving onward he spotted quite a few tunnels with miners, and rhythmic thumping on the walls filled the tunnels. He soon found a deserted tunnel whose crystals all had been extracted. He picked this tunnel and started moving through it, ascending slightly as he did. He wanted to get closer to the center of demon activities.

All these miners had sacs, but Zac never saw anyone carrying them back to the Demon City. That meant that either they were collected and put in a pouch or were left here in the caves. In either case, they should be collected somewhere.

The tunnels that had been mined looked truly bleak compared to the magical feeling of the untouched ones. Not only were the crystals in the walls removed, but most of the vegetation had also been ripped out of the tunnel. The only thing left was a smattering of moss to somewhat illuminate the area. Luckily for Zac, these exploited tunnels were completely deserted as anything of value was taken. It made it easy for him to move around the active excavations and into the inner area closer to where he expected the cave mouth to be.

He really felt thankful that his titles had improved his mental stats quite a bit. Normally he would be completely turned around after days in the tunnels. But while he couldn't exactly pinpoint where he should be in relation to the mountain, he generally knew the layout of the tunnels he had traversed and the direction he was moving. This was completely different from the old Zac who could almost get lost in his own neighborhood, and could only be attributed to either Intelligence or Wisdom.

Perhaps putting points in these stats wouldn't be a waste for a warrior, and not because it would help with his lacking sense of direction. He had been pondering on attributes a lot while healing up from the poison. If he was to throw his 1-stat-strategy out the window he needed a new direction. One alternative was to focus on all his physical stats, including dexterity and vitality as well. Find a good balance between the stats that still had Strength as the main focus, but not as lopsided as now.

But a new alternative he hadn't thought about was to start focusing on wisdom and intelligence. When he let go of his chosen path he started to think more deeply about what the various attributes could help him with, and he believed the mental attributes might help him with the Dao and Skill advancement.

If putting his free points in Intelligence allowed him to improve his Dao Seed faster and acquire new ones it might be more effective compared to putting them into

more physical stats. If putting 10 points in wisdom helped him get another Dao Seed that gave 15 bonus attribute points, it was a worthwhile investment.

It might also be possible that even physical attacks needed those stats. His **[Chop]** skill was approaching the realm of magic as it could be turned into a projectile now. Perhaps Wisdom and Intelligence would help it fly faster or further, rather than Strength.

He could only put aside those things for now, and for the hundredth sighed that he had no one to ask about these things.

The sounds of battle in the distance interrupted his thoughts. Who would be fighting down in the tunnels? Intrigued, Zac moved towards the clangor. He soon arrived at the mouth of a cave and saw four huge salamanders in a pitched battle against twice the amount of demons.

Earthen Spikes were shooting at the monsters while warriors were keeping the lizards at bay. A pyromancer conjured a huge fireball that shot into the open maw of a salamander, burning it alive from the inside. It started to furiously thrash about, slamming one of the warriors into the wall, at least breaking a few bones.

It was clear that apart from the fireball the salamanders held the advantage. Had the demons met only one or two of the monsters they'd likely have been able to defeat them, but four were too many.

The warriors didn't have the power to keep the monsters occupied, and the earth mages' attacks were largely ineffective. After their kill, one of the warriors sporting a large hammer and a shield shouted something in demonic and their party started to move backward.

Zac was happy to let this play out and hid behind a boulder, but the development put him in a predicament. The demons were moving in his direction.

After some deliberation, he picked up a few rocks and started pelting the demons. With his Strength he could likely throw them hard enough to blast through their bodies like bullets, but he controlled his power output. The first stones hit one of the warriors in the neck and in the back of the head of another.

It didn't knock them out but contained enough force to daze them. In a pitched battle like this a brief mistake could be deadly, and the salamanders unhesitatingly pounced. They bit onto the two demons and after a few furious shakes threw their mangled corpses away.

A small stream of cosmic energy entered Zac, and he was delighted to see that the System only awarded a small part of the full amount to him. It looked that the system did use some sort of distribution method that somehow gauged contribution or damage dealt.

He managed to throw another stone that actually knocked one of the mages out cold before he was discovered. One of the mages screamed angrily and shot a few earth spikes toward him. But a few hastily summoned spikes possessed no danger to Zac, and he broke them off with a wave of his axe.

Zac moved forward quick as lightning and grabbed the scruff of the mage. Then with a grunt he threw her like a doll right at the warrior that ordered the retreat. She slammed into him with enough force that they both helplessly went sprawling on the ground.

The salamanders were quick on the uptake and started helping out with the pincer attack. The two downed demons were quickly dealt with and suddenly it was four demons left versus three salamanders and Zac.

With the frontline down the remaining mages were in dire straits. They desperately erected defenses against the hulking monsters, and then tried to force their way through Zac. But Zac was well versed in anti-mage tactics by now and quickly threw the pyromancer over the hastily erected wall. The mage wailed and then went quiet forever.

The salamanders weren't standing idle either, and with a roar the largest one slammed straight through the defenses and snapped up one of the demons. Another one followed and started biting one of the earth mages. The stone skin the mage used was completely ineffective against the lizard's saliva and strong jaws, and he screamed as he was being eaten alive.

Only one solitary demon remained, and with a desperate roar he started gathering cosmic energy from the surroundings. With the large density in the air it felt like a whirlpool of energy was forming. Zac recognized that sign and immediately cleaved the demon in two from head to crotch, just before jumping for cover.

He held his hands over his head for a few seconds, but the expected explosion didn't come. Perhaps Zac managed to kill him before the energy managed to reach a critical mass. Somewhat embarrassedly he got to his feet and found himself facing three salamanders silently staring at him.

"Hey there buddy, let's be friends" Zac croaked toward the largest salamander, hoping to sound friendly.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 56 - Ill-gotten Gains**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

tiers are up! If you want to support me and the novel, or just want to read ahead, check it out! Read up to 13 chapters ahead of what's posted on RRL. As today is the 4th you will not get debited a second time until August if you sign up, giving you early access for weeks!

Zac spoke to the salamanders with the same voice he used to chat with his old neighbor's dog. While he felt that fighting three salamanders wouldn't be an impossible feat, he didn't want to move closer to another level unless he needed to. Besides, who knew if they would remember him as an ally if he kept feeding them demons and imps. Having an army of giant lizards to help out against the demon city would be very handy.

One of the salamanders ignored his request for friendship and started lumbering toward Zac, who helplessly backed away with his hands held up in response. Thankfully the leader's maw opened, and a surprisingly childish squeak emerged from its mouth. The squeak stopped the advancing salamander in its tracks, and it lumbered back toward one of the demon corpses.

Zac surveyed all the corpses for anything of value. He quickly noted that none of them carried a magic pouch, and the only other gear he found interesting was the shield one of the warriors had carried. It lay flung to the side by the corner of the cave. In case he spotted anything of real value or a magic pouch he would probably have initiated a fight, but he now saw no need to.

He briefly wondered what would happen if a monster ate one of the pouches while he moved away from the cave. Would it explode like a magic piñata, spewing its content all over the place? Or would the items simply be lost? Would a tear in space occur, sucking anything in the vicinity into some unknown void?

He waited some distance from the cave for fifteen minutes until the sickening sounds of feasting were gone, and sneaked back to the site of the battle. The salamanders were gone, apart from the dead one lying in a corner. All the bodies of the demons were gone as well.

Everything that the demons had worn seemed to have been ingested together with the bodies, but things they had dropped was left where it lay. Zac went and picked up the shield from the corner and examined it. It was slightly dented and corroded from the battle, but overall in serviceable condition. He threw it into his pouch and left again, not bothering with the damaged swords on the ground.

He was happy to see that the salamanders were actively hunting the demons, as that would provide an explanation of why some demons went missing when Zac started his activities.

With gusto he returned into the tunnels, looking for some stash house or clues where the mined crystals were gathered. But after looking around in vain for some time he changed his strategy. He found another group of miners and made sure he could get to both sides of their tunnel through side-paths.

After making sure he had a good grasp on the surrounding topography he simply sat down in a tunnel close by, waiting to see what happened with the sacks. Luckily he didn't have to wait long as the group of miners had been going at it for some time judging by the bulging sacks. Zac heard footsteps and hid his face deeper among the vegetation, hiding the rest of his body around the corner.

Five demons arrived at the tunnel, with the one in the middle wearing a fancy dress and having an air of haughtiness. The four others accompanying her were clearly bodyguards judging from their attire and how they encircled her. When she arrived the miners immediately stopped their activities and saluted the lady.

With a few words she brought out a clipboard from a pouch and one by one the miners brought their crystal sacks over to her. She lifted the first one up with her free hand, and after a comment wrote something down on the clipboard. She then put the whole sack into one of the pouches in her belt.

One of the guards brought out an empty sack from a backpack and handed it out with an expressionless face. The miner bowed and went back to his position. This process went on for two more miners without anything of note happening. But when the lady commented on the fourth miner's sack he couldn't help but grimace and hesitantly say a few words in demonic.

The bodyguards immediately perked up and started radiating a dangerous aura, but the lady waved them down. She simply pointed to the bag and said a few words with a smiling face. The miner looked horrified and went down on his knees looking like he was begging for his life.

The exchange continued for some time until finally the lady put the sack into another magic pouch, and the miner could only return to his position with a devastated expression. The other miners simply stared down in the ground, not wanting to be implicated by their mouthy associate.

After the lady was done she simply turned and left, with her four bodyguards in tow. The miners sighed and sat down to eat, conversing with subdued voices. Zac didn't linger on and instead crept behind the party of five.

*'Don't worry buddy, I'll mete out justice for you soon.'* Zac gave a silent prayer for the unlucky miner as he was skulked away. He kept a healthy distance from the group, afraid that any sound would alert the group, and the walking treasure trove would slip out of his fingers.

The group soon arrived at another tunnel with a group of miners, and the process repeated itself. Zac kept following the group for an hour and watched them collect sack after sack of crystals. He wasn't sure whether the group he first spied on was among the first the lady visited, but just going by what he had observed the pouches on her belt contained an astonishing amount of crystals by now, and could only be counted by the thousands.

Zac felt he couldn't wait any longer and got himself ready. He steadied his breath and placed himself at a side-tunnel that the party should be passing after finishing their collection. It was some distance from the mining group, so Zac had no vision of his target anymore. However, they were moving in a very systematic pattern through the tunnel system so far, and Zac could only assume they would continue.

Sure enough, soon the tell-tale echoes of the steps of the party were approaching. Zac held his breath, not wanting to give any indication of his presence. The first two guards came into view, but Zac didn't react.

As if sensing something was wrong one of the guards started to turn around, but it was too late. Zac entered the tunnel right behind the two and without hesitation swung a Dao-empowered strike at the lady in the middle. She looked shocked, but a golden sheen immediately enveloped her as an inscription pattern lit up on her dress.

Zac knew that inscription very well by now and forcefully stopped his swing. It hurt his muscles to do so, but it was better than getting the whole force of the strike redirected at himself. Instead, he lightly punched the golden barrier, and a recoil traveled through his arm bringing some discomfort.

Having fulfilled its purpose, the golden layer shattered, leaving the lady once more exposed. Black lightning arcs fluttered all over her body, but Zac swiftly decapitated her with a grunt. The black arcs traveled all over his body, making it feel like he was being electrocuted, and he actually blanked out from the pain for a second.

During the brief pause from the shock, a sword stabbed into his side, drawing a small gout of blood. The pain shook him awake, and he immediately pounced on the two guards that had stood behind the lady. They were alarmed, but still warriors. One had produced a spiked mace whereas the other's hands started glowing with lightning. From his muscles he didn't seem like a mage though, but rather a pugilist.

They tried to pincer Zac, with the mace-wielder swinging at him from the left and the pugilist attacking him from the right with a clawed hand. Zac ignored the martial artist, and instead swung his axe to meet the mace.

The collision was completely one-sided, as the force from Zac's swing slapped the mace out of his hand and made the demon lose his balance. Simultaneously the clawed hand slammed into Zac's back, easily destroying the leather protection, and trying to tear into his flesh. Unfortunately for him, Zac's skin was all the armor he needed, and the demon only managed to create a small flesh wound. The lightning entered Zac's body, but by now this level of power had scant effect on him.

He grabbed the mace-wielder's neck with his free left hand and slammed him down on the martial artist. The sounds of bones breaking could be heard, but Zac was interrupted as he planned to finish the two. A blade was flying right toward his throat, and Zac activated his armor to block it.

But he was shocked as no golden sheen enveloped him, and he could only desperately lift his arm to block the strike. The blade cut into his lower arm, only stopping after carving into bone. The pain was blinding but only served to enrage Zac. With a furious **[Chop]** the blade wielder was bisected, and then the two demons on the ground followed him into death.

He turned toward the last bodyguard only to see him desperately fleeing, heedlessly throwing away his weapon. Zac started running after him, throwing a few daggers his way. But the bodyguard was surprisingly nimble, managing to dodge most of them while running. One hit him in his back, but he only staggered slightly but kept moving.

Suddenly he started shouting at the top of his lungs, horrifying Zac. He threw one more dagger at him, but the demon turned a corner and disappeared from his vision. He could still hear the screams though, as they echoed through the tunnel system.

Zac hesitated a second, but then ran back toward the killed demons. With a furious speed he grabbed the pouches on the lady's belt, then threw her headless body into one of them. He then ran away in the opposite direction from where the screaming bodyguard was fleeing toward.

After a minute he stopped and quickly bandaged his wounded arm. It was bleeding freely and was currently creating a trail to his location. After making sure the blood didn't get through the bandages and rags he started running again. After he had run for an hour and completely left the area with mining activities or imps he finally slowed down and found a good resting spot.

The fight wasn't very taxing, but he was worried about the results. First he dragged his chest piece off his torso and inspected it. The armor itself looked whole, but the inscribed fractal on the front had multiple cracks on it. That should explain why the shield didn't materialize earlier and he got maimed instead. But a smile crept on his face as he glanced down at his belt. He knew he would be able to afford to buy a new one with his ill-gotten gains.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 57 - Dressing up**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

tiers are up! If you want to support me and the novel, or just want to read ahead, check it out! Read up to 13 chapters ahead of what's posted on RRL. As today is the 5th you will not get debited a second time until August if you sign up, giving you early access for weeks!

This is the last plug up here for a while, I promise

"> But to give a sense of what it's like to be a VIP I've turned one chapter public on my page for the weekend!

Zac suddenly remembered hearing a snapping sound when he used the shield against the imp Herald. He had no idea how to fix the inscriptions and could only reluctantly put the armor into his bag. He didn't want to risk damaging it further until he could fix it, as it had been a great life-saving tool so far.

He then brought out the headless body from his pouch. After a great deal of hesitation he stripped the bloody dress from the body, leaving the corpse only in its undergarments. He then put the dress on himself with a sour face before putting back the body into the pouch.

It wasn't ideal, but the dress had the same inscription as his armor, and it could be the difference between life and death. The dress he put on was strapped was a neutral beige and reached down to his knees. The design was luckily armless and somewhat nondescript, making it almost look like an overly long tank top. He put his belt over the dress then turned his eyes to the pouches.

A creepy grin was slowly surfacing once again, as he grabbed the closest one of the three he looted and took a peek inside.

If this was an old school cartoon then Zac's eyes would have turned into dollar-signs by now. The bag was almost filled to the brim with sack after sack of raw Nexus Crystals. If he had to guess he'd have to say there was at least an equivalent of 10 000 crystals in the pouch. The shapes and sizes were completely random as well, ranging from the size of a finger to almost a whole hand. Most of the crystals were encased in some stone and needed one last processing before being pure.

The second bag was unfortunately empty except a few solitary sacks, likely a spare in case the first one was filled up. The third one was the personal pouch belonging to the noble lady herself. It held various personal effects such as daily necessities, clothes, and jewelry. It also had a nasty-looking claw weapon with fractal inscriptions. Zac brought it out and tried to put it on his hand, but it seemed to have been custom made for the demoness, or at least made for ladies, as his hand didn't fit.

Most noticeably in the pouch there was a sizeable mound of raw crystals. There even were a few sacks as well. It looked like that the lady foreman was skimming off the top after all, as crystals worth a couple of hundred standard-sized ones could be found in the pouch.

Satisfied with his haul he took out some food and water from his pouch to have his dinner. As he did he started to plan his next step. He had planned on stalking the tunnels for a while longer, but unfortunately, he was already exposed. He didn't doubt that the fleeing demon soon would warn all his superiors about Zac. The demon had seen the whole fight where Zac showed many of his cards as well.

After half a month of living with the demons, he was finally exposed. It was better than he expected to be honest, as he wasn't really the stealthy type. It seemed he could only begrudgingly give up on finding any more mining foremen, and instead refocus on the monkey king. It was time to head back the way he came from, and search for an alternative exit.

But suddenly Zac got an acute sense of danger, and instinctively dove to the side. A soundless black arrow flew past him where his head had just been and a throng earth spikes followed right after. Zac scrambled to his feet and found himself face to face with over twenty demons swarming into his cave from all exits.

This clearly was an ambush that they prepared for some time, as they entered from both exits simultaneously. Feeling like a caged animal, Zac growled and immediately ran toward one of the groups, trying to avoid a pincer attack.

As if practiced beforehand, the group started to back away from him, with all the mages erecting barriers to keep him at bay. There were the translucent magical barriers accompanied by earth walls and earthen spikes. There was even a tree mage who manipulated the subterranean vines to ensnare his feet.

Meanwhile, Zac got pelted by the other group of demons with an array of ranged attacks. He could only give up his charge in order to avoid most of it. As he dodged he turned around toward the attackers who harassed him from behind and swung his axe in a mighty horizontal arc.

A translucent blade grew to four meters long in an instant and then shot toward the surprised group. Only a few in the back managed to dodge in time, and the others could only hastily erect defenses.

With Zac's power the defenses of the average demon were simply insufficient, as it tore through them one by one. The blade wasn't perfectly stable though, and after slicing through 6 demons it flickered out of existence.

Two daggers came whooshing straight behind the huge blade, one slamming into an eye and the other into the gut of another demon. Satisfied, Zac turned back and started pressing forward through the defenses of the group.

He summoned his large edge but kept it at maximum stable capacity for now. As the attacks from behind had paused from his strike he could once again focus fully on the group he had initially charged at.

He slammed the axe down on one of the translucent barriers and it cracked like fragile glass. Two spears stabbed into him as he advanced, one lodging itself in his side and the other got stuck on the bone of his pelvis.

It was two warriors who used their long weapons trying to keep him at distance. Zac ripped one of the spears out of the hands of the demon, making him stumble forward, and slammed the butt of the spear at the other warrior. The spear broke in two and made the demon fly into the wall with a thud.

Immediately after he actually threw his axe straight in the chest of one of the mages. He didn't know which kind he was, but he died instantly from the strike. He brought out his identical axe from his pouch and continued to press forward.

A few arrows slammed into his back, but only elicited a grunt in response as he pressed forward. He once again got the prickling sensation of danger and sidestepped without hesitation. An arrow flew straight past him and once again missed his head. Unfortunately, the archer that shot the super-powered black arrows still was alive.

He kept pushing forward, and with a great leap he was within the group of demons. He ate a spear strike and two stalactite attacks by the earth mages due to his reckless charge but now he was within striking distance of the demons. Zac started madly swing his axe, with **[Chop]** charged to its limit.

He kept taking various hits but for every strike he received, he returned one in kind. And with Zac's far superior stats he whittled down the group to only 3 combatants from 9 in under 10 seconds. The survivors from the other group joined their brethren in the fight, and Zac found himself encircled by the 6 last surviving demons.

Zac was completely drenched in blood by now, both his own and the demon's, and filled with small wounds from head to toe. Almost ten arrows were sticking out of his body at various spots, making him look like a demonic porcupine. He was panting and it looked like it was a chore to keep his axe raised, but he was still standing. Fighting twenty demons at once was a bit more than he could confidently handle, even in an enclosed space like this.

None of the demons were keen on being the first to attack, as over 15 demons already had made the ultimate sacrifice and they didn't want to be next in line. They seemed to be content to simply watch as Zac slowly bled out.

They all kept a healthy distance from him, making him unable to reach them even with **[Chop]**, and he currently didn't dare use his ranged attack due to the huge consumption of energy.

Zac knew he couldn't keep stalling and threw a dagger at one of the mages, who quickly summoned a barrier. The translucent wall shook when the dagger hit it, but it held true and the dagger dropped to the ground. Zac didn't want to throw his axe as his other one still was lodged in the mage some distance away.

Needing to break the status quo, he moved his hand down to his belt, and with underhand throw hurled a large crystal sack at another demon. The demon slightly froze from seeing a small mountain of wealth flying in his direction, and even instinctually reached out his hand to catch it.

But how could a heavy sack thrown by Zac be so easy to catch? It hit the demon who crashed into the wall behind with a wet thud. He slumped down on the ground and

didn't move. The other five demons all charged at him as if by command, throwing desperate attacks at him.

With only 5 demons left Zac finally threw his axe at a mage keeping his distance. He hastily erected an earth wall, but the axe had the momentum of a meteor and passed the rising wall and blasted a hole through the mage before he could also activate his stone skin.

He took out one of his large swords out of his pouch and with a sweep slapped away two incoming spears. He then charged straight at the closest warrior. The warrior tried to keep Zac at bay with his spear, but Zac simply swung his sword at it with enough force that it broke the fingers of the warrior, and continued into melee range.

With a growl, he stabbed the great sword into the demon's gut, and with a ferocious upwards tug ripped him in two, drenching the surroundings in a storm of blood. A second spear stabbed into his side, but it only added yet another shallow wound to the tally. The three remaining demons seemed to understand that they didn't have the power to contend with him, and simultaneously started absorbing inordinate amounts of cosmic energy.

Zac didn't want to see what a triple suicide explosion looked like, and desperately ran toward the closest target and decapitated him. He continued toward the next immediately, but as he approached a resounding explosion threw him ten meters away and straight into a wall.

Zac puked out a mouthful of blood, and his wounds only got worse. Just as he shakily got up to his knees his vision filled with a bloated demon falling down in front of him. It was the last living demoness, chock-full of cosmic energy. The demoness stared into Zac's eyes as she shed one solitary tear before she blew up with a tremendous explosion.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Last chapter of the week! Next week things heat up!

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall, please check out my

I'm sorry I haven't listed up all my new patrons lately, but I've been extremely busy with real life on top of keeping the writing going, so had to skip out on some parts. But know I truly appreciate the support!

#### **Chapter 58 - Quest**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New week, new chapters! Things are heating up now, excited about what you think of this week's chapters!

The world was shaking nauseatingly and an incessant ringing filled Zac's ears. He shakily got to his feet but immediately fell down again. His state was already pretty bad, but the last blast completely messed him up. His new dress had used the golden protection just a few hours ago, making it unusable for another day.

Luckily he managed to drag a corpse over at the last second to use as a shield from the blast, otherwise, he might have bit the bullet, 103 Endurance or not. And now he was covered in a blood mush from the demon shield to boot. However the last minute protection was far from enough, and it felt like everything in his body was broken.

But he knew he couldn't stay where he was. The demons somehow knew his position, and he had no other recourse but to flee. He shakily got to his feet and collected his two axes, and only swiped up a few knives if convenient. Zac didn't dare to properly loot the bodies as he needed to put distance from the cave.

His movements were extremely slow, even if he mentally screamed at his legs to move faster. He desperately wished he had some health and stamina potions right now like in a game, but the only thing he got was a cauldron full of poison.

After hesitating for a few seconds he took out his canteen with the azure water from the pond. The water was crammed full of cosmic energy and might help him recover enough for him to properly flee from the area. The problem was that he had no idea whether it also contained something else like poison or deadly super bacteria.

Zac knew he couldn't be picky at a moment like this, and had to risk it. With a few chugs he downed a couple of mouthfuls of the azure water. It tasted sweet and cooling in his mouth, and was hands down was the best tasting beverage he ever had. But as soon as the water entered his throat it started burning worse than the strongest spirits he knew, making him feel like he swallowed a sun rather than some water.

The burning feeling didn't abate in his stomach, but rather kept intensifying. He felt his body was turning into a pressure cooker that was ready to burst. Veins popped out all over his body and he was forced to stop walking from the intense pain. Sweat was pouring down his face like a waterfall and even his eardrums popped from the pressure.

Zac was starting to worry for real that he might explode like the demons any time now. But soon the intense pressure abated, and the scorching heat in his belly turned into comforting rays of warmth that spread all through his body.

Zac felt his cosmic energy reserves rapidly filling up, but his wounds were barely reacting to the water. He thought he might be seeing some improvement but couldn't be sure. It rather felt like he had taken a dozen shots of adrenaline and simply couldn't feel the pain any longer.

It was better than nothing Zac thought as he continued onward at a brisker pace. As he walked he dumped everything from the lady foreman's pouch onto the ground, leaving only the Nexus Crystals. He still didn't feel secure though and started to meticulously scan through the bag containing most of the crystals.

He went through them one by one to see if anything was amiss, trying to find out how the demons were able to track him. Perhaps there were bugs planted in one of the sacks he had stolen from the lady foreman, as that was when the trouble started. Soon his scanning stopped at an inconspicuous rock that was placed in one of the sacks. Most of the sacks had some rock chippings mixed in with the crystals, but this was the first time he saw a rock of that size. He brought out the sack and groped around inside until he found the stone.

As he glanced at it did not seem overly suspicious, but he could see some slightly odd veins on the stone. He brought out his flashlight for the first time and shone it on the rock. In brighter lighting he could see that the veins actually were fractals. Zac grimly stared at it for a second, before he crushed it under his foot.

He immediately backtracked a bit and changed direction. As he walked he kept checking each and every bag, and eventually found two more similar stones. Finally sure that was the last of them he sped off, ignoring any wounds protesting.

As he walked he multitasked by checking his status page. The fight with the demons pushed him over the limit and gotten him to level 35. He had already been somewhat close to leveling again after killing the Herald, and the melee was all that was needed.

His fears were unfortunately realized and he saw his Strength still was stuck at 175 instead of increasing from the class bonus. It looked like he really had to try and evolve somehow. He helplessly allocated his 3 free points into Vitality, as he didn't dare put any more in Endurance for now either.

Hoping for a class advancement quest activating from reaching a “big” level, Zac opened up his quest window next. Things weren’t that convenient, as no advancement quests popped up.

He did, however, receive a new class quest.

**Loamwalker (Class): Walk a thousand kilometers touching the earth. Reward: Loamwalker Skill (0/1000)**

He suddenly was pretty happy that he didn’t spend a few days to grind in order to buy [Steps of Gaia] from the shop. He only lacked 5000 coins for the skill by now, and could now use them to improve other things instead. [Loamwalker] was clearly some type of movement skill, just like [Steps of Gaia].

Honestly, his class skill sounded quite a bit blander compared to the one in the shop, but he had learned not to underestimate the dull-sounding skills he received from his class. It was also very convenient to complete, as he only needed to walk around.

A slight scuffling interrupted his thoughts, and he could only bring out his axe again with a grimace. He placed himself at a corner in wait, and soon a demon came into view. This one was highly alert, and immediately noticed Zac’s presence.

But Zac was ready and the axe was falling down on the demon’s head as just as he appeared, instantly killing him. He immediately entered the tunnel and unleashed a maximized [Chop] edge that flew outward before he could even register what was in the tunnel.

A few screams and groans were heard, and the demons were almost all dead before they knew what hit them. There were two that were badly hurt but alive, but Zac made short work out of them as well.

There was one final demon who for some reason had been doubled over when the edge passed through the party and was completely unharmed. Horrified he started running but Zac wouldn’t let yet another straggler escape. With a grunt, he threw his axe at the demon and then started his pursuit.

Luckily this time he hit, and the party was no more. He stopped by the fallen body and ripped out the embedded axe while glancing at the bloodied tunnel. He didn’t know who made the sound while walking, but that mistake cost the whole group their lives.

It looked like the demons hadn’t given up the chase. They had finally identified him and seemed determined to remove the problem. He quickly threw all the bodies and gear into his empty pouch and continued on until he found a secluded cave where he dumped them all, including their things. He actually wanted to bring them with him to hide his pathing, but who knew what else the demons could detect.

His speed slowed down somewhat due to taking even greater care to be completely silent, and thoroughly checking side-tunnels. But as he moved he was steadily moving upward. Zac figured the Demons might be impeded by the monkeys if he managed to exit into the mountains again. It was easier for him to hide as a solitary person, compared to their large groups.

He saw a party again as he checked a tunnel, but this time they were moving away. Zac kept completely still until they moved far away before skulking forward. At least it was clear that they couldn’t locate him anymore. It had just been a guess, but it truly seemed that those stones were some sort of tracking device.

He kept skulking forward and avoided any demons that he came across. He was lucky that the tunnels amplified sounds and it was almost impossible for a group of 10 people to be completely silent at all times.

He was forced into one more fight but ended it quickly before moving further up. After another hour he hadn't seen any demons for 30 minutes and finally sat down and brought out a crystal. He should be some ways up the mountain by now, and could happen upon an exit at any time. Even if he didn't want to stop he needed to recuperate before reentering the mountains.

The tunnels were endless and even if the demons sent hundreds of them into them it was still somewhat unlikely for them to happen upon him, as there was so much ground to cover. Meanwhile, he was afraid that the Herald had prepared an ambush for him the moment he reemerged.

So he finally allowed himself a break, eating some dried meat and then quietly waited for his wounds to get better. After two hours of quiet rest a loud ding entered his ears and forced him to his feet, warily looking around. But the area around him was completely deserted, with not a demon in sight.

**[Special Dynamic Quest activated. Emerge victorious and seize the Fruit of Ascension. Struggle for supremacy.]**

It was the familiar emotionless voice of the System entering his ears, but Zac barely had time to reflect on its words before his vision changed.

He suddenly was up amongst the clouds and stared down toward the familiar sight of his island. He could clearly see the whole topography, but the sea around it was blurred somehow. The vision moved and he closed in on the island with terrifying speed, hurtling toward the mountains.

Soon he arrived at the valley where he fought the monkey king earlier, but it looked different from how it did when he visited. The zone of death around the red and white tree had expanded to stretch across almost half the valley, and even the azure pond was shrunken down to half its size.

After having almost exploded from the energy contained in just a few mouthfuls he was shocked at the amount the tree had absorbed.

The vision kept moving and in seconds he was next to the tree. Zac would have thought it would be even lusher after absorbing the surroundings and the lake, but it actually looked a bit dried out. A couple of leaves had even fallen to the ground.

Neither the herald nor any other monkeys were anywhere to be seen, but Zac didn't ponder about it overly much as his eyes were glued to a pair of fruits that had grown on the tree. They were similar to a cantaloupe apart from their color. Instead, they were a glistening red mixed with white lines that almost looked like fractals.

The fruits were beautiful, but more importantly, they had some magical effect on him even though it was just an illusion. It felt like every cell in his body was screaming in desire, wanting nothing more than to consume the fruits. He hated the fact that he was just there in a vision, and not in reality.

As quickly as the vision appeared it suddenly ended, leaving Zac in the cave with a mixture of greed and hesitation.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read ahead) please check out my

**Chapter 59 - Now or Never**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

Heading out so early chapter today!

I have gotten an influx of bad ratings the last few days, and have kept dropping in rating. **If you enjoy the story please remember to rate if you haven't already!**

"That fucking monkey!" Ogras roared, this time enraged for real. No wonder it sent its underlings to keep his search parties out of the peaks. He thought it was just posturing that he'd allow for some time before setting monkeys straight. But Cindermane had likely found the Tree of Ascension long ago and just waited for its fruits to ripen. Somehow the monkey must have broken free of the clan's mental restrictions, otherwise it would have been compelled to report such a find.

"But if you think that breaking free from my grasp is that easy you're in for a rude awakening..." he muttered and then turned to his aide. "Assemble the regiments, we're heading toward the mountain."

"Yes, sir. What about the search parties in the mines?" The aid asked.

"Leave them. Hopefully they will keep that human busy while we deal with this."

He had been shocked to learn that the group of natives he discounted earlier actually was only one human. At least he hoped there was only one of them, as his power seemed high enough to give even him a headache. Of course, the human wouldn't be a threat to him if all the limitations on him were removed though.

Worse yet the human killed Qugo and stole the poison that was supposed to be one of his aces in case everything went south. Ogras had actually decided to hide the news of the third Herald's demise, afraid that his clan members would chain him up "for his own protection", while gleefully stealing all the loot Ogras had rightfully pilfered.

As if summoned by his thoughts Rydel walked in through the door, as always unheeding or dismissive of proper protocol. He wore a resplendent silver battle armor that matched his long white hair well. Strapped to his back were two swords with intricately carved hilts.

"Cousin, I assume you have seen the proclamation by The Ruthless Heavens?" he said with a smile.

"I'm not blind Rydel, of course I've seen it. The army is setting out immediately. And here on the baby planet I'm General, not cousin." Ogras spat out in annoyance.

"It is ironic, wouldn't you say cousin? It was you who championed sending the beast hordes through the gate first. But it seems they have only turned into lucrative target practice for the humans instead of paving our way, and now one of the hordes is even revolting. I wonder how the elders will react when they hear of this." Rydel smilingly continued, seemingly unperturbed by the troubling developments.

"That's not for you to worry about Rydel, know your place. I'm leading the armies myself to fix the monkey problem, and that human hiding in the tunnels will soon be caught." Ogras couldn't stand being in the same room as this thorn in his side any longer and prepared to set out.

Ogras didn't actually want to lead the army, but faced with the emergence of a D-ranked treasure such as a Fruit of Ascension, he couldn't sit still. He needed to secure it by himself, and if that failed destroy it so that Cindermane or some crony of Rydel didn't get it.

If someone from the main branch managed to get the Fruit of Ascension he might as well lay down and kill himself, as the family assassins would find him as soon as the incursion stabilized anyway. His plan was to turn the wealth of the crystal mine into acquiring a treasure like the Fruit of Ascension, and use that as a springboard to become the future hope of the clan. But if suddenly Rydel had the fruit as well, then he knew who the clan would favor.

“I’m sorry cousin, but I need to correct you on a few accounts.” Rydel said while holding up a hand to stop Ogras’ exit, his smile slightly widening. “The human has escaped the ambush, leaving at least thirty corpses behind by now. He also seems to have figured out the tracking stones, and now we can’t locate him. Furthermore, the one who will lead the army to fix your mistakes is me, not you.”

“Are you revolting against the clan precepts Rydel? You know the elders appointed me at least until the incursion stabilized. Are you sure you want to face the wrath of my grandfather?” Ogras spat out, a dangerous glint entering his eyes.

“Your grandfather is well-aware. As you were untested when appointed general, the elders came to an accord with your ancestor.” Rydel retorted as he retrieved a parchment from his bag. “In certain events that are deemed to be critical to clan Arh’Rezak’s future developments, the military command is temporarily transferred to me. Just to make sure nothing goes wrong due to inexperience.”

The bright smile looked like a death sentence to Ogras, as he snatched the parchment with a snarl. After reading through it he saw it was true. He immediately sensed his grandfather’s magic sigil on the decree, telling him that this was real. The parchment detailed certain events that would result in a transfer of leadership to Rydel, and the emergence of a D-class treasure or higher was one of them. It looked like his grandfather had been forced to make some concessions in order to snatch the leadership position for him.

“But not to worry cousin. As soon as this matter is dealt with I will return the command to you as per the instructions. I suggest you stay in your beautiful castle for now, as your safety is paramount to the clan. I have allocated a few of my guards to protect you. We have to make sure that the humans don’t assault you while we’re up at the mountain.” A cold ray flashed through Rydel’s eyes as he retrieved the parchment from the now mute Ogras. “Well then, I have a fruit to retrieve. I will be seeing you later cousin.” He said as he exited Ogras’ study, the last sentence rife with hidden implications.

Ogras briefly considered having it out with Rydel then and there, but soon gave up the thought. Rydel likely was ready for him, and he could also see multiple main branch members standing outside, sneering at him.

Ogras glared after Rydel, looking like a volcano ready to erupt. The aide sensed the atmosphere and made a quick excuse and fled the room, closing the door behind him.

Soon the energy left Ogras’ body, and he slumped down in his chair.

“Shit.”

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Zac’s heart was still beating quickly after having seen the vision. He wanted to immediately rush toward the valley but first checked his quest tab.

As he suspected a new quest had arrived.

**Dynamic Quests:**

**Ascension (Limited - Open): Seize the Fruit of Ascension upon ripening.  
Reward: Fruit of Ascension. [Time until ripening: 11:58:23]**

The classification of the quest was new, Limited - Open. His other two dynamic quests were classified as Unique. If he guessed correctly limited meant it was a short duration quest. And he hoped he was wrong, but he believed open meant that everyone within a certain area got it.

The system said to emerge victorious and to struggle for supremacy. Then it conveniently showed the location of the treasure a full 12 hours before it ripened. It wanted a bloodbath.

Zac slowly sat down again and took a small sip of the azure water. He wasn't in the mood to wait any longer and needed to heal quickly. The burning sensation spread through his body again, but this time the amount was manageable. Once again he felt his wounds slightly improve, and the throbbing pain he had felt come back once again was gone.

As the heat spread through his body he pondered on what to do. He was hesitating if he should actually compete for the fruit, as going against both the monkey horde and maybe even the demons sounded like a suicide mission. He also felt he had no choice.

He didn't know what a Fruit of Ascension did, but from how it managed to create a quest it couldn't be a small matter. If his enemies got it and received a huge power-up he might be screwed. The most likely recipient would be the monkey herald as he was the owner of the tree. It was a pretty even fight before, what would happen if it evolved once more?

Besides, it also presented an opportunity for him. The fruit would help someone ascend judging by its name. It sounded awfully similar to evolve, and he guessed it might help him get a better class or evolve his race.

He also almost knew for certain he would find the Herald by the fruit in 12 hours, hopefully still hurt from his slash. Zac knew the monkey possessed high values in Strength, Dexterity, and Endurance from their fight, and could only hope that it also didn't have a strong Vitality. It also felt reasonable that the general would be there to commandeer one of the fruits. That would mean that both his targets would be gathered at one place in roughly 12 hours.

In a sense, the quest represented an all-or-nothing gambit. If he succeeded, all his problems might be solved, including his incursion quest. But the danger would likely be off the charts. If he failed his mission would turn harder, no matter who got the fruit. If he even survived.

But he felt it was do-or-die. Time was running out, and he needed to take some risks. With a steely determination, he decided to participate in the fight.

Of course, there was no reason to rush there. He only needed to travel for less than two hours to get to the crimson tree. And getting there early would make him a sitting duck. He was only one man in what might be a huge free for all battle, and he needed to avoid attention as much as possible.

His goal should be to sneak in at the last minute, kill the monkey king and steal the fruit. If possible he should kill the general as well, or at least identify him. Then run for his life and see what the fallout was.

He sat down again on the ground, and while keeping a lookout for more demon parties only focused on getting back to prime condition. He waited a full 6 hours before he felt well enough rested to be able to give it his all.

The wounds from the ambush were somewhat healed by now, but a few wounds would likely reopen if he exerted too much force. But there still a couple of hours before he should see any action, and hopefully he would be in even better condition by then.

He set out again, and after some trial and error found a way out of the mountain. It wasn't the same path as the one he had entered through. He didn't want to dig through meters of fallen rocks, and besides it might be marked by the monkeys.

Instead, he found a tunnel that should end somewhere on the inner side of the peak, close to the entrance of the valley. It didn't actually have a cave entrance, but a few holes in the rock let sunlight through. The wall was quite thin here, and with a few minutes of effort, he would be out.

The outside was completely quiet, so Zac decided to wait some more before emerging. As he waited he started chipping at the wall with a dagger, not completely breaking through but making a quick exit easier. Finally done he sat down and continued to recuperate. When the timer showed roughly two hours until the fruits ripened, a cacophony of roars broke the silence.

Zac heartbeat fretfully hammered in his chest as he opened his eyes and stood up. It was now or never.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 60 - Entering the Fray**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac Immediately got ready, even though his wounds hadn't completely healed. But between his high vitality and the numbing effects of the azure water, he was in an almost perfect fighting condition. With no more time to lose, he finally pushed down the rock wall that blocked the entrance while hefting an axe in his hand. It made quite a crash, but it was nothing compared to the roars of thousands of monkeys, with demon screams peppered in.

As soon as he got out he was stunned by the mayhem.

Zac had emerged from a secluded spot on top of an outcropping, giving him decent vantage over the peak and down toward the valley. Everywhere he looked he saw throngs of monkeys duking it out with legions of demons.

The air sparked with energy as fireballs and lightning bolts filled the sky, the ground rippled from a multitude of spears and other projectiles shooting out. Even nature itself had entered the fray as trees slowly reached down to grab unsuspecting monkeys, before ripping them apart.

The other beast types were here as well, as a thick wall of barghest stopped the monkeys from getting into melee range of the demons. They mindlessly charged toward the monkey groupings, completely heedless of their survival.

Groups of gwyllgi roamed the battlefield with far more finesse compared to the hulking demonlings. They roved in packs and struck weak spots or lone stragglers almost with surgical precision and then quickly got out of harm's way.

There also was a smattering of imps placed together with the mage demons, but to Zac, it seemed that most of them still were in their underground dwellings, as their numbers were quite sparse. Perhaps Zac recently killing their boss had caused some sort of chaos to their ranks, making it hard for the demons to control them.

The monkeys wouldn't be outdone though, and the air was filled with flying debris, from the stalactites from the monkey captains to anything that the normal monkeys could get their hands on. Zac even saw corpses being used as projectiles, flung at the magical barriers erected by the demon mages. The barghest that came close to the monkeys were largely helpless after their first impact and were pelted and bitten to death by the angry monkeys.

The magical shields held for the most part, but every now and then they got overtaxed and shattered. The monkey captains were quick on the uptake and focused their energies on those areas. The focused fire turned the unlucky few behind the broken shield a crushed meat paste beneath a mountain of boulders.

However, most of the projectiles didn't reach the demons but rather slammed into the demon beasts who fulfilled their purpose of being meat shields.

Overall the demon's clearly held the advantage, as they steadily pushed forward. For every demon the monkey horde killed, at least five monkeys died. It still was early in the battle though, and from experience, Zac felt that the demons would run out of juice sooner or later. Those spells cost cosmic energy, while the monkeys likely could keep hurling debris for a good while. As long as the monkeys could withstand their furious onslaught long enough they might have a chance to turn the situation around.

Besides, the terrain was not ideal for organized warfare that the demons were trying for. He saw that the orderly lines were starting to splinter, and the legions forced to split up as they advanced.

Zac didn't know why it had come to a full-scale war, but he didn't complain. This kind of chaos was the best news for him. He wondered if the monkey's disadvantage was because of him. He had thinned out their horde quite a bit after all.

Some movement in the distance grabbed his attention. It was a solitary group that emanated a pressure a notch above the other demons. They were steadily pushing forward and was entering the valley at a furious pace. None of the magic shields were breaking and the monkeys could offer no resistance to their advance.

In the front a few demons in resplendent gear were personally reaping the lives of monkeys like they were harvesting wheat. Especially attention-grabbing was one male demon with shining white hair that was dancing in the wind. He held a sword in his hand and had another strapped to his back, and as he moved forward it almost looked like dancing rather than engaged in battle. The sword moved in graceful curves and moved around him in a mesmerizing pattern. But Zac knew it was no performance art, as that demon's speed of reaping monkeys seemed to eclipse even his own.

It looked like he had located the general.

Satisfied with what he had found, he started to make his way down from the cliff. He had wrapped his head in rags to hide his features and covered as much skin as possible. Zac hoped that the demons would be too preoccupied with the monkeys to realize he lacked horns and wore shoes instead of having taloned paws.

He skirted around the main army and aimed to enter the valley from a slightly different direction. There were a few clumps of demons along the path but none thankfully reacted to him. It was lucky that the demon armies all used individual clothing and gear, making their composition look very chaotic.

As he walked around a bend he almost ran straight into a party of 6 demons. The one in the front snapped something in demonic as Zac passed, but Zac only waved his axe in response. His heartbeat quickened as he kept running, waiting for the demons to go their own way.

It seemed the proximity was too close, as an arrow came whizzing at his back. Sensing danger Zac whirled around and blocked the arrow with his axe head. Sighing he made a 180 and rushed into the demon group while he summoned **[Chop]**. The man in the front held a sword, which by itself started burning as he swung it to intercept Zac's chop. The demon hadn't imagined the power contained in the axe, as the edge hit him like a truck and breaking most of his fingers as the sword was forced away. The swing continued onward as it chopped off his upper body, and continued to decapitate the unlucky demon who stood next to him with a short sword and shield.

Zac pushed on and made quick work of the last four demons, whose feeble attempts to stop him couldn't even slow him down. After the blitz he was bleeding a bit from two small wounds, but it was nothing serious. A few of his old wounds had opened as well, but there was nothing to do about that for now. He was also drenched in demon blood, and could only hope that the smell wouldn't attract any beasts.

He slowly kept moving forward, and after half an hour he reached the forest at the edge of the valley, taking twice the time compared if he had rushed straight in.

As he moved forward he saw that the orderly war at the slopes of the mountain was turned into a chaotic melee in the valley by now. There were clumps of demons fighting monkeys scattered all over the place. In most places, the demons still held an advantage, but at a few other they got overrun by sheer numbers.

He saw an unlucky group of 10 demons getting ripped to pieces by an angry horde of monkeys. They put up a valiant defense, but two fists couldn't defend against ten, and in just moment they were mangled corpses strewn on the ground. A few of the monkeys had even ripped off a limb and contentedly chewed on it as it moved toward the next pack.

Zac tried to avoid battle as much as he could, not wanting to get any more experience until he seized a Fruit of Ascension. He stayed clear of any larger battles, zig-zagging forward in a careful manner. Of course, every now and then he got accosted by either a group of demons that figured out his identity or a group of enraged monkeys happy to target any humanoid.

The clashes resulted in furious melees as Zac wanted to finish the battles as quickly as possible. Unheeding of energy expenditure he ravaged any party that got close with great chops using his skills. When he ran low on cosmic energy took a sip from the lake water and let the burn quickly restore his deficit. He did avoid using the Dao of Heaviness though, as he didn't have any means to restore his mental energy apart from sleeping.

Soon he arrived at the field of desolation, his body covered in a multitude of shallow wounds by now. Due to the consumption of the water he didn't feel any pain though, and still felt he was in peak condition.

The vision the system showed earlier was accurate, and a huge area was now covered in dried out and dead trees. The once lush forest was gone and replaced with a dead space.

After a quick look he saw that it only was fifty minutes until the fruits ripened. Even if he had blazed through all resistance in the forest it took some time to traverse the distance. He figured that if he ran it would take him twenty minutes or so to reach the crimson tree. He was hesitant whether he should leave the cover of the forest to enter the field as he would be completely exposed if he did.

After some deliberation, he ran along the forest edge toward the opposite side of the field. The demons should be concentrated on the eastern side, as they entered the valley from there. The army might have spread to encircle the tree by now, but it should at least be thinner at the opposite side.

When he was a bit more than half-way to the other side he veered into the dead zone and headed for the tree. He was running out of time and needed to get to the fruits. The area was largely devoid of combatants, either monkey or demon, and soon he saw why.

As he approached the tree he saw a scene of utter chaos. The magical tree still stood tall as it had before, with the addition of the two ripening fruits. Covering it was a glimmering shell covered in dense fractals. Zac felt that the shield should be the work of the System, as the fractals felt perfect and in harmony with the universe, just like

the ones on his array flags. The inscriptions on the demons' weapons were far more simplistic in comparison.

Packed around the shield was a confusing and bloody carnage between monkeys and demons. There were no lines of demarcation, no strategy, and no order. There were just hundreds upon hundreds of bodies crammed together, desperately trying to kill anything on the opposing side. They all tried to claw their way closer to the shield and the tree, to be as close as possible when the shield dropped.

Right by the edge of the shield, a few areas almost devoid of people could be seen, and in one of them, Zac saw the white-haired demon fight against the monkey king. The Herald had a few supersized monkeys by his side, and they furiously did everything they could to support their leader. It looked like the Herald was mostly healed up, but a huge scar adorned its chest now.

Every strike between the Herald and the general created rippling shockwaves in the area, keeping all the grunts at bay. The ground looked blazing hot with fire and molten rock, likely a result of the herald's onslaught.

But the general clearly held the advantage, and with dizzying swordplay was whittling down Cindermane's defenses. The large scar on his chest had started to open up, and new wounds over his arms accompanied it. Zac realized the lethality of the general, as even Zac's own mighty swings had only left a white mark on the Herald's sturdy hands. The hulking monkey captains were covered in wounds from head to toe as well, one of them even had a whole arm missing.

Meanwhile, the general still looked pristine apart from some soot marks, as though the carnage and fire in the surroundings was isolated from himself. The monkey captains were doing what they could to ease the pressure, but it seemed that they wouldn't be able to hang on for long unless something changed. Since Zac didn't want the general to kill the Herald, at least not yet, he was determined to be the change that would turn the tides.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 61 - Pitched Battle**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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The ground was barely visible beneath the forces as blood and broken bodies covered most of it by now. Even fires were starting to erupt at various spots around the battlefield, likely from the attacks of Pyromancers and the Herald. With the dried out tree husks on the ground the whole valley would likely be an inferno of flames in a short while.

Zac could see that more combatants from both camps were steadily streaming in from the surroundings, and immediately joined in on the mayhem when they arrived. He checked his quest and saw that the timer showed **[00:10:03]**.

Zac once more glanced at the mouthwatering fruits glistening on the tree, and after a few steadying breaths, he charged into the frenzy. He steadily moved forward wielding an axe in one hand and a dagger in the other. He refrained from using **[Chop]** in this crammed melee, afraid to draw attention to himself.

He mainly used the axe to deflect or hook incoming swings, and finishing off the enemy with a quick stab in their throat or heart before moving forward. It was a quick and dirty method that didn't announce his monstrous Strength.

He steadily moved forward, forced to kill a combatant almost with every step. His disguise was still assisting him immensely, as it often took the demons a second to register that they weren't facing an ally. And a second was all that Zac needed to quickly and discreetly kill them.

Soon he was just 30 meters from the edge of the shield, and the area actually was getting less cramped compared to more. Every single monkey at the core was a captain, and they were furiously fighting with various well equipped demons. The monkeys had to fight a few captains per demon, not being able to match their might.

Each battle had its own space, as the swings and shockwaves could kill, or at least disrupt anyone coming too close. Getting hit and distracted in an intense situation like this could be a death sentence, so everyone kept their backs clear.

It was obvious that the demons steadily were gaining the upper hand, as almost all the bodies on the ground were monkeys. That couldn't go on, as Zac needed the fight to keep going to a point where they whittled each other down. Zac took out a dagger and discreetly threw it straight into the back of a well-gearred demon. The make of his armor was the same as Zac's old chest-piece, only covering the upper torso, so Zac's dagger slammed straight into his back without giving the demon time to react.

The hit destroyed the demon's spine and he helplessly fell on the ground. The monkey captains immediately pounced and punched his head into the ground into it was a bloody pulp, before moving on to assist its brethren. Satisfied with his work he continued on and acted as a hidden reaper.

He still was forced to kill monkeys and demons coming too close to him, but he kept moving around to avoid getting exposed. He also kept a healthy distance from the battle between the Herald and the general, which were still going at it with extreme prejudice. Every chance he got he threw a dagger at one of the stronger-looking demons. Sometimes he got a perfect hit and actually managed to kill them himself, and at other times he managed to at least maim and distract them, allowing the monkeys to finish the job.

Soon he ran out of knives and was forced to start throwing Nexus Crystals at the demons. They weren't as effective as the knives, but with Zac's strength anything he threw could be considered a weapon. Soon the war at the center of the battlefield was starting to sway into the favor of the monkeys.

After Zac helped kill so many of the demons there currently were far more monkey captains fighting every single demon, and the extra help was often enough to turn the tides.

But the demons quickly figured out something was wrong, and a mountain of a man angrily shouted something with a piercing voice that carried over the sounds of battle, pointing a huge battle hammer straight at Zac. Many of the demons immediately spotted him, and it looked like his ruse was over.

However, he had already mostly accomplished his plan, and a great number of demons were killed due to his machinations. Also, the general and Herald's battle were reaching a white-hot intensity, and they couldn't be bothered with the scream. The Herald was quite ragged by now, and the old monkey captains had been replaced with new ones. Zac had a feeling that the only reason the monkey king was still alive was that the demons knew he was of importance to the incursion. Otherwise, Zac couldn't imagine that the General didn't have some ace to kill him after all this time.

He tried sneaking back into the chaos of the battle, but a few of the demon leaders wouldn't have it and they charged straight at him. A rock wall was erected in front of Zac, halting his escape. He tried shouldering through it but it was far sturdier

compared to the walls he had encountered earlier. It held together against Zac's slam, although it sustained some cracks from the impact.

Suddenly he sank down into the ground, and couldn't move his feet. The ground had first liquefied then solidified in quick succession, making it seem like he was wearing cement shoes.

Zac didn't have time to rip himself free, as a huge mallet was falling down upon him. Through some means, the mallet was getting larger as it fell down toward his head and soon was large enough to completely smash him into a pulp.

Zac saw no choice but to infuse his hatchet with his Dao, and brought his axe in a two-handed swing, holding nothing back. Zac had severely overestimated the demon from his size and choice of weapon, and when his axe collided with the huge mallet with a terrifying clash it flew out of the hand of the demon like a rocket. It sailed over the crimson tree and landed somewhere on the other side of the battlefield.

Zac was startled, but not as startled as the demon. He wasted no time and slammed the axe haft down on the demon's shoulder, and then used the spike on the back of the axe head as a hook to pull him to melee distance. As Zac dragged him close he ended the demon with a quick stab in his throat with his dagger, and then used the body to intercept a few ranged attacks.

The force from the weapons colliding had actually cracked the ground he was standing on, freeing him from the binding. He located the earth mage some distance away and grabbed a monkey captain by its arm.

The monkey captain furiously slammed his fist in Zac's chest, but Zac only took it with a grunt before he lifted the huge monkey up in the air and threw him like a boulder at the demon mage. The earth mage hastily erected another wall to intercept the monkey projectile, but the force behind the beast powered through it.

Zac was not far behind as he entered the wall through the breach and with a quick chop decapitated the demon, who didn't even manage to activate his stone skin skill in time.

Zac moved on toward the next demon who had tried to gang up on him, but a blinding light interrupted his plans. It was the large shield covering the tree that started to shine many times brighter compared to before.

Zac glanced around and when he saw no one was attacking him at the moment he brought up the quest skill again and saw the timer go down from 2 seconds to 0. With a bright flash, the shield immediately winked out of existence, exposing the tree to hundreds of greedy eyes.

No one moved for a split second, before all hell broke loose. Everyone started rushing toward the tree, holding nothing back. Even demons were hitting other demons in a struggle to reach the fruits.

Zac wasn't any different, and taking full advantage of his close proximity to the tree he pushed forward, driving massive amounts of cosmic energy into his legs. The ground cracked with every step he took, and it would be more accurate to say Zac pushed himself forward by slamming into the ground with his feet rather than running. He summoned **[Chop]** and killed any monkey or demon getting too close, and soon he was almost underneath the tree's branches.

Zac was among the first but he was still behind two individuals, Cindermane and the dazzling general. Both had already moved toward the fruits, their arms reaching to grab them first. The monkey king had actually created large lava pillars that lifted it up toward the branches, and the general somehow stepped on black arcs of lightning as he moved upwards through the air.

Zac knew he was out of time and with a roar he created a huge edge with [Chop] and unleashed it at the two. It seemed that no one of the other camps dared intervene with the two in the forefront, perhaps afraid that they would inadvertently ruin their leader's plans. The edge shot up at the two, cutting a few of the crimson branches on the way.

The Herald screeched and looked horrified as he stared at the incoming edge, and actually missed his steps and fell down from the pillars it created. It appeared that Zac's last chop had left a shadow in the Herald's mind.

The general looked surprised to be ambushed at this moment but still managed to smoothly dodge it. He was far up in the air by now and only needed one more step on the black lightning steps to reach the fruits. Desperate, Zac infused his axe with the Dao of Heaviness and hurled it at the demon. The fruits were 5 meters up in the air, so Zac and the general were extremely close. With Zac's power, it almost looked as though the axe teleported as it slammed into the general.

The general had skillfully blocked the strike with his sword, but between Zac's huge strength and the Dao of Heaviness, the momentum of the throw wouldn't be denied. The demon was forcefully pushed away from the tree and the shockwave destroyed most of the branches of the tree.

Even the branch which held the two Fruits of Ascension were broken off, and they were falling straight toward Zac. Not wanting to waste such a God-given opportunity he jumped up in the air and snatched the fruits, and immediately stashed them into his pouch.

He couldn't believe how easily he had acquired the fruits, it looked like 67 Luck wasn't just for show. But the elation of getting the treasure quickly dissipated, as hundreds of murderous glares focused their suddenly undivided attention on him.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 62 - Crescendo**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Last chapter of the week. A bit earlier than usual as it is hot outside and this Defier needs to get some beers in his belly.

If you enjoy the story, please remember to rate!

Zac brought out his second axe from his pouch, nervously glancing around. His plan had been to kill the Herald as well, but being stared at by hundreds of hungry eyes quickly extinguished any desire to remain. For a second he thought about throwing out the cauldron but soon discarded the idea.

The run-off fumes from when the imp Herald was concocting the poison was enough to do a number on him, and he didn't dare imagine what the finished product would be like. Unfortunately, he had no method to control the dissemination of the poison, and best scenario he managed to kill some of the demons. But that would still leave him to fight his way out against the survivors, now with one less ace in the hole. Worst case scenario the poison took too long to activate, or he poisoned himself as well, dying in a bout of friendly fire. The poison would have to be for when he truly was out of options as the last Hail Mary.

Zac instead shot back away from the tree and started cutting his way out of the packed masses. But how could leaving with the treasure be so easy? Combatants from

both camps furiously impeded his path, and he was immediately beset by attacks from all directions. New wounds joined a litany of old ones, and even with Zac's great constitution, he was starting to feel the pressure.

With a furious roar he overcharged [**Chop**] and created a wide circle of death with a radius of 6 meters with one fluid motion before he pressed forward. But he only managed to take one step as an intense hair-raising danger made him turn around.

A silver sword was aimed straight at his throat from behind, and Zac barely had time to block it with the enlarged edge of [**Chop**]. The power of the strike was enormous, and Zac was flung back from the force. He didn't even have time to land as a molten spear struck him in his back, the searing pain eliciting a howl.

Neither the Herald nor the general were ready to give up the fruits, and for a second put their differences aside in order to hunt down Zac. The same couldn't be said of their underlings of course, as their furious melee quickly resumed after the fruits were snatched. The monkey horde was once again starting to lose control of the situation, but this time Zac was too occupied to do anything about it. The fires started to grow, and soon the whole valley would likely be consumed in a conflagration.

Zac was in no position to worry about his island burning down, as he currently had two formidable foes to contend with. With steely eyes he activated chop to the limit he could sustain it and charged at the duo. With a roar he swung the axe in an upwards curve, rending a huge gash in the ground as he did. The edge flew toward the general, who Zac estimated to be the most formidable foe.

With a slanted blade the demon managed to nullify most of the force and redirected the swing upward. He then immediately followed up with a quick forward stab aimed straight at Zac's heart. Zac barely managed to inch his chest to the side in order to avoid the blade, but it still tore a bloody gash along his chest. The sword had to be of superior make, as it actually ruined the inscribed dress he wore over his armor. If Zac had known this would happen he would have immediately used its charge instead of holding out for a more threatening situation.

The Herald wouldn't miss the opportunity either and spat some magma in Zac's direction. Most luckily missed, but some splattered on Zac's arm, and some nauseating sizzling could be heard. Zac could only press forward, hoping to end things quickly.

He used every trick he had learned from [**Axe Mastery**] trying to get past the sword of the general in order to do some damage. Each swing was imbued with all the strength he could exert, and wailing sounds of his axe filled the air. He even swapped between using his Dao and using [**Chop**] trying to disrupt the general's rhythm.

But it seemed that nothing worked against the demon. He smoothly deflected or dodged every strike that Zac put out, not even looking strained. His strength clearly wasn't at the same level as Zac's, but he made up for it with skill with the blade. Still, Zac judged his Strength to be far above 100 though, as every strike with the blades created terrifying collisions, the shockwaves keeping any fire out of their way. The ground beneath their feet kept cracking and getting destroyed as well.

Even more dangerously it looked like the demon also possessed a Dao Seed, or at least was beginning comprehend one. His strikes contained a sense of sharpness, and the shockwaves from his strikes actually cut small wounds on Zac's body when the air hit him.

The Herald had gone somewhat passive, content in letting the two duke it out for a bit as he recuperated. By now it likely knew that it was not the match of either one of the two combatants, and probably hoped they would kill each other. It threw the occasional spear or boulder at Zac, but rather focused on helping out his brethren against the demon army. A few demons had tried to join the general in his battle against

Zac, but the Herald luckily killed them as they came. Unfortunately, the General was in no need of backup and was doing just fine on his own.

Zac was steadily accruing wounds from his fight with the demon, as he wasn't able to dodge his lightning-quick stabs. The best he could do was to avoid the sword hitting fatal spots by adjusting his body. Even worse, the general was one of the demons who used the black lightning attacks.

He used it far more freely compared to the first demon he had met. Every strike contained the biting sting of the arcs, and the lightning was actually slowly accumulating inside Zac's body. His arm suddenly jerked from the shock, completely exposing his chest. The demon was prepared, and with a lunge stabbed his sword straight in Zac's chest.

Lightning poured freely into his body, and Zac coughed up a mouthful of blood from the damage. He normally might have passed out from the pain but the lightning kept him awake. To make matters worse lava spikes erupted from the ground between Zac's legs from a stomp of the Herald.

Surprisingly, the spikes shot toward the general, with the largest one aiming straight towards his exposed heart. It looked like the Herald had been waiting for an opportunity for a double knock-out. However, the general simply snorted and from nowhere all the spikes were cut into pieces. Hovering next to him was the sword that the demon had kept on his back throughout the battle.

It crackled with black lightning and seemed to have no problem with defying the laws of gravity. It hovered a few rounds around the general before it returned into the scabbard on his back on its own.

Abruptly the spike on the back of Zac's axe head slammed into the temple of the Herald, instantly killing it. Zac had taken advantage of the brief pause in the Herald after its attack and used it to mount a surprise attack. Zac had consistently focused all his energy on attacking the general thus far, and the Herald had grown lax. He hadn't actually planned on killing the Herald before the general, but he saw an opportunity and took it.

A huge surge of cosmic energy entered Zac's body, and he felt himself gain another level. There was no time to go over it though, as the general renewed his attacks on him. Zac once again found himself at an impasse, steadily losing ground. The chest wound was creating trouble for him to breathe and move freely as well, and the fight turned even more one-sided. He wanted to somehow create an opportunity to flee, as he had accomplished all he needed for now. But the General would barely let him breathe, let alone leave the scene.

A tremendous amount of roaring erupted in the surroundings as well. The monkeys lost their minds upon seeing their leader fall and started madly swing at everything around them. In their madness they completely gave up on defense and started dropping with even faster speed compared to before. One after another the monkeys died, becoming food for the expanding fires. The flames hadn't died out due to the death of the Herald, instead truly becoming a force of their own as they spread over the dried leaves and husks.

Zac desperately tried to swing faster and with more power to turn the tides, but the general felt like an impenetrable wall of deft blades. As he kept fighting and swapping back and forth between **[Chop]** and the Dao, something suddenly clicked in his mind, and he once again summoned out the fractal blade.

This time it was different as it held a darker hue and emanated the aura of a lofty mountain. Even the fractals on the edge had grown denser, weaving another line of inscriptions along the edge. He finally managed to integrate his Dao with his skill,

and the result wasn't as simple as one plus one equals two. Something new was born out of the fusion.

With renewed vigor Zac roared and furiously swung his axe at the general, aiming to end it all with one strike. It was a huge overhead swing aimed at the demon's head, and it carried the aura of a falling meteor.

The demon immediately sensed something was wrong but didn't have time to dodge. Looking serious for the first time, the demon roared as the sword on his back flashed into his free hand, and he held up both his swords in the air in order to block the strike.

Just another sword wasn't enough and the force slammed him down to his knees, the impact blowing any debris or bodies in the surroundings far away. The general tried to deflect the force, but the Chop of Heaviness was intractable as it pushed his blades down. A golden sheen flashed into existence around the demon, but it only held for a second before it cracked. The force in the strike contained everything Zac had learned and gained so far, and a flimsy armor inscription wouldn't stop it.

An amulet around the neck of the demon started shining with a blinding light, and a silver shield winked into existence next. It looked like the shield of a celestial, as it shone with brilliant fractals as it met the oncoming axe.

The collision didn't create a huge impact as Zac expected, but it rather seemed the shield somehow absorbed the momentum. After the strike the shield started to crack, and the general groaned miserably as a crack could also be heard in his right arm. It looked like using that amulet didn't come without its price. But it was sufficient to stop Zac's monstrous swing.

The general didn't seem lax as before, and with an angry roar and his hair in disarray, he got to his feet. With a couple of furious slashes he created some distance from Zac, then pointed his sword towards the sky. His second blade crackled with an extreme amount of lightning and rapidly flew over ten meters up in the sky. The lightning kept expanding around it, creating a wide field of a lightning hell-scape.

The black arcs changed and actually turned into sword silhouettes covered in fractals. It reminded Zac of his own cosmic energy edge, but the danger he felt from the roughly hundred swords sinisterly hanging above was above anything he had felt thus far. The general didn't pull any punches anymore and wanted to completely eradicate him.

The lightning blades started falling towards Zac like a heavenly punishment. Any one of the blades could kill Zac if it hit, and there were over a hundred of them incoming. Knowing there was nowhere to hide from the strike, Zac could only fight it head-on. Cramming all his remaining cosmic energy into his fractal on his hand he created his largest edge thus far, sporting almost 8 meters long blade. It was imbued with the Dao of Heaviness, and with a roar of defiance, he launched it like a projectile up against the sword rain.

For a second it felt like a colossal mountain rose from the ground to intercept the heavenly thunder above, in a struggle between the Heavens and Earth. The collision was earthshattering and the chaotic energies temporarily blotted out the sky. Errant lightning blades fell all over the area, killing and maiming monkeys and demons alike.

Zac had managed to avert most of the attack with his colossal edge, but he was completely drained and his head hurt. Furthermore, his swing wasn't able to destroy all of the falling blades and he found himself impaled by multiple lightning swords. The general was panting as he walked over to Zac, one arm hanging limply to his side. He didn't look like he had much fight left in him either, but it was enough to finish Zac off.

His second sword floated above his head, looking like a sinister scorpion's stinger. Its crackling lightning had dimmed considerably, but it still held a strong killing intent within. Their eyes met for a brief second and the sword shot down towards Zac's head. He tried to muster up a response, but he could only feebly lift his axe in an attempt to avert the incoming sword.

A spear of complete darkness suddenly emerged out of the general's chest and lifted him up in the air, forcing him to puke out a huge amount of blood as his body started spasming. The sinister looking weapon had truly impaled him, and likely completely obliterated his heart.

Behind the general a nondescript demon in average gear was standing, with a determined glint in his eyes as he looked upon his dying leader. The general arduously turned his head and when he saw his assailer his eyes shrunk to a needlepoint.

With his last breath, he let out a ragged roar that covered the whole battlefield, garnering the attention of all the combatants.

“OGRAS!!!”

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 18 chapters ahead) please check out my

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

#### **Chapter 63 - Purple Haze**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New week, new chapters! Read post note about future changes.

The sinister blade that was supposed to end Zac's life powerlessly fell to the ground as the general died. Zac mutely stared at the impaled demon, unable to comprehend what was going on. The same seemed to be true for the hundreds of demons who watched the betrayal. They stared blankly at the scene until they were awoken by an angry roar from one of the well-dressed leaders.

Suddenly a murderous air filled the air as multiple demons were screaming and pointing their weapons at Zac's unexpected ally. The demon stood up from his hunkered position as he looked around at its supposed allies with a sneer. He threw away the corpse of the demon leader like it was trash with a whip of his lance after looting his pouch, and then turned toward Zac with a half-smile.

Suddenly the killer took something out of his pouch and popped it into his mouth. Unsure of what was going on, Zac shakily got ready for another round of battle as he finally scrambled to his feet. The wounds where he was impaled by the lightning blades screamed in protest, but he forced himself to stay upright. He looked at the demon in front of him with a dubious expression, wondering why this man saved his life. Zac's eyes widened as the demon unexpectedly puked out a huge amount of blackened blood, and fell over to the ground. With a few spasms he lay dead next to the general.

“WHAT?” Zac exclaimed, completely unable to follow the quick turns. Was the man an assassin or a member of a death squad that some rival demon group had sent after the general? But why would they want to ruin their own invasion? From what Zac understood the incursion would close the moment the four heralds and the general were dead.

But he could only put aside his doubts for now, as he was completely wrung out but still surrounded by hundreds of demons. At least they looked shell-shocked by the turn of events as well, as they hesitantly stared at the two corpses on the ground. Zac used this brief respite to quickly take a swig of the azure pond water, the familiar

burning sensation quickly spreading through his veins, temporarily muting the blazing pain in his various wounds. He knew he had to treat himself real soon though, as he was starting to feel woozy from blood loss, even with the water strengthening him.

Just as he put away the bottle the assassin suddenly spasmed again, and with a few wretched coughs he rose from the dead. Zac didn't want to take any chances, and started to advance on the zombie demon.

"Wait human, we are on the same side" the demon croaked as he weakly scrambled to his feet.

Shocked at hearing something else than demonic for the first time since he met Abby, Zac paused and hesitantly stared at the demon. The surrounding demons suddenly woke up from their stupor and started angrily screaming at the assassin again, which was completely ignored by him.

"We don't have time for a chat human, you should have a cauldron of poison from theimps. Throw the contents into a fire if you want us to survive" he continued.

"Why should I believe you? Why did you kill that man?" Zac questioned, loath to just follow some stranger's instructions. He glanced around and saw that most of the demons were closing in, except for a few who were taking care of the leftover monkeys.

"It doesn't matter. Unless you do something we're dead. Even if you drink the whole bottle of the Cosmic Water your wounds will kill you before you're out of this valley if you keep fighting." The demon interjected, having seen through Zac's original plan of trying to slash himself out with the help of the azure water. An arrow whizzed past Zac head as a reminder he was strapped for time, and he needed to act fast.

After hesitating for a while he decided to comply with the suggestion. He subconsciously knew he wouldn't make it out, as the only thing keeping him on his feet was the temporary boost from the water. He had held off until now, but it was Hail Mary time.

He brought out the large cauldron, and with a grunt threw it into one of the fiercest fires created by the Herald. The contents spilled out over the fire, and instantly a huge purple cloud, far more sinister compared to what he had seen in the imp Herald's cave, swelled out. The poison vapors created in the caves had only been from the small fires underneath the cauldron heating the concoction, but this time the poison was actually burned instead of heated up. It looked like it fused with the smoke of the raging fires, and quickly spread outward.

"What now?" he asked as he turned to the mysterious demon.

"Now I wish you the best of luck human" the demon answered with a slight smile as he popped another pill into his mouth. It was a different type of pill from the one that temporarily killed him, giving out a refreshing herbal scent. He then took one step and disappeared into thin air.

Zac got a sinking feeling as he turned back to the cauldron. The fire was spewing out purple gasses in a terrifying volume, and it quickly expanded outward. Judging from the horrified faces of the demons he realized he might have made a big mistake. Not wasting any more time on the enigmatic demon, he madly ran for his life back toward the forest. He stumbled and couldn't keep a very high speed even powered with the water, and his wounds kept bleeding as he ran for his life. With the mountain winds helping, the poison cloud would likely soon envelop the whole valley judging from its rapid expansion.

Only a few of the demons bothered with Zac after seeing the expanding purple haze, and instead fearfully dashed away from the battlefield, unheeding of any wounded comrades screaming for assistance.

A few of the wounded demons went for Zac with madness in their eyes, bent on taking him with them to hell. However, most of those who had given up fleeing were even more wounded than Zac, and could only helplessly glare at him as he stumbled away fueled by the azure water. An errant arrow hit his back, but Zac only grunted and continued on.

But the cloud moved too fast, and soon it was right at Zac's heels. As he ran he took out a rag from his pouch and put it over his mouth, hoping it would at least provide some protection against the approaching cloud.

Just before the cloud overtook him, he took one last deep breath of fresh air. Soon after the world turned purple, and a stinging sensation made his eyes tear. He couldn't see very far ahead anymore but could only keep moving forward as long as the air in his lungs let him. He madly dashed as quickly as his broken body allowed toward where he remembered the closest peak to be. Still, he knew it would take over 30 minutes at his speed to get there, and even then he might not be safe.

The wounds of his body seemed to be entrances for the poison as he started to get nauseous even though he kept his breath so far. After a while he couldn't hold on any longer and was forced to inhale a lungful of poison. He immediately started getting extremely woozy, his power quickly leaving his legs. The strength of the poison truly was on another level compared to the fumes down in the Herald's cave.

As he started despairing over what to do the familiar sight of the magical pond entered his vision. He lacked the luxury of having time to think things through, and immediately jumped into the azure water. He would have to risk meeting a pond monster, as even a few more breaths of that poison would kill him.

He planned on swimming down to the bottom of the lake and hopefully find a passage down into the mountain. Since the water was crammed full of cosmic energy Zac guessed it was connected to the crystal mine somehow. But he only managed to swim for 10 seconds deeper into the pond before his whole body felt like it was on fire. It was the water, as it seeped into his body through his wounds, and perhaps even his pores.

The heat quickly became unbearable, but it only kept building up. Meanwhile, his insides were churning from the poison, only adding to his misery. Zac's whole body started to swell up, and in seconds looked completely bloated. His whole skin was red and if he wasn't underwater he'd likely be steaming from the heat.

Zac felt hopeless and desperate. It was heartbreaking to think that he actually managed to defy all odds and beat the incursion, only to end up in this situation. He had killed the four heralds personally, and even helped set the stage for the general's death by destroying all his protective treasures and forcing him to expend all his energy in the fight. Almost two months of ceaseless life-and-death struggles, only to explode from over-ingesting super-water.

Completely unreconciled, Zac made one desperate attempt to survive. He grabbed one of the fruits from his pouch and tore into it with his teeth. An unimaginably sweet taste exploded in his mouth and made him almost forget that he was dying. It was by far the tastiest thing he had ever eaten, and it felt like he was munching on something that gods feasted on in ancient stories. As he swallowed it a fresh cooling sensation entered his body, immediately sweeping the poison away.

He devoured the fruit completely apart from some juices that leaked into the water, completely frenzied from the taste. He even accidentally swallowed some water with the fruit as he forgot himself from the otherworldly deliciousness. The cooling sensation spread throughout his extremities as he feasted and actually started combating the burning sensation from the magical water.

Zac was relieved as it looked like his gambit had been successful. But the relief didn't last for long as his body quickly started to go from blazing hot to freezing cold, over and over again in quick succession. Two forces were fighting for supremacy, and the ravaged battlefield was Zac's body.

Even though he was underwater he couldn't stop himself from desperately screaming in pain, with even more water filling his lungs. He couldn't even register it as the pain was all-consuming, far worse than getting burned or stabbed in his chest. With every change in his body, it felt like his cells were melted down into a puddle, then frozen solid again by the freezing cold of the fruit.

Zac sensed that his spirit could collapse at any moment, and every second felt like an eternity for him. Soon he couldn't take it anymore and brought out a dagger from his pouch. With his last energy stabbed it toward his throat, hoping to quickly end the suffering.

The dagger tore into his throat and then sunk to the bottom of the lake as Zac let go with relief. He felt a sting of shame when thinking of his family that he never was able to save, but he felt they would understand if they knew what he was going through.

But the sweet release of death didn't arrive. The wound closed with visible speed and soon his neck was as good as new. Zac despaired, not knowing what to do. His body wouldn't listen to his commands anymore, and his brain was overtaxed by the pain signals bombarding his synapses.

The continuous changes in his body kept on going uncaring about Zac's plight. Finally, his eyes rolled up into his head as he passed out into blissful darkness, and as he fainted his body slowly kept descending into the depths.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

This marks the end of Book 1 of Defiance of the Fall. Two months and 110k words, I hope you have enjoyed the ride so far!

There will be some changes, and I'll put it all in a spoiler box to not make it too long.

#### **Spoiler: Spoiler**

##### **On Goals.**

As some astute readers has noticed, the first "Big" goal for my is at 99%, and will likely finish very soon. However, as it's stated in the goal i need to keep it going for two months before I enact on it. That's because it involves me doing some changes to my real life that has real implications, and I need to make sure that the income is somewhat stable. I don't want to become a homeless author after all

But if I see that the goal is still met at the August draft for patrons, I'll enable it. It means **6 chapters a week schedule** (Mon-Sat releases). This change affects RR readers as well. For patrons the tiers will all get extra early chapters as well. 1/1/2/3 extra chapter depending on tier, but more on that on a post I'll put up a bit later.

##### **On change in style.**

So this arc got away from me to be honest, and turned out into a full book

">. But the Robinson Crusoe-esque survival theme is coming to an end, and more characters will enter the fray. If you want to know more about what style the story will contain going forward, you can refer to my Q/A as I have answered questions in there and in the comment section. But tl;dr is **One POV, No Harem, Main focus is Zac's adventure.**

On Publishing.

So now that the first Arc/Book is completed some might wonder what I'll do with the story from here. Releases will continue on RR as earlier, with receiving early chaps. I am looking into what it would cost to hire an editor and release Book 1 on Amazon / Kindle Unlimited. The reason for that is simple; money. Even with all your support I would barely make ends meet after all 's fees and taxes, and if I want to transition into doing this full time (which is my goal), I will probably need more revenue streams.

For those who don't know what it means to put a story up on kindle, it means that book 1 will be removed from RR for at least 3 months. Many never put them up again.

I am still not decided about this, and I'm currently looking into alternatives that won't force me to remove the story from this Page, as it is here I have built up the reader base and support which has helped me reach this stage. I will keep you posted about this as I come to a decision.

In any case I am mainly focusing on moving the story forward rather than this issue, so it will take a few months no matter what direction i lean on.

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 19 chapters ahead) please check out my

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

### **Chapter 64 - Taking Stock**

With a scream Zac woke up from his head hitting a sharp rock formation. Groggily he tried to orient himself and found that he was bobbing about in the azure water in a cave. Afraid that the burning pain would start again, he quickly scrambled up on a piece of dry land.

His body felt surprisingly good after all it had gone through. The mental scar from remembering the excruciating pain was far worse compared to anything his body was actually experiencing right now. Just thinking about it caused his hands to shake and almost made him cry. That had been too harrowing, far worse than risking his life in any of the fights or the pain from getting wounded.

It took some time for him to regather his wits before he finally looked at his surroundings. He was currently in a decently large cave that was 10 by 20 meters. Almost half of it was submerged in the azure water, and the other half was crammed full of subterranean plants. It made sense, as Zac had never encountered any tunnel or cave with a density of cosmic energy that could compare to where he was.

It was as though the boost from the crystal mines below had fused with the boost of the lake and created something even more intense in the enclosed space of the cavern. Zac was unsure of how he had gotten here. After snatching the fruits he had fled the purple cloud of death and jumped into the mysterious pond. After that everything had turned fuzzy, apart from the very real memory of the pain.

He could only guess that some stream brought him down into the depths of the mountain while the Fruit of Ascension kept him alive. Even though he felt generally restored, he wasn't ready to set out, as there were many things he needed to check out after the cataclysmic final battle.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**36**

**Class**

**Hatchetman (F)**

**Race****Human (E)****Alignment****Human (Earth)****Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many**

**Dao****Seed of Heaviness - Early****Strength****189****Dexterity****69****Endurance****130****Vitality****84****Intelligence****57****Wisdom****57****Luck****77****Free Points****3****Nexus Coins****746317**

The first thing he noticed was that his strength now was at a full 189 points, having increased by 14 points since he last checked. He had actually broken past his limit of 175 points, and could only attribute it to the fact that he luckily evolved to an E-ranked Human according to his status page, whatever that meant. He did a quick check all over his body and was relieved to find there were no wings or other new appendages that suddenly grew on him. He even checked between his legs and was half disappointed and half relieved that no evolutions had taken place there as well.

He didn't really feel any different, but he guessed that he would find out sooner or later what it meant to get a higher race class. He at least knew it helped him increase the limit of his attributes, which was one of his most important goals.

He had also gained two new titles, and he brought up the title menu to check it out.

**[One Against Many: Fight against 500 warriors of the same tier and survive. Endurance +10]**

**[Planetary Aegis: First to stop an incursion in world. All stats +5, All stats +5%]**

The first one was not bad, a nifty reward for staying alive through those odds. He guessed that there were tiers to that title, and he'd have gotten a better one if he actually defeated them rather than fleeing after throwing out a bunch of poison.

The second was even better, and the fifth one he possessed that gave a percent boost to all stats. The title didn't mention anything about solo kill like some of his other titles and he wondered if it was because he actually wasn't the one who killed the general.

He couldn't be bothered about that mysterious demon right now, even if he could speak human language and seemingly had helped him. Zac was sure the demon survived from how he had acted before disappearing. Since there only were so many places to go on the island Zac figured he'd find him sooner or later and get his answers then.

After having checked the title he closed the panel and did some mental calculations. He realized that he actually had missed out on another 3 points of Strength when he turned level 36. He still received the stats from the new title though, which confused him a bit, as he should have received the title before he evolved and broke his attribute cap.

He was also a bit surprised with the amount of Nexus Coins he amassed from the battle. He had gained roughly 150 000 from his whole day on the battlefield. While it was not a small amount by any means, it still didn't feel like it added up. That poison cloud should have killed hundreds, if not thousands, in the valley. Only the strongest combatants had been right by the tree, while the rest were spread out through the valley. Perhaps a few of the speedier ones had managed to escape, there couldn't be too many survivors with how rapidly the purple cloud had expanded.

Zac shuddered at the thought of having poisoned hundreds of beings to death but forcibly threw the thought into the back of his mind. Either all those kills didn't actually improve his level or give him coins, or they all were still alive.

Zac was convinced that they died from the poison. Just one breath of the poison cloud made him who had over a hundred endurance keel over, and he couldn't imagine normal demons or monkeys survive that. Furthermore, he had seen the horrified looks on their faces when they saw the billowing purple clouds.

Zac briefly considered trying to swim through the pond to get back into the valley, but soon perished the thought. Even if he managed to actually swim through the water now, the poison might still be up there.

Suddenly a thought popped up into his mind, and he opened the quest screen.

### **Active Quests**

#### **Dynamic Quests**

**Off With Their Heads (Unique):** Kill the four heralds and the general of an incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (5/5) [COMPLETE]

**Incursion Master (Unique):** Close or conquer incursion and protect outpost from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, outpost upgraded to town, status upgraded to Lord. (0/3) [43:12:32:11]

#### **Class Quests**

**Forester's Constitution (Class):** Fight in the forests, be one with nature. Reward: Forester's Constitution Skill. (8/30)

Loamwalker (Class): Walk a thousand kilometers touching the earth. Reward: Loamwalker Skill. (0/1000)

Zac sighed in relief, as the first incursion quest finally could be confirmed as complete. This had been his goal since Abby's warning, and it was thankfully done with after almost two horrible months. He already had been pretty sure he completed it the moment the general got impaled, but it was nice to finally see it set in stone.

He was also relieved to see that the quest said [COMPLETE] instead of just disappearing, as that meant the system hadn't spit out the reward somewhere while he was unconscious. As one of the rewards was related to his outpost he assumed he would have to get back to his camp to collect them.

The next quest had gotten a timer just like the limited quest. If he read it correctly he either had to finish it within 43 days or something would happen in 43 days.

Finally, he was surprised to see that the Loamwalker hadn't progressed at all since he got it. He wasn't exactly sure how far he ran yesterday, but he had been pushing it pretty hard with his inhuman stats for a few hours, so he felt that he should at least have ran a marathon on the mountain slopes. And walking on a mountain should constitute touching earth in any sense of the word.

After a brief hesitation he took off his shoes and threw them into his bag. He was reminded of the man in the vision, and could only try copying him. Perhaps his soles had to actually physically touch the earth for it to count, and if true he wondered what that meant when using the skill in the future. Would he become a barefoot warrior in the future just like the axe-man? At least his endurance was high enough that his soles wouldn't get cut or damaged even if walking around on glass shards.

Satisfied that he had gone through everything for now he brought out some food and water. He was generally happy with the progression, but also a bit pissed off that that harrowing experience in the water hadn't done anything except boost his Race a level.

From how precious the Fruit of Ascension appeared he thought that the fruit alone would be enough to ascend a stage, but with the harrowing molding his body had gone through he figured he should at least have been awarded some bonus attributes or a title. He wondered if the System had a complaint department he could contact, as its rewards weren't balanced.

Internally grumbling he tore into a piece of dried meat and he was surprised to see that his appetite was simply monstrous, and he ate a couple of kilos of meat before he felt satiated. Looking at his slightly protruding belly he wondered if evolving your race meant that you got a separate dimension tucked into your stomach.

Finally all set he stood up and ventured out. He had after some deliberation chosen to head into the tunnels instead, as he simply refused to enter that water again. He refilled his canteen though, just for emergencies.

The cave he was in was connected to the larger tunnel system he found out after some traveling. Only a small hole was open though, and Zac was forced to cut his way out with a sword. As he worked the sword he felt that his body was more coordinated than ever, as every muscle was working in perfect harmony. He wasn't really stronger or more agile, but rather had greater control of his body. Normally he would think that it was due to increased Dexterity, but the change was too large that just a few extra points from his new title couldn't cover it. He guessed instead that it was another advantage of being an evolved human.

After some hesitation he carved out a couple of boulders from a nearby wall and covered up the path again. That secret cave would be an excellent cultivation cave in the future, and he didn't want a salamander or wandering demon to ruin it.

Perhaps it wouldn't be useful for himself, but maybe for his sister or Hannah if he managed to bring them back to the island. Now that the demon threat was taken care of he needed to actually start preparing for the future.

At least he hoped that the demon threat was over, but he couldn't be sure. He never got any indication of what would happen when he finally killed the Heralds and the general. There still should be quite a few demons still around even after the huge battle. There had been at least a thousand demons in the mountains, but even if all of them died, there should be hundreds in the tunnels. Add to that the demon town and the roving parties and most demons should still be around.

Putting the matter aside, Zac pushed forward in the tunnels. Soon he found a familiar cave, whose tunnels led to the demon mining operation. After a brief hesitation he headed over there to check things out. As he walked he heard absolutely no sound of activity, which could only be considered a good sign.

The mining tunnels were completely deserted as he hoped, with not a single demon in sight. As he continued on he soon exited the cave entrance he had seen the demons use daily. Still, he didn't see a single demon anywhere. A few sacks and tools were thrown here and there, hinting at a hasty escape.

More importantly, for the first time since he woke up on this hellish island there was no huge red glaring pillar shooting into the sky. The incursion was simply gone.

But that didn't mean his work was over.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

I know some of you hoped the fruit and the water would turn him into a Super-Saiyan and might be disappointed with his gains. But remember, the rewards seen now is only what's visible on the surface... \*foreshadowing sounds\*

**I tried using more boxes in this chapter. You guys think it's worth fixing old chapters to this look?**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 19 chapters ahead) please check out my

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

#### **Chapter 65 - First Contact**

With a spring in his steps he hadn't felt for a long time Zac moved along the road toward the location of the now-gone incursion. He was planning on heading back to his campsite to complete his quest, but first, he wanted to check things out and make sure that the demons were truly gone.

He moved along the path leading to the fortified city, meeting no resistance on the way. Soon he reached the forest edge close to the town, and any further and he would be exposed due to all vegetation having been cut down to supply the construction.

He hunkered down and stared at the town for a good while trying to see any signs of demons. The good news was that the previously well-manned walls were completely deserted. Not a single guard was patrolling along the wall walk, and the towers were empty. The bad news was that he saw a few lines of smokes rising from the inner parts of the town.

After some hesitation he decided to take a closer look. The lines of smoke might just be left behind fires, and if there actually were demons here they must be disorganized for some reason. He briskly jogged over to the fortifications, and with a

few tugs pulled himself up along the wall. He didn't encounter any arrays impeding his path either, making him wonder if demons couldn't use them for some reason. He hadn't seen them use a single one so far after all, unless inscriptions on tools could be called arrays.

He looked out over the demon town and found it more or less deserted. He was disappointed to see that there actually were a few demons milling about, but they looked listless and without direction.

He also noticed that the town had grown considerably since he had seen it the first time a few weeks ago. Most of the military-looking rectangular buildings were gone, replaced with structures of various size and design. It almost looked like a medieval town by now rather than a military base. But the craftsmanship and cleanliness were far greater compared to some old city, and no garbage or excrement lined the sidewalks. Perhaps the large barracks were only temporary housing they used while they constructed the real city.

Zac soon spotted a solitary demon who walked towards a house right next to the wall. There were no other demons close to him and the small building would provide perfect cover, making him a perfect target.

Zac crept along the wall, and with one swift motion jumped down right in front of him. Quick as lightning he grabbed the startled demon by his tunic and dragged him behind the house. Without any pause, Zac slammed him against the building's wall with one hand and brought out his axe with the other.

"Scream and you die. Do you understand what I'm saying?" Zac asked with a steely glint as he held the axe at his throat, ready to decapitate the demon at a moment's notice.

The demon looked truly horrified after he saw Zac's face. Tears started falling like rain, and even a snot bubble was starting to grow. He incoherently started whispering something in the demonic language, regularly interrupting himself with large sobs.

Zac was stumped, not expecting such an exaggerated response. Perhaps his deeds on the mountain had spread, and the demon was afraid he'd poison the town to death. But then again, this demon differed from the ones he had encountered so far. He didn't look at all like a hardened warrior. Rather, he looked like a civilian. He didn't wear any weapon, and while his arms looked sturdy he also had a pretty large gut. Furthermore, he was middle-aged, whereas most of the warriors he had encountered seemed quite young.

Just as he was considering whether he should kill the demon and find a new interrogation target a shaky voice behind him interrupted his thoughts.

"Um.. P-Please let my dad go. He can't understand your words."

Zac instantly whirled around, holding the stocky demon as a barrier against this new voice. He found himself face to face with a small bespectacled demoness. She was the shortest one he had seen, just about reaching up to his chest, and had her silver hair in a neat bun. She didn't carry any weapons and shook with fright as she was facing Zac's murderous glare.

"Move over to behind the house. If you scream you both die," Zac instructed the scared demon with a low but harsh voice. Seeing her pallid face and remembering his words he was starting to feel like a villain, even though the demons were his enemies. "I just want some answers, help me out and I'll leave," he added in a softer tone.

The demon didn't seem very comforted by his words and still shook like a leaf. Still, she complied with his words, much to the dismay of the middle-aged demon. He started wheezing something out, and soon even tried to scream. He likely wanted his

daughter to run away from them and get to safety. While Zac could appreciate the sentiment, he couldn't let her go as he finally had someone he could question. With a quick thud, he hit the pudgy demon in the back of his head, instantly knocking him out and shutting him up.

"Sorry about that, but he is alive. I can't have him scream and warn the whole town," Zac sighed as he placed the unconscious demon next to the demoness.

"Why is it that I can speak with some of you, but most only speak gibberish?" Zac questioned, eager to finally get some answers.

"Gibberish..?" The small demon seemed a bit offended but quickly readjusted to a timid face, "You.. You need a skill to speak with other races. But it is expensive so most people don't have it. I am a merchant so the clan provided it for me." She seemed somewhat proud of the fact, as it was quite a glorious job to have.

"Your class is Merchant?" Zac asked with a renewed relief he didn't gamble for the Epic class when choosing a class.

"No, I'm a Scribe, a common class. But I am following, I mean I was following, the upgrade path towards a real merchant class in the future," the demon answered, looking somewhat deflated.

What she said about upgrade path was something he was interested in finding out more about, but he had more pressing matters.

"Why are you people still on my island? Your invasion should have failed when the incursion ended. Why haven't you gone back to wherever you came from?" This was the most crucial question on Zac's mind right now.

"Going back... Some of us can't," she answered with a melancholic smile. "We embarrassed the clan and cost it a lot of money when the invasion failed. If we went back bad things would happen. Some chose to stay on this planet instead."

Zac felt a headache coming on when he realized he suddenly had a bunch of demon refugees on the island.

"How many of you are still left?"

"I don't know..." she answered with a low voice, and hastily explained when she saw Zac's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I truly don't know, I usually just file documents. Ogras should know. He is, was, the leader of the expedition. But most of the warriors left, their status is better in the clan."

"That's impossible, I saw your leader die right in front of me," Zac growled, taking a step toward the demoness.

The Scribe seemed to have been reminded that the person was a dangerous enemy warrior and once again started shaking.

"I swear he is alive. I saw Ogras exit his palace before. He didn't go to the mountains I think?" she managed to stutter out through clattering teeth.

It didn't seem like she was lying, which confused Zac greatly. His mission was completed, and he had seen the general die from the huge black spear. Besides, she called the leader Ogras, which was the last thing the leader roared before he perished.

"Does this Ogras have white hair, a silver armor, and fights with two swords. Oh, and he can make the sword fly?" he tentatively asked, a guess forming in his mind.

"No... That is Rydel. He was second in command maybe? His grandfather is the clan chief after all," she answered, happy that Zac's murderous air receded somewhat.

The answer only made Zac more confused. If the one who died wasn't the general why had he led the forces? If this Ogras was the real general instead, why had his quest been completed if he was still alive and kicking? Because he briefly killed himself? Why would he do that? He was certain that the mysterious Demon was Ogras, but he didn't

understand why he would kill his own ally and even suggest poisoning the whole army. This girl said Ogras didn't participate in the battle, so it sounded like he had snuck out of the town behind his own army without their knowledge.

"Where is Ogras now?" he asked. It seemed this demoness held a low rank in the clan, and her knowledge was limited. It would be better to simply ask the source. Besides he had a bone to pick with this Ogras, as he almost got him killed with his poison idea. Of course, Ogras saved his life by killing this Rydel character, but he still had a sour feeling when thinking about the torment he was forced to endure when he jumped into the pond.

"Dad said he heard Ogras question many demons, then left the town toward the south," she answered, seemingly excited at the prospect of sending Zac on his way to become someone else's problem.

Zac mulled things over for a few seconds, before determining his next action. There were many more things he wanted to know, but he had a sneaking suspicion Ogras was heading toward his outpost. It was the only thing of interest to the south, the rest was just forest. And nothing good could come from the insidious demon fiddling around with his stuff, so he decided to briskly head back home.

As Zac had come to his decision he asked one final question. "Oh by the way, what is your name?"

"I'm Zakarith, my dad calls me Zak," she quickly introduced herself.

Zac's mouth tugged a bit trying to avoid smiling. "Well Zakarith, welcome to Earth," he said and immediately slammed the butt of his axe in between her horns, instantly knocking her out. He felt a bit bad about it as she reminded him a bit of his little sister, but he couldn't have her running around right now. He felt no need to kill both of them as it seemed the demon threat was largely gone. And even if they came to blows again he didn't feel a little Scribe and her pudgy father would be able to turn the tides.

He quickly tied up both the unconscious demons and left them hidden between the house and the outer wall, before quickly leaving the town the same way he had gotten in. Same as with Ogras, his course was south. He was going home.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 66 - My Dinner With Ogras**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you enjoy the story, remember to fav and rate!

Zac quickly jogged due south, and soon arrived at the part of the valley where the incursion was located. The crystal was still there, but it now looked inert. It had lost its colors, and no longer radiated any power.

The area seemed deserted as well, so Zac snuck up to the small house, finding it empty as well. Knowing no demons were around he walked up to the huge crystal. Fractals completely covered the whole thing, barely leaving an inch free. It reminded him of an evolved version of his Nexus Node in camp, and after a brief hesitation he touched it. No menu or prompt arrived, and he could only feel the cold and smooth surface of the crystal.

Zac thought about infusing the crystal with some Cosmic Energy, but soon decided against it. He had too little information about the thing, and was afraid that

he'd accidentally teleport himself somewhere. He was in no mood to suddenly arrive at a demon planet after having been stuck on a demon island for so long.

Zac could only leave it be for now and add it to the list of things he would squeeze out of Ogras if he found him. After a final check he left southbound. As he walked he noticed that the foliage in the surroundings unfortunately hadn't turned back into normal trees and bushes. They were still sickly-looking from the influence of the red pillar. He could only hope that the area would gradually heal now that the incursion was turned off.

He kept going through the valley, and after some trial and error he found an ascent leading up to the forest. Soon he was walking familiar paths south he had walked many times before. There still were quite a few barghest in the forests, but it seemed that the war thinned them out somewhat at least. Or perhaps they left together with the surviving demon army.

More surprisingly, he found out that the reward had lessened substantially when he killed one. The remaining ones still were hyper-aggressive, and he was forced to kill one that came rushing toward him with a kick. After killing it he actually gained less than 30 Nexus Coins. It was disappointing, as he had actually considered rounding them all up somehow and then kill hundreds of them with his **[Chop]** skill. That would have netted him quite a decent income, while simultaneously cleaning up for his town.

He saw two possible reasons for the decrease. Either the reward from killing demons lessened now that the incursion was over, or the reward lessened as his level increased. He had gained quite a few levels in the mountains and tunnels, and now the System maybe didn't want to award as many resources for killing weaklings.

Zac actually hoped it was the second. Then he could at least save a lucrative grinding area for other people. If the barghest could actually breed on the island he could have a perpetual farming ground going. But if it was the first he simply had a nuisance on his hands.

After half a day of jogging, he finally was in close proximity of his camp. He started his usual sweep of the area and actually found some worrying signs. There were footprints in the ground around where he battled the demon party, and even though he was no expert tracker it looked like multiple sources.

At the same time the illusion array was untouched, and he quickly equipped his amulet as well. He had actually removed it earlier in order to avoid getting any experience, and forgot to put it back on. The familiar warmth from the amulet told him that the mother-daughter array was still working as well.

With a heavy heart he retrieved his axe and got ready for battle, and he also took out the shield he had found in the caverns. He held the shield in front of his head and madly dashed through the illusion barrier. Zac even charged up his **[Chop]** ready to swing at everything in the camp even if he had to cut his beloved camper in two.

"You natives truly are barbarians, so aggressive." A familiar voice could be heard from the vicinity, followed by a helpless sigh.

Even though it wasn't completely unexpected the voice gave Zac pause. He quickly glanced around the camp, his axe still at the ready. What entered his vision made Zac visibly groan and lower his shield.

It was the mysterious demon comfortably sitting in an opulent chair, lazily eating fruits that were placed on a golden tray in front of him. The tray was placed on a large table even more intricately designed than Zac's own ostentatious table he had stolen. Did all demon noblemen walk around with obnoxiously over-the-top furniture just to be able to posture at any given time?

Thinking about the annoying smile of the demon right before escaping the poison inferno Zac couldn't stop himself and cleaved the table in two with a swing. The brows of the demon rose a bit in alarm, but he quickly regained composure when he saw Zac didn't continue.

Zac removed a chair from his own pouch and sat down as well with a grunt and retrieved some dried meat.

"Ogras?" he questioned, still finding it a bit hard to find the words after months of silence.

The demon looked slightly surprised, then it seemed he realized something.

"The very same. I guess you visited Camp Rezak on your way back. Ehm... Are my subordinates still alive?" Ogras asked, looking a bit troubled, but not to the point he was ready to come to blows.

"They are alive, I just caught a few to ask some questions. Why are you here, and how did you find the outpost?" Zac asked, still with a guarded expression against this unpredictable demon.

"You're using an F-grade illusion array for protection, any decent skill can detect it. We actually found your home a few days ago after investigating your... activities." Ogras answered with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"I can't believe you live in a cramped and bloodied tin can. Don't the humans of this planet know how to build decent structures? In any case, we found you in the tunnels before we could use the knowledge of this place to our advantage." Ogras gave Zac a pitying glance as he looked around at the small campsite, with the dented camper and ruined car.

Irritation once again started to build up in Zac, and he was unsure whether he should defend his camp or Earth's architectural ingenuity. But he once again calmed down quickly. This demon seemed like the crafty type, and Zac didn't want to give out any undue information by mistake because he was goaded into anger.

"You still haven't explained why you're here. And why you and the others are still on my island." Zac felt it was important to make it clear that they were refugees while he was the landowner. This was his planet and he had completed the quest to gain control of the area.

Ogras seemed to understand the implication of his words but only smiled in response. "Well, I came here to meet with you of course. I figured you would return here after the battle. The incursion is over, and so is our need to be enemies. I think it's time to discuss an Alliance between our group and yours."

Zac was about to say it was only him, but quickly stopped himself. If the demons thought he was just the spearhead of a larger group his position was only strengthened.

"You should know that this world was only integrated into the multi-verse less than two months ago. There are things we do not know. Explain to me why we shouldn't keep hunting your kind." Zac said, happy to keep the fib going.

"When you finished your quest the incursion ended. We were given 12 hours to return through the Nexus Hub before it closed down. Some of us couldn't get there in time, and others simply chose to stay behind for various reasons. After The Ruthless Heavens has closed the hub it won't open again for a long time, and never to our home planet." Ogras answered, seemingly prepared for the question.

"In other words, we made the choice to cut ties with our clan and our home, and it is unlikely we will ever be able to return. Even if we wanted to, it would be almost impossible due to the cost of traveling such a distance. We also won't get any back-up in the future. Therefore it makes no sense to keep a war going against you natives."

“That’s a pretty flippant attitude after so many of your kind has died. Why did you even come to our planet? And what’s the ruthless heavens?” Zac asked after mulling over Ogras’ answer. He couldn’t find any lies in what the demon told him from what he had observed, and what the demoness had said. But he wasn’t so naïve to believe everything he said either. Someone who could kill his ally with a stab in the back could only be a duplicitous character.

“The Ruthless Heavens, The Endless Heavens, The Cosmic Warden, The System. It has many names but you should know what I’m talking about.” Ogras explained with an expansive gesture. “And why should I care if some clansmen died? Life and death mean nothing in the multi-verse. Long before I came here all my siblings had already been killed in battle and assassinations by my very own clan members.” He continued, as though such a tragic life had nothing to do with him. He then leaned forward and stared at Zac with a glint.

“As for why we came here? Resources of course. The Ruthless Heavens thrives on conflict, and war is expensive. Baby worlds like yours are usually a treasure trove of wealth that can help a clan or country ascend. There are likely multiple forces across your planet who are gobbling everything up like locusts at this very moment. Clan Azh’Rezak was just unlucky being stuck on this island with a humanoid monster.”

Zac chose to ignore the last sentence and focused on the other information. There were many points of interest in the demon’s answer, but one more than the others. But before he could ask he realized something.

“Wait, why haven’t the system punished you? I was told the system might kill me if I failed the missions. Why are you demons fine after failing yours?” Abby had clearly warned him to properly complete the quest, at the risk of death and mutilation. Meanwhile, Ogras was just fine and dandy, even though he should hold the main responsibility for the demon’s invasion.

“Urh... What?” Ogras seemed truly confused, so after a brief hesitation Zac told him about parts of his conversation with Abby the Eye.

Ogras looked stunned at Zac for a good while before he started laughing self-depreciatingly.

“All our plans ruined because of a lying Stargazer... The Ruthless Heavens truly have a wicked sense of humor.” Ogras said and sighed.

“Lying? What do you mean?” Zac asked skeptically. So far everything Abby said had been true and he instinctively trusted her far more compared to this demon.

“The Ruthless Heavens doesn’t punish. At worst it loses interest in you. What did you think, a lightning bolt would zap you if you left the island on a raft? Don’t be silly. The only result would be that you no longer qualified to become a lord, and missed out on the rewards from the quests.” Ogras said with a snicker after having regained his composure.

“Just think about the quest for those Fruits you picked up. Would the system just kill off everyone who didn’t rush to the mountain? That’s crazy.” He continued. “By the way, are you interested in selling those fruits to me?”

Zac ignored the business proposal and pondered on what the demon said. He didn’t know what to believe. It did make sense what Ogras said, but Zac didn’t understand why Abby would lie to him like that.

“What would she have to gain for telling me to fight you guys? Are Stargazers and demons enemies?” He inquired.

“Bah, Stargazers don’t have any enemies. They pretty much all of them work for The Ruthless Heavens, who would dare mess with them? I guess she wanted a promotion. If you become a Lord you get a permanent administrator to help you out.

Then she could get appointed to a baby world to one of its leaders and get access to both many good resources and opportunities for advancement.”

Zac was stumped from the answer, but refused to believe that the floating eye would send him against a whole demon army just to get a chance to get a promotion if he actually survived.

“You need to toughen up human. The multi-verse is a cold place where the honest and brave get butchered while the calculating and shrewd survive. Everything else is irrelevant in the face of benefits.” The demon said, with stone-cold eyes that spoke of a deep-rooted cynicism toward the world.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Time to learn what’s what.

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#### **Chapter 66.5 - My dinner with Zac**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Shameless plug time! tiers are as of today 100% filled, with up to 20 early chapters to read!

Ogras swatted some flies out of his face as he walked through the alien landscape. His decisions were born out of desperation, but it was just now the fact that he was stranded on this foreign planet truly hit home.

The two suns in the sky were even more glaring now that the soothing canopy of the incursion disappeared, and the bombardment of colors was unsettling. Everywhere he could only see forests, and no civilization was in sight. He missed the bars, the pruned hunting grounds, and the whores. Gods, the *whores!* Why hadn’t he insisted on bringing along a brothel instead of a few of the farmers?

Even though he had cultivated a horrible reputation in his Clan he wasn’t the type of man who would force himself upon an unwilling woman. Unfortunately, the very same reputation was what now kept the town’s women at arm’s length. Well, there was Namys who was more than willing, but she had the face of a netherbeast. He spat in annoyance and could only continue.

Still, though he lost many things, he had gained perhaps something even greater. Freedom. He brought up his heavenly screen and took a look.

**Name**

**Ogras Azh’Rezak**

**Level**

**53 (73)**

**Class**

**Shadowblade (F)**

**Race**

**Demon (F)**

**Alignment**

-

**Titles**

Demon Slayer I, Adventurer, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Tower of Eternity - 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, Astral Pond - 20m, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Betrayer

Dao

Seed of Shadows - Early

Strength

112

Dexterity

134

Endurance

63

Vitality

63

Intelligence

38

Wisdom

35

Luck

23

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

300

Gone was the Alignment to his old Clan, leaving the space a liberating blank. Gone was also the constant need for machinations and pretension. Gone was constantly looking over his shoulder, afraid that he would be the 8<sup>th</sup> and last sibling to be killed by jealous clan members.

The surviving demons would soon understand the true Ogras. There already were some murmurs of discontent from the search parties that were stuck in the tunnels when the countdown began.

It was on his orders that they entered the mines, and now they couldn't leave this baby world. Many of the warriors didn't wish to stay here, as their status would have kept them somewhat safe even in the case of a return in defeat.

But soon they would understand that even without his ancestor his title as leader was unshakeable.

Ogras inwardly groaned at the fact that The Ruthless Heavens actually confiscated the Nexus Coins of everyone when they stayed behind. He never read about this and swore at the information missive he bought at the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes. It had been exorbitantly expensive and should have covered everything one needed to know about venturing into a baby world.

He was approaching the level and attribute limits as well. He had been furiously leveling up from his unimpressive level since he arrived at the island. With the limitations in place he could quickly gain levels without anyone finding out. He had done so in secrecy by absorbing the E-Grade Nexus Crystals his grandfather helped him bring along, allowing him to shoot up a few levels per day. He had kept himself at a low level on purpose earlier in order to not let anyone realize his high stat growth.

He was one of the few in the clan with a Rare class. Combined with his achievements in the Tower of Eternity his progress would outpace almost everyone in the Clan. Normally it would have been a cause for celebration, but for his branch it was a death sentence. But now he could finally grow into the limit and focus on his constitution. He grimaced at the fact that the human who snatched both the fruits now was gone.

Ogras could only hope that he could find the body and the Cosmic Bag as soon as the poison cleared out in the mountains. If the fruits were lost he would have to slowly cultivate his body until it evolved, and that would likely take years and years. And that would be the smallest of the losses from not getting the fruit.

He cursed himself for not simply snatching the bags when he had the chance up on the mountain. He was already stressed out from killing Rydel and subsequently killing himself, and he might have made an error in judgment. Ogras felt something dangerous in the human's eyes and instead had opted to cajole the human into using the poison. Besides, if any straggler lived to tell the tale it would be clear that it wasn't Ogras who did the deed, but the wretched human.

Soon he arrived at the area where the scouts found the human's small camp. He activated **[Omniscient Eyes]** and after walking around for a few hours he finally found the bubble of the illusion array. After testing it out he found it was a simple one-layer array, with no defensive or offensive options.

He entered and his eyes fell upon the base of operations of Clan Azh'Rezak's nemesis. Even though things had turned out somewhat okay for him, Ogras couldn't help but become pissed off at the sight. This human lived like some kind of animal in a dirty metal hovel and still had managed to bring about the downfall of their invasion?

There were scraps of items and rags strewn about the campsite and the domicile the native lived in was actually a large can. The can was dented and in disrepair, and there were even splotches of blood on it. As he walked inside it Ogras immediately was too depressed to continue the search, and quickly left the cage. To live like this and not go crazy must have required certain mental fortitude as Ogras was getting stressed out just thinking about spending the night in there.

There was another metal contraption in the camp and after going over it for some time Ogras realized that it was not another odd domicile, but rather a transportation device. It seemed like it was an extremely rudimentary version of the contraptions the Technocrats use to traverse the multi-verse.

He knew that some baby-planets had gone an impressive depths into what the Technocrats called the Dao of Technology. But of course, The Ruthless Heavens didn't acknowledge that Dao, so most newly integrated worlds soon discarded it for the pursuit of the true Dao and to wield cosmic energy.

But this wasn't why he was here. He quickly walked up to the large crystal, which should be the Nexus Node he read about. The City Lords in his own homeworld each had one as well, but they were fiercely guarded treasures, so he had never seen one before.

The missive stated that when the mission failed he and the other demons would be barred from attaining System-sanctioned properties and towns for roughly a decade, but he needed to make sure. If he could gain ownership of the crystal he would gain the tools to not only survive, but to thrive in this new world.

While they were on a desolate island he knew he wasn't safe. The Ruthless Heavens wouldn't allow the peace to continue forever and force some events into being. It thrived and existed for conflict after all.

He touched the Nexus Node, infusing it with his cosmic energy. But it was as though it hit a wall, and couldn't enter the crystal. He bit his finger and dropped some blood on it, but it wasn't absorbed, and only ran along its smooth surface. Ogras even brought up a small vial of blood and poured it on the crystal, but it didn't have any effect as well. The vial contained blood from the human that scouts had collected in the mines, and Ogras thought it might be the key to gain access to the Town Shop-system.

Ogras sighed in disappointment. It seemed that he couldn't integrate his town after all. They would have to do everything themselves. At least there were quite a few demons who stayed behind that would be useful in building up a sphere of influence, sanctioned or not by The Ruthless Heavens.

A movement in the distance immediately grabbed Ogras' attention and he whirled around. His eyes widened as he saw the very same human that he met in the mountain valley. How the hell had he survived? Was he a walking behemoth that just couldn't be killed?

Ogras watched this grimy-looking man look at the footsteps of the search parties and lumber around trying to act sneaky and he couldn't stop himself from grimacing. This is the man who caused the downfall of Clan Azh'Rezak? He looked like a thoroughbred lunatic, without any hair at all on his face, and dressed in rags and a ripped up lady's gown.

Sometime since the mountains he appeared to have lost his ratty shoes as well, walking along with his impractically soft bare feet. Was he intentionally looking like an idiot in order to lower his enemies' guard? Genius. He also looked like he had been living as a battle slave for a decade, with scars covering all parts of his exposed skin.

But the scars were far less pronounced compared to when he saw the human up in the mountains. Before they were grisly jagged lines along his body and face, making him look mutilated, and now they were simply thin white lines.

The human had eaten a Fruit of Ascension. Ogras' teeth immediately started to itch when he saw that this human had gobbled up a supreme treasure, probably without knowing its value. His eyes soon moved to the pouches on the human's belt and his eyes lit up with greed. His Fruit of Ascension had delivered itself to him. At least he hoped the stupid brute hadn't eaten both of them.

He retrieved his spear from his pouch. It was made from a rare metal that could only be found thousands of meters down in the depths of the Black Sea and weighed over 200 kilograms which gave it a nice feeling compared to normal ungraded metals. Most importantly it could absorb shadows and help him unleash his attacks in a far more deadly manner.

This was a great opportunity for him to break through his limits and truly become someone with great prospects, eclipsing even those of Clan Azh'Rezak. But as he watched the human fumble around his eyes moved to the Nexus Node in hesitation. After a brief pause he placed his weapon back into his pouch and quickly wiped off any traces of blood from the large crystal.

He instead brought out a large table and a comfortable chair and sat down. Soon a tray of fruits was placed on top of the table. Ogras knew that these fruits from his home-world were of limited quantity now that the Nexus Hub was closed, but one needed to make strong first impressions.

Of course, he also charged up tens of shadow blades in the shadows below the table, just in case it came to blows.

Soon the human seemed to have come to a decision to enter the illusion array. He brought out one of the standard regiment axes he likely had taken from some scout,

and then a mottled shield. For Ogras the whole thing looked like a play, as he could watch the whole thing unnoticed behind the array.

But he knew that this was no joke. This human seemed to be close to the limits in at least strength, and maybe endurance as well. He was a monstrously strong cockroach that was prohibitively difficult to kill. He mentally controlled his shadow blades to be ready to strike at moment's notice but adorned a lackadaisical face.

Soon the human charged in through the array, weapons at the ready.

"You natives truly are barbarians, so aggressive," Ogras said with a theatrical sigh, as the almost unnoticeable blades inched closer. It was time to get creative.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Hope you enjoyed. This chapter was supposed to be a -exclusive alternate POV, but I felt it started to contain too much new information/insight into Ogras, so I decided to add it here on RR as well. Chapter 67 on Monday

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#### **Chapter 67 - Diplomacy**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New week new chapters!

Zac sighed and tabled the whole matter as there was no way for him to know who told the truth at the moment. The thought that he had almost died numerous times due to a lie was almost too depressing to handle. Of course, it was thanks to that lie that he pushed himself forward, and now confidently stood at the forefront of humanity.

"You said your incursion is only one of many? Do they all contain demons like you?" Zac quickly asked, eager to change the subject. Besides, this was something he had wondered about since day one. He was thinking of his family and was worried that another incursion could pop up next to them at any moment. It had worked out for him, but he was given a huge advantage from his many titles. For normal people to contend against a demon army, he knew how that story would end.

"As far as I know us demons only got one for this world, unless a higher tier clan got one as well. I'm not privy to their activities. The others are from various forces in the multi-verse. That's why we need each other, Human. Because if you think that our little Clan was bad, you haven't seen anything yet."

Zac got a really bad feeling when he heard that the other incursions could be even worse compared to the demons on this island. It didn't seem like the demon was lying, and his desire to get back home to his family only got stronger.

"Need each other how?" he asked, curious to hear what benefits the Demon could provide.

Ogras grinned, obviously pleased that Zac tentatively opened diplomatic relations.

"We both have things the other party needs. My side has man-power. Many of those who stayed behind are non-combat classes who would be very helpful for someone who wish to build up a base. We have builders, farmers, blacksmiths, and traders for example. I can also provide information about many things that could help you in the future" Ogras rattled on, sounding like a salesman trying to secure some business.

“And what would you want from me in return?” Zac asked as he knew there was no such thing as a free lunch.

“Sanctuary. You may not know this, but The Ruthless Heavens limits the powers of foreign entities in a baby world.” Ogras explained, to which Zac only tersely nodded. “Well, after the incursion failed the limiter remains, and we will have some... problems... getting stronger. Even if we gain a few levels we might only actually be able to use the additional power of one level. But the nexus coins and energy we give out when killed is the full amount. We essentially become walking treasure troves the longer we reside on a baby planet.”

“Why do you need me for that? If you just stay holed up here won’t you be fine? We’re on an island after all.” Zac interjected as he didn’t see how he fit into the picture. If Zac was expandable for the demons’ survival, then he could be killed at any moment.

“Breaking the restrictions will take a very long time. Sooner or later some force is going to find the island, and what would happen when they found an island full of monsters and inhabitants that gave 10 times the reward upon killing them?” Ogras explained, but Zac looked far from convinced.

“More importantly, you have become a Lord so you can provide the sanctuary of a System-Sanctioned city. That’s not something we can do by ourselves now that the incursion failed. We failed our quest and are barred from seizing a system-town” The demon continued as he glanced at the Nexus Node.

“What’s the difference between a system-sanctioned city and a normal one? And besides, I’m not a Lord. I still need to complete a quest for that.” Zac corrected him, feeling that particular information was no problem to share. In case they would actually form an alliance, the demons would have to help out defending his outpost against the denizens of other alignments after all.

Ogras looked slightly surprised by this information, but quickly recovered. It seemed that even these invaders didn’t have all the answers after all, which was comforting.

“The biggest difference is that you can buy structures from The Ruthless Heavens in a sanctioned city. In a normal city you have to build everything yourself. A sanctioned city is much safer as long as the Lord has coins to spare. Only an idiot would invade a sanctioned city unless they held an overwhelming advantage. The Lord could simply spend a few generation’s worths of Nexus Coins and blast the attackers to pieces with a new defensive structure”

Zac felt that it made a lot of sense. He hadn’t thought about it before, but if he was really put against the wall he could instantly buy the strongest array he could afford and immediately improve his outpost by a few grades. It was essentially the time-tested strategy of throwing money at the problem until it went away. That kind of strategy was impossible unless you had access to the outpost shop.

“Can you explain what you need to accomplish to become a Lord, human? And you have me at a disadvantage as I still don’t know your name.” Ogras continued.

“I’m Zac. It says I need to protect the outpost. I have a timer that counts down toward the 3-month mark after Earth entered the multi-verse as well.” Zac explained and Ogras visibly relaxed.

“I think I know what that means, but could you share the quest just to be sure?”

Zac’s eyes immediately thinned at that, rife with suspicion. If he shared a quest wouldn’t Ogras become a lord as well? Could he usurp him if that was the case?

“You misunderstand, hu.. Zac. Sharing the quest just means showing me the quest prompt from the Heavenly Screen. Just focus on that particular quest and make

it visible with your will.” Ogras quickly explained when he saw Zac’s distrustful Face. “I’m sure you and your allies have shared various prompts with each other.” He added with a slight smile.

Zac had a distinct feeling the jig was up, and the demon knew he was alone. But he chose to keep the charade going in any case, not wanting to give out any confirmation to the demon’s suspicions.

Deciding it was no harm he decided to try it out. He singled out that particular quest, and it appeared alone on a blue window. He then focused on making that particular window visible. And soon it got “fixed” in the air instead of following his vision. He even managed to adjust what was shown so that the reward wasn’t visible to the demon.

**Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect outpost from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. (0/3) [43:01:17:47]**

Ogras’ eyes lit up and he looked through the quest. But soon his face went from interested to grimacing.

“It’s actually a monster horde quest...” Ogras said with a frown.

“What does that mean, and how can you tell?” Zac asked, eager to know more about how the quest system works.

“It says denizens and not forces or factions, which means it will send beasts rather than intelligent forces such as us demons or other factions in the multi-verse. It is one of the more annoying quests The Ruthless Heavens can throw at a Lord,” Ogras explained with a dour face. “A few thousand years ago a City on my home planet was overrun by millions of Blight Rats. When the quest ended the whole city was just a huge crater with everything from its structures to citizens eaten.”

Zac didn’t know if it was true, but if millions of anything attacked him it would be a quick game over, unless he learned how to make his [Chop]-edge a kilometer long. He could only hope the system adjusted the difficulty for his power level.

“When will it start?” Zac probed.

“After the timer. It seems like a normal monster horde quest, so The Ruthless Heavens will likely send one horde a month for three months. The faster you kill the monsters the more time you will have to prepare in between. Too slow and you will be facing multiple waves at the same time”

If the demon could be trusted it meant that he had one and a half month to strengthen himself and the town as much as possible. He grimaced at the thought of having to fight a horde of beasts constantly for a month, only for it to be topped up with another horde. Besides, he was sorely lacking Nexus coins to get anything worthwhile for his outpost.

“Where are the crystals your faction has mined? If we are going to work together then your kind needs to contribute to the town construction.” Zac immediately went into fundraising mode now that he knew he had to fend off hordes of beasts.

“I’m afraid they all got taken with them by our clansmen when they left through the Nexus Hub.” Ogras answered without hesitation with a completely straight face.

“...”

“...”

The two only silently stared at each other for a full minute until the demon finally coughed and added a sentence.

“Well. Maybe they didn’t find it all, and I can go back and see if they forgot to look in some places?”

"I'm *sure* you can find some," Zac answered with an equally straight face. "If a foreman could steal hundreds of crystals in only one day, I'm sure there are quite a few crystals hidden through the town."

"Ah yes, Azra. Can I ask why you are wearing her dress? And why the sudden interest in raw crystals? They're not very efficient for leveling up." Ogras asked, seemingly eager to change the subject of how much crystals he had stashed away.

"I'm planning on buying a store in the Shop, and sell them for Nexus Coins. That way I can buy defensive structures to survive the quest," Zac answered, completely ignoring the part about wearing a dress.

"Usually I'd say that it's a waste to use crystals to get some Nexus Coins, but it's our best bet right now I suppose. But I'd suggest that we buy a Smelting Furnace as well to turn the raw crystals into proper graded ones first," Ogras agreed.

"Our? We?" Zac said skeptically, still not having decided what to do with the demons.

"Yes, we. You should understand how useful it is to have us around after our short talk. Even for your own plan we're integral. After all, are you planning on mining the whole mountain range for the crystals by yourself?" Ogras said with a smile.

"Maybe the two of us can work together since I've seen you kill that Rydel person. And you helped me kill half your army so you seem to hate your kind far more than I do. But would the others even work with me?" Zac was highly doubtful that he could get a successful partnership going after what he had done to the demon ranks over the past weeks.

"Most of those left behind have some grudges with our previous clan in any case so they aren't too upset with the armies dying. There are a few who might be troublesome. But I am sure we can handle that."

"Like you handled Rydel?" Zac asked, to which Ogras only smiled slightly.

"Well Regarding that, let's keep that little detail between us, shall we? I won't go into it, but it was either him or me. Everyone who witnessed that is dead by now so only the two of us knows. But if the citizens of Camp Azh'Rezak find out that I was up in the mountains helping your rampage, and not staying in my castle, they might lose trust in me. And our partnership would suffer in turn."

Zac mulled it over for a long time. He'd rather not work with a snake like this man to be honest, as he would have to constantly watch his back. But he had made a few good points. Zac desperately needed assistance, both in the form of information and manpower, if he wanted to create a successful town and a sanctuary for his family. Since there were no one else to turn to he could only enter this dubious alliance.

Besides, just having someone to talk to, even if it was a sneaky demon, felt extremely good.

"Ok, I'll keep quiet about it. So, what else can you tell me that's useful for our short-term goals?" Zac asked, hoping for some simple tips that would save him some coins or increase his chances of beating the quest.

"Well now that you asked, are you aware that you have been drinking poison?"

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

New weeks new cliffs! Hope you enjoyed.

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 20 chapters ahead) please check out my

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

**Chapter 68 - Progenitor's Advantage**

“WHAT?!” Zac immediately jumped to his feet with his axe at the ready, afraid he had fallen into some trap of the demon’s making. He charged up [Chop] to a meter long edge and advanced on Ogras.

“Calm down, calm down!” Ogras screamed and scrambled out of the chair. “The Cosmic Water you have been drinking!”

“You poisoned the pond as well? Why?” Zac glared angrily at the demon, ready to start a war.

“What poisoned? It was poison from the start. Only lunatics drink that stuff raw, it burns your pathways from inside. Haven’t you noticed?” Ogras spat back and waved his hands.

The trees rustled in the wind and shadows were flickering all over the ground as Zac glared at the demon, but he eventually stopped his advance.

“Explain.” Zac growled through gritted teeth, extremely pissed off that the demon hadn’t mentioned anything about this for the whole duration of their conversation.

“That kind of water can be born in areas where there is extremely dense cosmic energy. It was probably created when The Ruthless Heavens crammed a Nexus Vein into the mountain range.” Ogras grumpily explained. “It is pretty rare and somewhat expensive. Normally it’s used as an ingredient in alchemy, but some forces give their death squads some of it to use just in case. It restores your cosmic energy in seconds, but it damages your body and can even kill you.”

“But I feel fine?” Zac said doubtfully.

“You just used some cosmic energy, try restoring it naturally without using any tools,” Ogras said as he sighed and sat down in his chair again while he muttered something under his breath.

Too stressed out to care about any glib remark from the demon he unsummoned his enlarged blade and tried to sense the cosmic energy entering his body. He wasn’t a cultivator, but even mortals could naturally restore their cosmic energy as the ambient energy slowly entered their bodies. It was normally a slow but steady stream that entered his body, but now it could barely be called a trickle.

Zac’s face went white and he stared at the demon. He was still suspicious but somewhat believed the demon told the truth. It took him hours to restore his cosmic energy even with a crystal, but it almost happened instantly with the azure water. He hadn’t reflected on it before, but how could there be such a good thing with no side-effect?

He simply didn’t notice the effect since he used crystals or more water every time he needed to restore after chugging the Cosmic Water the first time. He had been strapped for time and didn’t have time to wait for his energy to naturally restore itself. He had been angry that he wasn’t given a power boost from bathing in the stuff earlier, but now he was just happy to still be alive.

“How do I fix this?” Zac asked.

“I’ve heard that there are pills for it, but I don’t know where to get it. It’s extremely rare, because idio... individuals who drink it almost always die within a day you know?” Ogras said. “I think I’ve heard that spending time in energy-rich areas can help your body slowly heal various types of damage to your pathways. So that might work, but I’m not sure how much time it would take. And that is if you still can absorb some energy. If it’s a full stop it’s over for you I’m afraid.”

“What happens if I keep using it? Can’t I just refill my energy with crystals if I can’t naturally absorb energy anymore?” Zac asked. He had enough for a lifetime or

two in the pond, and while not being able to naturally restore was regrettable, it wouldn't be the end of the world.

"You need to heal up your ruined pathways. If you keep cramming energy into your body in your current state, even if it's from crystals, you will keep getting worse. First it's natural energy that stops, then it's Nexus Crystals. Soon not even the Cosmic Water can restore your energy, and you truly become a cripple until you die of energy starvation. Then what good are you?"

Zac was horrified at that outcome, and quickly unequipped his amulet. The good news was that least his situation wasn't completely irreversible, and it almost seemed a miracle that he was still alive from how Ogras described it. Death Squad members died after chugging that stuff just once, but he used it multiple times in the duration of a day. First time was after the ambush in the tunnels, but after that he used it multiple times during battle. It sounded crazy, but it almost felt like taking the bath actually saved him. His body was unceasingly refined after he ate the Fruit of Ascension, and perhaps it did something to increase his resistance or heal up irreversible damage.

But the predicament was extremely troublesome since there was a monster horde coming. If he wasn't healed by the time the monsters arrived he would have to fight without using any cosmic energy. If he kept using **[Chop]** like with the monkeys he'd soon have to use crystals to restore himself. It would be a vicious circle that would end up with him in the same situation as now...

He swore to do everything that he could to get healed in time, and he needed to go to the mines anyways to prospect as many crystals as possible to get Nexus Coins. Zac asked a few more questions of how to improve his recuperation, but Ogras either didn't know much more or was holding back on him. Zac could only sigh and move to the next subject he needed to know about.

"What are the attribute limits when you're E-Grade Race?" He really wanted to know where the limits lay now that he was E-Graded. He didn't want to lose any more points than he already had. With his Title boosts he already lost over 10 strength, which by no means was a small amount.

"Attribute cap? Why do you.." Ogras stopped himself and stared blankly at Zac for a few seconds. "You god damn progenitors just makes my teeth itch. And you even got a Fruit of Ascension to save your ass! Just disgusting. Well don't worry, attribute caps are not something you will need to worry about for a long time now."

"Progenitors? What are you talking about?" Zac wondered. Abby had called him a Defier, not a progenitor.

"You first-generation cultivators of a baby planet." Ogras spat out, looking loath to even think about the subject. Zac didn't feel the need to correct him that he wasn't a cultivator at the moment, as the demon was starting to work himself up in a huff.

"Haven't you realized? You have many advantages that your descendants won't get. The Ruthless Heavens gives you a running start. There are many unique titles, the System crams the planet full of unique treasures, and you even get the Tutorial. It just makes us normal cultivators want to lay down and die of jealousy."

Ogras looked about ready to explode greed and jealousy as he talked about it. Zac felt he had found his match in his quest for wealth, and he also vowed to never show the demon his Title page. The demon might just fall into apoplectic rage and start swinging that scary spear at him.

The demon soon found his bearing again and with a cough continued.

"Cough... In any case, those who manage to grasp a decent number of the limited advantages a new world provides will have a life-long advantage compared to most people in the multi-verse. These individuals are called their planet's progenitors, as

they usually end up creating influential clans or sects on their home planets. On the off-chance they don't get killed that is."

Zac thought that made a lot of sense. So far he had only compared himself with the cultivators and trying to keep his head start going. He hadn't even thought about the following generations and how they would grow up in this environment. But it was true, many of the titles he snatched would probably never appear again on this planet, closing that door for an advantage forever.

As time progressed most limited titles would be taken, leaving only maybe the most obscure and well-hidden ones for future generations. Otherwise they would have to settle for the mediocre non-limited ones, such as the Adventurer-title.

Ogras was a veritable treasure trove of answers after having fumbled about blindly for so long. For example, it was very interesting to know that normal cultivators in the multi-verse didn't get access to the tutorial, making it an even more rare opportunity. Zac kept coming up with various questions that had hounded him and threw them at the demon randomly as he thought of them. The smiling façade of Ogras soon cracked, and his answers got shorter and terser until he slammed his hand on the arm-rest of his chair.

"God damn it! Do I look like a tutorial fairy to you? I'll be back tomorrow," he spat out and threw a crystal at Zac who deftly snapped it out of the air. "Read that instead of pestering me."

"Read? How?" Zac looked at the crystal in his hand confused. It looked similar to a Nexus crystal but the color was green like a watered out emerald. It was also covered in intricate golden fractals.

"Just imbue some energy in it." The demon sighed, obviously still annoyed, and walked toward the edge of the camp. "I'm done answering your inane questions human. Put your energy on survival instead."

Ogras soon left the camp and afterward disappeared like he did up on the mountain top. There were many questions that were still unanswered, but he had gotten many of the more pressing issues cleared up. He looked at the crystal in his hand and after a long hesitation poured a minuscule amount of cosmic energy into it. The demon was very helpful so far, and it felt unlikely he would give him a bomb after all this. Still, he was ready to hurl the crystal far away if needed.

A screen similar to the ones the System provided suddenly popped up as the crystal lit up. The design of the window was a bit more intricate though, and covering it was an image of a grand pavilion with a Stargazer floating on top of it. It clearly was a man-made item, and the intricacy made Zac marvel. It was something on a whole other level compared to the cruder enchantments on the demon's gear pieces.

Soon the image changed, and it turned into what could best be described as a web-page. There were menus with various categories and images. Luckily Zac could understand the content just fine, and was amazed at what was written. The crystal contained a thorough guide of what happened when a world was integrated into the multi-verse.

Granted, it seemed to be written for the invading forces, but still most of the information was very helpful to Zac. But the more he read through the more troubled he became. It became very apparent that the natives were largely discounted, and that the web-page considered the other Incursion forces the only challenge for a successful invasion.

It did mention that there was a small chance of encountering extremely strong forces on an integrated planet, but most civilizations couldn't even be considered F-

Graded. From how the text described it Zac knew that Earth's civilization wasn't considered anything much, and was not what it meant when it mentioned strong forces.

For normal civilizations like earth's humans, the missive simply stated that enslavement usually was most convenient. It would increase the resources that could be gained in a new planet as manpower usually was limited.

It also listed out the most common tactics of various forces in the multi-verse and Zac was shocked to find out that the demons truly were some of the more decent forces. They usually created a country and entered trade negotiations with surrounding forces, native or foreign, to amass wealth. They did enslave the native populations on their lands though.

But there were many forces that simply eradicated everything and ceaselessly strove to increase its influence until the whole planet was theirs. There was even a force that entered incursions just in order to annihilate the natives and didn't care about the resources at all. It was a cult that called itself The Church of Everlasting Dao.

Unfortunately, the missive gave no information about the forces themselves so Zac couldn't find out more about them. But it was clear that almost none of the forces cared an iota about the natives, and only considered newly integrated worlds treasure-troves of wealth.

All in all the crystal was just what Zac needed, and he swore that he'd pester the demon until he handed out more goodies. The crystal said it was the first crystal of two, so hopefully he could annoy another out of the paws of the demon tomorrow.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 69 - Rewards**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Announcement: I am currently looking for an artist to commission a proper cover and some other things. I already have already contacted a few very talented individuals, but if you know someone GREAT, give me a heads up

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Even if the demon was gone Zac stayed put for some time, going over the conversation he just had. Everything that came out of the mouth of the demon seemed to be the truth, but he didn't feel it was that easy. He guessed that many of the things he learned today weren't any hard-to-gain secrets, maybe with the exception of the things in the crystal he received.

How things like quests, races, and classes worked should be the most basic of things and not something that the System would keep hidden. Still, he would work under the creed 'Trust but Verify'. He believed that he would get access to a secondary source of information soon now that various buildings were unlocked in the Town-Shop. It would be easy to compare and contrast the words from the demon with what he learned in other places. From there he might actually be able to learn the demon's agenda, from finding out what he lied about through omission for example.

Satisfied he turned his attention to the Nexus Node. It was time to do what he initially returned to the camp for. He had some rewards to cash in on.

**Off With Their Heads (Unique): Kill the four heralds and the general of an incursion within 3 months. Reward: 10 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, E-Grade equipment, unique building depending on performance. (5/5) [COMPLETE]**

Not wanting to wait any longer he walked over to the crystal. Zac knew Ogras might actually be spying on him from the shadows, but he didn't have any means to locate him at the moment and could only let him be.

As he placed his hand on the crystal it started pulsating for a few seconds until the familiar voice of the System appeared.

**[Incursion subjugation complete. Calculating personal contribution. Contribution 88%. Time taken: 47 days. Support: 1. Completion Grade: A. Distributing rewards.]**

Two boxes appeared on the ground and Zac picked up the smallest one first. Zac still felt it was unsettling that the System could just make things appear out of nowhere. There was no sound, no ripples of power, nothing. One second emptiness, the next the boxes just were there.

As he opened the lid of the smaller box a blinding light radiated out from its contents. They were the E-Grade Nexus Crystals from the reward. Zac could easily discern that anything he had seen so far was F-Graded at best, as these crystals were on a completely different level.

Each crystal contained a terrifying amount of energy inside, perhaps as much as a thousand crystals in his bags. But it was condensed into the small space of his hand. Zac felt that one single crystal might hold enough power for him to gain more than a level, and if these crystals could be absorbed as quickly as an F-Graded one he would instantly skyrocket in power.

But unfortunately he didn't dare try them at the moment, not while his predicament with his energy poisoning still remained. He could only reluctantly close the lid of the box and place it into his pouch with a sigh. Next he picked up the larger box, which should contain a set of equipment from the reward.

But before he had time to check it out a large rumbling interrupted him. The ground was ominously shaking and a deafening noise could be heard from somewhere close by. Zac instantly got a bad feeling from the sound. Had Ogras lied, and the demon horde was already upon him? He quickly threw the box into his pouch and summoned his axe instead.

He quickly looked around but saw no change. The noise clearly came from the south so he ran there after a brief hesitation. The only thing to the south was the ocean, and Zac was afraid an aquatic beast horde had started if it wasn't the demons making trouble. As he ran he opened up his Town Shop, ready to buy a defensive array at moment's notice.

He soon arrived at the edge of the island, and immediately spotted a familiar figure. Ogras was staring out over the cliff with his mouth ajar.

"What did you do?" Zac angrily huffed at the demon as he ran up to him, axe at the ready.

"What did I do? Nothing. I heard the noise and thought you had done something crazy. And it seems that I was right," Ogras snappishly retorted and gestured at the odd scene in front of them.

The cliffs were magically rearranging themselves in a baffling manner. It was as though an earth mage untold times more powerful than the demon mages was reconstructing the whole shoreline to his liking. The previously natural cliffs flattened out into orderly land.

Huge rectangular breakwaters grew out from land and created a sheltered basin hundreds of meters across and two piers emerged out of the sea, displacing all water into mighty waves. Furthermore, fractals appeared on the emerging rock-formations as all the various changes took place, glimmering in a mysterious golden hue. They

expansively covered the whole shore-line, the piers, and the breakwaters. The script itself differed from both the system's fractals and the simpler demonic inscriptions, and it actually reminded Zac of the squarish text in very old computer environments.

The changes didn't only happen on land though, and the duo was forced to scramble to safety as the ground gave out and created a wet dock where they stood. Next, various buildings flashed into existence. The largest was an enormous warehouse-looking building that was at least 300 meters long and 100 meters wide, where one of the short sides ended close to the sea-line. It was probably the largest building Zac had ever seen, and he thought few structures on earth would be able to match it.

Soon the rumbling subsided, and Zac looked out over the majestic harbor that cropped up in under a minute. The design was cubic and looked extremely robust, and Zac felt that not even the worst storm would be able to do any damage to the structures. The cubic fractals covered all the structures as well, and Zac started to believe that they were some sort of protective inscription.

### **[E-Grade Medium Scale Iliex Shipyard Awarded]**

The System blared in his ears, but Zac had no time to react before he was interrupted.

"What the FUCK!" Ogras screamed as he agitatedly grabbed onto Zac's arm. "Is it upgradeable, IS IT UPGRADEABLE?" Gone was the wise-ass know-it-all, replaced with a spluttering madman who seemed to have fires in his eyes as he glared at Zac.

"God damn, calm down," Zac said and freed his arm from the crazed demon. "What are you talking about?"

"Inspect the building from your town menu and share the information" Ogras hastily said, almost dancing on the spot in excitement.

Zac didn't know what Ogras talked about, but from his face it looked like he would explode from impatience at any moment so he tried various mental commands instead of asking anymore. As he used the command "Town" a new menu opened up. He knew he had tried that command a long time ago with no result, and guessed it was activated when he completed the incursion quest. His camp should still be classified as an outpost though, as it was only promoted to city upon completing the next quest.

The new menu was a list of all the structures he had bought or gotten from the system. Everything between the water gathering-array to this huge construction in front of him was there. However, his camper or the car was not listed, so only System-structures were included it seemed. He focused on the shipyard but stopped himself from sharing the prompt.

### **[E-Grade Medium Scale Iliex Shipyard. Upgradeable.]**

"Maybe it is, maybe it isn't," Zac defensively said, feeling that this might be important information from the demon's reaction.

"Just how high is your luck human? A Creator's Shipyard. This changes everything," Ogras said, ignoring Zac's attitude.

"It says it's an Iliex shipyard though? And why are you getting so excited?" Zac couldn't understand his reaction. It was a nice-looking shipyard, but that was it. He was likely going to build or buy one like this sooner or later since he was on an island so it was nice being able to save in on that expenditure. But he'd much rather have a town protection array or some turrets as a reward since there were monster hordes incoming.

"Truly pearls before swine. The Iliex is a race of living golems who are among the greatest builders in the multi-verse. Most just call them Creators, since that's pretty much all they do. A shipyard that's manned by the Creators will create faster,

stronger and more durable ships compared to normal ones. But more importantly, the shipyard is upgradeable.”

Zac was starting to get excited as well since it seemed the System had actually given him something pretty good. But still, Ogras’ reaction seemed exaggerated if that was it.

“So, what else?” he asked the excited demon.

“Well... Creators can also make some of the most sought after cosmic ships and sky fortresses. Owning a shipyard means you can sell those in the future. It can net the Lord hundreds of times more income compared to the crystal mines in the mountains.” He explained after a brief hesitation.

“Cosmic ships? Like spaceships?” Zac asked, now starting to get excited as well.

“Something like that. Ships that can traverse the endless distances of the multi-verse. They can travel to any points on a planet in seconds as well, very convenient. But they are not ‘spaceships’. They are Spiritual Ships that travel using the Dao of Space and cosmic energy, rather than relying on technology.”

Now Zac was on board the hype train as well. Travel anywhere on the planet in seconds? This was exactly what he needed in order to search for his friends and family.

“How much do you think it costs to buy one of those cosmic ships?” Zac asked eagerly.

“Slow down, an E-grade shipyard can’t create things like that. I think it must be D-grade, maybe even C-grade before you can create those kinds of things,” Ogras immediately doused the burning desire Zac was building up. “We need to upgrade the shipyard first before we can start reaping the benefits. And before that we need to keep it safe and hidden.”

“How do I upgrade it? And why hidden?” Zac asked confused, but the next second froze, knowing that he had exposed himself.

“Yes, hidden. This shipyard is a treasure, and any force would drool after it. If the word spreads that you control a Creator Shipyard you will have endless troubles coming your way,” Ogras said after a smug smile at Zac’s mistake. “As for upgrading it? No idea, try asking the Creators.”

“I mean I get that this is a good thing, but why would even you foreign forces go crazy for it? Can’t you just buy your own?” Zac asked, starting to feel he was sitting on a hot potato.

“You can’t just buy a shipyard from the Creators when you wish. There are so many requirements that have to be met. They are extremely picky who they work with and where they work. You’d never be able to build such a thing on this planet if it wasn’t a reward from the System. This applies for most of the good things, just check your Town Shop.” Ogras impatiently explained. Clearly he knew it wasn’t a purchase of Zac, rather a reward, just from how rare this thing was.

Zac opened up the town shop and the screen displayed the various shops. He had looked it over briefly as he trekked back toward his camp, as he needed to buy a shop to sell his crystals. But now the screen was changed. The shops were now actually purchasable, but almost all of them shone with a red light on the screen. Confused, Zac focused on one of the red ones called **[Parlaz Consortium - General Store]**.

A new window with deeper information about the shop opened, something he hadn’t been able to do before. A list of what type of services it provided was listed on one side, and it truly seemed comprehensive. It sold everything from seeds for farming to construction materials to weapons and armor. It also dealt in basic information,

having stocks of crystals explaining most things, from plants to blacksmithing to even town-building.

On another row, a number of requirements were listed. Zac's outpost didn't actually fulfill a single one, except having enough space. There were requirements for minimum town size, population, town daily turnover, and security. Since Zac's town was just an outpost and a shipyard with no inhabitants it wasn't possible to fulfill those demands.

As he flipped through various buildings he saw that most of them had varying severity of requirements. Some even demanded a town population of a hundred million, or that it was the planet capital. There were myriad choices, but the ones he could actually choose were scant few. It seemed that the merchant conglomerates of the multi-verse were quite picky.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

I rewrote pretty big parts of this chapter last minute, so might be some odd sentences here and there. A pesky migraine has stopped me from properly working on the novel most of this week :/ As always, I'm grateful for any errors you find!

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 20 chapters ahead) please check out my

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

#### **Chapter 70 - Town Shop**

Frustrated Zac focused on the shop he actually could buy. It was actually just called **[F-Grade General Store]** with no mention of a faction or company behind it. Confused he turned to Ogras.

"I can't buy almost anything in the store, most things are restricted. But there is a shop called F-Grade General Store that has no requirements. Why's that?"

"That's The Ruthless Heavens' store," Ogras answered.

"Wait, the System runs stores as well?"

"The Ruthless Heavens is the largest employer in existence, though it's not a very hands-on boss. Running a multi-verse takes many hands after all," the demon explained with a roll of his eyes.

"So why should I get any other store if I can just get the one from the System?" Zac knew he was straying from the subject of the shipyard, but he felt another opportunity to drag information of the contrary demon had appeared.

"Because The Ruthless Heavens is god damn greed... Ehm, economical. It provides basic facilities in almost all fields that have no requirements, but its prices are between 50 to 500 percent higher compared to the average." Ogras looked like he would be sick as he talked about the daylight robbery of the System-run stores.

The image of the almighty system being an intergalactic price-gouging bodega-owner gave Zac's image of the System somewhat of a thorn, but he guessed running a universe, or multiple universes, wasn't cheap.

"The corporations have far better rates on almost everything, and can also procure things for you if you're in need of a specific item. For a fee of course. But they operate for profit and would never open up a branch if they weren't sure if they'd be able to turn a profit in the location. The corporations have to foot most of the bill of coming here themselves, and it's not cheap from what I understand. Therefore they'd never open a branch without some assurance." Ogras continued.

"Some factions have even more requirements. The Creators, for example, I think they normally only open a branch in B-Graded worlds or higher. You also need to have a referral from an actual Creator to even get the application process going. And getting

that from one of those living machines is almost impossible. Well, I'm not sure about the details since that is so far above my paygrade. Even my grandfather has no qualifications to know about what goes on in B-Ranked worlds. So you see why this shipyard is so valuable."

Excitement and unease was building up simultaneously in Zac once again. He might actually have gotten a curse rather than a treasure. The shipyard was extremely valuable, but one needed to be alive to reap its benefits.

"So what do you suggest we do?" Zac hoped for some input from the demon. He was crafty and he knew how the various forces worked.

"Two options. Either hide it completely, buy a huge illusion array to start. An E-graded one at least, as many can see through an F-Graded one. As soon as you can upgrade it to a D-graded one. Then we build walls around the whole area and say it's the lord's residence, only giving you access. Later you can add on slaughter-arrays to the illusion array, killing any trespasser. Then you build your town far away". The demon clearly had a meticulous mind, already having formulated strategies.

"Second is to hide in plain sight. Ask the creators to redesign their Shipyard and hide their characteristics. Make it look like a normal shipyard. Don't make a big deal out of it, just make it look like a decently important place with some defensive arrays protecting it."

Zac mulled it over and preferred the second option if it was possible. He didn't believe an illusion array was the answer. Sooner or later something similar to the peeing demon would happen, and he would be exposed. Then everyone would know he was hiding something and would get even more curious.

Besides, his goal was to build a town, and that had to happen around the Nexus Node. He couldn't move the crystal very far, and the area where he could place town structures from the outpost shop was limited as well. As soon as he walked too far from his camp or the crystal the shop turned to a browse-only mode. The area would probably grow along with the population, but for now it was only a few kilometers in every direction, far too short to create a town at other sides of the island.

"I will do a mix. I'll wall off the area from my camp to this shipyard to make it my private property, and then build a town outside. Inside the inner wall will be my residence, the shipyard, and other critical structures I might build in the future. It should look like I'm just protecting the important parts of the town, and not raise too much suspicion." Zac decided.

Ogras mulled it over a bit then nodded. Zac glanced in the demon's direction and his thoughts started to turn in another direction. The demon seemed very helpful right now, but he clearly was ambitious and ruthless. Now that Zac was sitting on an even greater pile of treasure, how would the demon act? Should he nip the problem in the bud and kill him?

But Zac soon gave up that idea. Ogras was still needed to control the demons, and he didn't want to fight against the former general unless absolutely necessary with his current condition. Such a battle would take all the cosmic energy he had, and if he was forced to drink the azure water just to defeat him it would truly be a pyrrhic victory.

Maybe just as important, he didn't want to become the kind of person who started preemptively murder people in cold blood to protect his wealth against possible perceived threats. He didn't want to devolve into a crazed paranoid dictator. Certainly, the number he had killed by now would horrify anyone in a civilized world, but it was done out of necessity. And it wasn't like he would adapt to some naïve no-kill policy in

this ruthless new world. His hands were already bloodied, and he knew that this was only the start. But there needed to be balance.

Ogras seemed to measure his choices by how much benefits they would bring, and Zac was convinced that he was more valuable alive than dead after reading the contents of the crystal. He knew Ogras was unable to forcefully seize the town for roughly a decade due to being locked out of that system. If he was Ogras and was planning long term he'd do everything to make the town as successful as possible for now, and then forcefully seize it in the future.

But a lot could happen in ten years, and Zac planned on keeping utilizing his advantages to get stronger to the point that betrayal would be more foolish than staying on as a confidante.

Ten years sounded like a long time, but Zac knew it might not be too long in this new reality they lived. He had been surprised by Ogras telling him that longevity actually increased as people got stronger. As he increased his Race-ranking to E-Grade his life expectancy actually increased to a full 500 years.

It was crazy to think that he already had the life-span like some Elf, and that was just after one upgrade. Furthermore, Ogras told him that the life-span of a D-ranker was counted in the thousands rather than hundreds of years, and the grandfather he mentioned was over 1600 years old. Above that he seemed unclear, as apparently that was the highest official rank on his home planet apart from some mysterious emperor.

Zac had initially thought that in the multi-verse there would be no limit to the powers of the factions. As long as one had time they could keep killing monsters and level up. But apparently it got harder and harder to increase strength, and many bottlenecks kept peoples' power in check.

Generally the powerhouses of a planet held the same Class-rank as the planet itself, meaning that the general limit of Earth was D-ranked classes. If someone wanted to break through their limits they were forced to venture out into the multi-verse and look for enlightenment or lucky opportunities. Eager to find out more Zac had pestered Ogras about the details of getting stronger and ranking up, but it was around this time he flipped out and left the camp.

"I will keep any demons away from this area for now. Though I don't think anyone has the guts to seek you out anyway. Between your actions and your... fashion sense... you have cultivated a rather strong image among my people." Ogras said and woke Zac up from his thoughts. He realized he'd have to stay out of his own head a bit more now that there were actually others around, he couldn't just be blankly staring out into the distance like an idiot.

After exhorting Zac some more about the importance of secrecy Ogras once again left toward the center of the island.

Still curious Zac wanted to enter the shipyard to look around, but first he wanted to check out the gear. He looked insane at the moment and from how Ogras explained it there should be the very famous Creators inside. He didn't know if they were peculiar about propriety, but first impressions were important.

The larger box was brought out of the purse and Zac opened it eagerly. Inside was actually a full set of clothing neatly packed. As he lifted it up he was initially confused as it initially seemed the System had gifted him another dress. Did the System have a sense of humor?

But soon he realized it wasn't the case, but the item was rather a robe that felt distinctly eastern in its make. It was of excellent quality and had a deep green color.

He wanted to try it on but once again was reminded how grimy he was. Being bathed in the poison water at least cleansed him somewhat, but he was still pretty disgusting.

After hesitating a bit he ran back to camp and threw himself into the shower. After furiously scrubbing himself for a few minutes he finally was clean again for the first time in a long time. He stepped out of the shower and took a look at himself in the mirror.

Zac was shocked to see what was looking back at him. It was him, but *better*. Most noticeably most of his scars were gone. Only the worst ones were still there, such as the nasty wound on his cheek. But even they had faded considerably and turned into thin white lines.

Not only that, his body looked like perfectly sculpted marble, and even his face seemed to have improved somehow. He couldn't put his finger on it but it felt like small adjustments had been made to enhance imperfect features. If some old friend saw him they'd probably think that he had gotten some plastic surgery done. Of course he didn't look like a movie-star or something, but he had gone from average to above-average at least.

Of course, the fact that he still was completely hairless since the fight with the imp herald detracted from the image somewhat. At least it looked that some stubble was coming along, and he wouldn't look like a monk much longer.

He guessed that it was a result of evolving his race. New benefits kept cropping up it seemed. When he reached D-rank all the scars might be gone and he would become a real hunk he thought with some eagerness.

Finally clean he quickly donned all the new items the System gifted him. After checking himself out in the mirror he could only say he looked pretty dashing.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 71 - First Impressions**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

That's it for this week, hope you enjoyed! Remember, if you like the story please remember to rate and fav!

The clothing consisted of two layers. The inner layer was essentially a long-armed shirt, with the exception that it didn't have any buttons. Instead, one side was wrapped above the other, and both sides were fastened with a clasp to stay snugly on his chest. The arms and shoulders had a slightly looser fit and didn't restrict his movements at all. It fit perfectly and Zac felt it must have been custom-made for his frame.

His pants were made in some smooth cloth as well, and went in darker brown compared to the beige of the shirt. They were slightly baggy at the thighs but snugly fit around his calves, and they reminded Zac of some jester's pants. But at least they weren't tapered in bright colors or had bells attached.

The outer layer was a green robe that was put on in the same manner as the inner shirt, with one side was placed over the other. But instead of being kept in place with clasps it stayed fastened with a wide leather girdle. It was sleeveless and went down to his knees just like the dress he used earlier, which was why he got turned around earlier. Adorning the hem of the robe was intricate fractals in the same style as

the array flags, meaning they likely were put there by the System, or its own craftsmen at least.

No shoes were provided though by the system, which was fine by him since he couldn't wear them at the moment in any case. All in all, it seemed the System tailored the rewards to his needs, which he guessed was due to getting such high marks on his completion.

A stream of information entered his mind as he touched a fractal, and he was delighted to know that the gear had quite a few features. It was self-cleaning and self-mending which translated into Zac not looking like a murder-hobo again in a few weeks. It even had two forms of protection.

One was that it displaced force over his whole body instead of only at the point of impact. Quite some force was needed to break through that passive defense and Zac wouldn't keep getting the small flesh wounds from bites and arrows. That should come in quite handy when fighting the horde of beasts in the future.

It also carried a similar protection such as the one on the demon's armors, except that it didn't provide any recoil force. Instead it could be used twice in a day and could stop a much stronger attack, which was far more valuable as Zac saw it. His strongest Dao-empowered strike had been able to break through the golden shield in his fight with Rydel, so he knew roughly where its limit lay.

Looking fresh and presentable, except for his bare feet, Zac once again headed back to the shipyard. It still seemed deserted as there were no sounds of activity breaking the silence. Still, Zac entered a building next to the huge warehouse that seemed to be either an office or rec house.

The inside was made of stone, cut and polished to perfection. All the furniture and details were created in heavy stone as well, and Zac couldn't see one curved line. Everything was squared, and the whole lobby gave Zac a truly brutalist impression.

The room clearly was a lobby. Apart from some stone furniture a huge counter was placed in the middle, and behind it stood a statue of a humanoid. It had no facial features and its face was instead covered in a large fractal in the computer font. It was dressed in a simple silver-colored robe, and looked somewhat human apart from the fact it had a few extra fingers on each of its hands. All in all, it looked like a robot statue carved out of soapstone or onyx.

It was completely still, and Zac wasn't sure whether this was one of the so-called Creators or just an elaborate decoration. Ogras had called them living golems and this kind of fit the bill.

"Hello? I'm Zac Atwood. Am I disturbing?" He tentatively tried to call on the statue.

**[Greetings, Mr. Atwood. I am Rahm, liaison of Iliex Pre-cosmic Shipyard Nr. 65 238, now located at your planet. Future inquiries are preferably directed at me, and I will endeavor to resolve any issues and complaints in an expedient and equitable manner.]**

The statue came to life and answered in a perfunctory voice. It then even followed up with an aristocratic bow in Zac's direction. It seemed that the Iliex conversed in the same manner as Abby had, using some magic instead of a mouth. Zac quickly bowed back with far less grace, flustered at the cordiality.

**[Haha don't mind Rahm, that rigid old goat. We're not some dour robots like he would have you believe.]** Boomed a similar, but far rowdier voice from the interiors of the building as deep thuds approached the lobby. Soon the speaker entered through a passage, and Zac had to stop himself from taking a step back.

It was a three meter tall amalgamation between spider and robot. It had five huge legs that bent at the middle, each over three meters long. If they stretched upward the weird-looking Creator would stand at over four meters. The torso itself was largely humanoid, with the face sharing the characteristic fractal. It did however have four arms instead of two, and it actually looked like the body was full of either tools or weapons.

Zac could only stare at the monstrosity with mouth slightly ajar, which seemed to please the spider robot immensely.

**[Pretty impressive, isn't it brat? Took me the better part of three hundred years to fuse form and function into the great body before you. Even had to steal some C-graded nebulous copper to finish it. Well, I guess that's why I was demoted to the foreman of this shithole. No offense.]** He shouted as he slapped one of the metallic legs, creating an echoing clangor throughout the building.

The more normal-looking Creator didn't react at all to the entrance and tirade of this fantastical being, seeming used to its antics.

**[So, kid, what do you wanna build? Terrornaughts? Modified destroyers? If you can get some D-graded crystals we can make some nasty cosmic bombs, blow one of the neighboring islands off the face of the earth! Attack is the best defense, who knows what kind of assholes lives there!]**

The man's legs started tap excitedly at the floor as he started to list what could only be terrible weapons, each tap actually punching a hole in the ground. Zac was unable to react for a second, his mind working overtime to grasp the new information. Luckily, the liaison saved the day with a timely interjection.

**[D-grade battle-ships such as Terrornaughts and destroyers are not within the accord with The Great Shaper. Please purview the pre-approved designs.]**

Two crystals appeared in its hands, of which Zac graciously accepted one. The metal spider-being waved his copy away though, and the Rahm could only put it back.

**[May I present Karunthel, foreman and foremost expert of this shipyard. And he was relocated here after a few... Unfortunate.... Experiments, not some minor item acquisition infraction.]** The liaison, who started to feel like a long-suffering butler, said as he gestured toward the spider.

**[Bah, I know I know, no blowing up any islands or continents of the baby world.]** Karunthel said as he rolled his shoulders.

"Actually I'm not here regarding any ships at the moment. I was wondering if it was possible to, uh, camouflage the fact that this is a Iliex Shipyard, make it look like it's a normal one?" Zac asked tentatively, gauging the reactions of the two golems.

**[Haha afraid of a little heat, brat? Any greedy forces nearby? You should just carpet bomb anything that looks at your stuff, far more effective.]** The foreman said with a booming laugh.

**[Well, I guess we could make it look like a human dock, hide the inscriptions and such. But such changes are not included in the standard package.]** Karunthel continued, seemingly entering into business-mode.

"What do you mean?" Zac asked with a sinking feeling.

**[Money! We don't work for free, and restructuring the whole thing to make it look uglier is gonna cost you.]**

"How much?" Zac asked, determined to just grit his teeth and bear the cost, almost no matter how large.

**[Eight millio-]**

**[Five hundred and twenty five thousand Nexus Coins.]** The liaison quickly interjected, only to be lightly kicked with one of the spider legs as the foreman muttered something Zac couldn't discern.

Zac was starting to get a headache as it seemed everyone entering his life lately was filled with greed. Luckily Rahm had come to his rescue, and he helplessly accepted the reconstruction, leaving him with a huge hole in his pocket. A window looking like a purchase confirmation appeared in front of him and he accepted.

**[Remuneration confirmed. Expected duration for project 4 hours. May this be the start of a long and mutually beneficial cooperation.]** Rahm said and once again bowed toward Zac.

More impressively, his whole body started flickering, and he changed into an actual human. Of course, there was a tinge of lifelessness in the Creator's eyes belying his real identity to Zac. Though that might just be the personality of this particular individual rather than a failure in the camouflage. But after watching its movements and mannerisms for a few seconds he saw some imperfections in the disguise. But from a distance or for a short while no one should be able to tell at all.

**[Bah, how boring. Call me when you want to create things that go boom. And don't expect me to turn into a stupid bipedal after getting these shiny legs. But don't worry, no brat on a baby world will be able to expose me, native or foreign.]** The foreman said and started to walk away with a wave.

"Um, are you able to build anything that can help against a monster horde?" Zac asked, as this was the most pressing issue now that the reconstruction was dealt with.

Karunthel stopped in his tracks as he was leaving and eagerly turned toward Zac once again. But after a few seconds of hesitation, he answered.

**[I'm sorry kiddo, but most of what I'm allowed to create right now is meant for naval exploration with limited functions for naval battle. It's cheaper if you buy the fortifications and arrays from the Shop. It's not Creator-quality, but it's more effective against beast hordes. And don't expect us to help you kill any critters, we're only here to build things.]**

Having nothing else to do at the shipyard Zac thanked the two golems and left. As he left he saw quite a few humans efficiently scurrying about as they remodeled the whole area. But he knew that it wasn't actual humans, rather more camouflaged Creators.

He was very pleased with the result of the visit, apart from having been forced to spend most of his hard-earned coin. But since there might arrive more people or demons at any moment he didn't hesitate to spend it. If what Ogras said was true, then not even a whisper of any rumors could be allowed to grow.

He was a bit disappointed that they wouldn't provide any assistance in case of an attack. But he had a feeling the System put various restrictions on those who worked for it. Abby wasn't allowed to explain certain things, and Rahm told him they were only allowed to build pre-approved ships. It meant that the golems likely weren't even allowed to provide assistance outside doing their jobs. Otherwise Zac believed that the crazy foreman wouldn't pass up the opportunity to blow up hordes of monsters, even if it was just for fun.

He arrived back at the camper and once again opened up the Town Shop. It was time to start the improvements. First he bought an **[F-Grade Middle Scale Cosmic Smelting Furnace]** for 200 000 Nexus Coins, leaving him with a scant 20 000 Nexus Coins. Luckily the shops only cost a symbolic sum, as they made their money through trade.

The purpose of the furnace was to refine various F-graded metals and minerals, and Nexus Crystals were one of the things it could refine. It was an expensive purchase but Ogras had promised it would be far more profitable to refine the materials by himself before he sold them, as every shop would try to scam him on rates when he sold raw crystals.

It was a large black box roughly two meters tall and three meters wide. On one side it had a chute for throwing in the raw materials, and on the other, it had a hole leading out to a large tray. He immediately summoned a sack of crystals and threw the contents into the chute, and contentedly watched his wealth grow. It took roughly 10 minutes for the whole sack to be processed into crystals, and when they came out they looked identical to the ones he had stolen long ago. Gone were any defects or rock remains, leaving only unblemished uniform crystals.

Next, he needed someone to buy his products.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

Have a hard time picturing his getup? I essentially based it on [this image](#).

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Remember, charges immediately, and on the first of the month.

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**Chapter 72 - Thayer Consortia**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

New Week new chapters!

Calrin despondently surveyed the various reports strewn about his table. Twenty thousand years of heritage teetered on the brink of destruction, all under his watch. He knew that he was partly to blame for the situation, but others were far more culpable.

*'Greed is the fuel which push us forward. Honor is the compass which keeps the course.'*

That was the creed inlaid under the painting of his ancestor, hung behind him in an ornate frame. He didn't need to turn around to know the words, or to remember every single detail of their ancestor's face. The slight upward tug of his mouth, the ever-present Ancient Empire coin in his hand, ceaselessly whirling between his fingers. The mischievous light in his eyes that seemed to see through all lies and posturing.

Almarillo Thayer was born a beggar in a lowly E-graded world on decline. He had no family, no education, and no prospects, but through his intellect and drive he managed to become an assistant to a shop-clerk. From there he gained the Assistant class, the first step which ended with him founding the **[Thayer Consortia]**, a System-sanctioned mercantile corporation with branches in hundreds of worlds, and its headquarters located on a bustling C-Ranked continent.

Those awe-inspiring offices were long pawned off, even before Calrin Thayer was born. For the last five hundred years, the company had been in a steady decline. Calrin, with his quick wits and solid business acumen, was chosen to steer the company back on course and was given the chairman position at the young age of 80. But all he accomplished was the reduction of branches from 26 to one last struggling location.

He knew the cause wasn't only himself. His family remembered the first half of their founder's creed perfectly well, but the second half had gotten blurred over the years. Shady and short-sighted business practices made them lose a few branches and simultaneously made them quite a few enemies. A few family members even betrayed

the Thayer name for personal wealth, and even if they were eventually found out the damage was already done.

But the downfall started for real roughly 25 years ago. The great Tsarun Clan had turned their avaricious gazes toward the Thayer Consortia. Or rather, at the Mercantile License their founder gained all those years ago. The license was something awarded by the system, and not something that could be forced away or stolen. Even eradicating the whole Thayer family wouldn't do any good, and would even result in a punishment by the System.

But a business license could be seized through business. Normally it should be almost impossible to snatch a license from a sanctioned corporation, and it would be far easier to try to gain one through normal means. But between the Thayer Consortia being in tatters and the Tsarun Clan's vast connections and wealth, they actually managed to incrementally bring down their corporation, one world at a time.

If they lost their last branch as well the System would void the Thayer Consortia's license, and revoke access to the multi-verse Mercantile System, rendering them completely and utterly powerless. The merchant's protection they currently enjoyed would disappear as well, and Tsarun clan would begin a wholesale slaughter of the remaining family members. No need to risk a come-back, after all.

Calrin desperately tried to open up new branches to keep the situation afloat. He had tried every means, such as lowering the requirements or offering great rates on various common resources. He even tried bribing various fledgling city lords, but nothing worked. Between the machinations of the Tsarun's elders and the awful reputation his consortia had amassed due to multiple scandals no one would place their branches in their cities. And if they did it would soon be closed after a visit from a Tsarun clan emissary.

His intellect strained to find some way out, but the numbers in the reports were clear. In 3 days their last branch would be declared defunct, and he would have to flee for his life.

It was time for one last desperate gambit.

Zac skipped sleep that night in favor of watching his pile of wealth grow. He unceasingly kept throwing sack after sack of crystals into the chute, and then ran over to the other side to gleefully gather the refined crystals. A completely filled bag had taken roughly 10 minutes to completely process, and it resulted in around 200 finished crystals.

That meant that the machine could refine almost 30 000 crystals every single day, which should be enough for the mining operations for now. Instead of the numerous sacks he now carried exactly 11 328 crystals, including the first ones he had stolen.

In the downtime he kept training his axe-work. He only dared to use half of his cosmic energy to activate the **[Axe Mastery]** guidance system, leaving the rest as a backup. Then he let his body slowly recharge the energy, instead of using any aids.

The beast hordes were coming, and it was a real possibility he might have to face the sea of monsters without the aid of his skills. He needed to get faster, stronger, and better at using his axe. He remembered how all his moves were in vain against the demon leader. The difference between them hadn't been skills or attribute points, it was the huge difference in technique.

Around midnight the sounds of activity from the shipyard ebbed out, and Zac guessed the transformations were done. He kept going for about another five hours until all the refinement was done. Luckily the Furnace seemed to need neither rest nor maintenance, and unceasingly spit out crystals as long as it had something to process.

The next step was to get a shop to sell the crystals in order to start shoring up the defenses of the town. Since the transformation was complete for the shipyard he didn't really need to worry about gossipy shop clerks leaking the secret, but as he opened the Town Shop he paused after a few seconds.

Initially his idea had been to buy the only store that he was able to purchase at the moment, which was the System-run one.

He was, of course, loath to buy it after hearing about the ridiculous prices since he believed that the System would give equally abysmal rates on crystals as well. Unfortunately, none of the privately-run businesses in the multi-verse deemed his island good enough to open up a branch at the moment. However, that had changed since he last checked the store.

In a sea of red, a green-marked shop had silently appeared, called **[Thayer Consortia, Headquarters]**. For some reason this shop was not only ready to open a branch at his island, but it actually wanted to move its headquarters here. When he opened the store he realized that it wasn't luck that he somehow managed to fill all its criteria. The Thayer Consortia had removed every single normal restriction such as population and security and only demanded two things. First, they required a far larger space compared to the other shops. Secondly, they required the world to be within three years of integration to the multi-verse.

At first glance it looked like a God-given gift, but he wanted to wait for Ogras before he did anything. If something seemed too great to be true, it usually was. Zac felt that it was fishy that a large corporation would move their headquarters to a place like earth. Any newly integrated planet should be quite chaotic and poor, and should be a bad place to move your business to.

Perhaps they weren't actually traders, but rather bandits who wanted to gain access to a new world through the outpost, and then start a massacre when they arrived. Even if it was an opportunity he'd forgo it rather than potentially making a fatal mistake. As it was still quite early Zac decided to get a few hours of sleep while he waited for Ogras. He simply sat down with his back to the furnace, and went asleep with his axe in hand.

After who knows how long Zac was awakened by a loud sound. Immediately alert he jumped to his feet, axe at the ready. Soon he relaxed though as he saw the now familiar face of the demon outside his array. Ogras seemed content to just stand there and idle about, so Zac ventured outside to meet up with him.

"What are you doing?"

"Basic etiquette not to enter someone's array without permission. It's an easy way to get your head cut off," the demon answered off-handedly. "By the way, impressive work with the little demoness. She's growing a third horn now in her forehead," he added with a snicker.

"Well, tell her I'm sorry about that. Couldn't have her scream after I left. Anyways, I need to ask you something," Zac answered with a shrug, and proceeded to share the window of the Thayer Consortia while explaining his concerns.

"Hmm... Very interesting. You don't have to worry about them being raiders, as The Ruthless Heavens place extremely strict restrictions on those who use the Mercantile System. Even if a shop-clerk turned out to be an A-Ranker Hegemon in disguise he wouldn't be able to do anything to you." Ogras explained.

"So, isn't this a great opportunity then? They demand quite a bit of space, but that shouldn't be a problem." Zac eagerly asked.

"Well, they are merchants for certain, but there is something wrong with them wanting to come here. They likely are escaping something. It's almost impossible to

find a baby world except by going through an incursion, so they are excellent places to hide out in. So if you accept them you'll likely have a bunch of refugees rather than well-stocked merchants." Ogras explained.

"So kind of like you demons then?" Zac retorted gruffly, annoyed that the golden opportunity didn't turn out so golden after all.

"Cough... well, something like that. The thing is that if they are forced to flee here, they will likely be barely stocked at all with items and crystals, and will have an abysmal support system for acquiring treasures in the multi-verse. Only moving their headquarters here might completely clean them out. So even if you wanted to task them with finding some specific item they'd probably not be able to help you out."

"So which should I buy? The system-run store or this Thayer Corporation?" Zac didn't understand how the so-called Mercantile System worked, and could only ask for directions for now.

"You should get the headquarters. They are likely desperate for sanctuary, and will be extremely weak in negotiations," Ogras said with a ruthless grin. "After all, since you will pretty much be their only customer for a while you can single-handedly run them out of business if they don't comply".

Zac felt a bit of sympathy for this Thayer company that was forced to escape some unknown hardship, only to be exploited here on Demon Island. Well, he didn't really have a good time being stuck here, so why should anyone else?

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 20 chapters ahead) please check out my

**Remember, charges immediately, and on the first of the month.**

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

#### **Chapter 73 - Foundations of a Capital**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

**REWRITE NOTICE!**

I honestly have dropped the ball on the terminology for the towns I believe, and its something I need to fix before it gets worse.

My thinking is that there will be (for now) three stages to towns.

Outpost: Temporary Base with extremely limited options.

Town: Permanent with more options. The amount of options depend on how you founded it.

City: Must be a Lord to rule a city, more options opened up.

That means that his Outpost became permanent, and therefore a town, the moment he managed to close the incursion.

That's why his Town Shop changed and he could suddenly purchase things, for example. In essence that means Port Atwood is currently a town, though it still feels more like an outpost since he hasn't really built any structures so far.

If he completes the quest it upgrades to a city and he becomes a Lord.

These changes aren't done, but is something I will have to fix over the week.

Zac and Ogras walked northbound away from the campsite. If they were going to get a compound full of merchant refugees they couldn't be too close to the future core of operations of the town. As they walked Ogras asked about the shipyard, and when he heard that they had somehow transformed to look like humans he whistled, looking very impressed.

“You didn’t know they could do that?” Zac asked confused.

“Clan Azh’Rezak is a middling family in a D-Grade world. There has never been one of the Creators on our world as far as I know, and all the information about them we have is hearsay. Buying a missive on them from one of the information merchants would have bankrupted us from the expense.” The demon said defensively, looking unhappy that his image of an omniscient veteran of the multi-verse was crackling.

“Well now that they are already hidden, wait here a second. Don’t mention anything about Creators,” Ogras said and rushed into the forest without waiting for a response. Zac stopped confused at current location, hesitantly looking around. It wasn’t a very good spot for an ambush, so he didn’t feel too worried about waiting there. But he did bring out his axe just in case.

After a couple of minutes sounds of footsteps alerted Zac to someone approaching. What made him wary was that it didn’t sound like just one person, but a group. Angered at the betrayal he got ready for a battle as he looked around for a path of escape if needed.

He quickly scaled a tree in order to be able to mount an ambush. His pathways was still a problem so he would have to finish the battle quickly. Ogras should be the strongest demon still alive, and if he managed to quickly execute him then the rest shouldn’t prove too large a problem.

Soon he saw a group of ten demons walking behind Ogras as they approached his location. Soon they were almost beneath him and Zac wordlessly jumped down as he infused his axe with the Dao of Heaviness. With a grunt he swung down toward Ogras’ head, aiming to quickly cleave him in two.

“WHAT THE F-“ Ogras screamed as he desperately brought out a spear from his pouch. Shadows from all around him gathered into it as he swung it upward to block the incoming axe. The collision of the weapons created a huge shockwave at the level of his battle against the other Demon leader, and the group of demons were flung away from the shockwave.

Ogras was slammed into the ground from the impact, but Zac was thrown away as well. The demon had actually managed to defend against his Dao-empowered strike, although not effortlessly, which showed that his title as leader of the demons was not just for show.

Suddenly the demon melded into the ground and appeared twenty meters further away from Zac. He stood up and angrily pointed his spear at him.

“What the fuck are you doing? God damn lunatic!” The demon screamed as he spat out dirt from his mouth.

“It’s better to get the first strike when getting ambushed,” Zac retorted tersely as he approached the demon.

“Ambush? With these fucking civilians?” Ogras shouted as he waved his spear at the other demons. They had managed to scramble to their feet and looked completely shell-shocked.

Zac stopped his approach, and for the first time he took a good look at the group. Quickly he realized that he might have made a mistake. They truly looked like a bunch of weaklings. None of them carried a weapon, and two were actually pretty fat. Every single demon he fought so far had been in tip-top shape, even the mages. Even more importantly, the little demoness he interrogated yesterday was in the group.

She looked like a deer in headlights, ready to bolt into the woods but her legs not listening. As Ogras mentioned she had a pretty comical bulge in her forehead between her horns from where he thwacked her with his axe.

“What’s going on, why did you bring a bunch of people here?” Zac asked a bit embarrassed, but he still didn’t lower his axe. He realized that the last two months made him too primed for battle, but those were also the habits that had kept him alive.

“Damn it, almost shat my pants...” Ogras muttered as he put back the black spear into his pouch. “Crazy natives. These people are representatives of the various departments needed to properly run a city.” He continued as he waved at the group, obviously still quite annoyed. “If you just start throwing out buildings randomly it’s going to look like shit, and problems with things such as infrastructure and sustainable growth will start cropping up as the town grows. These people will help you make a proper town that can be grown all the way into a world capital if needed.”

Zac stared mutely at the demons for a second. They looked back with horror at him, no one daring to move an inch, afraid that he would swing his axe after them as well. Zac inwardly groaned as he had hoped to create a better rapport with the demons now that they were going to work together. But this first impression might have set him back quite a bit in his quest for diplomacy.

“Well. Sorry about that, thought you were here to kill me. I’m Zac,” He awkwardly greeted the group, wondering where his social skills had gone. Had focusing on Strength turned some of his brain cells into more muscles? His greeting got no response as the group mutely stared at him.

“Uh...” Zac glanced at Ogras who rolled his eyes.

“Don’t stare like some country bumpkins! We have work to do,” Ogras snapped, and in the next second he started taking out a wealth of items.

First it was a large mat that covered most of the clearing they were in. Next, he placed a rounded oblong table, large enough to fit everyone present, on it. Next followed chairs, and finally a red canopy covering the whole area from the glaring suns. Clearly the bag in Ogras’ possession was far better compared to those Zac had stolen so far.

Zac hesitantly put his axe back into his pouch and sat down at a solitary chair at one of the short sides. Ogras sat down at one of the two chairs that were the closest to him, and what followed was a discreet but energetic melee for the chairs as far as possible from him.

The small demoness was the loser who could only grit her teeth and take the other chair next to Zac after having been physically bodied away from a more distant chair by one of the fat men. Zac tried to improve the relations by nodding at her, but she stared straight ahead without moving like a zombie.

After everyone sat down Ogras summoned glasses and a few jugs of what smelled like liquor and poured himself a drink. The others poured themselves some as well, but were clearly not as comfortable as their leader. Zac declined the offer, and instead took out one of his canteens of normal water.

“So, now that everyone is settled we can discuss the construction of... uh... what name have you chosen for the town?” Ogras asked as he turned toward Zac.

Zac was completely stumped, as he never bothered about such a detail while struggling for the last month. Now that the incursion was gone and his temporary outpost was turned into a town. He called this place Demon Island in his mind, but he couldn’t name his town that. Maybe something with his name? In case his town got famous and his family heard of it they might come here. Zachary Town? No. Atwood sounded better for a town. Atwoodtown? Atwoodville? Camp Atwood?

“Port Atwood.” He finally said after some hesitation. It had his name and ‘Port’ was a pretty normal addition to coastal cities, so he felt it sounded pretty neat.

“Hm... Ok. The construction of Port Atwood. You have seen the general area already. Remember, it needs to be defensible within 40 days.” Ogras said as he rolled out a parchment. It was a surprisingly detailed map of the general area. It had his camp and the harbor marked, and even the large warehouse was drawn out. After scanning it for a few seconds he knew that it was completely accurate when comparing it to his memories of the area. Of course, the only error was that the details of the harbor were quite indistinct, and nothing was mentioned except the line “shipyard”.

Zac wondered how he could have produced such an accurate map in such short order, but he didn't want to make a fool of himself in front of so many people, and could only ask later. The conversation was a bit stilted at the beginning, where Ogras had to drag the words out of the craftsmen's mouths. Zac himself was content to just listen for now, as he realized he had no idea how to build a city.

He had thought that it would be like a strategy game since he possessed the Town Shop. He just bought the buildings and they produced or did whatever they were designed to do. But as the group started discussing everything from plumbing, to district allocation, to traffic flows and congestion points he started to zone out.

Between the hard liquor and the fact that Zac kept mostly quiet the demons started to get more and more animated as they discussed and debated various points, each individual clearly convinced that their specific field was the most important for a burgeoning town's success. Soon an early blueprint for Port Atwood was starting to take shape, with Ogras pushing things forward.

The general idea for the beginning was to create four Zones. The inner Zone was to be a walled-off area belonging to Zac. It would also encircle the Shipyard, with walls going down to the water a few hundred meters to both sides of it. Another wall would be erected between Zac's camp and the shipyard. Ogras explained it was to protect the Lord's manor against naval attacks, but Zac knew it rather was to keep the Creators separated.

Outside the core area three Zones would be established. The first was on the southwest side of the core, expanding alongside the wall all the way down to the water. It would be the trade zone where merchants and craftsmen had their headquarters.

On the other side of the core zone would the military encampment be. Zac was confused as he didn't have an army, but let them go ahead with the plans anyway. Having an army would be convenient, as that meant he wouldn't have to spend as much on defensive arrays. And if he became a real Lord there actually might be a time when he had a proper army.

The central area would be residential, with some businesses such as bars, and bathhouses peppered in, and it would be connected with the mercantile zone with a large square. Most space around the square was earmarked for various key institutions, such as an auction house and a bank, which Zac didn't qualify to own yet.

They even allocated a large space for an academy. After asking he realized it wasn't like a school on the old earth, but rather to help the students to get a class they wished for and guide them with their cultivation. This was something very interesting to Zac who had just fumbled around when he got his class choices.

He was already getting bored about the discussion about the town construction, and set his eye on the demon who appeared to represent the field of education.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Remember, charges immediately, and on the first of the month.

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

## Chapter 74 - Classes, Cultivation, and old Hegemons

### A note from TheFirstDefier

I made a (horrendous) map of the town plans in case ppl found the last chapter confusing.

**Spoiler:** Spoiler

It turned out that actions truly influenced the available Class choices. After some hesitation a slender demoneess in charge of education started explaining the mechanics behind classes, quickly finding her confidence after entering lecturing mode.

“The Ruthless Heavens allow you to start progressing on the path of cultivation starting at the age of 16 for both humans and demons, but it varies between species. Many forces are able to bring up the levels of their young to 25 in a day with various treasures and Nexus Crystals, so preparation before they officially enter the path of cultivation is necessary. An academy prepares the young generation, and help them attain the Class they wish for. Or at least have the most aptitude for,” the schoolmistress started to explain.

“If they want to become a Sword Master they will have to arduously train with their sword, and physically train their natural attributes to the peak. If they wish to become a magic user it’s a bit more complicated, but essentially they have to study the elements and learn all they can about cosmic energy. Craftsman Classes are best gained by apprenticing themselves to someone,” she said.

It was as Zac had assumed. His classes were largely based on his actions, and it was possible to influence the options the System gave. But it seemed unlikely that too good a class could be attained from just swinging around a sword within the safety of the school.

“What rarity of the classes do the students get this way?”

“It depends on the grade of the school. Normally only common classes can be attained at an academy, with one or two lucky students out of a thousand getting an uncommon one. Out in the multi-verse there are far greater academies who have curriculums that can guarantee uncommon classes, and even give a decent chance for a rare one.” She said as her eyes glistened, obviously yearning to visit such a place.

“Besides, if the youth accomplish great things after becoming 16 years old, instead of rushing to level 25, they can improve their chances to get a better class.”

“Still, being stuck with a common class doesn’t seem too great, no? Won’t it negatively influence their future?”

“Getting common classes is by far the most common starting choice in C-graded to E-graded worlds. Classes like Warrior or Swordsman have a multitude of well-documented advancements paths. For example it is well known that a Warrior can advance to an E-Graded Uncommon Champion. It can also advance to E-Graded Uncommon Captain, then D-Graded Uncommon General.” She explained, getting more and more animated as she started looking at Zac less as an axe-wielding lunatic, and more like a student.

“They won’t get as many attribute points or as good skills as someone who gets a Rare or even Epic class in the start. But the requirements for each advancement is well documented, giving cultivators a clear and unimpeded path of progression. The multi-verse has an endless amount of classes, and only a small part of them is public

knowledge. Many promising youths have had their path of progression cut short since they got an unknown rare class, and wasn't able to progress it."

Zac found all of this very illuminating, and decided to have this teacher accompany him into the mines to keep his education going while he tried to get his pathways repaired.

"If the multi-verse contains endless classes, why did so many of your kind seem to have the same class?" Zac probed, his memories slightly clashing with the teacher's explanation of the class system. For example, there had generally been three types of mages; earth, lightning, and fire. But no demon mage seemed to use wind, ice, gravity or any other types.

The demoness slightly hesitated and looked at Ogras for instructions. He shrugged and continued the explanation himself.

"It's called heritage." He said. "The progression paths are public knowledge, but the details are fiercely guarded secrets. Those classes that Alyn mentioned are public knowledge, but the exact method to advance past E-grade is not. Clan Azh'Rezak has bought guides that explain the progression to E-grade Uncommon for over a dozen classes, but only had two clear paths to reach D-rank."

"Buying a full progression path from F to D with all required attributes, Dao-requirements, and hidden requirements is costly enough to set back a D-ranked force quite a bit. So most only have one or two, and they are the foundation of the clan. Clan Azh'Rezak has the progression path of Lightning Warrior, which evolves into Tempest Warrior, and finally Stormblade. It's a mix of lightning magic and bladed weapons. Rydel followed this path for example, and only the main branch of our clan is allowed to progress this class path," the demon continued, and Zac immediately remembered the three demons he had killed whose skills contained the black dreadful lightning.

"The stronger the heritage of a clan the greater its prospects. The more and better progression paths, cultivation techniques, hidden Titles, access to hidden pocket-worlds and unique cultivation resources a force has, the better the heritage is.

"Of course, the stronger heritage you have the more attractive a target you become, and wars are constantly fought across the multi-verse to snatch heritages," Ogras said. "The greatest forces in the multi-verse are said to have progression paths all the way to at least B-rank, making their heritage an unimaginable treasure," he finished, with yearning in his eyes talking about those lofty clans.

"And how does cultivation fit into all of this?" Zac continued. This was one of the most confusing things for him so far. From Abby it seemed that cultivation was extremely important, but so far he had progressed just fine without being able to cultivate.

"Cultivation has various benefits. First it improves your advancement speed in levels. At a certain point one can forego sleep completely and instead cultivate, making it possible to ceaselessly progress levels. At low levels it doesn't make a large difference, but at high levels a single level can take a year or more, and at this point the difference starts to show." The schoolmistress Alyn picked up again.

"Secondly, cultivation doesn't only improve levels, it also improves our very foundations. It can improve our very beings over time. Essentially, it can help evolve our races, which is the biggest difference between a cultivator and a mortal." She said.

"Most mortals are forever stuck at F-Grade Classes, since they can't afford the means to evolve into E-Rank Race. Advancing the Race is the most basic requirement for any class advancement, and no matter the Dao enlightenment or titles, without an advanced race you just will not progress. And as mortals progress it becomes unimaginably hard to find the treasures to keep their advancement going."

“Finally, cultivators can increase their combat power compared to a mortal if they have a suitable cultivation method. Say the cultivator is a Pyromancer Class. If she has a fire-attributed cultivation technique, her attacks will get even fiercer. Conversely, if she use a water-based cultivation technique she might get weaker, or even hurt herself over time.”

Zac finally understood how classes worked in the multi-verse, and was a bit troubled that he seemed to have gone down a harder path. His Rare class was a boon in the form of giving good skills and extra stats, but it seemed it was far harder to progress compared to the normal classes.

Even worse, it seemed that getting stronger truly was easier for cultivators. It would become harder and harder to keep his lead it seemed as time went on. At least he had caught a lucky break snatching up a Fruit of Ascension, solving the issue of his race for now. Still, he would have to find new treasures to keep advancing, whereas the cultivators could just, well, cultivate.

“Can a mortal become a cultivator?” Zac asked, as that would solve his issues easily. Besides, Abby had said only 10% of the population of Earth was able to become cultivators, so most earthlings could benefit from turning into cultivators. Alyn seemed to hesitate a bit before answering.

“Perhaps. It is said that mortals will automatically become able to cultivate when they reach a certain power level. But I am not sure whether it is true. Some say it is at C rank, others at B rank. Some say it’s just a hoax to give mortals false hope. I only know it’s not possible at D rank or lower.” She said. “There are a few treasures able to turn a mortal into a cultivator though, but they are so rare they might as well be rumors as well.” Alyn then added after some thought.

“Those treasures are real but unfathomably rare. In our homeworld one was put up for auction fifty thousand years ago, and hasn’t been seen since. When it arrived it created a bloody storm that impacted the whole world. Besides, getting one of them can be a death trap. There are so many old monsters in the multi-verse that have a grandson or granddaughter who can’t cultivate for some reason. They are fine with slaughtering a whole country to snatch the treasure for their kin, making it extremely dangerous to own it.” Ogras added on.

“There even was an old hegemon who went to war with a ruling family of a B-ranked planet just to get a supreme treasure which would allow his beloved pet to become a sentient god-beast. Billions of lives were lost because of that stupid mutt.” The demon then said, his mouth curving slightly upward.

“What happened?” Zac asked intrigued.

“The hegemon essentially destroyed the world and took the treasure. The mutt became a god beast and over tens of thousands of years started to rival even its old master in power. Soon the beast could transform into humanoid form and it had the appearance of a stunning woman. The old master actually fell in love and wanted to marry his old pet, but the god-beast didn’t reciprocate his feelings.

“Mad with rage that he was rebuffed after all he had done for her, he immediately tried to kill her. It back-fired spectacularly, and the beast was victorious after an earth-shaking battle. Now she is a hegemon herself and leader of a grand beast world. It is one of the most famous stories about the dangers of owning too valuable treasures” Ogras narrated with a sneer, obviously considering the old master a true idiot.

Zac almost laughed out loud when he heard the story, and said a silent prayer for the old master. More importantly, it seemed it was possible for him to become a cultivator in the future. Of course, it seemed impossibly hard, but he had time and a

huge amount of Luck. Not wanting to hold up the meeting any longer with this tangent, he changed the subject.

“What about the defenses of the town? The monster hordes are coming soon.”

This was what mattered the most to Zac right now. The town needed to be standing at least until he could buy a teleporter or a cosmic ship so he could finally start his search for his family. And if possible he would want to defend Port Atwood from the incoming animals, in order to turn his island both into a sanctuary and bastion.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

I have

## **Chapter 75 - Gaming the System**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

New Month, new plug update! Due to reaching the first Goal the number of Early Chapters has increased. Read up to **23** chapters ahead of what's posted here on RR! Some Tiers also get access to the multi-verse side-story “Employee 34”

As today is the 1st you will not get debited a second time until September if you sign.

**Spoiler: Spoiler**

Employee 34 is a Slice-of-Life shop-management/“dungeon-ish” LitRPG set in the universe of Defiance of the Fall. Follow Ekz, or Employee 34, as he manage the Boundless Dao Training Center, a System-run experimental facility that's testing the possibility of a “soft-integration approach” for integrating new universes, instead of the System's usual heavy-handed method that Zac currently is experiencing.

It has no connections to the main story, more than the shared multi-verse, and the fact that the MC lived on earth until the integration. It's meant to be some lighthearted fun and will not be as serious or gritty as Defiance.

**ALSO:** Due to meeting the first big goal we're also switching over to **6/chapters per week release schedule**. Now only Sundays are rest-days for this Defier.

The demons were aware of Zac's quest and started discussing various means of defense. They soon came to an agreement that it wouldn't be possible to complete an outer wall in the duration that remained until the first horde arrived, and would have to focus on the inner wall instead.

Zac was a bit skeptical, as he knew the whole wall around their own town was erected in just a few days' time. Were they holding back on him? However, it was soon explained that the whole force came together and immediately fortified their position when they arrived at the island. Now they were left with only a tenth of their force, and almost all the earth mages that had been instrumental to the construction were either dead or back in their home world.

“What is the point of the wall anyhow? I could easily scale your wall in seconds. I can just buy a defensive array instead” Zac probed, wondering if all the work of erecting walls were even worth it.

“Defensive arrays need power to run. If no one, or just a few assailants are attacking the ambient energy is enough. But as soon as it comes under attack either cultivators or crystals are needed to provide energy to keep the shield active. Imagine ten thousand beasts simultaneously clawing and ramming their bodies into the shield. The energy consumption would be terrifying, and you'd become broke after a few weeks of maintaining it.” Ogras replied. “Walls are cheap and effective below E-rank. They are the first line of defense that is easily replaceable and provides a vantage where we can grind down the enemy forces before even wasting a single crystal on

maintaining an array. Only if they break through the walls will we need to spend resources on maintaining the arrays.”

“What about the merchant headquarters? According to the blueprint the compound will be placed outside the inner wall.” While Zac was no angel he didn’t want to summon the poor traders just to be eaten by monsters in a month, he wasn’t that cruel.

“Many structures provided by The Ruthless Heavens have certain protections in place. It will automatically be protected like the Tree of Ascension was.” Ogras explained, which reminded Zac about the impenetrable shield that covered the tree while the fruits were ripening.

“Can’t we just hide inside there then?” Zac asked. Having a safe spot where nothing could harm him would be extremely convenient while assaulted by a sea of monsters.

“We can enter and leave, but only during business hours if we’re not members. And no, we can’t just become temporary members during the beast horde attacks.” Ogras ruthlessly crushed Zac’s hopes. “Also, that protection only applies to buildings connected to the Mercantile System, so nothing else you build will be safe. The horde’s main targets will be you and the Nexus Node, and everything impeding its path will be destroyed. Trying to exploit various loopholes such as surrounding your camp with protected merchant shops won’t work either. Everything has been tested over time, and the loopholes have been fixed by the Ruthless Heavens millions of years ago. ”

In the end they decided to focus on erecting a wall around Zac’s camp. The radius of the wall was to be five hundred meters, giving Zac a huge personal area to build a proper home in the future. Medium Scale Arrays would also fit properly inside a fortification of that size.

Parts of the wall were only temporary, since the main plan was for the walls to go all the way down to the water in the future. For specific arrays they held off for the moment since they didn’t know the amount of Nexus coins they’d be able to scrounge together before the first wave appeared.

Content with the results, Ogras dismissed the others to speak to Zac privately. They decided that Ogras would travel between Demon Town and Port Atwood to keep both the mining efforts going and oversee the construction of the wall. Zac would head to the mines to try and restore his pathways and excavate as many crystals as possible.

Before they left Zac showed Ogras the screen for the Forester’s Constitution skill after some hesitation. It was still stuck on (8/30), and Zac explained the situation.

**Forester’s Constitution (Class): Fight in the forests, be one with nature. Reward: Forester’s Constitution Skill. (8/30).**

Yesterday Ogras told him how he managed to speak to Zac on the mountain top. He also explained how Zac had finished the quest, even though Ogras as the general was still alive. Before the completion of the incursion quest Ogras wouldn’t be able to speak to Zac even if he had the translation skill. The System wouldn’t let communication happen between natives and invaders until one side was defeated, as it didn’t want to see any peaceful solution. Therefore the completion of the quest was necessary.

It was the first pill the demon swallowed right after killing Rydel that made it happen. The pill was actually called [**The Coward’s Escape**], and truly killed the user for a short duration. It was a tool for escaping various situations that would only end with either death or success, such as inheritance sites or being the target of a quest.

It would complete any quests that demanded his death and often even teleport him, the “corpse”, out of the inheritance site. The downside of the pill was that all

active quests were considered forfeited upon death, so using it could be extremely detrimental if you had an important quest active. It was also the reason Zac didn't get 100% contribution on finishing his quest, as the last target killed himself.

Obviously Ogras had some experience in exploiting the rigid system, and Zac needed some of that ingenuity. He was strapped for time but wanted to complete his constitution quest before the beast horde arrived. But he also needed to stay in the mines with its high concentration of energy in order to heal his body broken by the Cosmic Water.

He would have used the mountain valley for both purposes if it wasn't turned into a poisoned hellhole after the forest fires and poison clouds made it uninhabitable. Ogras had explained with some embarrassment that it could take months before it was possible to get back up there.

"From the description it is either a Seed-quest that gives you a vision for a Dao seed, or it requires a Dao Seed connected to nature. Perhaps Seed of Grass or Seed of Trees."

"Not Seed of Nature or Seed of Earth?" Zac asked skeptically. Seed of Trees did not seem very impressive.

"The Dao of Nature and Earth are high tiered Daos, and not something you can touch." Ogras sneered derisively. "I've never heard of this skill, what class did you say you had?"

Zac ignored him and waited for the demon to provide some solution instead.

Seeing that Zac wasn't intending on answering, Ogras could only mutter something and continue. "Fight in the forest is very vague, and you can probably exploit it. What constitutes a forest, and what constitutes fight? If you want to complete it without wasting too much time we need to do two things. First, find the spot closest to the mines that The Ruthless Heavens considers forest. Second, find out how often you need to kill something to be considered in battle." He said as he was tapping the table with his hand.

"You said you were steadily gaining progression when you fought the Barghest even though you instantly killed the barghest, so there is an allowed downtime. Find how long it is, and if it is long enough you can easily exploit it. Simply have someone drag a Barghest to the forest-spot, and run out of the mine and kill it. Then run back in and continue mining. If you're lucky you will only need something like 5-10 minutes on travel time per kill and can spend the rest on mining and focusing on recuperation."

Zac was stunned. He would never have thought of that method, and was glad he confided in the demon. He was a shady character but could also be very useful. And Ogras didn't know it, but his solution would also help him progress his other Class skill for **[Loamwalker]** through all the running.

There was only one thing more to do before he headed toward the caves, and that was to buy the **[Thayer Consortia Headquarters]** and have them start buying his crystals. It was obvious that they were desperate to be bought, as they cost a fraction compared to most others for buying the building in the Town Shop, and Zac didn't want anyone else snatching the building up before he did.

Zac and Ogras moved toward where the large merchant compound was to be located. It was quite far from both his camp and the shipyard, with only trees and stones around. After a double-check, Zac opened up the Town Shop and bought the headquarters.

Soon changes to the area started appearing just as with the creation of the shipyard. Trees and rocks disappeared, and replacing them were gravel and cobblestones. Soon structures appeared as well, one by one sprouting up like

mushrooms out of the ground. But that was where the similarities with the shipyard ended.

The Creator structures were crafted with meticulous care, looking pristine with mighty fractals covering every inch. But what appeared in front of the duo could almost be called a ghetto. The buildings were a mix of stone and wood structures that once might have been proper structures. But the houses looked like they had been abandoned and then put through decades of harsh weather.

There were broken windows, mold, tiles missing, and they could even spot a few buildings where a wall had simply collapsed. No fractals covered anything, and Zac was actually loath to enter most of the buildings from safety concerns. The only building that looked to be in decent order was also the largest one. It was a three-story building where each floor should have an area of roughly a thousand square meters, and if Zac had to guess it was the actual store for the Thayer Consortia. The other structures should be warehouses, support buildings, and homes for the employees.

“What is this shanty town?” Ogras asked in shock. “You might just have enlisted the worst merchants in the multi-verse, I can’t believe how poor they look.”

Zac was very much inclined to agree. The goal of merchants was to amass wealth, just like the goal of a cultivator was to get stronger. Judging by the state of disrepair of the structures he could only assume the Thayer Consortia was really incompetent at their job.

But there was nothing to do, there was no refund button in the Town Shop, and they could only suppress their misgivings and enter the shop. The inside was slightly better than the outside, and at least everything was spotlessly clean. It was the store as Zac expected, but it reminded him of a struggling convenience store with mostly empty shelves.

There were a few pieces of equipment at various racks, but they looked worse compared to the ones the demons used. There also were a few information crystals behind glass displays, but the displays weren’t even a quarter full. In some corners various materials were sold, and there also were some herbs and plants, though they all looked a bit dried out.

Manning the desk were a few humanoids that somewhat reminded Zac of gnomes. They were less than a meter tall but didn’t have the stockiness, or beardiness, of dwarves. Their skin was also light blue and they had deep sapphire-colored eyes, with pointed ears like elves. Perhaps they were genies?

Before Zac and Ogras could approach the clerks another genie came running toward the two. He looked much like the others, with the blue skin and no hair. He wore what looked like an old-fashioned suit, and had an ascot tied around his neck.

“Greetings honored customers, I am Calrin Thayer, Chairman of the Thayer Consortia. Excuse the slight disarray, we are currently setting everything up. Can I presume one of you is the distinguished Lord?”

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 23 chapters ahead) please check out my

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

#### **Chapter 76 - Business Tactics**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New Month, new plug update! Read up to 23 chapters ahead of what’s posted here on RR! Some Tiers also get access to the multi-verse side-story “Employee 34”

As today is the 2nd you will not get debited a second time until September if you sign!

Also: This is not the last chapter of the week, another chapter tomorrow!

Calrin looked over the reports and agreements strewn on his table, his feelings not much better compared to when he was holed up waiting for the Tsarun Clan to hunt him down. He had cried in relief when someone finally purchased their headquarters, the window with the teleportation prompt looking like a writ of amnesty.

He had thought that the Thayer Consortia would be able to slowly regroup and recover on this new world. The newly integrated planets and continents were filled with valuables that needed a buyer, and the natives seldom knew the worth of what they held in their hands. A single trade could result in a profit that would cover expenses for months.

But who would've expected that they got placed on a deserted island instead of some burgeoning town. Apart from a shipyard there wasn't a single building, and the Merchant's Window showed that Port Atwood, as the presumptive town was called, only housed one solitary citizen; its Lord.

Worse yet was the Lord's companion, the System-blasted Demon. For a second Calrin was ecstatic when he heard that the Lord controlled an actual Nexus Crystal Mine. That meant there was a Nexus Vein on the island, and sooner or later things like farms with valuable plants would pop up. Even cultivators would relocate here for the high density of energy, which would only help business further.

Until then he would be able to turn a tidy profit buying the crystals and reselling them through the Mercantile System. A native had no idea of value of things, and if they added a larger margin, who would know?

But that Demon wasn't actually a native, but a defected invader. He ruthlessly started to pressure down the profit margins to a razor's edge, even threatening them with a trade embargo. He obviously had a general idea of the Thayer Corporation's situation and knew that if they didn't produce some profit and turnover, the System would rescind their business license.

Gone were the dreams of a mighty comeback, replaced with a nightmare of toiling under a demonic taskmaster for little to no profits.

Zac was quite happy with the result of the negotiations as he moved through the forest. Ogras kept proving his worth as a teammate. The little genie, whose race was actually called Sky Gnomes, made a big production of support and mutual cooperation after he heard about the Nexus Crystal Mine. After almost wiping away a tear of self-sacrifice he offered the most generous price of 35 Nexus Coins per Crystal.

The price seemed to have awoken a dragon in Ogras, and he started making a scene. It turned out that the value of a crystal was actually closer to 50 Nexus Coins, and after subtracting transaction costs for using the Mercantile System and some profit for the merchant, the crystals were generally bought for 44 to 46 crystals at most merchant shops. The price-gouging System-run stores only gave 35 crystals though, and it seemed that the gnome planned on offering the same price and pocketing the difference.

What followed was an almost surreal exchange between the gnome and the demon, where the demon initially wanted to get 54 coins per crystals, forcing the trading firm to eat a loss at each trade.

The gnome tried every trick in the book to keep the prices reasonable in order to make some profit. At one point he had even tearfully ordered one of the clerks to fetch a noose, as he said he would 'rather hang himself than keep suffering this kind of

injustice'. Not long after the noose was long forgotten, and instead the chairman paraded two little Gnome Children in front of Zac and the Ogras.

They were some of the cutest things Zac had ever seen, but they were wearing frayed clothing and looked hungry with large puppy-dog eyes. Zac was tempted to stop the demon at this point, but Ogras waved him away and ruthlessly pushed forward. Zac did however spot the demon surreptitiously place candies in each of the kid's hands, without pausing in his screaming contest with Calrin.

Ogras' trade tactic was simpler, as it was just a long stream of threats, insults, and angry gestures. He tried everything from threatening to fill the area with competing businesses to enacting trade embargoes on the Sky Gnomes.

Finally, the price they agreed upon was 47 Nexus Coin per refined crystal, a rate that obviously was one of the best one could get without selling them directly to a customer who needed them. Both Ogras and Calrin was heaving and sweating at this point, looking like they had just finished an arduous battle. Zac quickly handed over 11 000 crystals, and immediately received 517 000 Nexus Coins in return.

Next, Zac asked about a pill that could help with his situation with his pathways, but as expected the little gnome had nothing of that quality in the store. He did however promise to acquire one through his channels, but it didn't look like he even believed himself.

Content, Zac and Ogras left as there wasn't much else of value to buy in the shop. Besides, both of them were suffering from a lack of funds at the moment. Ogras told him that the System had confiscated all the demons' nexus coins when they stayed on Earth, but Zac wasn't convinced. After watching the previous display he was more inclined to believe that he simply refused to expose any hidden wealth.

Not long after they were done at the consortium they parted ways, with Ogras heading to the camp to start converting more raw crystals he had 'found' in the town. Meanwhile, Zac headed toward the mines to start mining himself while staying in the energy-rich atmosphere of the tunnels. Ogras estimated the daily turnover from the mine to be roughly 5 000 crystals now that most of the demons were gone and they were short on man-power.

That meant that together with whatever Zac managed to excavate the daily Nexus Coin gain would be roughly 250 000. It didn't seem like too much compared to the prices of some of the structures in the Town Shop, but it was a steady source of wealth that could be increased as soon as more citizens arrived. And judging from the tunnels he had walked through before, the crystals would last for years.

That meant that before the horde arrived he would be able to afford the [**E-Grade Medium Scale Town Defense Array**] array he had spotted earlier for 5 000 000 Nexus Coins, and even add in some more fortifications.

After walking for half a day and killing a barghest every now and then, Zac finally reached the mines once again. Less than two days had actually passed since he last was here, but it felt like much longer for some reason.

After walking some distance into the tunnels he felt the air had filled up to the density of cosmic energy that suffused the depths and going any further wouldn't make the environment any better. Unless he went to that cave he woke up in, but it was too far into the mountain for convenience.

Thus began Zac's monotone days down in the mines. On the first day he only focused on recuperation and seeing whether staying here actually helped with his situation. He expended some cosmic energy by using the guidance system, and was ecstatic to notice that he actually recovered quicker here compared to at his camp. It

looked like the demon had told the truth. The difference was small though, but it gave Zac some hope.

The following day he retrieved Alyn, enlisting her as a private teacher to go through various subjects about the System, Cultivation and the Multi-Verse. Every time he paused after having furiously whacked at the mines for a few hours they would go over some subject. Alyn also helped him recruit a few ranger demons that would lead a barghest to a patch of grass next to the mine entrance. It was the closest spot that System considered a forest, and killing a beast there did advance his quest.

After two days of trials he learned that he only needed to kill a monster every hour, and then that whole hour would be considered as “fighting in the forest”. After that his daily life took on a very structured schedule.

He’d mine for roughly 45 minutes, then run out of the caves to kill a barghest. After running back to his mine-shaft he’d have a mini-lecture of 5 minutes with Alyn while he had a small break, before starting mining again. He felt a bit bad for the demoness having to just fiddle around for 55 minutes an hour, but she seemed perfectly content taking out a book and read in a comfortable couch. And Zac guessed it beat toiling to erect a wall.

On the fourth day Zac got ten identical axes to the two he had from a scared-looking demon. It looked like it would take some time until they warmed up to him. He didn’t want to use other weapons even while mining, and instead used his weapon of choice. His mining wasn’t only for gaining wealth, but also to improve his proficiency with his axes.

Every time he hit into the wall, no matter if it was with the edge, the spike, or the butt, he tried to remember the trajectories and methods that he learned from the guidance system. He had realized that while blindly following the paths had made him stronger, there was a limit. If he wanted to truly improve he needed to internalize the teachings and understand *why* he swung like he did.

He realized that just some small differences in how he applied force, or a slight change in angle on impact, could have a huge difference in how much rock he managed to cut. As Zac progressed through the days more and more rock started to gather at his feet. His furious assault on the mountain walls kept damaging the axes, and he was forced to keep circulating them and let the old ones rest.

As time passed he felt that his pathways were truly slowly healing, as every day he could sense his recovery speed had increased a bit. Still, the improvement was very limited, and he wasn’t sure if he’d make it in time for the beast horde.

If he had to point out one negative about his current lifestyle was the complete and utter lack of progression in levels. He unequipped his amulet long ago, and the few barghest he killed per day could barely move his level forward.

Zac had simply run out of targets on the island. The demons and their beast hordes were some sorts of allies by now, leaving only the small critters in the forest. There also were the salamanders, but those huge lumbering beasts were too few and far in between to actually be an effective target for improving further.

He knew that he would likely get more targets than he could wish for as soon as the beast hordes arrived, but it clearly showed the long term problem that he had outgrown the island. If he wanted to improve further he needed to venture out into the world.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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## Chapter 77 - What is the System?

### A note from TheFirstDefier

New Month, new plug! Read up to 23 chapters ahead of what's posted here on RR!

As today is the 3rd you will not get debited a second time until September if you sign!

Zac was wiping off some sweat as he sat down on a small stool. He had been mining and running back and forth between the tunnels and the plot of forest for over six hours, and needed a break. This was the ninth day in the mines, and his speed of accruing crystals had progressed greatly as his mastery with his axes improved. He brought out a canteen of water and some food as he looked over to his companion in the tunnel.

Alyn was sitting in a comfortable chair reading a book at the moment, seemingly unaware of the clangor in the tunnels. She had been extremely uncomfortable being left alone with him in the beginning but was starting to warm up to him a bit it seemed. Zac unceasingly peppered her with questions about various aspects of the System during every break he took, and instead of being annoyed like Ogras she seemed to be very much in favor of his thirst for knowledge.

“So, you’ve explained so many things about the System to me. But you haven’t explained what the System itself is. Does anyone know?” Zac probed.

The demoness put down her book and looked over to Zac.

“I was wondering when you were going to ask. In fact, almost everyone knows what the System, as you call it, is and how it came to be. It is no secret. But to explain that you first need to know about The Ancient Empire,” she said, quickly going into lecturing mode.

“Millions upon millions of years ago the System did not exist. Instead, cultivators strove for immortality by cultivating the Dao without any guidance, windows, attributes, or prompts. They used their cultivation techniques to gather the Spiritual Energy in the cosmos, and improved by reaching higher and higher cultivation stages.”

“In this ancient era there existed an endlessly powerful empire, which stood on top of the cultivation world for millions of years. It spread over myriad worlds in the universe and unceasingly kept expanding. Leading this great nation was a man called Emperor Limitless. He was said to have reached the peak of cultivation, and many still consider him the strongest being to have ever existed. Of course, many also believe that the System has allowed the powerhouses of the multi-verse to reach further heights compared to the ancient cultivators.”

“Emperor Limitless had already reached the peak of cultivation long ago, and instead set his boundless ambition upon his empire. His goal was to turn all creation into his empire, to control all life in existence.”

“Therefore he waged wars, fighting for thousands and thousands of years, the empire ever expanding. The battlefields grew more numerous, and the empire actually started to run out of soldiers. Trillions of lives were lost in the battle over millions of worlds, and the empire had problems producing new powerful warriors. Almost all cultivators were forced into the battle, leaving few competent teachers behind to train the next generation.”

“Emperor limitless, and a few of his closest generals and magistrates, came up with a daring solution. They wished to create a synthetic being that would connect with every single cultivator in the Empire, and train them into strong warriors. A cosmic

teacher that would lead the empire to further heights, as no potential genius would go unnoticed, and no cultivator would train inefficiently due to bad teachings.”

“The creation of this entity took an astounding time, and everyone that worked on the project died generation after generation from old age, except Emperor Limitless with his almost infinite longevity. The resources that were poured into the project can’t even be calculated, and just a small fraction of it would cause a bloody storm to erupt even on an A-ranked continent.”

“But finally they were done. The last step was to activate it and attach it to the Heavenly Dao itself, allowing it to spread to all space. Billions and billions of the strongest of the Ancient Empire gathered at their main continent, and together infused this construct larger than a sun with energy.”

“The activation was a success, and the cosmic being spoke its first words to the world.”

“What words did it say?” Zac interjected, entranced by the story.

“Insufficient energy’. Those were the first two words of the System, and every cultivator in existence heard it. What followed were the dark ages.”

“Something had gone horribly wrong with the being, and it forcefully started absorbing energy. First the cultivators part of the activation were absorbed until they died, even the emperor was almost killed. He escaped after paying a terrible price, but the System wasn’t done and started absorbing the ambient energy from the universe.”

“The absorption continued, and soon once glorious cultivation havens were turned into wastelands due to lack of Spiritual Energy. Even worse, the Dao of the Heavens had somehow become clouded, and progression on the path of cultivation became impossibly hard. All the powerhouses in the multi-verse were furious, as Emperor Limitless’ experiment essentially cut off their path of progression.”

“With the empire being weakened and all forces banding together, the Ancient Empire crumbled. Emperor Limitless was slain as well, as the System had stolen most of his power already. The chaotic times continued for a million years, and the sparse energy and obscured Dao became the new norm. Emperor Limitless was remembered as the sinner of the world of cultivation.”

“But one day it all changed. Energy came flooding back into the universe, and all cultivators once more heard the voice. This time it said ‘Initiation complete.’ After a million years the System had completed all the preparations, and then it started to actually diligently fulfill its purpose. It opened the path of progression again, and started to train warriors and powerhouses. All cultivators that resided on planets that once were part of the Ancient Empire got integrated with the System, just like you and me.”

“It soon became clear that many things had changed, as the System had constrained and categorized the Myriad Dao itself. Gone were the cultivation levels and cultivation through meridians, and instead empowering through levels was introduced.”

“The fact that the Dao was usurped is why a few factions in the multi-verse, such as the Technocrats, call the System ‘The Cosmic Warden’. They believe that by constraining the Dao it has cut off the avenue for new Dao’s, such as Dao of Technology or Dao of Guns, to emerge. Their goal is to destroy the System, and in their words ‘free the Dao’. Other factions consider the System the liberator of the multi-verse though, and are stuck in a perpetual war with the Technocrats,” Alyn animatedly explained.

The fact that the System was an ancient training system gone haywire seemed like a huge cosmic joke to Zac. An almost endless amount of beings had been affected because this Ancient Empire wanted to streamline their war efforts. But at least it explained why it wanted people to struggle and take risks. Its very purpose was to

create strong warriors and even powerhouses, and those could only be born through battle and hardship.

“So why did the System integrate Earth? If the System is only supposed to be a training system for this Ancient Empire, why bring us into the mix? Was Earth part of the Ancient Empire?” Zac asked.

“No. Earth isn’t even in the same universe as the Ancient Empire was located. The System not only fulfilled its purpose by training warriors, it also somehow inherited the goal of Emperor Limitless. Since the System’s birth all that time ago it has kept expanding. After a while it spread to the whole universe it resided in, and soon after it started finding new ones to spread its influence into. Since then it has kept ceaselessly expanding.”

“Of course, this is just the most generally accepted theory of the System’s origin. The reason that it’s taken as the truth is that it is the history that is taught by The System’s pixies in the tutorial of all newly integrated worlds. There are some that believe that the System hides its true origins for some sinister purpose, but such things are far beyond us small F-rank individuals.

“The exact details can’t be confirmed for certain, as it happened in another universe an impossibly long time ago. We do however know that the Ancient Empire was real, and that it was ruled by an Emperor Limitless. There are multiple historic remains from the empire, and there are many collectors of relics from that long lost time.”

Zac was truly in awe of the power of this synthetic being, spreading through whole universes with nothing being able to stop it. At least if what Alyn said was true, Zac didn’t feel that the System was either good or evil. It was just an impossibly powerful AI let loose, eternally fulfilling its purpose. Unfortunately for Earth that meant that it would throw the planet into Struggle, heedless of the cost in lives. As long as strong warriors were created out of the turmoil, the System was happy.

He briefly thought about the Technocrats. They had to be truly brave or true lunatics to want to fight against the System. It was like going to war against the basic rules of the universe by this point, like trying to fight Death or Time.

It seemed that there was some parts missing from Alyn’s explanation though. From her description it seemed that the System was designed to train and strengthen cultivators for the Ancient Empire. But the system did much more than that. It also helped mortals become stronger, and it also seemed to work with Beasts somehow.

It even had side-features such as the Town Shop and the Mercantile System, which enabled trade over the vast distances of the Multi-Verse. And that was just what Zac had discovered so far in the scant two months since being introduced to it. Perhaps there were even more functions that waited to be discovered.

“How come the System affects all beings then, like mortals and even beasts? Didn’t you say it was designed to train cultivators?” Zac probed.

“Good question. It as you said, the system initially only trained cultivators, and only those able to cultivate were connected to the System. But the system has changed a few times throughout history, each change disrupting the way of life in the multi-verse. To understand these changes we must talk about the Apostates. Those scant few who managed to throw the laws of the universe out the window, and bend reality to their wills.”

“The number of Apostates that has emerged since the system was created can be counted on two hands. Each was a being of unlimited power who actually managed to change the way the system operates. Very little is known about the first Apostate, not even his name. He is simply known as ‘The First Defier’.”

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

This, and the next, chapter was actually meant to be intermission chapters that would be posted around mid 90's right after a mighty cliffhanger chap. The Patrons thought it would be too mean, so I relented and placed it at its chronological order instead.

**NOTE: will be a bit messy for a few hours after posting this chapter, as it was originally posted un-numbered. It means i will have to renumber all the ones uploaded on EDIT: Its fixed now.**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 23 chapters ahead) please check out my

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

### **Chapter 78 - The Apostates**

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New Month, new plug! Read up to 23 chapters ahead of what's posted here on RR!

As today is the 5th you will not get debited a second time until September if you sign!

The subject of the origin of the System was very interesting to Zac. He had a hard time imagining an empire strong enough that it dared to wage war against a whole universe, and an individual powerful enough to change the basic rules of the universe by creating the System. Just a glance of someone like Emperor Limitless was probably enough to blast him into molecules.

The subject of Apostates also piqued his interest to the point that he actually put down his axe and decided to keep listening instead of resuming his mining operations.

"So you mean that these so-called Apostates managed to actually change how the System worked?" he asked intrigued.

"The actual reasons are quite unclear. Some believe that the System rewards the Apostates for reaching the peak of their path by letting them design or change aspects of how it operates. Other say that they reached such a height that their ideals and convictions shape reality itself, and the System was forced to comply. None of the Apostate has actually broached the subject to tell us what the truth is." Alyn answered.

"Are they still alive?" Zac probed.

"It's not clear, at least not to us in lowly D-ranked worlds. From what has been passed down through the multi-verse the last Apostate and change happened roughly 280 million years ago. Even with the enormous longevity of such supreme beings, they shouldn't be alive unless immortality is real. Besides, the Apostates reportedly disappeared roughly at the same time the change they brought to the system appeared. That's why a third theory for the change is that the Apostates actually merged with the System."

Zac felt it was reasonable that even the school-mistress didn't have all the answers. These were the top characters in the multi-verse, and there should be many hidden things behind the curtains that the general population wasn't qualified to know.

"So, what changes did they bring?"

"Well, we can begin with the latest Apostate. He is called the Apostate of Greed, but his real name was Orlan Stillsun. His contribution was the Mercantile System that

Calrin and all other merchant organizations use. He was a progenitor of a planet just like you and rose to the peak in only a few dozens of millennia.

“But his class wasn’t combat-oriented, and there are very few mentions of him ever battling. The peak he rose to was through business, and his company is still around today, even though he is not. Being able to get a Stillsun Family shop in your Lordship is one of the greatest signs of your status in the multi-verse. Of course, they would never open a branch on a D-Ranked world, as they still are one of the most powerful entities in the multi-verse.

“His accomplishments were only possible because of the Apostate of Mercy. I have no real knowledge of her, and I don’t even know if there is a family line that can trace to her like the Apostate of Greed. She reportedly felt sorry for the myriad people in the multi-verse being forced into conflict. In her era, all classes were combat-oriented, and the only method to get stronger was to fight and kill.

“She enabled the non-combat class system, also known as the craftsman class system. Thanks to her it is possible to gain levels and improve classes without having to risk your life in constant battle. Of course, the craftsmen need to still arduously improve and practice their craft to gain cosmic energy and levels.”

“What about you?” Zac asked.

“It is generally a bit rude to ask someone about their class, but it doesn’t matter in this case. My class is simply Teacher, an F-Ranked Common class. My skills pertain to knowledge retention and dissemination. I also get ocular skills that can help me see cosmic energy circulation in others so I can guide students’ cultivation practice. I even get some defensive spells to protect myself and my students, but no offensive ones. And I am actually gaining Cosmic Energy as I am explaining these things to you, as I am fulfilling the purpose of my class.”

“Are there upgrade paths for the Teacher class as well?”

“Any class has the potential to reach the peak of power, non-combat classes included. There are some restrictions in general when it comes to class upgrades. We explained some of it when we discussed Heritages earlier, but this is a good point to go over class upgrades.” Alyn said, swiftly jumping in between subjects.

“The first class upgrade is at level 75. There are generally three things that are needed to upgrade to E-Grade. Race, Dao, and Achievements. Your race needs to be E-class, you need to have grasped at least one Dao-seed and your actions must enable the class. Some classes have even more restrictions, such as status restrictions or Title-requirements, but those are exceptions rather than the rule. Classes with higher Rarity almost always have more stringent requirements in Dao and Achievements.

“If you don’t fulfill all three requirements you will not be able to upgrade your class and progress from level 75. It is therefore known as the first bottleneck. Furthermore, many are able to upgrade their class but still chose to stay down there, even until the day they die.”

“Why would they not upgrade if they are able to?” Zac asked confused. There seemed to be only upsides to upgrading and becoming stronger.

“There are a few reasons people stay on at F-class, at least for a bit. First, there are certain trials and titles that are only accessible before advancing. The Tower of Eternity is one such example. The second, and more important reason is that people desperately try to gain access to a better class” Alyn said.

“What do you mean?” Zac already felt pretty happy getting a Rare class, but if it could increase the rarity even further when upgrading to the next tier, that would obviously be better. The tower thing sounded interesting as well, but one thing at a time.

“Achievements is the third requirement, and the most diffuse. Only with a full heritage can you know exactly what you need to do to be able to gain a class. But examples are to fight in wars, to have killed enough enemies, to have seen and explored certain areas. Generally to have grown as a being and have accomplished things above the norm.

“Warriors do not only wait to get a better class in order to gain better skills and attribute points, they do it since they do not want to cut off their path of cultivation. There is another minimum requirement for class advancement that is related to class rarity. An F-ranked class can be any rarity and still gain an upgrade. But an E-ranked class need to be at least Uncommon ranked to be able to advance further. So if you pick an E-ranked common class, then your path of cultivation will end at E-rank, no matter how deep your insight of the Dao is or how grand your achievements are.

“And with every stage, the requirement increase one step. A D-Ranker needs to have at least a Rare class, a C-Ranker at least an Epic one and so on. There is an endless amount of individuals with greater ambition than talent that throw themselves into perilous situations to gain achievements in hope of gaining a better option for a class. Most die, but some succeed. Of course, the Fruit of Ascension you ate is a shortcut in a sense.” Alyn stated with some obvious desire in her eyes as she mentioned the fruit.

“What do the Fruits I ate have to do with class options?” Zac asked confused. He thought they were only good for upgrading his Race, and that was why they were named after Ascension.

“Ogras didn’t tell you?” Alyn asked surprised. She hesitated a long while before she seemed to have come to a decision. “Well, this part you didn’t hear from me then. The main goal of a Fruit of Ascension isn’t improving your Race, although it is a good time-saving effect for most people, cultivators included. It is the effect it has on your class upgrades. It’s only a D-ranked treasure, so it’s effect is limited, but essentially it improves your choices when you upgrade your class.

“Even if a warrior normally only qualified for common classes when upgrading to E-Rank, after eating a Fruit of Ascension they would be guaranteed to only have uncommon classes to choose from. If you could already get uncommon ones, it is likely you will get Rare options. It can even help push you toward getting an Epic class if you were close to qualifying but falling a bit short. The fruit is a cheat, or a shortcut, that immensely improves a warrior’s future prospects. That is why it’s considered one of the greatest D-Ranked natural treasures” she finished with a longing sigh.

Zac’s heart started to beat rapidly, finally understanding the gravity of what he had eaten. No wonder everyone had scrambled to get those fruits on the mountains. He had already heard that most warriors in the multi-verse, even on established D-Rank planets, started out as a Common class. This fruit would enable them to reach at least D-Rank in the future.

In his case the use was still great, as it might be what pushed him into getting an Epic class when upgrading. From what he understood an epic class was extremely rare and it would be a huge event if an Epic class emerged on a D-ranked world. He didn’t wish to stay on this topic though, as he still had another fruit sitting in his pouch like a hot potato.

“So what did the other Apostates change?” he asked, changing the subject.

“The one before Lady Mercy was called the Apostate of Order. He was a great scholar who strove to understand all Dao under the heavens. The change he brought was the codifying of the Dao. You should know it as the patterns, or fractals you see from everything from our weapons, to skills, even to your pathways.” Alyn answered, jumping back to the original topic without any hiccup.

“It is thanks to him we can gain Dao Seeds and further our understanding of the Dao through study of the fractals” she continued.

“What do you mean?” Zac asked, once again getting derailed by an interesting topic. He still hadn’t found a way to upgrade his Dao Seed, and had tried various tricks.

“The fractals contain a hint of the Dao. It is most clear in the fractals awarded from the So-called Seed-quests, as they emanate the Dao itself. But it is possible to gain insight from almost anything, from the inscriptions on a piece of gear to continuous usage of a skill. It is generally more effective to study fractals than to sit in silent meditation, though many consider a combination of the two the best.

“In any case. The two first Apostates do not actually have any Apostate designations but are rather called The Beast Progenitor and The First Defier, and they are strong contenders for the title of the most powerful beings since the inception of cultivation.”

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Some more things are explored, hope you enjoyed. A bit rough chapter since I have to rush away for a contract signing for an apartment, some proofreading is appreciated as always :)

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#### **Chapter 79 - The Lifebringer**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New Month, new plug! Read up to 23 chapters ahead of what’s posted here on RR!

As today is the 6th you will not get debited a second time for almost a month if you sign!

Zac was walking back through the forest toward the Camp. He had spent the last 16 days in the mines and felt the need to check up on the battle preparations. He wanted to be done with everything something like 10 days before the first horde arrived in case something went wrong, and he was now halfway to his deadline. While Ogras had proven himself quite useful he wasn’t too comfortable leaving the demon to his own devices in his camp. Besides, who knew how many crystals he was stashing away while Zac was preoccupied.

Zac sighed as he knew there was nothing much he could do about that for now, as long as it was kept within reasonable limits. He would just have to see it as a salary for the demon. As he walked he activated the **[Axe Mastery]** guidance system, once more following its intrepid pathways.

Two days ago as he was swinging away at the tunnel wall he actually evolved the skill. It seemed that the method to level up Axe Mastery was to learn and internalize everything the trajectories had to offer, and he had arduously kept trying to improve his form over the last two weeks. It was now at Middle Mastery, just like **[Chop]**. The changes weren’t as obvious as with his other skill though, only adding some techniques and strikes.

It did however also incorporate both his Dao of Heaviness and his Skill **[Chop]** into the mix. Just as it before had fluidly changed between various techniques and attacks, it now also incorporated those two elements in the ever-changing barrage of strikes. He had quickly realized some new usage methods for the skills, such as using **[Chop]** like a retractable lance, almost instantly impaling enemies as the energy edge

expanded when he held the axe with the right angle. For that attack he didn't even have to move his arm, just charge the skill as he held it stationary, making it a great surprise strike.

He also found out he used the Dao empowerment inefficiently, since he only really needed to empower the strike in the last second as it approached the enemy. Until now he charged his strike up as he did with cosmic energy, starting to infuse the Dao even before the swing started. That both gave the defender a warning and wasted too much mental energy.

Unfortunately, the improved **[Axe Mastery]** didn't show any strikes where the Dao and his skill were combined, like with his final furious strikes in the battle between him and Rydel. It also didn't provide him with a new vision like it did when he first received the skill. He had hoped that the skill would give him a new vision that would help him finally understand the Dao of Sharpness.

He felt he was actually progressing there though, and might grasp it by his own soon. He was diligently trying to improve the sense of sharpness of his strikes, cutting increasingly large gashes in the tunnel walls.

There was another reason for Zac leaving the tunnels this day. He was very close to completing the quests for both his **[Loamwalker]** skill and **[Forester's Constitution]**, and he felt it would be better to complete those skills when he was alone.

Since Alyn explained to Zac how Luck worked he was far more ready to listen to his gut. It turned out that the attribute wasn't only good for things such as winning in card games or getting good rewards from quests. Luck was an extremely convenient attribute that greatly improved a warrior's survivability, and cultivators across the multi-verse desperately looked for means to improve their Luck. There were actually fruits like the Fruit of Ascension that could permanently improve an attribute, and those that improved Luck were hundreds to thousands of times more expensive compared to the other ones.

It could be said that Luck gave a person a sixth sense, and the higher the luck the more pronounced it would become. At lower levels it could vaguely sense that something was wrong, causing a general sense of discomfort. As luck improved it would give the person an acute sense of danger in case his life was in peril, allowing him to survive where an unlucky person would die.

Zac thought back to some of his fights, especially the ambush in the caves. He had suddenly felt an extreme sense of danger just before an arrow slammed into his head, and it was that feeling that saved his life. Only now did he understand that it came from his extremely high Luck.

Alyn had also told him that it didn't only work against bad things, but also for fortuitous encounters as the attribute kept increasing. She mentioned how a person with extremely high Luck could sometimes get an almost irresistible urge to walk in some random direction, and as long as he followed his gut there would be a treasure waiting at the end. But to get lucky to that point one needed hundreds of points in the attribute.

Therefore, since Zac's gut told him he should be alone when completing the quest he didn't hesitate to head out, using the fact he wanted to check out the camp as a convenient excuse. He once again checked the class skills.

**Forester's Constitution (Class):** Fight in the forests, be one with nature.  
**Reward:** Forester's Constitution Skill. (29/30)

**Loamwalker (Class):** Walk a thousand kilometers touching the earth. **Reward:** Loamwalker Skill. (983/1000)

After confirming the status he kept moving through the forest, westward rather than going south. He wanted to get out of the way, as there was some foot traffic through the forest that could interrupt him. Or rather jungle as it started to feel like. The path between Port Atwood and Azh'Rodum, which was the new name for the Demon Town, was getting to the point that an actual trail was getting created.

Ogras had decided to rename it since it didn't make sense for the town to be named after the clan they abandoned. From Alyn's explanation, Rodum simply meant capital in their native language, and the Azh-prefix was a reminder of their origin.

Apparently, there had been sort of an uprising in Azh'Rodum while Zac diligently trained in the mines. Zac learned that Ogras' influence came from his extremely powerful grandfather, but his own reputation was less than stellar. Some demons felt that they would do a better job at running the town now that they didn't have to fear repercussions from the clan or Ogras' ancestor, and sought to seize control.

It was a group of demons who had been stuck in the mines looking for Zac when the incursion ended, and who were still disgruntled that they couldn't get home. Different from most of the town, the demons who were in the mines had no choice whether to go home or not and were involuntarily stranded on Earth.

The rebellion had been shortlived and extremely bloody. Ogras unleashed a level of power that dumbfounded the town, and Alyn was still shocked as she retold the events. Just as interestingly, Ogras was aided by multiple powerful demons that had been thought to be non-combat class individuals until that moment. They sprung up from nowhere and suppressed the town with their power as well. They captured the dissidents in quick order and with overwhelming power.

The rebellion did not just end with the rebels being caught. What followed caused even the stoic Alyn to be shaken. Ogras ruthlessly tortured the group of demons in front of the rest of the town, their screams echoing through Azh'Rodum for hours before they finally were allowed to die. After that Ogras had once again become an unquestioned leader. Zac didn't believe that those methods were sustainable, ruling with fear could only take one so far. But they were strapped for time and Zac needed the demon's to work as if their lives depended on it, because in a sense they did.

During the past two weeks Zac learned a few words and sentences so that he could at least greet the demons who didn't possess the language skill [**Book of Babel**]. The name greatly confused Zac when he heard its name since it was clearly based on the biblical origin myth. But Alyn explained that the skill also translated many things into something that made sense for the listener. For example, the skill was named after an ancient Devil with a million mouths in demonic, which was based on their own mythology.

Soon he was close to the edge on the west part of the island, far away from any Demon activity. Zac marveled at the surroundings, as the forest had changed so much after only two weeks in the cave. Some trees were starting to grow impossibly large, and all sorts of plants and flowers peppered the forest floor. Many of the flowers were things that he'd never seen before, and he wondered whether they were mutations or something that had drifted over from a neighboring island.

As he walked along he killed a barghest every now and then in order to keep his quest progressing. He hadn't been too surprised when he learned that the demons sent through hundreds of thousands of the beasts, as they were literally everywhere on the island.

When he asked why they didn't send more demons instead Alyn explained that going through an incursion had a cost, and the more powerful a warrior the more expensive it would be. Non-combat classes like Alyn were somewhat affordable to send

through, but individuals like Ogras and Rydel alone cost almost as much as the whole barghest hordes.

Suddenly Zac felt the familiar gathering of energy in his mind and his heartbeat sped up. Ogras had told him that the skill might be a seed-quest that was designed to award a Dao Seed, but Zac didn't dare to hope for it after he'd already got a vision for the Dao of Axes.

Alyn had explained that a rare class could get two Dao Seed quests at the most, and an Epic class was needed to be able to get a third. Even getting two was considered great luck, and generally an indication that the Rare class was top-tier amongst its kind.

Zac quickly ran to a close-by tree and nimbly climbed its branches. After a thorough check for any inhabitants, he sat down on one of the wider branches and closed his eyes.

He was a small pod in the darkness. Nothing existed apart from the warmth of the surroundings, and the refreshing pearls of water that sometimes ran along his surface. Time was irrelevant, and the only thing that mattered was to keep reaching upward. Zac had no idea how long he stayed in the darkness, until one day a burst of light, or rather of life, inundated him as he struggled upward.

He had broken through the earth, a small sapling being greeted by the endless sky. The blast of light woke up Zac for a second, and he realized he was in another vision. This one was different though, as it seemed endless. Days quickly became years as Zac slowly forgot about his quest, his Town, even himself. The only thing on his mind was to keep absorbing life and growing.

Seasons came and went and beset him with an ever-changing trial by nature itself. Winds whipped his branches, trying to rip his leaves away from him. Rain pelted him relentlessly, quickly turning from a refreshing shower to a deluge threatening to drown him. The water froze and became a layer of snow and ice, freezing him and forcing him dormant, dreaming of the sun. But the trials always ended and were sooner or later replaced with the warm kiss of the sun.

Zac started to realize he was different from his brethren around him, as while their growth stopped after a few centuries, he kept growing. Soon he was towering in the sky, his kin only small dots hidden among his roots. He kept growing for millions of years, unceasingly absorbing the warmth of the sun and the sweet life in the atmosphere. Every inch of his being vibrated with vitality, every leaf glistening with life.

Small beings started to live around him, treating him with great reverence. Some even started to move up to his branches, forever denouncing the ground. Zac let them stay on, as some company was welcome in this eternity.

He kept growing upward, eventually breaking through the vault of the heavens. Sparkling dots glimmered in the darkness, as Zac started floating in the vast expanse. His old friend the sun stayed behind, but the whole cosmos was provided him with sustenance instead. He once again went dormant as he floated through the void, ever growing. Every place he passed as he slept was changed, desolate worlds rousing themselves, suddenly teeming with vitality.

He was the Lifebringer.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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## Chapter 80 - Loamwalker

### A note from TheFirstDefier

New Month, new plug! Read up to 23 chapters ahead of what's posted here on RR!

As today is the 7th you will not get debited a second time for almost a month if you sign!

Don't worry, this is the last time I spam this month

And thank you for the support to my new patrons!

Zac woke up, disoriented for quite some time before he found his bearings. This vision was even more impactful compared to the last in a sense. Living millions and millions of years was a completely surreal experience for someone who hadn't even turned 30 in reality. Luckily the passage of time was made fuzzy somehow for him, otherwise he might have turned mad.

The vision showed him the peak of power just like the one with the axeman, but in a completely different sense. That tree he had grown into was truly gargantuan and reminded him of the old tale of Yggdrasil, the world-tree. It was larger than a star by the end, but more importantly, it contained an endless source of life.

Zac closed his eyes again and started to imprint the feelings he felt in his mind. He knew this time was critical, and wouldn't waste it. It was only hours later he once again opened his eyes and checked out his new skill.

**[Forester's Constitution - Proficiency: Early. Man and Nature One Entity. Endurance +5%, Vitality +5%. Effects doubled while in a forest. Upgradeable.]**

Next, he quickly checked his monster horde quest and breathed out in relief as he saw the timer. Only one day had passed in the real world, even though it felt like eons in his vision. He was once more happy he didn't finish this quest in the caves. While everything looked fine on the surface, he didn't relish the thought of going into a trance for a whole day right in front of a bunch of demons. Who knew which one of them held a secret grudge for a friend or family member killed, just waiting for an opportunity to strike? Relaxed, he once more refocused on the skill.

He had initially thought the Forester's Constitution would be some sort of defensive skill like the Stone Skin he saw the earth mages use, but he was only partly correct. It was rather a passive buff skill that worked like a title that improved his survivability. The bonus was quite good, especially considering it would give double the bonus at most parts of the island.

Zac wondered if he could carry around a patch of forest in a pouch, and throw it out whenever he was entering a battle. That way he'd always have the improved bonus. He was curious if there were any other functions of the skill, as **[Axe Mastery]** had given him the training system, so he tried finding another pocket space in his body.

As he suspected, when he turned his gaze inward he found another area in his body, this time in his chest. The last fractal he gained in this manner looked like a large axe, emanating the Dao of Heaviness. This fractal rather looked like the Tree of Life he saw in the vision, but inert.

Next, he checked out his status page to see what other changes might have occurred.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**36**

**Class**

**Hatchetman (F)**

**Race**

**Human (E)**

**Alignment**

**Human (Earth)**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis**

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - Early, Seed of Trees - Early**

**Strength**

**189**

**Dexterity**

**69**

**Endurance**

**147**

**Vitality**

**105**

**Intelligence**

**57**

**Wisdom**

**57**

**Luck**

**77**

**Free Points**

**3**

**Nexus Coins**

**538317**

He actually already acquired another Dao Seed during his meditation without even noticing it. It was called the Dao Seed of Trees, and a prompt showed its properties.

**[Dao Seed of Trees - Early. Vitality +10, Endurance +5]**

The properties of the Dao indicated that it wasn't a Dao meant for battle, but he was fine with that. He already had the Dao of Heaviness for battle, and he was making inroads on the Dao of Sharpness from his activities in the mines. Having a defensive Dao to accompany the offensive ones seemed quite good. And if he was going to fight in a sea of beasts, having an improved Endurance and Vitality would come in quite handy.

He was a bit disappointed that the Seed he gained felt pretty distant from the supreme entity that was the Tree of Life. Then again, the vision of the axeman was quite distant from the seed of heaviness as well. Besides, Ogras had already warned him from hoping he would gain some high tiered concept as a Dao.

Zac knew what to do now that he knew he had a new Dao Seed, and started channeling the Dao of Trees into the fractal, and it lit up with a green luster.

The once dead tree started to emanate an aura, but it wasn't oppressive like the one from his axe. Instead, it gave a refreshing feeling, but also spoke of unyielding perseverance. Of course, the aura was like a firefly against the towering sun that was the Tree of Life in his vision.

If the endpoint of his first vision was the Dao of Axe or Dao of Destruction, then this one rather led toward the Dao of Life or Dao of Nature. The duality of his vastly different Seeds reminded Zac of Yin and Yang, and he felt that it was an extremely well-balanced foundation to build his future upon.

No prompts lit up his surroundings like with the last skill when he infused the tree made from fractals, and the only discernible difference was that he felt it started to emanate a warmth that spread out throughout his body. It felt a bit like when he drank the azure water, but he instinctively knew that this warmth wasn't hurting him.

He tried swinging his axe a bit while he was infused with the Dao of Trees, but he felt no improvement in his speed or strength. He was even having trouble keeping the Dao active as he moved around, the warm feeling noticeably subsiding. It made sense since trees weren't really mobile unless ents were a thing in the multi-verse. Besides, Zac had already surmised that the new Dao wasn't meant for battle from the attributes it awarded, and this somewhat confirmed it.

Having an idea he cut a wound on his left arm, and once again sat down. As he started to infuse the Dao and some cosmic energy into the tree again, he felt the warmth properly spread out once more. The wound on his arm started itching within seconds, and Zac felt how the warmth moved towards his wound and started healing it. It wasn't to the point that he could see the improvements with his naked eye, but he knew it was improving his recovery rate. Unfortunately, it didn't seem to work on his damaged pathways, at least not with Early mastery.

Satisfied he once again focused on the status screen. He noticed that there was no new title this time for attaining a second Dao. He felt it should be due to the fact that there was no award for a second Dao, rather than multiple people having beaten him to it. There shouldn't be too many who already had a second Dao, it wasn't like one could just stare at a fire for a few days and suddenly know the Dao of Fire.

He realized he still had three free points from his level when the Herald died. After some hesitation he allocated them into Dexterity, bringing the stat to 73. Alyn told him earlier that the general view on the connection between Dexterity and Strength in the multiverse was that one of the stats shouldn't be more than 100% larger than the other. After that, the effectiveness started to wear off.

For example with great Dexterity but no strength one would be able to hit the enemies in a dizzying blur, but each strike would be too weak to do proper damage. Conversely, Zac's case was that he possessed monstrous Strength, but very low Dexterity. His strikes would be strong, but they would be slow and clumsy, making it easy to deflect or dodge them.

It had only really been a problem when he faced Rydel so far, but in the future he would meet more and more enemies with stats that could match his, so he needed to get his stats balanced as soon as possible.

It felt a bit weird to forgo his min-max strategy that always had been his method when playing games, but he needed to get used to the fact that video game knowledge could only take him so far in this reality. Of course, there were exceptions to the general guidelines of stat-allocation, but you really needed to know what you were doing.

Zac felt that he should stick to the most-accepted route for now at least, and only change it up in the future if he was absolutely certain. Besides, his Strength would

keep increasing through his Dao and his class-bonuses even if he didn't specifically allocate any more stats there for a while.

Finally done with everything he set out toward Port Atwood, but only after an hour of walking he was once again interrupted. This time it was his **[Loamwalker]** quest that was completed. Eagerly he checked the skill out, and as he expected this time it was a fractal that went on his legs. More specifically it was two identical fractals that were placed on the soles of his feet, directly touching the ground below.

Zac didn't hesitate and immediately infused the new fractals with energy. As he stood still he noticed no difference, but when he took a step the world turned blurry for an instant. Afterward, he found himself standing two meters away from his original position. The skill actually increased the distance he traversed somehow.

Zac kept trying to figure the skill out by repeatedly moving around, but he had a hard time grasping what the skill actually did. Initially, he thought that it teleported him small distances, but he noticed that the movement wasn't instantaneous. Next, he guessed that he got super speed while he moved, but he felt that wasn't quite right either. He tried swinging an axe while he moved, but the movement was far quicker compared to his swing. It was as though the earth moved around him, rather than him moving on the earth.

Did the skill somehow disconnect him from earth's rotation? That couldn't be correct either, as he had no problems moving in any direction. After a while he gave up trying to explain it with logic, and could only conclude he magically moved quickly somehow. As long as he was touching the earth, that is. He also tried jumping and running, but as soon as he stopped touching the ground with at least one foot, the effect disappeared.

He kept using **[Loamwalker]** as he walked toward his camp in order to get used to the skill. It was an odd feeling to move faster when he leisurely walked compared to when he ran. After a while he was forced to stop using the skill, as the consumption of Cosmic Energy was quite high. It wasn't made for long-distance movement, but all in all he was quite happy with the skill.

He wouldn't be able to do magical feats such as strolling in the air as Rydel did, but the skill would be quite convenient in battle. He could keep moving between targets deceptively fast, and both use the skill for ambush and retreat. Of course, it would take some practice until he was proficient in combining the movement skill with battle skills.

His grasp over how far he walked right now was terrible, and he slammed into trees like a barghest four times in a short duration due to his lack of control. He could only put it aside for now and keep walking until he arrived at Port Atwood.

The wall was coming along nicely, and it was even taller compared to the one in the Azh'Rodum. The demons knew a Beast Horde was coming and didn't dare slack off. If the town fell their settlement would be next, and they wouldn't have the defenses of strong arrays or System-bought fortifications helping them out there. Saving Port Atwood was essential, even from a selfish standpoint.

He entered through a gate and started to look for Ogras. He couldn't find him anywhere, and he wasn't able to ask the resting demons either, as none of those present seemed to possess **[Book of Babel]**. He first went to the merchant compound to check whether the demon was there. Calrin met up with him, and after a few pleasantries explained that the demon hadn't been there today.

Zac also asked for a status update regarding his order, but Calrin explained he still hadn't been able to acquire a pill that could heal pathways, looking a bit embarrassed. Zac sighed in disappointment but thanked him and left, heading for the shipyard.

Ogras shouldn't have any reason to approach the Creators, but he couldn't be sure. As he closed in on the shipyard, he actually heard some subdued voices. Suspicious, he brought out his axe and closed in on the source of the sounds. Soon he saw Ogras, and together with him were two other male demons Zac hadn't seen before.

"Ah, you're here. That makes things easier," Ogras said, as two spears wrought from shadows impaled the chests of the demons, instantly killing them.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 81 - Subjects**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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"What the fuck are you doing?" Zac loudly exclaimed, shocked as the two demons fell lifelessly to the ground.

"These two were snooping around the shipyard on their breaks. I'm not sure what their goal was, but we couldn't have them walk around as they wished. These two will also set an example for any other curious individuals," the demon tartly explained, as he brought out an axe identical to those Zac use from his pouch.

With two swift swings he decapitated the lifeless bodies before he slammed the axe into the thin wounds on their chests, effectively masking their true cause of death. Zac mutely looked on having some problems processing what was happening. Was the demon framing him right in front of his eyes? Ogras felt Zac's stare and glanced at his direction, giving a slight shrug.

"It's better if you killed them. It will remind the others that you are not to be provoked, and you don't take kindly to people looking into your business. If it was found out that I killed them just because they were looking at some humans at the shipyard I will start losing my grasp on the other demons."

Zac silently stared at the two demons on the ground, a cold feeling gripping his heart. He felt he had grown a bit lax against the demons, particularly the one in front of him. While Zac believed it was in Ogras' interest to keep Port Atwood and Zac protected for at least a decade until he could try to usurp it, he couldn't be sure of the demon's plans.

This was a person who had no problems betraying those close to him without batting an eye as long as it benefitted him. Besides, he couldn't be sure whether Ogras' story was true. For all Zac knew he happened upon a clandestine meeting, and Ogras killed his allies rather than letting his plans be exposed.

But Zac also realized that might just be how the multi-verse worked. Might makes right, and benefits trump friendships. He knew that he had grown callous as well, as he wasn't about to clamor for justice for these two or start some sort of investigation. There was no benefit to it, and he'd rather just bear the blame so that people would keep away from his Shipyard. Getting tired from the whole situation he could only move on. It was a bit annoying to be framed for the murders, but he had already killed hundreds of demons, what was two more to the tally?

"How are the fortifications coming along? And where are the crystals?" Zac asked as he put away his axe, not bothering with the two fallen demons any longer.

Ogras, looking pleased that Zac wasn't making a big deal of the situation, swiftly took out a few Cosmos Sacks from a pocket and threw them over.

“The wall will be done with a few days to spare, and the mining operations are proceeding splendidly. Now that there aren’t a dozen main branch assholes embezzling a part of the cake, the daily output is above expectations. We have mined and refined a total of 109 344 crystals so far, meaning slightly more than five million Nexus Coins. A few issues have cropped up though.”

“What now?” Zac asked with a grimace. He should have known it was impossible to only get good news.

“First of all the lizards down in the tunnel are getting more aggressive, and we don’t possess as much manpower as we did, making it hard to keep them at bay. Secondly, I have run into a snag with the Gnomes, but we might be able to turn it into an opportunity. But most importantly, I’ve run out of moving pictures.” He said

“Moving pictures?” Zac asked confused, to which Ogras fished out Izzy’s portable video player from a sack, waving it at Zac. Zac had completely forgotten she had brought it with her when the group went camping, but it seemed that the demon had found it while idling in his camp.

“I have watched everything inside this device, and I must say that this planet is pretty interesting making all these things. I bet we can make some money if we figure out how to turn the moving pictures into Crystals and sell them. Is there any more than what’s contained in this device?”

Zac was stumped, his mouth curving a bit upward. He knew that the demons didn’t use much technology as it was frowned upon on their homeworld just like large parts of the multi-verse. The demons were very much in favor of the System, which put them against the so-called Technocrats, and they disdained to use devices that weren’t created with fractals and inscriptions.

“There’s enough for you to watch until you die even if your longevity gets a few upgrades. I don’t have any more with me though.”

“Then we need to quickly beat the beast hordes and find human settlements.”

“Uh, yeah. How are you charging the player anyways? It should have run out of power long ago. And what about the merchants?”

“Any decent lightning mage can charge up the energy containers on this type of device. Even normal cultivators can do it when their fine control of cosmic energy gets high enough” Ogras waved dismissively. “And it seems we might have pushed the Sky Gnomes a bit too hard. I’ve had a talk with Calrin and they might actually go under if we keep forcing these prices.”

“We pushed them?” Zac asked pointedly, as he stored the little information nugget that one could use cosmic energy to charge devices. Perhaps he could even resurrect the car with some training.

“I didn’t see you stop me. In any case from what I understand the Merchants have made some truly troublesome enemies, and they have managed to put pressure on the Thayer Consortia even through the Mercantile System. Calrin is unable to make a profit as it stands, and The Ruthless Heavens might actually revoke their license,” Ogras sighed.

“So we need to lower our asking price? Are you sure it’s not a business tactic? That little guy seemed to be pretty thick-skinned.” Zac asked, not relishing the thought of lowering the price. A difference of only a few Coins per Crystal would turn into a huge amount when put to the perspective of the whole mine.

“It doesn’t look like he’s lying, he is truly fearing for his life from the look of his eyes lately. But that doesn’t mean we need to just throw away money. We’re not a charity. I’ve worked out a deal that I think will benefit you in the long run instead,” Ogras answered, the greedy face once more showing.

“We only demand 42 Nexus Coins per Crystal, in return Calrin hands over 25% of the Consortia to us.”

“That’s a lot of profit to give away for a run-down shop where I’m the only customer. And what do you mean to *us*?” Zac said unconvinced.

“What we’re investing in is not the shop itself, but their Mercantile License. They are notoriously hard to acquire, and very sought after since they give access to the Mercantile System, allowing you to trade with the whole multi-verse. In a normal situation, you’d have to pawn off a whole continent to get the license, but now we’re in a position to snatch up a stake for just a few million Nexus Coins.

“If we help them get back to their feet and help them grow, more and more coins will enter our pockets. Imagine your whole planet full of branches selling all the essentials to billions of people, and all that profit entering into your pocket. Then we can even expand to other planets, the income only becoming larger. Progressing and becoming stronger gets insanely expensive as you get to higher ranks, and this can help out a lot.” Ogras got more and more animated as he launched into his business plan, and Zac was starting to get excited as well. If it was as he explained this was a great opportunity to make some money.

“What about their enemy, won’t they become our enemy as well? What do you know about them?” Zac still hesitated, as he had enough things on his plate. Adding some formidable foe into the mix wasn’t an option, even if it meant giving up potential profit.

“It’s a powerful family on a top tier C-Rank world. They are located in another universe though, and I don’t think they will start a search for your planet, even if it’s for a Mercantile License. Besides, The Ruthless Heavens obscure your planet for a hundred years making it almost impossible to find.

“Therefore I wouldn’t worry too much about it, but if they do come knocking we can just throw our shares to them as a greeting gift, feigning ignorance of the conflict, and then sell the Gnomes out,” Ogras said dismissively.

Zac was hesitating a while over what to do. The enemy of the Thayer family sounded troublesome, and he didn’t want to bring that kind of headache to Earth. But they were protected for a hundred years through the System. Even after that, it was not like they could easily find Earth even if they wanted to, and transportation costs would likely be huge. They might deem it not worth the trouble, and get the license from someone else. There must be more struggling corporations to exploit in the multi-verse after all.

After some time Zac agreed, and Ogras veritably dragged him to the storefront to sign the documents at the consortium without pause. It appeared that Ogras’ initial plan was an even split of 12,5% stake each between the two, but after a glare the split was changed to 20-5.

Zac still let the demon get some stock in the corporation. He figured it would tie the demon to Zac’s wagon, and hopefully it would make him work more diligently if he had some stake in its success. Besides, it wasn’t bad to give something valuable to the demon, as he could threaten to take it away if needed.

Zac was in dire need for some talented people working for him after all, and Ogras was by far the best option for now. Zac already knew he wouldn’t be an active ruler, sitting on his throne and making decrees. He wanted to leave the island as soon as possible to find his family. After that perhaps even explore the multi-verse. And he needed to get stronger, which he couldn’t do from a throne room. Therefore he needed subjects, or at least employees, that could look after his little island kingdom while he was gone.

The Sky Gnome looked ready to vomit as he signed the documents after a great deal of hemming and hawing. He only looked a bit better after a promise that Zac would help give the consortia a strong position on Earth. Of course, it was Ogras that was promising things far and wide, and Zac only looked on helplessly. He had no idea how to do that, and he didn't even know if there were any towns left.

Next, he ordered some demons to collect a large amount of meat for the salamanders. They had obviously warmed up to Zac when he had fed them various corpses, and perhaps it was possible to bribe them on a larger scale. If not it would at least keep the monsters satiated so the mining operations could go on unimpeded.

Finally done with everything he wanted to do Zac once again returned to the caves. The next time he emerged would be to meet the hordes of beasts.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 82 - The Hordes**

Only wind and creaking from leather armors interrupted the silence as Zac stared out from his fortified position, a steely glint in his eyes. He was trying to gain any hint of what was to come when the timer went to zero in ten minutes. Everything that could be done to prepare was already finished during the past month, and the only thing remaining was to actually fight the hordes.

The once lush forest next to his camp was gone, replaced instead with a forest of jagged spears jutting out of the ground. Thousands of poles that reminded him of his first fight with the Herald was embedded in the earth, and moats ran along the wall at various distances. Apparently no one would get any Nexus Coins if an enemy impaled itself or fell down a trap while they stood up on the wall, but from what Ogras had told him about beast hordes it wouldn't matter. What made the beast horde a horde was the seemingly endless amount of beasts, more than anyone could possibly finish by himself. No one would have to worry about not finding targets, even after the traps did their job.

He wasn't alone on the battlements, as roughly two hundred demons stood on the wall with him. Most had eager expressions in their eyes, while some looked quite pale. Down at the ground the rest of the demons were at the ready, preparing to serve as various types of support. Zac was at first confused why the demons happily agreed to man the walls without any persuasion needed, but Ogras explained it with only one word; money.

A beast horde was extremely dangerous, but it could also be considered an endless stream of Cosmic Energy and Nexus Coins. The demons who stayed on had lost most of their wealth and needed to refill their pockets. Many of them were mortals just like Zac and needed millions and millions of Nexus Coins to be able to advance past their bottle-neck.

The cheapest method to become E-Rank Race was a medicinal bath that you took over and over that incrementally improved the constitution. But this method took years and cost tens of thousands of Coins each bath, making the monster horde a prime chance to be able to afford some more ingredients.

The method Zac had used with the Fruit of Ascension could be considered an extreme luxury, as the fruits were prohibitively expensive if you could even find a seller. The baths did however incrementally improve the attribute limits though,

meaning that none of them would ever be in the same awkward position as Zac was earlier.

“Are you ready to make some money?” Zac heard a voice from his left, and saw Ogras approaching. With him he had his four underlings, each with enough power to contend with the top tier warriors of the invasion. Zac sparred a bit against them the last few days as he waited for the monsters to arrive and was surprised to see that none of them used classes from Clan Azh’Rezak’s heritage.

They were Ogras’ hidden ace that he recruited and trained using his family’s wealth in order to have some back-up against the main branch forces in case it came to blows. He had smuggled them in after killing a few of his clan-mates without any strong connections or close friends, having these four take their places. In fact none of the four were actually real members of clan Azh’Rezak.

Ilvere was a burly man who had masqueraded as a farmer when he entered through the incursion. He fought with a flail whose chain could extend to over ten meters according to his will. He was actually trying to gain insight into the Dao of Heaviness in order to combine it with the Dao of Lightness. That would apparently create the Dao of Momentum which could imbue the spiked ball with a terrifying force as he swung the weapon. When the demon heard that Zac actually possessed the Seed of Heaviness he plastered himself next to Zac, to the point that Ogras finally had to kick him away due to the annoyance. His class was only an uncommon class called Strongman, and it didn’t give him any class skill that helped him with the Dao, and he desperately wanted to observe and feel Zac’s Dao in order to gain some insights.

Janos was a thin dignified-looking man who compulsively adjusted his spectacles as he looked around. He was quite terse in his communication and seemed to enjoy solitude over any company. That made it a bit surprising for Zac to learn that the demon actually was a support-mage that couldn’t really fight on his own, making him require teammates to fight. He walked the path of illusions, and used skills that confused and weakened his enemies. When in battle Janos would continuously mess with the senses of the enemies. It wasn’t enough to kill them, but it would completely disrupt their rhythm and making it hard to fight properly.

Namys was whirling her blades as she looked provokingly at Zac. She was one of the few in the camp who was a truly willing follower of Ogras. She even had a class that looked similar to his, as it utilized darkness and shadows to create an assassin-type combat style. She was extremely unhappy that Ogras was placed as a sort of second in command behind Zac, and his spars with her were the most dangerous. More times than one Zac felt that she truly tried to hurt him with her large daggers.

Alea was his largest headache though. The beautiful demoness looked at him with a slight smile as she winked her large eyes at him. She wore what looked like an old-fashioned dress from the 60s. Apparently she had asked Ogras what humans from Earth wore, and Ogras had explained in detail, armed with outdated information from old-timey movies on Izzie’s device.

Alea liked the strong and ruthless, and Zac fit the bill nicely as being able to single-handedly thwart an incursion made him quite the dashing figure in her words. Furthermore, she possessed a class related to poison, and the fact that Zac essentially poisoned two armies to death was a cosmic sign that they were compatible in her eyes. The fact that one of the poisoned armies was her own clan members seemed to be completely irrelevant to her. Zac wasn’t sure if her interest was real or whether Ogras tried to plant a honeypot by his side, but in either case Alea was a continuous source of exasperation.

Ogras didn't kick her away as he did with Ilvere, leaving Zac to fend for himself. In private Ogras told him that he didn't want to poison test every swig of water or bite of food he took due to angering Alea, as she was slightly crazy like all other poison masters. Something about breathing poison fumes for years made their wiring a bit off. That nugget of information only served to increase his discomfort.

Even the schoolmistress Alyn would make a measured but immediate retreat when Alea found him in the mines, and the poison master sometimes took over the role of lecturer. It was from Alea he found out the general rules of grinding beasts. He had asked why she chose poison class when poisoning enemies to death didn't seem to reward Nexus Coins or Cosmic Energy. If it did he would be quite a few levels higher after throwing out the cauldron up on the mountain. But he was surprised to hear that she actually got rewards from poisoning enemies.

She explained the distinction the system made was whether effort, or skill, was involved in the kill. In her case generated the poisons herself and disseminated them using her class skills. The system awarded her cosmic energy for that. Zac just snatched a bunch of poison and threw it out, and the System didn't consider it enough effort. For the same reason getting a machine gun or even an atomic bomb couldn't help you gain levels at all.

The System considered those types of tools not to require skill. It did consider using a bow and arrow requiring of skill though, and would award everyone, not just archer classes, cosmic energy from that type of kill. From her words the System generally didn't award energy or coins from kills when technology was involved. It was something about the System not liking tools not made with cosmic energy.

Zac thought that many armies in the world would be in for a rude awakening after hearing that. He believed that many would have a hard time letting go of their weapons, and instead fight monsters hand-to-hand in order to gain levels. That would mean that the beasts would get continuously stronger due to the System pumping them full of cosmic energy, whereas the armies stayed stagnant. Sooner or later it would reach a tipping point, where conventional weapons were useless. Zac was pretty sure that he was mostly bulletproof by now for example. It might hurt, but a bullet should barely be able to penetrate his skin. Especially if it hit his E-graded clothing.

"You all seem to be in a chipper mood," Zac said dourly. He didn't relish the thought that he would have to spend the next three months continuously fighting for his life. He felt he was on the cusp of finally being able to leave the island and look for his family, but first he was stuck in an endless battle.

"Birds die for food, men die for money," Ogras answered with a shrug. "If worse comes to worst we can just jump ship and sail for kinder shores."

Ogras was referring to a small Creator-vessel that Zac had bought for one million Nexus Coins. It was powered with Nexus Crystals and could comfortably house 10 people, or 30 if people covered every inch of the deck as well. It was one of the cheapest creations available for sale at the Shipyard, and Zac planned on using it for exploration, or fleeing if necessary.

Now that he knew the System wouldn't punish him for failing a quest or fleeing for his life, he wasn't as ready to risk everything just to finish the quest and become a Lord. He had confirmed that what Ogras said was true from a few sources, and that Abby had in fact lied. The largest punishments for failing quests were that he couldn't get them again.

However if he failed too many quests he risked not getting awarded new ones for a while. For example Ogras would likely not get any quests for a couple of years due

to eating The Coward's Escape-pill. But for a cultivator whose life could be counted in the thousands, it was a small price to pay for escaping with his life.

That didn't mean that he wouldn't diligently try to complete the quest and rebuff the three monster waves. The more he learned about cultivation and the multi-verse he knew he was sitting on a rare chance. The island was likely one of the safest places on Earth right now. There were no dangerous beasts skulking around apart from the salamanders, and they kept to their caves. The reason for this was simple, it was the hordes of barghest. They had hunted everything that started to evolve since they arrived, stopping any species from gaining strength.

That made this island a haven, and an amazing source of wealth, for himself and his family. As he was the lord that wealth would turn into further safety as he could keep buying defenses if some force meant him harm. To give up this would mean he would turn from a so-called progenitor to another refugee without a place to call home.

Alea walked over and greeted him with a smile and a light touch on his arm, and Zac could only bear it for now with a grimace. He knew from experience that telling her off or pushing her away wouldn't work, and if he got too insistent she might poison him in a rage. Nothing lethal, of course, but something strong enough for him to be puking his guts out for a few hours.

So they stood at the top of the wall surveying the battlefield looking like an old couple until the timer finally the timer went to zero.

**[Ladder activated, struggle for supremacy.]** The emotionless voice of the System entered his ears just as the third month ended and the timer went to zero.

"Huh, what's this ladder that the system mentioned?" Zac said as he turned to Ogras. But immediately afterward he turned back toward the forest as he saw tens of grey pillars flash into existence roughly a kilometer away. They looked just like the incursion, just in a different color and a lot smaller.

"The Ruthless Heavens spoke to you? Ladder? Must be some function it is using on this baby planet. It has all types of modes that it can activate that changes how -" Ogras explained but was interrupted by the System itself, this time speaking so everyone was hearing.

**[Special Dynamic Quest activated. Defend what's yours and vanquish the hordes. The strong will be rewarded.]**

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**Chapter 83 - Wolves**

"It actually handed out a town protection quest" Ogras exclaimed gleefully, as most demons around him looked like they had eaten stimulants.

"What's going on?" Zac asked as he looked over at the grey pillars. Nothing had emerged from them yet, but he knew it wouldn't be long now.

"It's a bonus quest. Everything you kill will award contribution points apart from the usual Nexus Coins and Cosmic Energy. You can trade these points for all kinds of goodies at a temporary Nexus Node that should pop up somewhere close. Those who rack up the most points usually are awarded some bonus prize as well." Ogras answered hurriedly as he took out his spear from his sack. It looked like he wanted to simply jump down from the wall and run to the pillars, not able to wait for the enemies come to them.

Zac started to get excited as well, but was very annoyed that he still wasn't completely healed. He was a lot better by now, but not to the point that he dared use crystals or his amulet to quickly regain his energy. He wouldn't be able to unheedingly use his [Chop] skill to quickly gain contribution points in other words, and his two Dao's weren't helpful in fighting large groups of monsters. He still hadn't gained the Seed of Sharpness, which he guessed would be convenient when fighting against packs.

He didn't have time to ruminate over his condition any longer as grey silhouettes started to pour out of the portals and immediately flooded toward the wall.

"No offense my friend, but I'm aiming for the top spot. It's a shame we can't have a completely fair competition with your condition" Ogras lamented with mirth and greed in his eyes. It looked like he was already considering the prize for most contribution points his.

Zac decided to ignore him as the horde was closing in on the battlements, and he could finally see their visage. It was an enormous wolf pack that charged as one. Each had a mottled grey fur and the rough size of a gwyllgi, reaching almost up to Zac's chest.

He could also spot larger versions at various areas in the sea of wolves, and he guessed that they were the equivalents of the monkey captains. A piercing howl arose from the pillars as Zac surveyed the horde, and Zac spotted a far larger wolf skulking around in the back. All in all it looked like there were a few thousand wolves, almost all of them the normal-sized ones.

Zac didn't feel that this looked too threatening, and he cast a questioning glance at Ogras.

"This is just the first wave of the first horde. It will get more... exciting... soon enough" he said as if he understood Zac's unspoken question.

The wolves streamed toward the walls and Zac saw that the erected poles didn't have much effect on the nimble monsters, as they simply dodged them without any effort. A few unlucky wolves were accidentally pushed into the pitfalls by the wolves behind and skewered there, but generally the horde was unimpeded.

However, the erected wall was where their charge ended, and the monsters simply had no method to scale it. They clawed some scratches at the foundation, but at that speed it would take days for them to tear down the wall.

In the demons' eyes, this meant that the wolves turned into target practice, where each hit awarded some money. Arrows started flying out in rapid succession, and the wolves dropped one by one.

Some were even more efficient, such as the mages who managed to skewer multiple wolves with each earth spear attacks or create multiple fried carcasses with a large fireball. But the most efficient was clearly Ogras. Any shadow on the ground created by the wall or a wolf was a weapon for him, and shadowy needles kept poking up from the ground, hitting the throat or heart of the wolves. Wolves kept keeling over wherever Ogras turned his outstretched hand, and he was creating patches of utter death down on the ground.

Zac tried to keep up by throwing rocks he had prepared in a few pouches. Each rock he threw slammed into a wolf, the force almost always enough for an instant kill. Still, he couldn't keep up with some of the stronger demons, let alone the sneaky spears of Ogras, and knew his contribution ranking wouldn't be too great if things kept going this way.

He paused after killing a few and checked his status screen. It looked like each of the normal mottled wolves awarded around 100 Nexus Coins, which seemed very generous for helpless targets. The feeling of seeing an endless stream of money slipping

out of his fingers was extremely uncomfortable, and he knew he needed to switch up his tactics.

Alea looked annoyed as well as she stood next to Zac.

“They keep dying before my poison kills them, I only get a small part of the money. You’re supposed to be the Lord, do something and I’ll give you a reward” she whined as she looked entreatingly at Zac.

Zac ignored her with a roll of his eyes but he agreed that something needed to be done. After a few seconds of hesitation he took out one of his axes and simply jumped out from the safety of the wall.

As he fell he imbued himself with the Dao of Heaviness and he fell down like a meteor. A huge shockwave spread out as Zac punched into the ground ten meters away from the wall. Any wolf in the vicinity was killed or at least badly maimed from the impact. Zac stood up from the crater and he summoned **[Chop]**.

His plan was simple. Even though his pathways weren’t completely healed they were in far better condition compared to a month ago. Together with his improved attributes his recovery might even be higher before he ruined his body with the Cosmic Water. He planned on going on a rampage as long as his energy allowed, reaping as many wolves as possible before swapping back to killing without using any energy. With his stats he wasn’t afraid that some of these weak wolves would threaten him, even if they came in droves.

He started to weave a net of carnage around him as he moved full speed ahead. His energy would only last for a short duration at full power, but that should hopefully be enough to thin out most of this wave and perhaps a few more. He headed straight toward where he had seen the huge wolf, hoping that killing the boss would offset his slow start.

No demon dared to shoot their attacks in his vicinity, with the exception of Ogras, who kept summoning spears at some wolves around him. Zac glared angrily in the demon’s direction, but Ogras simply looked back innocently and waved.

Zac wasn’t the only one who jumped down from the wall, as some of the stronger melee fighters followed suit. They generally stayed close to the wall though to keep their backs free, not daring to wade into the thick of it like Zac.

Zac was soon drenched as every wave of his axe created a fountain of blood and a few bisected corpses strewn around. He realized he had actually missed this feeling, and relished letting loose after over a month of being stuck in the mines mindlessly chipping away at the walls.

He steadily progressed toward the portals, and soon not even Ogras could kill steal his wolves due to the distance. Each swing created a swathe of death in front of him, but it was quickly filled with new wolves. He truly felt like the description of the Hatcherman class, *Their army is an endless forest and I’m the lumberjack*, was an apt description at this moment, as he methodically cut everything down like lumber as he waded forward.

The wolves desperately tried to bite him, but the few that managed to get close couldn’t even puncture his skin. A few tried to rip open his robe, but the clothing was even more durable than Zac himself, and not even a scratch could be seen on the green overcoat. Even so, the animals pushed forward toward their death, heedless of anything else. Zac started to suspect that the System had done something with these animals, as they were completely frenzied. Wolves should be smarter than this, especially evolved ones like these guys were.

After a few minutes of swinging away he was at close proximity to the portals. It should have been even faster, but he took some detours to kill the even larger wolves

that were peppered around the horde. They only gave 2-300 Nexus Coins each, but Zac thought they might be more valuable in terms of contribution points as the System might consider them mini-bosses.

Wolves had stopped pouring out of the multiple portals a minute ago, and the area was getting a bit thin as most wolves headed straight for the wall. There were some exceptions though, most notably the hill with the leader. It looked almost identical as the smaller versions, apart from the fact that its eyes had a silver glister compared to the duller brown of the others.

Zac approached the hill and started to kill the larger alpha wolves that surrounded their leader, but a movement in his periphery made him infuse his axe with his Dao of Heaviness and launch it at the wolf leader in a surprise attack.

The wolf's reactions were quick, but not quick enough, as the axe ripped a hole in its throat, instantly killing it. Immediately after two large spears of shadows rose up from the ground and impaled the corpse. However, Ogras was too late as the energy entered Zac's body as the spears rose up, confirming his kill credit.

Zac grinned at the demon who emerged from the shadows with a tsk as he took out another axe from his bag. This one was different from the ones he had used lately and looked like a misshapen monstrosity.

Its handle was roughly a meter long and the edge itself was almost two meters, formed in a rudimentary facsimile of his axe when he used **[Chop]**. It was something Zac had ordered a blacksmith of the demon town create for him, meant to be used to retain some kill speed while he restored his energy.

It was ugly and completely unbalanced, but it got the job done. Unfortunately no one of those remaining had the skills to add the self-repair inscription on a weapon, and instead this one had an inscription that slightly increased its durability. Still, someone would need to fix it up every now and then after Zac's onslaught.

"I'm starting to see why you guys were so excited," Zac remarked at Ogras as he started to swing at the remaining alpha dogs, heading to pick up the boss carcass and his axe.

"Don't get complacent. This is just the warm-up. If some mangy dogs was all that The Ruthless Heavens threw at you when creating a monster horde then it would be a reward, not a quest. It's going to get much worse than this." Ogras retorted, obviously a bit irritated that his kill steal hadn't worked out. As if to confirm this the remaining wolves in his surroundings died by being impaled by multiple shadow blades rather than the usual one per monster.

As if they responded to the demon's words, the portals pulsed and started to spew out another wave of wolves, but these ones looked quite different.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 84 - Super Brother-Man**

Zac turned toward Ogras a bit confused.

"Why are there already more monsters pouring out? How does the System decide?" he asked hesitantly. He felt that it was too big a coincidence that new monsters just started spawning after Zac and Ogras arrived here and killed the boss.

"You ask me, but who am I going to ask?" Ogras responded. "But I think there might be certain triggers that push out new waves. Perhaps killing the boss immediately sends the next one through. But I think there is a limit of how long you can stall, even

if you keep the leader alive. The Ruthless Heaven has its name for a reason, and it won't let you breathe too easy by finding a loophole."

If what Ogras said was true the System really created a conflict of interest. Killing the boss would spawn more monsters, but it also probably awarded a good amount of contribution points. Greedy warriors would hunt it for the points, not caring about the results. Soon the whole camp would be overrun by waves upon waves of wolves.

"We need to set some ground rules," Zac immediately said as he turned to Ogras. He didn't mind the demon killing the odd wolf around him, as that was only playing around. There were almost an endless amount of targets, and Zac didn't worry that he wouldn't be able to hunt his fill. But running for the bosses in greed for contribution points couldn't be allowed.

"The boss is off-limits until only a quarter of the wave remains," he said as he stared at Ogras, who only grimaced but nodded after some deliberation.

He didn't have time to keep thinking up plans as the new wave was upon them. Zac first thought it was large rats when he saw them exit the portals. They were a lot smaller compared to their brethren, the normal ones only reaching his knees in height. They also looked completely wretched, with their mangy fur fallen off at large patches of their bodies. Their eyes were a sinister red, and the feeling he got from them was that they were putrid cursed creatures.

Ogras seemed to agree as he started backing away as he kept throwing out Shadow blades at anything approaching. He even seemed loath to use his real spear, afraid it would get dirtied by the new beasts.

"These things look pretty disgusting. Try not to get bit, I am willing to bet an arm these things carry some weird diseases in their bodies" the demon said with a wrinkled brow. "If you capture a few live ones and gift them to Alea I'm sure she will be delighted. I bet she can create some sinister concoctions from these things after some experimentation. Anyway, I'm off. Good luck."

With that the demon was gone, using his escape skill to move through the shadows. Zac was left alone pondering whether to stay here right by the portals or to head back. The gnarly wolves didn't wait for him to make a decision as they stormed him with speed belying their small shriveled frames.

As they scurried close to him they launched themselves in the air toward his face in order to rip into more vulnerable areas. Zac turned his huge axe and with a horizontal swing smashed multiple wolves into broken pieces of flesh with the broad side of the edge. Even their blood smelled rancid, and Zac didn't want to get any of that on his face. He rapidly backed away and quickly put a handkerchief over his nose and mouth.

Next, he swapped out his huge unwieldy axe to two normal ones. The new foes were too small so he couldn't easily kill them with the giga-axe. A wide swing would simply fly past above their heads, and he felt that using two normal axes would be more effective. He kept swinging away, decimating anything that moved close as he gradually retreated toward the walls. His kill-speed wasn't as great as when he used [Chop], but it was respectable.

Since he upgraded his race he found that his body's coordination improved noticeably, and it had made him resume his training with two axes. The first time he tried it out he felt it was too unwieldy, but by now his arms moved independently from each other, each creating gouts of putrid blood wherever they hit.

Soon enough he was closing in on the wall and saw that most of the first wave was dead by now. A perimeter of melee fighters had been erected, and Zac saw some scared non-combat demons scurrying about the battlefield. They were throwing the

wolf carcasses into cosmic bags, to be dumped and burned further away from the camp after anything of value was stripped from the bodies.

It was to both avoid pestilence spreading, but also to not allow bodies to accumulate to the point that they started to form a ramp up the wall. Their work was extremely efficient as they rapidly moved along, barely stopping as they threw the carcasses into the Cosmos Sacks. Obviously, the melee fighters had done a do-over of the corpses first with quick stabs, ensuring that everything was dead.

When they saw Zac and the putrid wolves approaching they all scurried through a gate to safety. The gate wasn't some thick wooden door like in a medieval castle, but a section of the wall itself even thicker than most other sections. It was created in conjunction between some craftsmen and Earth mages and required 10 Nexus Crystals to power every time it opened and closed. It was a bit slow, but it didn't present a point of entry or weakness like classic castle gates did.

One exception to the escape through the gate was Alea, who gleefully charged straight toward Zac.

"I heard you're bringing me gifts?" she exclaimed, looking absolutely delighted. She unheedingly ran straight into the frenzied pack of the mangy wolves, and Zac's eyes widened in alarm. It was one thing for him with his huge endurance to be running around in the midst of the beasts, as these small ones couldn't hurt him either.

But even he was wary of their blood as it looked positively unclean, with a greyish murky color instead of red. Luckily his clothes had a self-cleaning feature and the blood just slid off after a short while. But for the slender demoness to do the same approach seemed suicidal. He wasn't sure what stats a poison master focused, but it didn't feel like it was endurance at least. He quickly changed direction and ran to help her out.

Soon he realized he was worried about nothing as the beasts that got too close to her simply melted into pools of goop. Zac immediately stopped in his tracks, afraid to get caught in whatever poison the demoness had surrounded herself with.

Next she quickly threw out a small needle at one of the beasts that looked extra wretched, and it powerlessly fell down on the ground immediately after the needle embedded itself in its throat. She walked over to it and picked it up, and for some reason it didn't melt like the others around her. Zac first thought the beast was dead from the needle, but the frantically whirling eyes of the beast told another story.

"It seems its condition is due to living in a weird environment. The Ruthless Heavens calls its race Blackswamp Wolf, so it probably lives in a miasmatic swamp. Something in the waters is corroding these wolves, and over time they have transformed into these cute little things. Perhaps it's possible to extract whatever's the cause and add it into a concoction," she started to mutter mostly for herself, seeming eager to try and weaponize the wolves' affliction.

"People with less than 80 or so vitality shouldn't come in contact with their blood, or they will probably get sick," she added with a louder voice up toward the walls before she started to continue to examine the beast. She quickly broke all its limbs with a deftness that hinted that this wasn't the first time she did experimentation on animals and started to retreat to the wall while she flipped it over to look at every detail of the poor creature.

Zac simply moved away without a word and kept killing wolves with his two axes. These small wolves were a bit more annoying to kill since they were so small, but he wouldn't stop. Each one gave around 110 Nexus Coins, even better than the last wave, and he was accumulating wealth and cosmic energy at a terrifying speed. It was barely more than a barghest, but they were everywhere. If the density of barghest was this crazy he would have finished grinding for his first class quests in less than a day instead

of a week. Of course, with his stats at that time he might just have died from being swarmed rather than just having more targets to kill.

Less than 30 minutes had passed since the start of the quest but he already managed to accumulate something like 30 000 Nexus Coins. He had only used less than a quarter of his cosmic energy so far, and could keep going for a long time. The attacks from the wall had reduced somewhat though, as some of the demons were sitting down and absorbing energy from Nexus Crystals that Zac provided.

Some of the other demons kept blasting away, greedily farming some money, and a few burly-looking demons even dared to jump down the wall as well, apparently trusting Alea's judgment. This wave was starting to thin out as well after the furious melee continued, and it gave Zac a brief chance to catch his breath.

He had been busy with the monsters, so he ignored the prompt from the System that entered his ears just before the monsters arrived. It said that a Ladder was activated, and he was curious to see what that meant. He kept killing any beasts who approached with a quick swing with his axes, but it was mostly by instinct as he focused on the new screen that popped up.

**[Ladder System initialized. Enter pseudonym or real name?]**

That gave Zac a start. He started to feel that the ladder system was akin to a ranking that you could see in many games, where his level was listed against others. It sounded like something the System would do. It wanted to force people to get stronger, and a ladder would generate competition amongst the elite.

Entering his real name would let his friends or family know he was alive and fine, but it might also cause them trouble. He was pretty sure he should be up there in the rankings if the Ladder was only for earth, even after his month of not gaining levels. Someone might want to exploit his family, or even kidnap them to threaten him if such a connection was made public. He already had created a beacon with the name Port Atwood, which should hopefully be enough when the town gained some fame in the future.

After coming to a decision he chose pseudonym, and a new problem presented itself. What should he call himself? At first, he thought of just using his class name, but he didn't know if people learning of the name Hatchetman would have some implications. Suddenly he had an idea, and he chose 'Super Brother-Man' with a nostalgic look in his eyes. He could only pray that Mackenzie, his little sister, would remember.

She was only five when he played pretend-superheroes with her, using the name Super Brother-man. He hadn't thought about it for over a decade, and no one but her should know about it. As soon as he chose it a large window popped up, and he quickly realized that he was right, it was a ranking ladder containing various names and their accomplishments.

As he went through the list his mouth started to widen into a grin.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

**Chapter 85 - Four Fates**

Kenzie blew an errant wisp of frizzy auburn hair out of her face as she once again opened the Ladder system. It had almost become a compulsion over the last two weeks since the new function was enabled.

“Browsing for a husband again?” a teasing voice came from behind, as another girl moved up to the fire and sat down. It was Lyla who came back with some dinner in her hands. It was a few cans of various vegetables and fruits, and somehow she had even scored some canned beef.

“Whatever,” Mackenzie answered with a roll of her eyes. She stared at the familiar alias for a few more seconds before she reluctantly closed the window and turned to her friend.

Lyla had been by Kenzie’s side since everything turned crazy. Kenzie was just sitting at home playing with her phone when she suddenly found herself in a square in a medieval town with hundreds of others. When reality set in that this was not a dream, she soon realized she didn’t recognize a single person. Zac or dad wasn’t there with her, leaving her vulnerable and scared.

It was shortly after she met Lyla, another scared and confused 19-year-old. It was by sticking together they survived that hell that the System and fairies called a tutorial, and in a sense they were returned as reborn people like the fairies promised.

But they soon realized that just because they had been returned in one piece, all wasn’t well. They were placed in a town called Kingsbury, which actually was a chaotic hodge-podge of 4 different cities mixed together into a cauldron of conflicting interests and goals.

During the month of their absence all order collapsed and chaos reigned supreme. Roving gangs of thugs terrorized their blocks, and rape and murder were just commonplace events. It didn’t even take an hour after returning before a group of men accosted her.

Luckily the tutorial had truly reformed her. A scenario that would have petrified her in the old world was only a small annoyance now. With a few quick attacks the group of thugs lay on the ground with her not even taking damage. The thugs of Kingsbury just stayed in the safety of the town preying on other people, and likely weren’t even level 5.

After the returnees appeared, it only took a few days for a new order to be enforced on the town. A few of the stronger cultivators allied and started a bloody cleansing, and soon held the population in an iron grip. There was no government, no vote, only forced obedience. The leaders named themselves the Kingsbury Council and set themselves up as kings.

Mackenzie and Lyla followed Ruth, a 48 year old lady who they got to know a bit in the tutorial. She had been a cleaning lady before the integration, but now she held command over a large district, subduing any discontent with surprising brutality. Ruth was harsh, but she was the best of the bunch. None of those who stood out were saints, as they had all bathed in blood during the tutorial to get their current strength.

It was actually due to one of the other councilors that Mackenzie and Lyla decided to volunteer to scout out the undead problem that was spreading. They needed to get away from the town, and hopefully gain some strength while away. Harold was an insatiable old goat, and he already considered himself an emperor and had started amassing women for his harem. Some of them were willing to get the protection of a powerhouse as food was running scarce and monsters were roaming the outskirts of the town, but most reportedly were unwilling captives. There was a lot of discontent about his conduct but Harold was possibly the most powerful cultivator in Kingsbury, and even Ruth didn’t dare to confront him outright.

Of course, Harold was a joke compared to the people on the Ladder, like a fly compared to giants. Especially her brother, the Super Brother-Man...

With a thundering swing Billy crushed the skull of the rat-like monster, grey smelly goop splashing all around. It was one of the last of their kind and he could finally catch his breath with deep guffaws. The whole field around him were filled with big holes from his mighty thwonking.

The new world was good. Before, everything had been confusing and complicated. People had given Billy stinky eye all the time for no reason. But no one looked down on Billy now. Not even papa, not after the thwunk on his head set him straight.

Billy didn't understand why so many didn't like the new world. It was so simple. Hit things on the head and they gave you money and made you stronger. But people hid behind the walls and cried instead of going out thwonking. People were the idiots, not Billy.

"Good work great chief! You are so strong. The name Billy is surely known around the world by now!" a voice came from up on the wall.

It was Nigel. Nigel was smart but dumb. He was smart because he understood Billy was a good chief. He was dumb because he didn't thwunk monsters with Billy, and instead stayed on the wall.

"I bet not even the Super Brother-Man is a match for you and your club Billy! See how those large rats got destroyed!" Nigel continued, even waving the flag of the town, Billyville.

When Billy heard the compliment is back straightened a bit further and the bulging muscles on his huge frame swelled, but he soon shrunk back a bit.

"Super Brother-Man is probably super-strong, he has thwunked a lot more than Billy. But Billy is going to catch up, there are still many rats to bash," he said with the type of modesty that mama always said a gentleman should have. He really missed mama, but she was gone when Billy came back from the funny town with the mini-people. Nigel said that she had died, but Billy knew no monster would dare hurt such an angel.

Billy really wondered who the Super Brother-Man was. It was a great name, and caused Billy to regret the one he chose, Thwonkin' Billy. He really wanted to see who could swing a club the best. Having another smart friend to bash rats with would be great.

Billy was right about the rats. There were so many of them and some help would be nice. He had tried counting them but he got a headache from it. They all came from that grey weird shining light in the distance. Nigel called it an incursion, but Billy preferred to call it a ratlight since it created rats and was a light.

Nigel always told him that the thing needed to be closed for some quest, but Billy didn't care about any of that. He needed no reason for thwonking rats. It felt good, it gave money and made Billy stronger.

Billy was truly in heaven.

She moved through the forest, a flittering shadow between the trees. Any unsuspecting beast that came within a few meters were bisected into pieces by a quick flash.

Thea was days from any back-up or civilization, but it was out here in the wilderness that she felt most at home. No politics and intrigue, only survival. She had hoped that the integration would make the world simpler, but it was anything but the truth.

The Marshall-clan went into overdrive the moment Earth was integrated, ever hungry for empowering the family. She was tired of it and had essentially become a nomad, fiercely battling in the wilderness non-stop since she came back. The pixies had called her a once-in-a-millennia genius, but she didn't care about any of that. She relished the feeling of balancing on the edge of life and death, pushing the limits of her power even further.

Still, she was shocked when she saw the Ladder. Her tireless effort and fortuitous encounters seemed almost like a joke in front of that man. She thought herself the true elite of Earth, as no one in her tutorial town even came close to her accomplishments. It only took her a week of grinding after the tutorial was over before she attained her class, and it was of the Rare-rarity, something that was almost impossible to get.

Yet she barely maintained the third spot on the ladder. She had even pushed herself beyond what she thought was possible in order to catch up, refusing to lose to someone with such a stupid moniker. But no matter what she did he steadily increased the distance between them. Who the hell was the Super Brother-Man?

She sighed and opened up her quest panel and stared at her newly acquired mission. Completing it might be her only option to pass that monster, but was it worth it?

Order was crumbling. Thomas Fischer sat on the short-side of the large table and quietly stared at the troubled faces in the meeting room.

“What about recruitment?” Thomas said with a sigh.

“80 Returnees, or cultivators as they call themselves, have signed up to the special government task force the last week,” a bespectacled middle-aged lady answered. “Unfortunately, most of them are in the lower tier who barely came out of the so-called tutorial in one piece. The stronger ones have largely stayed ambivalent, adopting a wait-and-see response.”

“We need to get tougher! People are running around playing super-heroes. Or even worse, super-villains. We need to round them up. If they don't want to join and register, they need to be locked up!” a robust scarred man shouted while thumping emphatically at the table. It was Hank, the representative of the army.

Thomas was somewhat inclined to agree with him, but not really due to safety. The more powerful of these cultivators were setting themselves up as local lords, completely ignoring the government. If this was allowed to continue, then Earth's countries would just become a memory.

“What about the rankers? Have we located any of them?” Thomas probed. Getting the support of a few of the rankers would hopefully once again legitimize the government in the eyes of the population, and rebuilding work could begin in earnest.

“Why bother with them? The training program for the elite forces of the army are coming along well, and there are cultivator servicemen who have reported for duty leading them. Soon we will have an army adapted to this so-called System. It is better to rely on patriotic soldiers than some war-lords who can betray us at moment's notice,” Hank interjected.

“What's the average level so far among the trainees?” Julia asked, breaking her hour-long silence. She was the newly appointed liaison with the unaffiliated cultivators, and one of the four cultivators herself in the meeting.

“The average level is 19, and we already have two people who have gained their classes,” Hank answered proudly.

“How can you compare some fodder to the rankers? Any one of them is probably able to decimate your army in a minute.” Julia said dismissively and turned back to Thomas.

“We have located 5 of the rankers so far. Rank 34, 58, 63 and 94 on the level ladder. We have also located Rank 87 and 99 on the wealth ladder. Rank 87 is as you know the same individual as rank 34 on the Power Ladder.

“There are also about a dozen individuals who used their real name that we have identified with some certainty. Most notable is Thea Marshall of the Marshall-family, who is ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> on the level ranking. Unfortunately we do not know where these people are located at the moment, with the effects of the reshuffling still being mapped out.”

“Any word on ‘Super Brother-Man’ or ‘Salvation’?” Thomas asked. Thea Marshall would be a good get for the government, but the Marshall clan likely had their own plans in this new world order. And he didn’t want to wage war against that ancient family when there were both the incursions and the new natives to worry about, so he could only turn his eyes toward the other two top rankers. Of course, neither of them seemed to be quite sane from their choice of pseudonyms, but one couldn’t be picky after the apocalypse.

The hesitant look in Julia’s eye was all the answer Thomas needed as he sighed.

“Next on the docket is the situation with our new... neighbors... to the west.”

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 86 - Ladders**

Zac opened up his eyes after an hour of meditation. Alea sat next to him like an ever-present shadow, but even she lacked the energy to banter lately. Even Zac felt exhausted after the last three weeks of wholesale slaughter, and the demons were even in worse shape. He had killed thousands upon thousands of wolves in all shapes and sizes, as the waves unceasingly kept coming once every hour from the start of the quest. In the beginning the wolves were just free money for the defenders, and each wave took between fifteen minutes to half an hour to complete.

But their strength incrementally increased with every wave, and after hundreds of waves they barely managed to finish the last one before the next one arrived. Zac and Ogras had been forced to create rotating groups of the stronger demons, as there was a wave that actually caused a crack in the wall since almost everyone was resting.

There were some good signs though. If he and Ogras were correct, they only needed to hold out for another 3 days before the first part of the quest was completed. A new wave arrived at the hour unceasingly, and they needed to defeat 720 waves in a month. They had already cleared 641 waves in 3 weeks due to quickly finishing the early waves, and hoped that would mean that they got the rest of the month off until the next part of the quest started.

Another good news was that Zac hadn’t been forced to use any of his aces so far, with the walls and demons having been enough for now. Perhaps they would be able to finish the whole first part without any tools, which would save a lot of Nexus Coins for the next parts of the quest. Since it was getting incrementally harder he assumed that things would only get worse with the second and third horde.

It was his turn to man the walls in just 10 minutes, so he started to get ready. He opened his status screen to check his progress before heading out.

**Name**  
**Zachary Atwood**  
**Level**  
**48**  
**Class**  
**Hatchetman (F)**  
**Race**  
**Human (E)**  
**Alignment**  
**Human (Earth)**  
**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher**

**Dao**  
**Seed of Heaviness - Early, Seed of Trees - Early**  
**Strength**  
**248**  
**Dexterity**  
**125**  
**Endurance**  
**165**  
**Vitality**  
**108**  
**Intelligence**  
**62**  
**Wisdom**  
**57**  
**Luck**  
**77**  
**Free Points**  
**0**  
**Nexus Coins**  
**21 281 353**

He had gained a whole twelve levels from the last weeks of desperate struggle, which averaged to roughly a level every other day. He put all free points into dexterity until he reached a 2:1 ratio of Strength to Dexterity, and after that started putting points in Vitality. By now his build was far more balanced compared to before, and he wasn't a lopsided one-trick pony anymore. That didn't only go for attributes. He had battled every imaginable kind of wolf as of late and gained tremendous battle experience in a very short time.

Zac gained most of his levels in the first week of the monster horde, and it started to slow down considerably after that. The last four days had gone by without a single level. When he complained about it to Ogras, the demon got so agitated he

started to spit after him. Apparently his leveling speed was out of this world. It had taken Ogras 5 whole years to reach the same level as Zac. Of course, Ogras wasn't pushing toward getting levels, but rather focused on the Dao and his body-grade. Otherwise it would have been a lot quicker.

But if a cultivator didn't level through battle like he did, and instead only relied on their cultivation techniques, it would take years and years to get to this point. A few days ago he gained a new title which was quite telling about his life on the island so far.

**[Butcher: Kill 100 000 beings in solo battle. Reward: Strength, Dexterity, Intelligence +3.]**

The absolute majority of those kills were the wolves from the last weeks, but he had been steeped in blood and gore constantly since the world changed.

Next he opened the ladder to see if any changes happened in the last few days.

#### **Ladder - Level**

**Rank**

**Name**

**Level**

1

Super Brother-Man

48

2

Salvation

39

3

Thea Marshall

38

4

Joker

35

5

Enigma

34

6

Dahlia

34

7

Dillinger

33

8

Thwonkin' Billy

33

9

Abbot Everlasting Peace

33

10

The Gravemaker

32

...

100

Santiago

30

### **Ladder - Wealth**

Rank

Name

1

Super Brother-Man

2

Smaug

3

Joker

4

Enigma

5

Thwonkin' Billy

6

Salvation

7

Greed

8

Little Treasure

9

Thea Marshall

10

The Eternal Eye

### **Ladder - Dao**

Rank

Name

1

Abbot Everlasting Peace

2

Guru Anaad Phakiwar

3

Thea Marshall

4

The Eternal Eye

5

Silverfox

6  
Abbot Boundless Truth  
7  
Super Brother-Man  
8  
Father Thomas  
9  
John Doe  
10  
Daoist Chosui

He had mostly memorized the ladders by now, and the top ten spots didn't really change in the last few days. The ranking boards only showed the top hundred, and it was clear that a few frontrunners were solidifying their position as future progenitors as Ogras called them. Beneath the true powerhouses were the elites, and it seemed the elites in the world should have gotten their class a few weeks ago, and now were around level 30.

When the Ladder was introduced the 100<sup>th</sup> spot on the leveling ranking had been level 27, which meant it took them roughly a week per level up until now. Beneath the top 20 the list was a lot more volatile, with people changing positions every day. He had also seen over a dozen names just suddenly disappear, which he assumed meant that they died.

When he first checked the ladder he found himself only two levels ahead of Salvation, which shocked him quite a bit. Certainly, he hadn't improved his level for over 40 days while in the mines, but he started out at level 16 with extremely boosted stats due to the lottery he was forced into. Furthermore, he had almost only killed incursion monsters who awarded an increased experience. Yet this Salvation, and to a lesser degree Thea Marshall, were right behind him in progress.

That changed over the last few weeks though, as his level kept steadily increasing while they could only helplessly fall behind. Still, their speed was respectable, and Zac assumed they found great grinding spots as well, likely incursions with their improved experience rewards.

The wealth ranking thankfully didn't broadcast the exact wealth people possessed, but it did show he was number one in that ranking as well. Surprisingly, the second spot belonged to someone who wasn't in either the Level or the Dao-rankings. He had named himself after the dragon in Lord of the Rings, so Zac assumed he alluded to the fact that he was sitting on a pile of treasure.

Otherwise, there was some correlation between the level-ranking and the wealth ranking, as everyone on the list must've killed an enormous amount of beasts and farmed Nexus Coins. But the level rankers only accounted for roughly half the names on the wealth rankings.

Ogras believed that it was due to dumb luck. Some individuals had found some great treasures and sold them in the System Shops that should have cropped up at various places by now. Some might have scored millions of Nexus Coins just from one herb or rare metal. Neither Zac nor Ogras was sure how the System calculated wealth. Nexus Coins were a given, but what about his other treasures, such as his remaining Fruit of Ascension? What about the Creator's Shipyard? Either of those were worth a fortune, far more than every coin he had gained so far. Calrin might know, but they hadn't visited lately due to constantly being in battle.

But even without those two treasures he wasn't too surprised about his number one spot. He gained over ten million nexus coins from the crystal mine, and another twenty million from the last three weeks of carnage. He had a hard time imagining anyone gaining coins at his speed.

Last was the Dao-ranking. He was only ranked seventh on that ladder, even though he already acquired two Dao-seeds. He wasn't sure whether the ones above him somehow gained even more seeds, or if they managed to upgrade the ones they had. More interestingly, a large part of the rankers seemed to be spiritual people from the old world. There were priests, gurus, monks, and even a shaman represented on the list.

He learned from Alyn that a combination of meditation and study of fractals were the best combination to improve the Dao, so it seemed that these individuals hit the ground running when it came to pondering the Dao. They were already quite used to meditation, and maybe even entered the System with certain useful insights.

The Dao-list was also the only list that wasn't filled, with only 68 spots occupied so far. There was a few that got added every day though, so Zac expected this list to be filled within the month. This list was also the one who moved the least. He had only seen one movement, where Thea Marshall instantly went from the 23<sup>rd</sup> spot all the way to the third. Ogras said she must have had an epiphany or a fortuitous encounter that gave her Dao a level up.

Actually, the Dao ranking was the one that shocked Ogras the most. There only were 3 demons currently on earth who actually possessed a Dao according to him. And two of them only gained their seeds after arduously meditating for years. Ogras believed that it was the Tutorial giving a huge hand in some way, otherwise only those who got Dao-seeds from quests like Zac should have touched the Dao this early.

Zac was surprised to see that many of the top 10 individuals of the level ranking actually hadn't gained a Dao seed so far, not even the second-place individual named Salvation. Zac didn't know whether that made him more or less scary, having reached that level without any Dao to assist and empower his or her skills. Actually, only he and Thea were the two people represented on all 3 lists, with his rankings slightly better.

Finally Zac closed down the windows and got ready for work. Alea roused herself as well, and mutely followed behind him as he proceeded up to the wall walk. Ogras approached not long after Zac arrived at the top of the wall, the usual lackadaisical attitude missing. He had a grim visage as he nodded toward Zac before once more looking out toward the battlefield. His hand didn't stop moving, and the large bristled wolves beneath died one by one.

"Third casualty this wave," he curtly said, worry evident in his eyes. The demon forces were limited, and every death hurt them in the long run. Over the course the whole monster horde quest it meant thousands of additional monsters the others would have to kill. Three deaths in three weeks might sound good, but only roughly 200 of the demons were combat classes. Three deaths were noticeable, besides the quest wasn't even one third completed, and Zac could only assume it would keep getting worse.

It wasn't that the wolves were extremely strong. The large wolves beneath the wall could roughly be considered as strong as the monkeys in the mountains by now. But their numbers were endless, and the demons were tired. And tired people made mistakes.

The wolves of this wave apparently were able to shoot out the bristles on their backs in a wide range attack that targeted both friends and foe. One demon had been unlucky and actually got skewered up on the wall from an errant flying bristle. Normally

he should have been able to erect a defense or dodge in time, but he spaced out due to extreme fatigue.

Zac only grunted in affirmation as he looked out over the battlefield. Most of the wolves were dead, with just a few large packs remaining. He could already see the next wave's approach from the distance, so he didn't hesitate as he jumped down right among the bristled beasts. The impact killed 8 of them, not giving them any chance to shoot out their projectiles.

With a large **[Chop]** he immediately created a circle of death, and then he methodically started killing the beasts with a blank look on his face. A few bristles flew in his direction, but they were no threat to him. The ones hitting his body he simply ignored since his clothes nullified the impact, and those flying for his head he blocked with his axe head.

Just as he killed last of the Bristleback Wolves, as they apparently were called, the next wave was only a hundred meters away. These wolves were of average size and build, and had a greyish black color. What made them stand out was that they actually looked a bit translucent as he saw them approach.

Hesitant, he brought out a rock from a pouch and launched it like a rocket at one of the frontrunners. It was his standard move lately whenever a new wave of wolves approached. He started using it after wave 372, which had consisted of 'Wolves of Kar'Ka'Venum'.

He still had no idea what Kar'Ka'Venum was, but when he charged into the group of wolves and swung his axe in a large **[Chop]**, every single monster exploded in a huge shockwave upon death. The blast from his swing almost killed him then and there, and after that he swore to be more careful.

To his surprise the stone whizzed straight through the monster like it was a ghost. Zac got a sinking feeling as he saw the approaching horde, and without hesitation turned around and roared.

"ACTIVATE THE ARRAY!"

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

**Chapter 87 - Spectral Wolves**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

B-B-B-BONUS Chapter. Not really celebrating anything. The most common feedback/complaint about the current mini-arc from my Patrons was that it was a bit on the long side. And since I'm too busy to write new chapters to completely rewrite the old ones I'll simply post more chapters

Might be another bonus chapter next week, depending on my mood and how much writing I get done during the weekend.

Ogras was quick on the uptake and he immediately shouted down the other side of the wall, where Janos stood next to a large crystal. The illusionist immediately activated the array with the help of a pile of Nexus Crystals, and with a deep hum a shimmering dome grew out of the ground, covering the whole inner area of camp Atwood. It reminded Zac of a large soap bubble, with prismatic colors covering the whole shield, slowly swirling about. But the observant watchers could see that the swirls weren't really random, but rather followed some pattern, and that the stripes of colors were reminiscent of fractals.

It was the **[E-Grade Medium scale Town Defense Array]**. It was Zac's first purchase with his wealth gained by the crystal mine. The town planners had gone over various other solutions, such as purchasing a defensive and offensive arrays separately, but the Town Defense Array simply gave an unparalleled bang for the buck at these low tier battles. In the future an established force would likely have tens of arrays available, each designed for a specific defense or attack, but with their limited resources they went with the generalist approach.

The only downside was that it cost quite a lot of crystals to operate. But with a crystal mine in his possession Zac wasn't too worried about consumption. Initially, its radius was roughly 50 meters shorter compared to the wall, creating an inner death-zone between the wall and the barrier. But after some adjustments, it grew to stop ten meters outside the walls, not allowing the spectral wolves access to the fortifications.

Zac took a few quick steps backward with **[Loamwalker]**, allowing him to cross over a hundred meters almost in an instant. He smoothly passed through the barrier without creating a ripple. The shield wasn't intelligent enough to distinguish friend from foe, but as the owner of the array he had some perks.

Normally he would have preferred to keep the array at its original size and test whether the wolves could actually run through the wall, but there were too many tired demons up on the battlements at the moment. They were changing shifts with this wave, and everyone hadn't left their posts yet. Instead, he had to expend some money in order to ensure the group of demons heading further in to rest wouldn't be assaulted by these ghost wolves. They were wrung out and didn't have the energy to resist anymore.

Soon the beasts heedlessly slammed into the shield, some even dying from the impact. The shield was a product of the System itself, and didn't even flicker from the impact. The wolves weren't disheartened, and started to claw frenziedly at the translucent barrier, but it had no effect at all. After a few seconds it was obvious that these beasts' only strong point was their incorporeal state.

Zac didn't want to waste even more crystals by activating the offensive component of the array as well, and instead took out his axe and headed out through the array once more. Attacks from the wall also started to fall down at the wolves through the barrier, as it only stopped things from going inside and not the other way.

It immediately became clear what worked and didn't work with these things. The arrowheads helplessly embedded themselves into the ground after passing through the transparent bodies of the wolves, with a few exceptions. Any arrow that was imbued with some skill, such as lightning or darkness, had no problem killing the beasts. Meanwhile, the mages had no problems at all and gleefully peppered the wolves full of holes.

Zac saw the same results. His axe just passed through the wolf it targeted, and it responded by trying to bite his free arm. Zac actually let it in order to see the result, and surprisingly it managed to grab a hold of the small of his arm. Its bite had no effect on Zac, and he felt that its power was only equivalent to the beasts on the 200<sup>th</sup> wave or somewhere around there.

He charged a minimal amount of cosmic energy into the fractal on his hand, and a small edge from **[Chop]** appeared. It was barely as long as the normal edge, but it costs almost no cosmic energy. Normally there would be little benefit to using it like this, but with these particular wolves it was very effective.

The wolves were like normal beasts to the edge created from cosmic energy as its head was split in two. However, no blood spurted out and the beast simply broke down into motes of darkness before it was completely gone. Next he tried using only

the Dao with his axe, and it worked as well in letting him kill the monsters. Obviously, the beasts would be extremely dangerous to normal humans, but against skills they were pretty weak.

Still, the speed of whittling down their numbers was quite slow, as not all the demons possessed ranged skills. Those who were melee classes usually helped out by throwing rocks or shooting arrows from the wall when the battlefield was too dangerous, but now they could only helplessly stare on.

Very few demons dared to pass through the barrier to fight head-on. It wasn't like the wall that had the gates or ropes hanging from it that would allow the demons to quickly retreat if needed. If they passed through they would be stuck on the battlefield until the barrier was lowered as they couldn't come and go as they pleased like Zac.

The longer the barrier stayed active the more crystals would be consumed, and Zac felt the need to end this battle quickly. He started to charge up his **[Chop]** skill until it was five meters long, then with a mental command the edge multiplied into five identical parallel edges. They were right next to each other with less than a centimeter between them, making the edge look like a thick block of fractals.

Zac rapidly swung his axe horizontally five times, and with every swing one of the edges flew out in a different direction. Each blade created a huge path of death, and Zac felt a constant torrent of cosmic energy enter his body as a large part of the battlefield turned into black motes of light.

The new attack was the result of constantly being in pitched battles for weeks. Both his **[Axe Mastery]** and **[Chop]** had improved once again, reaching Late Mastery. According to Alea the mastery stages of skills were Early-Mid-Late-Peak before they reached their limits and needed to be upgraded, meaning the skills were close to completion.

The improved **[Chop]** currently held stable at five meters instead of at one, and now allowed for multiple blades to be created. Initially, he had only managed to create two, but as his control over cosmic energy improved from constant battle, the number of blades he could maintain stably increased. The extra blades had no purpose when they were attached, but greatly improved his area damage when he shot them away.

**[Chop]** was more and more turning into an area skill, but it didn't really improve the power of his strikes. He would have to imbue his Dao into the blades in order to improve the lethality compared to a normal swing. Luckily area damage was just the thing he needed with the monster hordes, so he was quite happy with the improvements.

Initially he wasn't sure what the point was of creating five blades in this new manner since he could just create them one by one and shoot them out in succession instead. But he realized that the Cosmic Energy consumption was a lot lower for copying an existing blade rather than creating it from scratch for some reason. Creating five blades the new way only required half the cosmic energy compared if he created them one by one. East blast he shot out usually killed a good amount of beasts, so being able to launch twice as many was a huge improvement.

He hadn't really explored the effect of **[Axe Mastery]** yet, as he didn't have the luxury of spending cosmic energy on the training system with the hordes constantly requiring attention. He hoped he'd get some days off where he could try it for a bit after the first horde was finished with.

Zac spent a decent chunk of cosmic energy in quickly reaping the lives of a large part of the wave, which allowed the melee warriors to head out and help out with the remainder. Soon only a few stragglers remained and Zac could deactivate the shield.

The shield was only active for roughly 30 minutes, but Zac knew that it cost him over a hundred thousand Nexus Coins. Even with his large number of kills from using his area attacks he knew he took a loss from this wave.

That's why he had refused to use the shield thus far, even though it cost the lives of a couple of demons. It might seem callous, but no one was stepping up to share the cost of maintenance, with everyone trying to amass as much wealth as possible from the waves.

He could force them to hand over some the earnings, in a manual shakedown of sorts. But he didn't feel the need for that as of yet, and saw their gains as a salary. But if it came down to it he wasn't above commandeering everything they had in order to protect his base. The demons were aware of this fact, and many even braved the dangers of the wolf hordes in order to burn all their cash at the Thayer Consortia when their pockets became heavy.

Apparently Calrin was well aware of the situation and had hiked up the cost of the herbs needed for medicine baths to twice its normal prices, citing the troubles of restocking during war-time. Zac suspected was all baloney as the Gnome had access to the Mercantile System, which allowed him to easily restock the supplies at any time.

The demons could only grit their teeth and cough up their hard-earned Nexus Coins. Zac really looked forward the shareholder's meeting of Thayer Consortia in two months when he would get his quarterly dividends from the proceedings. He had a feeling that the little gnome should have squeezed out an extraordinary amount of coins from the poor demons by then.

Since the ghost wolf wave was largely dead the System quickly pumped out the next one, and the army went back to business as usual. This time it was large lumbering things that looked made out of rocks, and some even had moss growing on their wide backs. The wolves were easily the largest kind so far, each reaching over three meters tall, with the leader towering over five meters. It was a bit troublesome as the walls only stood at 8 meters, meaning that the huge thing might be able to reach the top, if it stood on its hind legs.

The saving grace was that there only was a bit over a hundred of them, but each felt like a walking siege machine, and Zac started to wonder whether he should erect the barrier again before these hulking things started to break down the fortifications. Imagining the cost of maintaining the barrier with these monstrosities charging at it quickly helped Zac arrive at a decision, and he charged toward the wolves after the customary rock throw which only elicited an angry growl this time.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 23 chapters ahead) please check out my

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

#### **Chapter 88 - A day in the Wolf Horde**

Zac intercepted the group of wolves some distance in front of the walls, not wanting to give them a chance to ruin his fortifications. These hulking things really looked like they could cause a dent in the wall. Zac really wished that the walls were inscribed with protective inscriptions like the whole Shipyard, since then he wouldn't have to worry about this. Unfortunately, there was no one with the skillset to inscribe the wall among the demons.

It was a recurring problem with the non-combat class demons in Azh'Rodum. Only a handful possessed great proficiency or promise in their field, with the rest generally being assistants or simply untalented. Most of the more talented ones enjoyed

almost the same level of reputation in the demon clan as the warriors and decided to head back as their punishment would be bearable. That left a large number of people fumbling around, kind of like Zac. Ogras had obviously oversold the competences of his people the first time they met.

A huge rocky maw approaching woke him from his thoughts, and he sidestepped a few meters with his movement skill. His normal axes were much too small to do any real damage to these massive things, so he swapped it out for his huge elongated axe. He didn't want to use too much energy this wave, as he spent more than usual the last one.

Fighting the monster waves was a marathon rather than a sprint, and conservation was key. He jumped up a few meters and with a grunt decapitated the huge monster. Rock chippings flew all about as the head fell down, and Zac felt that the cut barely was enough. The axe took noticeable damage as well from cutting into the hard monster even though it had strengthening inscriptions.

Suddenly his Luck stat warned him of something approaching from behind and he immediately pushed to the side. It surprisingly was the head of the fallen beast. Or rather, it were a few smaller versions of the large rocky wolf that somehow was born out of the decapitated head. Zac was surprised but quickly killed them with a few swings.

He looked over to the main part of the body and saw that it was starting to squirm. Soon over ten wolves were born through its various parts, the transformation creating jarring sounds of rock scratching against rock. These wolves were apparently like some type of matryoshka dolls, containing more monsters inside. Even worse, he saw the smaller version he just bisected once more turn into even smaller wolves, these ones the size of medium-sized dogs.

After some deliberation, he chose to ignore these new smaller beasts and instead ran toward the next huge wolf. With a large jump he approached the next wolf from above, and at the last second he infused his large axe with the Dao of Heaviness. The swing contained the momentum and weight of a falling meteor, and not only was the beast cut in two but cracks ran all along its body.

A large surge of cosmic energy entering his body told Zac that the swing had destroyed a lot more than just a few beasts like his last swing did. It seemed he needed to do large scale damage to the rocks if he wanted to destroy the smaller versions along with the main body. Since most of the beasts in this one was dead, he proceeded to the next one. The large ones were the real trouble, as they might be able to threaten his walls. After they split into multiple smaller targets their threat lessened greatly, and the demon army could handle that.

Zac went from beast to beast and with large swings destroyed one towering beast after another. Every time he infused the swings with the Dao almost half the monsters inside died as well due to cracks forming all over from the impact. After roughly a dozen wolves his large axe was starting to distort from the force, and he could only helplessly tuck it away, instead bringing out a large mallet. It was reminiscent of the large hammer a demon used on top of the mountain, and Zac found it pretty interesting when he raided the Demon's armory.

He still preferred using axes, but sometimes other weapons were simply more convenient. Blunt force was clearly the best tool against these beasts, and that wasn't something axes excelled at. Unfortunately Zac had problems using his Dao of Heaviness with the large mallet, but with his enormous Strength he only needed his body against these wolves.

One by one the large wolves were decimated by Zac's approach, and he actually managed to destroy 80 of them before they reached the wall. Left behind in his wake were broken rocks and smaller wolves who resumed the approach.

The demons on the wall had huge trouble destroying these large beasts, as it took them an inordinate amount of effort to destroy another 10 of them. Helplessly they could only focus on the smaller ones, as they began a methodical dismantling. The number of wolves was staggering by now, as most of the wolves survived after Zac switched to the mallet.

The last surviving whole wolves heedlessly ran into the wall, creating huge impact that could be felt to the bone. Worst was the area where the boss rammed the wall, as large cracks ran all the way to the foundation. The earth mages on top of the wall quickly stopped their attacks, and instead focused on mending the cracks before they spread any further. A few unlucky demons were even flung off the wall into the ground by the shockwave.

After the initial impact, the normal wolves couldn't do too much damage. They scratched and bit the walls, and with every attack deep gouges were created. Still, it would take some time before they got through the thick walls, so Zac wasn't too worried about that. The boss was another matter.

With surprising nimbleness, it backed away a bit and stood up on its hind legs. The monster was huge, reaching a fair bit over ten meters in height when it stood like this. It looked like bad news to Zac, forcing him to action even though he usually tried to ignore the boss as long as possible. He even swapped out the mallet for his usual axe, and charged up a **[Chop]** as he approached. With one quick motion he cut off one of the hind legs, but it was too late. The monster was already falling down toward the wall, and with a tremendous crash it slammed into it. Rocks from both the boss and the wall flew everywhere, and the shockwave forced even Zac back some distance.

Luckily the wall was sturdy enough that a single bodyslam wasn't enough to destroy it. A section of the top wall was crushed though. Even worse, the boss created a sort of ramp up toward the other side, and it looked like most of the wolves were ready. They stopped their assault at the wall and charged toward the now unmoving boss.

The fact that Zac gained almost no cosmic energy when he lopped off the leg told him that the boss was still alive, and simply kept still in order to let its minions over the wall. This put Zac in a predicament, as he didn't know whether to kill the boss or try to stop the invasion on its back. If he destroyed the boss the security breach would be fixed, but the next wave would spawn prematurely. Conversely, if he left it alive some demons risked dying from the onslaught.

After some hesitation he started chopping off parts of the large boss, making the walkway along its back a bit thinner. He quickly stopped after the walkway was only three meters wide at most parts though, as he was afraid the System would count it as a kill if he continued on.

After that he placed himself on the back of the wolf to meet the oncoming onslaught. Hundreds of stone wolves were converging on his location, and Zac destroyed them one by one as they approached. He once again took out a second small axe to dual-wield against the incoming sea of wolves. He was like a grinder where wolves entered and small chunks of rocks exited. Every now and then some of the smaller wolves slipped through the cracks and ran past Zac up toward the wall. A second line of defense consisting of a few melee warriors had already formed behind Zac though, and they were quickly dealt with.

The other demons weren't idle either, as they bombarded the wolves below. Zac's actions created a chokepoint, and the wolves trying to get up their leader's back were packed tightly along the wall. Any attack was having great efficiency as it was essentially impossible to miss by now. A group of warriors also scaled the wall down to ambush the wolves from behind as they all tried to move toward Zac.

The number of wolves was steadily decreasing, and the battlefield was starting to fill with rocky debris. It was worst around Zac as most of the action was centered around there. It was actually starting to create a problem, as every death added onto their boss, and the wolf-ramp was growing wider and sturdier as the battle went on.

It was getting increasingly hard for Zac to kill everything that tried to get up without expending any cosmic energy, as he simply had trouble reaching both sides of the widening ramp. Every now and then he stomped the ground with a Dao-Empowered Foot, creating a small landslide of rocks and gravel. It helped to somewhat allay the problem, but it was only delaying the inevitable.

"Stash the rocks into Cosmic Pouches!" Zac shouted behind him, and a few demons moved forward to comply. He had actually attained the [Book of Babel] some time ago by using contribution Points.

The skill wasn't available in his Nexus Node, so he was quite excited to see the skill in the temporary contribution shop. The shop was actually another crystal that spawned close to his camp, along with a huge monitor that listed the rankings of contribution. It only showed the top 10 though.

The skill cost a week's worth of Zac's contribution points, but he felt it was worth it. Communication was getting more important as the waves got harder and some teamwork was needed. Besides, he would need the skill soon anyway when he set out from the island. He had no idea who he'd meet when he left since the world had gotten randomized, and it would be quite frustrating if he finally met humans but couldn't communicate with them.

The wave was finally starting to thin out, but the battle on top of the boss had continuously caused damage and cracks to the hulking beast they stood on. Finally, some threshold was passed, as Zac saw the portals start pulsating in the distance. Since there was no reason to be careful anymore Zac ordered the demons to back up to the wall again.

Next he charged up a huge fractal blade on each of his axes, and even empowered them with the Dao of Heaviness, turning the blades darker and giving them a palpable pressure. With a roar he swung down on the boss below, and the power from his swings completely decimated the beast and everything along with it.

The landing that had accumulated over time from the kills was completely destroyed as the strikes made debris fly in all directions, and even the closest wolves were thrown away. He immediately removed the Dao empowerment from the blades but kept them up for a few seconds as he completely destroyed any remainders of the siege. It would be impossible for the non-combat classes to pick up all these small pieces of gravel so he had to spread them out as much as possible.

Tens of the stone wolves were caught up in Zac's wide swings, and along with the efforts of the demons less than ten percent remained. Finally content Zac let the fractal edges dissipate as he turned toward the next wave that was already approaching. These wolves had a washed-out cyan coloring, and the ground actually froze to ice where their feet touched as they ran. Zac sighed as he picked up one of the larger rocks from the ground and moved toward the incoming wave.

The day was far from over.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

## **Chapter 89 - The Final Four**

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

A chapter from the road. This one is unedited as I'm moving and don't have access to my computer.

As the days passed the fights got increasingly desperate. Zac had improved quite a bit over the last weeks enabling him to pick up some of slack. But the same thing couldn't be said about the demons. He was surprised to hear that most of the demons that entered the incursion were actually level 75 already, stuck in the first bottleneck. Their current power was around a level 50, or a level 30 elite. This made Zac realize that levels were only a half-decent indicator for actual power.

The continuous battling was a crucible that let a few warriors push through their limits and improve their skills. There had even been a few warriors who gained a Dao-Seed in their desperation. A nondescript demoness gained the Seed of Tinder, and her fireballs suddenly created waves of death as the flames quickly spread into their surroundings. But it wasn't enough.

Ogras was truly impressive, both in the number of his kills and his leadership. Over the weeks his role as the leader of the demons went from something born out of fear into willing submission. Unfortunately Ogras didn't have the inhuman Endurance and Vitality of Zac, and as the fights got more intense the shorter amount of time he was able to keep going.

Initially the two split the fighting 50-50, giving both sufficient rest, but now Zac fought in 75 percent of the waves. In some waves he simply acted as a back-up to the tired Ogras, but the other waves he was forced to almost single-handedly carry.

Just in the last day Zac had been forced to activate the shield on eight of the waves, rapidly draining his crystal reserves. One of the waves he actually decimated with the offensive component after letting everyone rest for a full 59 minutes.

In a perfect world he would have done that in every single wave for half a day, but it, unfortunately, was impossible. The offensive attack took twelve hours to recharge and cost 2500 crystals to use. Even though he had a crystal mine to his name, the actual amount of crystals he had on him wasn't too large, so he had to use the attack sparingly.

Zac was running quite low on crystals, even though Ogras reluctantly fished out a surprising amount of them a week ago. They were his private hoard he kept as long as possible. Zac regretted that he traded so many of them for Nexus Coins prematurely. He was afraid the whole wave would come in one go instead of the incremental way the wolves had, and splurged on the array and a few offensive options to be able to meet a storm of beasts.

Only afterward did he know that he was wrong, and Ogras was as surprised as he was. It was easy for him to sometimes see the Demons as some omniscient beings, but Ogras was only a youth from a D-Ranked world just like him. There were an endless amount of things he didn't know the specifics of either.

Zac had even gone to buy back some of what he sold to Calrin, prepared to eat a loss. He was dismayed to learn that Calrin's reasons for hiking up prices of herbs weren't actually purely a business tactic. There apparently were restrictions put in place the moment the waves started and the protective shields of the shop were

erected. The System stopped the trade of certain items, and crystals were one such thing.

Crystals were used in powering most powerful arrays and war machines, and Calrin said he believed the reason for the embargo was that the system didn't want people to finish hard quests with money alone. It made sense, as the beast horde quest would become a joke if Zac had unlimited funds. He could just sit on top of the wall and watch as powerful arrays ripped the wolves to shreds. He had seen the terrible power of the arrays the one time he activated the offensive functions. The blasts left nothing alive of that wave.

He already had an advantage from possessing the mine and the knowledge of the demons. Without either the quest would be far harder, but still manageable. Unfortunately the restrictions on trade meant that Zac couldn't just keep the array active for the last four hordes. His remaining crystals simply wouldn't be enough.

"Just four more waves," a voice said next to him as Zac stood on the wall. It was Ogras who looked uncommonly rested. Both he and Zac had taken it somewhat easily the last day even though the waves were getting quite extreme, which was partly why he had been forced to use the shield so much. The two could only assume the finale would be pretty bad from the escalation of difficulty.

Zac grunted in affirmation as he threw rocks at the stragglers of the wave below. These wolves were extremely thin and excelled in speed, so Zac only managed to hit them every ten throws or so. He could have gone down but these wolves were actually quite dangerous. Their claws were razor-sharp and together with their speed one of them actually managed to cut a wound on Zac's throat before he managed to react. He had quickly climbed up the walls again after the scare.

If the wolves were a bit faster the wave would have been really calamitous. With their amazing speed and light frame they actually managed to run up most of the wall before being impeded by gravity. A few actually made it all the way, but they were quickly ganged up on before they could orient themselves and do any damage.

The rest had slowly been dealt with using quantity over quality. The monsters were too deft to target so the demons simply focus fired certain congested areas, pelting it with spells and arrows. A whole area with a radius of fifty meters quickly became a zone of death, and even these quick wolves couldn't escape.

Still, the elusive wolves took time to kill, and some still were running about below the wall even as the summoning of the next wave approached, every so often trying to scale the fortifications. The portals in the distance pulsated, which signaled the next wave's arrival.

Soon the 717<sup>th</sup> wave was approaching. These wolves looked quite normal, apart from the fact they were completely white, making them look albino. But instead of the red eyes that usually accompanied that condition even their eyes were without any color, making them look blind. The only exception to the monochromatic color scheme was a perfect black circle in their foreheads.

They trotted toward the wall in a uniform speed, not heedlessly charging like most of the waves did. When they were a few hundred meters they suddenly stopped and let out a synchronized howl toward the defenders.

The sound pierced into Zac's ears and he immediately got woozy. He forcefully refocused his mind and looked at the surroundings, and saw most of the demons hunkered over. Many bled from their eyes or ears as well, a testament to the penetrating power of the howl.

“Mental attack,” Ogras hoarsely said, his eyes a bit red from the impact. He glanced at Zac who seemed completely unperturbed by the assault. “Jeez, just how high is your Intelligence? Such a synchronized attack didn’t even affect you.”

Zac ignored the comment as usual. Ogras tried to dig out some information about Zac’s class and attributes every so often through innocuous comments. Zac didn’t trust himself to weave a believable net of lies and then keep track of it, and could only stoically ignore the remarks. He instead focused on the psychic wolves in the distance, and suddenly his eyes turned into a needlepoint.

“DOWN!” Zac roared on top of his lungs, and most demons immediately threw themselves at the ground. Over the past weeks most learned to trust Zac’s nose for danger, and wouldn’t hesitate to follow his commands. However, a few were still dazed by the mental attack, and they paid dearly for it.

Another earth-shattering howl somehow created an enormous shockwave that pushed toward the fortifications with lightning-quick speed. In just over a second it closed the distance to the wall, ripping the straggler wolves from the last wave to shreds on the way. The wave slammed into the wall with a tremendous impact and the only thing stopping the demons from falling off was the protruding wall on the inner side of the wall walk. Multiple cracks ran along the fortifications, and some parts even completely crumbled.

The few demons who hadn’t reacted in time met miserable ends as well. Some at least managed to activate one type of defense or another, such as stone skin or a magic shield. But the defenses quickly shattered as the demons were thrown off the wall into the distance, their life, and death unknown. The demons who hadn’t even erected defenses immediately turned to mangled pieces of flesh and bones that splattered their teammates.

“Fucking imbeciles” Ogras muttered as he shook off a piece of brain matter that had fallen on his legs. He had been the first to throw himself to the floor, his survival skills simply impeccable as always.

“We can’t let them shoot off another blast like that, the wall will completely crumble,” he continued as he turned toward Zac.

The shaking from the impact quickly subsided and Zac hesitantly looked up over the wall. The wolves simply stood rooted at the same position as before, their white eyes staring at him. Not one of them took a single step forward, and they seemed to be waiting for something.

Zac guessed that it took some time to charge a blast of that power, but he didn’t want to find out how long. This race of wolves clearly preferred ranged attacks, and if they were left alone they would quickly turn the whole wall into rubble.

He didn’t dare erect the shield as well, as he wasn’t sure that it could even withstand such a concentrated attack. It was one thing for it to defend against a multitude of claws and bites, but to withstand the concentrated power of hundreds of fused attacks at once? Zac felt doubtful. Even if it held it would take a massive amount of crystals just to defend against an attack of that magnitude, and Zac might find himself without the use of the fortifications against the next three waves.

“We need to go,” Zac simply said and got ready to jump over the wall.

“What the fuck, are you crazy?” Ogras immediately said, clearly unwilling to brave such an army.

Zac only ignored him and jumped down, creating a thud as he landed. At least there were no wolves of the last wave remaining standing after the blast wave. He unhesitantly charged straight for the ranks of the psychic wolves. As he started running he heard an exasperated “Goddamnit” and a lighter thud behind him.

With a wry smile, he kept running and took out a huge boulder from his pouch. It weighed a few hundred kilos and looked like something a catapult should throw rather than a human. Zac launched it straight into the middle of the pack with a resounding roar, wanting to disrupt their rhythm.

A shimmering shield actually winked into existence in front of the group, and the boulder slammed into it with a terrifying force. The shield wobbled and flickered from the impact, but it barely held true. But just as the stone helplessly fell to the ground a black javelin slammed into the very same spot, cracking the shield with a snap. As the large shield broke and many wolves let out a pained yelp.

The wolves' magical defenses were down and an opening was created. One human and a demon rushed inside, each creating a storm of blood.

## Chapter 90 - Worsening Conditions

### A note from TheFirstDefier

This Defier is too tired from the move, but a schedule is a schedule :) Here's today's chapter. See you guys Monday.

The psychic wolves weren't as deadly in close quarters, but Zac still was constantly pelted with waves of mental attacks which strained his mind. Fortunately his stats made him able to barely hold on, but he was worried about his partner. A quick glance showed him that he was worried about nothing.

Ogras was creating corpses all around him with his deadly spear. Zac also saw that the demon wore a circlet he had never seen him use before. It was a simple metal band with engravings, and in the forehead between his horns a large milky white gem was inlaid. The gem flashed with power every now and then, giving out a hazy light. It looked like the demon had a tool that protected him from psychic attacks.

Zac didn't have that kind of luxury, and could only painfully withstand the attacks as he wildly swung his axe around. The two were quickly decimating wolves, but the wolves weren't just sitting around doing nothing. The flanks of the wolf wave split off from the rest while the main group kept the two powerhouses busy, and instead headed closer to the wall.

Zac tried to move to stop them, but was overwhelmed with shockwaves and mental attacks from all directions, and couldn't get out in time. The offshoots started to bombard the wall with attacks, mainly targeted the damaged area.

The demons on the wall, led by Alea and Namys, tried to handle the wolves as quick as possible, but most of the attacks were ineffective against the wolves' newly erected shields. Besides, many warriors on the walls weren't still back to fighting condition after the initial psychic blast.

Hearing the ominous sounds of rock cracking Zac could only grit his teeth and Summon **[Chop]**. He didn't want to use any cosmic energy this wave in order to save it all for the last three, but he saw no option. He expanded the blades to five meters, and in conjunction with **[Loamwalker]** created huge swathes of death in the main group of wolves.

Every step moved him a few meters into a new group of wolves, who immediately were bisected by a swing of the enormous edge, before he disappeared to the next cluster. It looked like large blood explosions erupted amongst the wolves in quick succession, as he almost wasted no time on movement between the swings.

Over the countless battles over the month he had mostly mastered his movement skill, and could freely move within a few meters of his position with a speed that almost

looked like teleportation. It had a huge effect on his kill speed in conjunction with his enlarged edge, but it also cost a substantial amount of cosmic energy.

When he felt he had pruned the group of wolves to the point that Ogras could take care of it himself within the remaining time of the wave, he charged toward the offshoot groups. Ogras seemed to be incensed from seeing Zac rack up a huge amount of contribution points in short order, and his spear turned into a blur as he moved through the wolves. He used some odd skill that caused holes to erupt in the throats and heads of wolves even when the spear was meters away, making it look like there was a sniper in the distance assisting him.

The flanks that assaulted the wall had splintered into even more groups in order to avoid the attacks from the demons, and small shockwaves were constantly flying up at the cracks on the wall. The wall looked ready to fall down, with spiderwebs of cracks running along large stretches. A few earth mages frantically infused the wall with energy in order to patch it up, but it would take some time to restore its structural integrity.

In some areas large chunks of the wall were even lying down by the foundation, having been blasted clean off. Fixing those large breaches would take time and require a lot of manpower to lift the pieces back, which there obviously was no time for.

The battle started calming down over time, as Zac eased the pressure for the demons by charging at the wolf packs one by one and decimating them. He was starting to get a pounding headache from all the mental assaults, but he couldn't do anything but grit his teeth and continue. Another fifteen minutes later Ogras came running over, a sheen of perspiration covering his head. He stopped and took a few deep breaths before he turned

“Lunatic! Leaving me alone with all those beasts,” the demon spat out between deep breaths, looking miffed but obviously not too angry.

“Well it worked out fine, didn't it? Do you have some solution for the wall?” Zac answered with a shrug as he waved at the crumbling battlements.

The two had taken stock of the available crystals right before the last four waves, and there were enough Nexus Crystals left to power one widespread attack and to use the shield for roughly an hour unless the attacks were too powerful. With three waves remaining he didn't wish to start using the shield already, potentially leaving them undefended against the last two waves.

As if feeling Zac's thoughts a deep rumbling could be heard from the wall, and a whole section crumbled, leaving a three-meter wide opening through the wall.

“FUCK!” Zac screamed and didn't wait for Ogras' answer, immediately running toward the breach.

The last stragglers of the psychic wolves were already converging at the hole as well, seemingly wanting to cause some damage before they were wiped out. To make matters worse the pillars started pulsing again at this very moment, the 718<sup>th</sup> wave starting to pour out from the shining lights.

“REPAIR THE WALLS!” Ogras roared as he ran after Zac, shooting out shadow spears at the charging psychic wolves.

With Zac and Ogras holding up the wolves a few dozen burly demons frantically started moving large pieces of rubble back into the wall, where earth mages melded the pieces back into the main structure. The earth mages had been tapped hard lately, and they looked like walking corpses by now, completely pale and with sunken eyes.

But they were the only ones who could fix these types of things in short order, and simply had to keep going even if they overtaxed themselves. They knew that if the wall fell most demons would die. If they were overrun the two leaders in the front

might be able to escape, and perhaps the generals like Alea and Ilvere as well. But the earth mages didn't specialize in escape techniques, and the wolves would hunt them down sooner or later. So they kept infusing the wall with cosmic energy, to the point of harming their bodies.

Ilvere and Namys appeared next to Ogras, who started to give out orders.

"Ilvere, help with the repair of the walls, only you and Zac can hold the largest blocks of stone while they get reattached. Namys, help me control the remaining Psychic Wolves. Zac, can you go ahead and try to stall the next wave?"

Zac looked around for a second and judged the situation was under control, so with a nod he sped off toward the next wave. He held roughly the same pace as the new wolves so he met them right between the wall and the mini-incursions and frowned when he saw the new adversaries.

The new wave consisted of metallic wolves full of jutting edges and sharp blades, looking like some steampunk tool of war. Just from a glance he couldn't tell whether they actually were machines or living beings. Of course, that line apparently was a bit blurred in the multi-verse, with the Creators being a prime example of that. He guessed that destroying one should give him the answer, as he would see whether parts or metallic blood would spew out.

He took out another rock and threw it with full force at one of the wolves in the front. It moved its head to not take the stone right in its snout, so it slammed into its shoulder with a tremendous crash. The wolf was thrown away a few meters from the impact, but Zac saw the beast shake its body and get back on its feet right away. Where the stone hit only a small dent could be seen, and it didn't seem damaged at all apart from that.

Zac possessed over 250 strength by now and had the power to lift a small car. That a full-powered throw from him only caused some superficial damage to the beast told a troubling story about this wave. How were they going to destroy these wolves in time? There would only be a scant few that could deal with these things apart from himself and Ogras.

But he had a job to do so he could only grit his teeth. He charged up a five-meter **[Chop]** and unhesitatingly imbued it with his Dao of Heaviness. The blade turned darker and more intricate as he swung at the incoming stampede.

He felt a shock travel up his arm as he mowed through the metallic beings with his axe, their sturdiness being far and above anything he had fought so far. Even the rock wolves from earlier weren't any problem for him with his overpowered stats.

Luckily the wolves didn't fare any better as they were destroyed into metallic pieces over the ground. Zac did everything he could to impede the charge expending both mental and cosmic energy in wreaking havoc. Many of the wolves headed straight for Zac in order to avenge their brethren, but some still ignored him and continued onward toward the wall.

Some packs kept trickling past him as the main force kept trying to mob him to death, and after 15 minutes he was pretty wrung out and needed a break. His arm was actually starting to feel sore and he had been forced to swap axes six times in the short duration, as they simply were getting destroyed on the tough bodies.

He started to push back toward the wall, and he could only hope that it was somewhat fixed at least. Unfortunately, he saw that it was still an open entrance, and the metallic wolves were trying to get in. At least the hole was mostly shored up, the opening being quite a bit more shallow.

Zac soon arrived at the breach and met a tired-looking Ogras accompanied by Namys and Ilvere. A quick glance showed Janos and Alea at a walkway that was built

above the crack, giving the demons above a spot to throw down large boulders of debris at the monsters. The boulders were too heavy to be carried, but they simply used Cosmos Sacks for it, summoning them up above and letting gravity do the rest.

“These fuckers are so hard to kill, there’s no way we will be able to take down all of them,” Ogras grunted, clearly starting to fade from his high Cosmic Energy expenditure. The two demons looked ready to keel over, but they coordinated their attacks to take down one wolf by one in a stoic manner.

Zac planted himself in the crack, and helped arduously destroy one wolf after another. Eventually, they ran out of time, even as quite a few wolves remained. The pillars started to light up as usual, but this time it looked different. The glow looked almost blinding, and soon Zac saw why.

The 719<sup>th</sup> wave was an endless sea of wolves, tens of thousands of them. And even as they approached the wall, the pillars kept spewing more out.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 91 - Lightning Punishment**

“RETREAT!” Zac unhesitatingly roared as he saw the insane amount of wolves approaching. If he had to guess he would say that the System crammed 20-30 waves worth of wolves into one.

The demons immediately complied and moved down from the wall to a far lower one roughly 50 meters further in. It could barely be called a wall, not even reaching three meters in height, and was rather a purchase to gain a bit better vantage when fighting. The wall wasn’t made to physically rebuff enemies, but rather it was there as a line of demarcation, showing where the Town Defense Array would cover.

Soon only Zac, Ogras and his two confidantes were holding off the remaining metallic beasts as the rest had moved back to safety.

Ogras looked a bit hesitant as he turned to Zac.

“Are you sure about this?”

In response Zac only nodded and took out a blue glass ball out of his pouch, not stopping his attacks with his other hand. The glass ball crackled with lightning, as though a thunderstorm was caught and crammed inside the bauble.

“Alright. See you on the other side friend,” Ogras said with a solemn expression as he nodded to the other two demons. They rapidly moved backward, leaving Zac alone in the crack facing a sea of wolves.

Soon after the last three demons were inside the defensive array flickered into being, covering the inner area of Port Atwood. Zac instead moved out toward the incoming waves. Some of the metallic beasts charged after him, while some tried to claw their way into the array.

As Zac pushed forward he started to infuse the glass ball with cosmic energy, making the thunder inside flit about more and more erratically. After roughly two minutes a large part of Zac’s remaining cosmic energy was consumed, but finally a change happened in the ball. It was as though it had reached critical mass, and started to absorb a huge amount of cosmic energy from the environment itself.

The ball started to flow in the air on its own, and Zac’s both hands were freed to protect the device. It would take a few more minutes before it was ready. He stayed put and mindlessly killed any wolf that came close, and he was surprised to see that he recognized many of the wolf-types from things he had fought during the past weeks.

It was like the System had summoned an all-star combination of the wolf-waves for the 719<sup>th</sup> assault. Zac was pelted by all types of attacks, but luckily his E-Grade robe protected him from most of it. As he fought the sky started to darken, and ominous rumblings echoed out through the island. A huge bolt of lightning flashed, and suddenly the hovering ball next to Zac was gone. He knew his mission was completed and started to bolt toward the protective array with full speed, not caring about the wolves anymore.

As he ran the battlefield turned almost pitch black from huge dark clouds that amassed with impossible speed, and then all hell broke loose. Huge pillars of lightning slammed into the ground all around the area, frying any unlucky wolf that was too close. But that was only the start as the chaos kept intensifying.

The area was blasted with such an amount of lightning bolts that the whole southern tip of the island was brightly lit up. The ground crackled and exploded at every place the bolts landed, completely destroying any wolf corpses or fortifications strewn about. In some areas the lightning was so intense that they started to spread along the ground, creating what looked like lakes made out of lightning. These lakes kept expanding, creating a field of death for anything caught inside.

Zac desperately ran toward safety, shocked about the efficacy of the device. It sounded mighty from the description when he bought it for 3 000 000 Nexus Coins, but he hadn't expected it to be of this scale. Of course, something like this would only work on dumb beasts who refused to flee. The area of attack even spread toward the array, and lightning bolts slammed into the shield every now and then, making it light up.

The ball Zac used was actually a purely offensive array that he bought as preparation for the monster wave called **[E-Grade Medium Scale Lightning Punishment Array]**. Different from the offensive capabilities of the Town Array it was a one-time usage attack. It was an array that consumed itself to summon the monstrous cloud in the sky that would rain death and destruction over the area.

It was Zac's ace in the hole that he had hoped to keep until the last wave, and finish it off with a bang. But he immediately knew there was no way for them to manually kill the endless amount of wolves that spawned out of the wave, especially not with the wall in shambles. They would have been tired out then overrun from the numbers.

An acute sense of danger warned Zac, who immediately used **[Loamwalker]** to move away as far as possible. Soon after he heard the ground explode behind him from a lightning bolt, but he didn't bother turning around. He was closing in on the safety of the array.

The lightning actually kept increasing, and Zac was forced to keep dodging the bolts. But even with his movement skill he didn't come out unscathed as the lightning ran along the ground between two nearby bolt, shocking Zac on the way.

His world turned white for a second and he stumbled, but he shook himself awake and continued. It felt like he was cooked from inside, and the pain was even worse than the black lightning arcs that the main branch demons used. He was forced to eat a few more secondary blasts of lightning before he finally threw himself through the array and fell down panting.

Smoke was rising from his body, and the short hair that had grown out lately was singed clean off, once again turning him into a bald monk. After a few steadying breaths he got up and turned toward the battlefield. Now that he wasn't running for his life he could actually properly inspect the lightning storm, and the sight was truly exceptional.

He felt it was a joke he considered Rydel's final attack to be a punishment from heaven. This was what real heavenly thunder looked like. It was as though the god of

thunder himself wanted to smite this whole part of the island out of existence as huge bolts unceasingly slammed into the ground.

He looked up and saw that the cloud was spread a bit further than he had hoped, and errant bolt kept slamming into the shield. He winced with every blast, as he knew that each time lightning struck the shield it cost him Nexus Crystals.

“Good hustle, human” Ogras said as he approached with his trademark half-smile. “I didn’t expect the lightning punishment to be this intense. It might be because there’s a Nexus Vein beneath the island.”

Zac nodded and brought out a canteen of water that he poured over himself, the water cooling his singed body.

“I’m not sure the crystals will last,” the demon then added with a low voice, his face turning somber. “The amount of lightning striking the shield is more than we expected.”

“Are the rods ready?” Zac asked in response.

The demon nodded and waved toward the small wall, that now was adorned with five-meter tall metal spears jutting out at some intervals, leading down into the ground. It was lightning rods they had asked the blacksmith create in case the lightning got out of control.

“Lower the power to the shield and it might last longer,” Zac sighed.

Ogras nodded and waved toward Janos, who still was managing the shield. He touched the large crystal ball and soon the shield dimmed somewhat.

“Move away from the wall!” Ogras shouted, and people spread out some distance from the wall.

Even with weakened energy output the shield defended against most of the lightning bolts. Every now and then a crack was blasted open, letting a few slip through. Luckily they harmlessly entered the rods, who pushed the lightning down into the ground, until the shield repaired itself again. However, it was clear that each rod would only be able to take one or two of these magical bolts of lightning, as they partly melted from a strike.

They didn’t have to worry about the metallic wolves outside either, as they had been the focus of the lighting since the start due to their composition. They were quickly reduced to molten pools of metal on the ground outside.

Finally, the lightning bolts started to subside and the skies cleared up with noticeable speed. Zac and Ogras finally dared to exit the shield to look at the result. They quickly moved up to the mostly ruined wall and surveyed the battlefield. Even Ogras looked shocked by what they saw. The scene was like something taken out of a horror story. Thousands upon thousands of mangled and burned carcasses covered the ground, which by itself was burnt and pocked.

Zac was surprised to see that only one pillar of light remained in the distance. Had the Lightning Punishment even destroyed the portals? As if sensing that the offensive array’s onslaught had ended the last incursion started pulsing and out walked a humongous beast. It was the 720<sup>th</sup> beast wave, and it was the complete opposite of the last one. As soon as the monstrous wolf walked out of the portal it winked out of existence.

The wolf looked abyssal with six pitch-black eyes and a much too large maw. It actually gave Zac the same vibes as the demonic beasts he had fought so far on the island and he turned toward Ogras and found him looking pale.

“E-Grade Fiendwolf,” Ogras exclaimed with some fear evident on his face.

“From your homeworld?” Zac asked, as Ogras clearly recognized the monster.

“No, but it lives within demon territory. They are extremely dangerous. Luckily there’s only one. Usually, they rove in large packs of thousands. Still, it’s going to be a tough fight. It’s evolved to E-rank, and possess at least one Dao Seed.”

The wolf started approaching and let out a demonic roar that echoed through the battlefield. The howl felt like a physical blow to Zac, and he saw that some bloody gashes actually appeared on Ogras who lost his balance.

The wolf swiped its claws toward the two, and even though there were two hundred meters between them Zac felt a terrifying sense of danger. He immediately grabbed the falling Ogras and unhesitantly jumped down from the wall.

As he landed he heard a swishing sound from above, and the next second the wall was simply blown away, cut into multiple pieces. A terrifying wave continued on and slammed into the shield, instantly destroying it.

“Dao of Sharpness...” Zac muttered, convinced that it should be the Dao Seed he had been trying to gain for so long. He realized the wave of destruction from the sharp claws felt very familiar, and he was sure that it had the added feeling of the Dao of Sharpness he once sensed in his first vision.

“It’s too strong. E-Rankers are simply different from us unevolved. We should give this one up, human,” Ogras muttered as he spat out some gravel from his mouth.

But Zac paid him no heed, as he stood up and glared at the last Wolf who stood between him and his goals.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 92 - Fiend Wolf**

The wolf obviously was able to do great damage from such a distance, so there was no point in hiding behind the wreckage of the walls. Zac didn’t have any more tools or arrays to take care of it, so he would have to finish this last wave by hand. He took out an axe and charged toward the beast with determination in his eyes.

The fiend wolf spotted him and with a mighty roar set of against him as well. As they approached each other the boss once more swiped with its claw making three edges rend a path toward him. In response Zac charged up five **[Chop]** edges and launched them to meet the blades one by one.

The wolf’s attack demolished the first blade without being impeded in the slightest, and the following four blades didn’t fare much better. The five blades somewhat slowed down the attack and weakened it, but it was nowhere enough to stop it. It forced Zac to use his movement skill to dodge it, happy that at least his axe didn’t take damage from using the cosmic energy blades after they detached from the axe.

The attacks of the wolf were on a higher tier compared to his own, and he didn’t know whether it was due to the Dao of Sharpness or the power of the beast itself. He knew that evolving into an E-Grade class was supposed to give a huge power-boost, but he still felt he should be able to contend with his enormous stat boosts from his titles. Luckily his movement skill was great for dodging attacks, and he sidestepped the incoming strike.

Soon he was upon the beast, and it felt even more threatening this close. It was even larger compared to the huge rock wolves he fought some time ago, reaching over six meters in height. But that clearly wasn’t its only difference. The very air around it hummed with power, and he actually felt himself getting cut by innumerable air blades.

Some small cuts even appeared on his body with his huge Endurance, so Zac knew that an unevolved human would be cut into ribbons by simply walking close to this monster.

It was the beast's Dao Field. Ogras and Alyn had explained the magical effects of Dao in battle. For example when a warrior's insight got deeper he could actually spread his Dao out into the vicinity, creating a field that empowered himself or hurt his enemy. An early-stage Seed was too weak for that though, meaning this wolf not only possessed the Seed of Sharpness, it was also an evolved version.

He moved underneath the monster, careful to avoid its long serrated claws that looked like they could bisect him in a second. He quickly summoned **[Chop]** and swung at one of its hind-legs in an effort to chop it off. He had no wish to stay in this field too long, as he'd be slowly whittled down to just bones.

The five-meter edge slammed into the leg some ways above the knee and penetrated into the thick sinewy muscles. But the axe didn't get far before it was stopped. Even with Zac's monstrous power he couldn't lop off its leg. The swing pushed the leg back, but soon the axe in his hands started to bend.

The standard-issue axe simply wasn't good enough to cut through the monster, at least not without the aid of his Dao Seed or a stronger skill. Even odder, it was as though some force rebounded his energy, annihilating the cosmic energy he used in the swing, which nullified much of the effectiveness of the strike.

He threw away the ruined axe and brought out a new one, but the wolf wasn't content just to let Zac scurry about underneath its stomach. It pushed away with extreme speed and repositioned itself so that it could bite or claw after him. It started to furiously swipe at Zac, who could only once again rely on his movement skill to move away.

It destroyed the ground all around him as the waves from the claws rent gashes as deep as Zac was tall, which stretched tens of meters away. The beast wasn't using any skills, only the power of its body empowered with its Dao, and still the effect was even greater compared to when Zac used **[Chop]**. Gravel and charred body parts of wolves were flying all over the area from the Fiend Wolf's assault.

Zac tried to move closer to the beast but it held him at bay with its claws and huge maw, making it impossible to get around. He soon gave up and infused a **[Chop]** with the Dao of Heaviness and furiously swung it at the claw to intercept it. The collision was enormous, and Zac was pushed twenty meters away, the axe in his hand completely destroyed.

The wolf wasn't unscathed though, as it yelped and backed away a bit. Nothing was cut off, unfortunately, but the empowered strike at least broke some bones in its paws and perhaps destroyed some muscles. The Fiend Wolf obviously didn't want to put any weight on the damaged paw even though it didn't actually bleed.

The wolf only seemed to get even more enraged and the air started to distort around it. It furiously howled up in the air, then exploded into action. With a frenzied charge it ignored its hurt paw in order to close in on Zac, who once again was forced on the defensive. Zac's cosmic energy was over halfway depleted even before starting the battle and he knew he couldn't just keep dodging. **[Loamwalker]** had an amazing effect, but it was his most draining skill.

Without seeing any alternative he pushed forward right after dodging a swing, moving straight toward the beast's head. The maw of the monster was immediately upon him, rows of jagged teeth closing in. But just as the mouth was about to slam shut a green shimmering sheen enveloped Zac.

It was the defensive option of his clothing, something he hadn't used apart from some experiments during the past month. As a top tier E-Grade equipment, the shield

from his robe stopped the teeth in their tracks, even causing many of them to crack or break off.

The pain must have been blinding for the monster, as it howled in pain while its head jerked away by reflex. Zac saw his opportunity and charged up his **[Chop]** with the Dao of Heaviness, and ruthlessly chopped at its exposed throat. The power of his swing was enormous, and he could actually hear some things in its throat breaking. He also managed to cut some ways into its throat, making a great deal of almost pitch black blood spurt out.

The power of the swing together with the Dao of Heaviness actually threw the huge monster over ten meters away, where it landed in a deep thud. The ground beneath Zac's feet caved from the pressure, chippings flying in all directions.

Unfortunately the swing wasn't enough, as the monster had no trouble getting back on its feet. It was frothing at its mouth in anger, and a deep growl incessantly escaped its mouth. But just as it got to its feet nine large spikes materialized around it from clouds of green shimmering gases. Zac's sense for danger started tingling from just looking at the meter-long spikes, and he glanced around.

He saw Alea stand some distance away with a pale face, ready to keel over. Just as he saw her she closed her fist, and a penetrating screech erupted from the wolf. Zac quickly turned back and saw that the large spikes had penetrated deep into various parts of the beast's body.

The wolf let out an enraged roar and furiously shook to remove the poisoned spikes from its body. However, they were firmly lodged into its body, and even with its thrashing they stayed inside. The wolf howled in anger and ignored Zac to swipe its front claw toward the demoness, who desperately scrambled away. The movements of the wolf were weird and twitchy after getting impaled, but it still was able to send those sharp edges out.

The nail-attack clearly used up all of her power as she stumbled around while she tried to avoid the incoming blades. Zac knew that should have been Alea's ace in the hole, as he could barely draw blood with his huge swings, yet all nine of her spikes penetrated the tough hide.

The onslaught quickly became too much, and the edge of a swipe hit her shoulder, drawing a great spurt of blood. She had actually used some defensive option the last minute, but the attack immediately destroyed the cloud that formed in front of her. She yelled in pain but kept moving away from the wolf, but it wouldn't have it.

Zac tried everything in his arsenal to stop the assault of the enraged wolf, wildly swinging his axe at it, but it seemed intent of bringing the poison master down. Apparently, those spikes hurt far more than anything else it had felt during the battle. It furiously gathered a great deal of cosmic energy in its claw and swung a huge arc after her when it saw that she was moving further away.

Zac saw that she wouldn't be able to dodge it and unhesitantly moved in front of her with a few quick strides of **[Loamwalker]**. He activated the second charge of his shield, once more enveloping him in the protective layer as he positioned himself in front of the demoness. The enormous wave of destruction approached, and Zac was punched back from the impact. But luckily the shield held even against this huge attack.

He managed to soak most of the damage that appeared, but the wave was simply too large. Some parts passed by him, and an errant streak of power swiped Alea, making her scream and topple over. A huge gash appeared on her clothes, and blood was immediately starting to pool beneath her. It looked like the strike almost completely bisected her.

As he saw his companion who got such a terrifying wound because she wanted to help him out, a blazing fury erupted in his mind and he charged toward the hurt wolf. The only thing in his rage-addled brain was the need to destroy the Fiend Wolf. Zac didn't even notice that cosmic energy was gathering towards his head as he furiously charged toward the boss.

The wolf was in quite a bad condition from Zac's swings and the poison, but it roused itself to intercept his strike. Just as it did tens of black spears rose up from the ground, striking various weak spots. A large spear whistled through the air and impaled its undamaged front leg, making it fall down again with a yelp. Zac didn't care about any of that, and with a roar pushed off the ground, sailing through the air toward the monster.

While he jumped he gripped his axe with both hands and lifted it over his head. As he did an enormous edge over ten meters formed, thrumming with a sharp power. The edge was neither the pale blue as usual nor the darker shade from imbuing it with the Dao of Heaviness. It glistened with a silvery luster, and it looked that the very air itself was cut apart as Zac moved forward.

With a bestial roar he swung down the axe, infusing all his anger and cosmic energy into the strike. He completely cut the beast in two, instantly killing it. It didn't end there though as the strike slammed into the ground, tearing a fifty-meter gash into the ground with a thundering sound. It was like a miniature version of the huge canyon created by the axe-man in Zac's first vision.

Seeing the beast dead it was as though all power left Zac and he unceremoniously fell down after the strike. The last furious charge completely overtaxed him, and he was almost completely out of cosmic power. As he lay panting on the ground the shadows next to him flickered, and Ogras appeared through his movement skill.

A flash of fear filled his heart as he saw the ruthless demon stare down at him, but he only bent down to give him a hand.

"Good hustle,"

"I thought you were going to retreat," Zac sighed tiredly with a glance at the demon.

"I was just waiting for the right opportunity to tip the scales. My normal attacks wouldn't be able to hurt it, so you needed to do the heavy lifting," the demon answered with a half-smile.

Zac knew the demon probably only hid in the shadows until he saw an opportunity to kill the Fiend Wolf. If it didn't appear he would have receded into the darkness and left without so much as a goodbye. Still, he knew the demon was under no obligation to risk his life for him, so he wouldn't comment on the flakiness.

Normally, this would be the time to celebrate with the first horde defeated, but he quickly remembered himself and ran toward the demoness who was still bleeding out.

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#### **Chapter 93 - Verun's Bite**

Zac was overlooking the reconstruction and cleanup taking place around the battlefield. There weren't many demon's working, but they were efficient. Ogras had already taken most back to the mines to refill the stocks of Crystals for the next horde. The demon only gave his underlings one day of rest before work resumed.

There was only twelve days before the next stage of the quest started, and they needed to get ready. Luckily Zac wasn't needed for any heavy lifting, as people didn't need any strength to throw boulders into Cosmic Sacks.

Satisfied with the progress he turned around and headed toward the crystal that contained the temporary Contribution Shop. It stood roughly halfway between his camper and the battlefield, and when he arrived multiple demons were milling about, likely looking over their options in the store. Everyone had accrued a decent amount of contribution points over the past weeks, and there were quite a few products inside that could help them in various ways.

When they saw Zac arrive they made some room for him and nodded with respect. The demons respected the strong and Zac's feats over the past weeks left a deep impression on them, especially the last battle with the fiend wolf. There had been a few that held strong grudges against him, mostly because of Zac having killed a family member or friend when the two camps were still at war.

But Zac knew that Ogras and Namys secretly made these malcontents have "accidents" during the wolf-horde to quell any unrest or disharmony. He felt it was a bit overkill, but he wasn't about to complain to Ogras about such a detail. He knew he'd likely have failed the quest unless he had the demon's help.

It was clear to Zac after having gone through the quest that it wasn't meant for a lone warrior like him. A Lord was expected to have subjects, and perhaps even an army to assist in this type of battle. He felt extremely lucky that things worked out somewhat with the demons so far, otherwise he'd be forced to give up on his island after all this struggle. Zac realized that his alliance with the demons was only a fragile cooperation based on benefits, but it was better than nothing.

When he came within a few meters from the crystal a screen automatically popped up, containing both a Ranking list and a shop. A quick glance showed he possessed roughly 45 million contribution points. It seemed he received a full five million of those for killing the Fiend Wolf, as he had just below 40 million before that fight. Generally, the contribution points awarded were on a 1:1 ratio to the Nexus Coins he gained, with the exceptions of the wave leaders giving a substantial bonus above that.

The 45 million points placed him in the comfortable lead of the ladder, but the others were no slouches either. Ogras held a stable second spot with 24 million points. The former general held the lead until halfway through the waves, at which point Zac eclipsed him. It was a combination of his pathways slowly healing, allowing him to use his area skills more, and that Zac's power leveling started to give an advantage.

Ogras grumbled quite a bit about it, but he could only helplessly watch himself get overtaken. He had tried to buy the Fruit of Ascension in order to get a power-up, but immediately got shut down by Zac. Ogras wasn't too disappointed about it though, as there actually was one for sale in the shop for only 50 million contribution points.

While gaining contribution points was roughly the same as Nexus Coins, the prices were far cheaper. He'd never be able to buy a Fruit of Ascension with 50 million Nexus Coins, not even ten times that. Since he already got 24 million in the first wave he shouldn't have any problems getting the last bit before the quest was over.

Zac was looking at something else entirely; **[Verun's Bite]**. It was an axe that cost a whopping 40 million contribution points. It was called an **[F-Grade Spiritual Tool]**, and Zac wasn't sure whether it was worth it at first. But after asking around he found out that Spiritual Tools were not the same things as F-Grade equipment or weapons, it was a far more valuable thing.

Spiritual Tools possessed an actual soul, and could almost be considered a living being. Only the most talented Blacksmiths could create them, and only using the best materials. They held a power level far above a normal weapon and even had their own skills. They also had the basic functions such as sharpening and repair as well, making them a great long-term companion.

What made them an even better investment was that they could be evolved if you gathered the right materials for it, making it a great weapon to use even after ranking up. Even Ogras' grandfather still used an E-Grade Spiritual tool he had nurtured for almost a thousand years according to Ogras. It was one of the only three E-Grade Spiritual tools in the whole clan, as far as Ogras knew at least, showing how precious they were.

A great weapon was something Zac really wanted, as it was one of his current shortcomings. Very few demons used axes as a weapon of choice, as it was generally considered a brute's tool. Only a few of the lower-tier soldiers used it, so there were no better axes than the military standard issue on the island.

With Zac's current power his weapons couldn't really keep up. He was forced to cycle various weapons as they couldn't withstand the force he utilized nowadays, and it hampered his efficiency. There were a few other interesting things in the shop, such as skills and other gear, but the axe was the most interesting for him. He initially considered taking the fruit so he had one for both his father and sister, but he reluctantly gave up that idea.

First of all, he needed to focus on strengthening himself at the moment, and he didn't want to create any new reasons for Ogras to conspire against him. He felt that the two of them had forged somewhat of a friendship over the past month, and he didn't want to mess things up with two more waves on the way. He wouldn't lower his guard against the demon though, as it was far too soon for that.

Besides, he knew that he didn't have to worry about the demon suddenly evolving and becoming too strong to control, as there were still the restrictions on the invaders that would stay on for some time.

He also considered buying some of the skills to power up, but also decided to hold off on that. The analysis by the demons was that the skills were actually of high quality, differing from those in the Nexus Node. Those were actually "overpriced garbage" as Ogras put it, and Zac could only agree after hearing the difference between his [Eye of Discernment] and the skill Ogras used. In the end, he felt a real weapon would be a better immediate power-up.

Besides, there was another reason he didn't feel the need to buy a new skill right now. He once again brought up his status window before making the purchase.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**50**

**Class**

**Hatchetman (F)**

**Race**

**Human (E)**

**Alignment**

**Human (Earth)**

**Titles**

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Early, Seed of Trees - Early, Seed of Sharpness - Early  
Strength

257

Dexterity

139

Endurance

173

Vitality

113

Intelligence

69

Wisdom

57

Luck

77

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

21 510 103

His stats were becoming more and more monstrous, with even endurance getting close to his original attribute cap. His dexterity was getting up there as well, partly thanks to his third Dao Seed.

**[Seed of Sharpness - +10 Dexterity, +5 Intelligence]**

The seed also pushed him up to the fourth spot on the Dao-Ranking, and he was still surprised that he still wasn't first with a full three seeds.

He opened up the quest screen next and looked at the reason for not feeling the need to buy any skills at the moment.

Active Quests

Dynamic Quests

**Incursion Master (Unique):** Close or conquer incursion and protect town from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, outpost upgraded to town, status upgraded to Lord. (1/3) [12:17:45:16]

Class Quests

**Nature's Many Faces (Class):** Decapitate 10 000 enemies - OR - Plant 10 000 trees. Reward: Nature's Punishment - OR - Nature's Nurturing Skill. (0/10 000) - (0/10 000)

It was the first time he saw a branching quest. He immediately decided to go for Nature's Punishment rather than Nature's Nurturing as soon as he saw the options, even though he only could finish Nature's Nurturing right now. The choice reminded him of

his musings about his Dao seeds. He currently trod both the path of destruction through his offensive seeds, and the path of life or nature with his Tree-seed.

The choices in the quest did the same. He currently was like a walking cockroach with his monstrous attributes, so he'd go with the offensive skill Nature's Punishment. From the sound of the other name, he guessed that it was a healing skill, or something that had something to do with plants.

Neither of those options sounded like something he needed right now, while a stronger offensive skill than **[Chop]** was something he would really benefit from. **[Chop]** was still great against hordes of monsters, but against strong singular enemies its effect was limited.

He closed the screen and hesitating no further bought **[Verun's Bite]**. An elaborate large box appeared next to him, and he immediately put it into his Cosmic Pouch without opening it. He knew these demons would eventually find out what he bought in battle, but for now he felt no need to spread rumors.

With a nod he left the demons to their business and walked toward the hastily erected town close-by. The settlement consisted of mostly tents with a few rudimentary buildings peppered in, and was the temporary living space for the demons during the quest.

He entered one of the larger structures and looked around. It was the infirmary, and it was thankfully only half-filled. The effect of Vitality was generally that something either killed you, or you bounced back in a week or two at most. Apparently, it was different at higher levels though, where the skills could contain weird energies and Daos that impeded recovery.

Alea was lying at a bed in the corner, pale but breathing steadily. Zac felt some sourness as he watched the red bandages that wrapped around her. She had become a comforting presence to him over the weeks, although he wouldn't call it love. To see her lying here because her desire to help him against the Fiend Wolf caused some guilt in his heart, and his desire to get powerful only got stronger.

"How is she?" Zac asked the physician making rounds between the beds.

"She's stable. Due to her... interests, she has focused on Vitality which is now helping her immensely," the young man answered with some disgust on his face. Clearly, he didn't approve of her dabbling with poison, which in a sense was the opposite of his occupation.

Zac only nodded and fished out a small vial from his Cosmic Sack.

"Will this improve her condition?" He said as he opened the stopper, letting an earthy scent waft out. It was a healing pill he bought at Calrin's for a full 2 500 000 Nexus Coins before coming here. Normally warriors kept it as a last resort type of thing, as it was too expensive to use as one pleased. But Zac didn't hesitate to cough up the coins.

The man looked at the pill inside with some greed in his eyes but quickly remembering himself nodded his head. Zac handed it over and watch him gingerly feed it to her, using some skill to make her swallow and absorb it in her sleep. The effect was immediate and obvious, as some color appeared on her face and her breaths became deeper.

"It's helping, but she will stay asleep for some time," the physician noted.

Zac nodded and left after observing her for some more time. Next, he found Ogras and told him that he didn't want to be disturbed for the next few days unless it was something important. He headed back to his camper and sat down with a grunt.

First, he took out the large box and dripped a drop of his blood on his new axe to establish a connection. He would normally try it out a bit, but there was something he was even more eager to do at this moment so he put the axe back into his pouch.

Next, he took out another vial out of his pouch and looked at the pill inside. It was a deep blue with some shimmering white spots, glistening very beautifully. The pill was actually called [**Rivers of Cosmos**] and was something Zac commissioned from Calrin the first time they met. The price tag was far more expensive than he expected, reaching 7 500 000 Nexus Coins, but its effect was also amazing. Not only would it help heal his pathways, but it would also somewhat stabilize them and make them more resilient.

His pathways were mostly healed by now, and even if he left it alone he might get better soon. But he refused to spend any more time mindlessly staying in the mines. He had things to do. He immediately swallowed the pill, and just sat down cross-legged and let the medicine do its thing. A soothing sensation soon spread through his body, like his veins were filled with clear spring water.

The healing process took a full day, and after he inspected the result he was more than happy. The Cosmic Energy that he naturally absorbed for restoration flooded his body at a pace that was far and above anything he ever felt before. He wasn't sure whether it was because of the experience in the pond or just from evolving to E-Rank Race, but it was at least three to four times the speed from before.

After almost two months holding himself back he finally felt confident enough to start using tools and crystals to restore himself. He thought he might have been able to do it sometime earlier as his pathways were in pretty decent condition lately, but neither Ogras nor the physician really knew too much about his condition. He decided to not do anything rash and wait until he was completely sure.

Next, he took out his small box of E-Grade Nexus Crystals and immediately started to absorb it. A huge surge of pristine energy entered his body. It was on a completely other level compared to the F-Grade Crystals. If the F-Graded crystals was a water faucet, then this was a waterfall of energy that poured into his body. Still, he didn't feel any discomfort from the deluge of power coursing through his pathways.

The energy was completely tame and quickly added itself to him, and he felt how he steadily climbed toward level 51. The amount of energy required for a level was immense by now, but it only took 12 hours for him to reach it. He kept absorbing throughout the day, but was interrupted by the sound of a bell on the morning the second day. He opened his eyes, and with a frown looked toward the source of the sound. But as soon as he saw his guests his eyebrows rose in surprise.

As Zac suspected he saw Ogras, but with him was Rahm, the Creator liaison. Zac quickly invited them through the array and asked what was going on.

"A boat of humans arrived at our docks 20 minutes ago, and they are at present being detained."

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Jumbo-chapter for my lovlies :)

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 23 chapters ahead) please check out my

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

#### **Chapter 94 - Humans**

Megan glared at their captors as she was stomping around in fury. Something was clearly wrong in the head with these people, as they silently stood like zombies with a blank stare in their eyes. The only time they moved was when she or someone else tried

to leave the pier they stood on. They even blocked access to the ship, stopping them from leaving.

The only reason things hadn't come to blows was the polite man from earlier who said that he would fetch the so-called lord of the island. Megan already disliked this mysterious person, what kind of jack-ass named himself a lord? She decided that he would get a proper lesson in manners when he arrived.

Of course she knew that her anger was simply a coping mechanism. The last months had been like something out of a horror story. She and her friends were in Vietnam on vacation when the apocalypse came, just as they were visiting a fisherman's village. Suddenly they found themselves stuck on some island with a group of fishermen who barely spoke any English. Two of her friends had also simply vanished into thin air, and she still didn't know what happened to them.

The shocking changes were only the first trouble that appeared. The animals on the island slowly turned insane, and they grew way too large. In the beginning they could fight them off, which was how they learned about levels. But the monsters grew too strong too fast. Hundreds of rats as large as Labradors charging their small village was what broke the camel's back, forcing them to set out to sea on one of the dingy fishermen's vessels.

It was a risk, as two boats had already set out without coming back, their situation still unknown. But those rats simply tore through anything and they were extremely aggressive. Mr. Trang saved their lives by fending them off while they started the boat, and he still wasn't recovered from his wounds as he sat down nervously on the pier.

Finally she saw movement in the distance as three men were walking toward them. One was the polite man from earlier, but he walked back to his house after bowing to the other two. One was a completely bald man who looked like a monk, while the last one looked extremely weird, with greyish skin and almost white hair. He even wore some odd crown on his head with horns jutting out. Megan was feeling pretty confident that he was the so-called lord.

She was getting ready to blast off a salvo of vitriol at the two, but as the duo closed in her flame of rage snuffed out like a weak candle in a storm. Something about the monk forced her attention on him. It was as though she was facing a mountain as he approached. Every step he took was like a sledgehammer hitting her, and she felt suffocated from just being in his presence.

Most of the other castaways were faring even worse, as they backed away with pale faces. Some even knelt down on the floor, unable to stand in front of the monk's towering aura. The pressure was so all-consuming that Megan only noticed that the grey man wasn't actually wearing a crown when he was right in front of her. She was looking on a bonafide demon from mythology, and her terror only intensified.

What kind of monsters inhabited this island?

-----

"Control your aura human, you will kill these weaklings," Ogras said with a subdued voice.

Zac started before quickly taking control of the energy naturally coursing through his body, making sure that nothing leaked. He had forgotten about that lesson from Alyn after spending time with the demons for so long. As a warrior got stronger their presence intensified as well, and if the discrepancy in power was too large it could even be considered a weapon. It wasn't something like the Dao Field, rather just an effect of beings in different stages of existence. There wasn't any point in controlling his presence among the demons, as most of them were actually higher level than himself

and immune to its effects. But against low-level individuals with weak willpower he might actually be harmful.

The fact that these humans were ready to keel over was quite telling about their power. Zac quickly used his **[Eye of Discernment]** on the twelve people and to his surprise, the highest leveled person was only level 21.

“Pathetic,” was the only comment from Ogras who obviously performed the same type of scan, and Zac had to agree. How could people survive with such low power? If these humans were representative of the average population then Earth was well and truly doomed. His image of the outside world was maybe skewed from looking at the ladder which only showed the powerhouses. Maybe the average humans were as weak as these people who probably couldn’t even kill a barghest.

“Ahem... Welcome to Port Atwood. I’m Zac. What brings you here?” Zac tentatively asked, unsure how to proceed from here.

The group only stared fearfully at the two, no one daring to step forward. Zac was starting to think that his language skill wasn’t working with the humans until a thought struck him and he turned his companion.

“You’re scaring them, go away,” Zac said, making a shooing motion.

“Yeah I’m the problem, why don’t you blast off your Daos as well while you’re at it?” Ogras retorted with a roll of his eyes, but he walked some distance away and picked out a chair from his pouch. Next he took out a piece of fruit and started eating while pointedly ignoring the humans. The Creators also took this as a signal their work was done and wordlessly headed toward the huge warehouse.

It seemed to calm the people down somewhat to be left alone, but they still looked very warily at Zac. Finally, a woman who was the second strongest in the group stepped forward. The strongest person was actually an old Asian man sitting down, clearly still nursing some old wounds. That revelation only lowered Zac’s opinion of the youths in the group, letting an old man stand on the front line while they cowered behind.

“I’m Megan. We’re from an island two days’ sailing from here. Um... what’s going on with your friend?” she said as she fearfully glanced at the demon loitering in the distance.

“That’s Ogras. He lives on my island.”

That answer seemed to only make the group more fearful, but Zac couldn’t be bothered to explain any further. Going into the demon’s origins would be too troublesome, and Zac and Ogras long ago decided that they were going to pretend the demons were natives who were brought here during the integration. That little lie should hide the fact that there had been an incursion here, and that the demons were actually invaders. At least for a while.

“Young man, how come I can understand you? I don’t believe you are speaking Vietnamese,” the old man sitting on the pier said with a weak voice.

Zac willed the screen for the language skill into being, making it hover in front of the group.

“It is a skill I have that allows me to understand and be understood when speaking with anyone,” he answered.

“Skills, what’s that?” the girl called Megan asked as she looked at the screen in wonder.

That question made Zac realize that these people were even worse off than him during his first months on the island. They obviously had no idea about many aspects of

the System, not even knowing about skills. He realized he only knew about skills because of Abby and the Nexus Node where he bought **[Eye of Discernment]**.

He was lucky in a sense that an incursion spawned on top of him. If he didn't get to build an outpost he would have been as ignorant as these people, fumbling around in the dark. The first time they came in contact with skills would be at level 25 when they got their class. If they could even attain a class on a deserted island.

"You still haven't explained why you people are here," Zac said as he ignored the question.

"The animals became crazy on our island. They kept growing and even the rats were as dangerous as wolves in the end! We couldn't stay anymore, so we left to find a safer place. After two days at sea we saw your harbor and thought that there might be a town here," the girl explained.

"We're from Chicago. Is there an airport close? Have you had any contact with the government? Why hasn't there been any rescue operations?."

The girl kept peppering Zac with questions, giving him a headache.

"The governments have likely fallen. You should have heard the voice in the beginning. The world has been integrated into the multi-verse, Earth got fused with a few other planets and everything got mixed together," Zac sighed.

The castaways looked ready to explode from that declaration, but a voice cut through the mounting chaos.

"Can we stay here, young man? There is safety in numbers".

It was the old fisherman. The 3 other Asian men looked at Zac with some hope, whereas the Caucasians looked confused, prompting Zac to translate the question.

"Mr. Trang is right, there's safety in numbers! We have become quite strong over the past months, and were only forced to leave the island due to the huge number of rats!" one of the young men said.

The proclamation elicited a derisive guffaw from Ogras in the distance. He obviously was listening in on the conversation using some skill, and he looked very entertained.

Zac pondered what to do about the small group. It wasn't really any problem to let them onto the island as they didn't lack food or water. But there also were many secrets on the island, things that he didn't want to make public to the world. Besides, he wasn't sure that letting them stay was doing them any favors, with the next beast wave coming in less than two weeks.

"You can't let them leave. This place can't be discovered yet, there are too many treasures here, so you need to solidify your position as Lord first. You either need to kill them or let them stay on the island," Ogras' voice could be heard from the shadows.

"What if they leave and they tell the story of the island with demons and superpowered humans? People will rightly think that there's some secrets on this island and set sail in search of treasure," the demon continued. He used some sort of skill that projected his voice from a distance, and it didn't seem that the other people could hear him at all.

Zac sighed as he knew that putting them back on the ship was out of the question now. Ogras would likely sink it with a shadow spear the moment it left the pier in order to protect his interests. Besides, he agreed with his points. He wanted to turn this island into a true sanctuary for those close to him and didn't want random people to come here for some sort of treasure hunt.

“You can stay here. But you should know that this island is likely far more dangerous than your old home,” Zac said after some deliberation. “We don’t need freeloaders. You will have to work to earn your keep. There are some areas that are off-limits on the island, and this shipyard is one of them. I’ll show you the way to the town.”

When told that this place wasn’t safe as well the group started to hesitate. But the old fisherman got to his feet with a grunt and unhesitantly followed Zac who turned to leave. The other fishermen followed suit, and soon the Caucasian youths followed as well.

Zac saw Ogras flash over and put the boat in his pouch, which caused some alarm and shock to the refugees, but he only said a few comforting words and continued on. As they walked some way the people started to find their courage and started pelting Zac with various questions. They asked about everything from what amenities the island had, to how the system worked and the situation of humanity.

These people were thirsting to know what was going on, just like Zac was before he finally got things explained by Alyn and Abby. He tried to answer as much as possible, but by the time they arrived at the tent-town, he was thoroughly tired of answering questions.

The refugees were dismayed to see that the whole population were demons, and two actually tried to run away in panic. Zac could only sigh and flash over with **[Loamwalker]**, and carry the struggling people back. It took some time to settle the refugees, and Zac couldn’t be bothered with them anymore afterward. He pawned them off to Alyn and Zakarith, who both had the language skills that could help them acclimatize. He also had a few warriors keep an eye on them just in case they tried something stupid.

Zac held mixed emotions as he walked away from the inquisitive group. It almost felt like he was robbed of something from the encounter. One of his largest wishes over the past months was to reunite with humanity, but he didn’t expect it to be like this. A group of listless people who barely scraped by the past months. Obviously none of them had left the safety of their village overly much. Otherwise, they’d be at a higher level by now.

His own countrymen were the worst. They clearly were mainly concerned about their own well-being, focusing on questions such as food and lodging for themselves. None of them asked of how they could help or listed things they could do for a town. The fishermen mostly kept quiet after a few questions about humanity. Zac had hoped that his first encounter with humans would finally allow him to get some news about the state of the world, but it looked like he needed to switch back to his original plan.

He informed Ogras of what he was about to do, and the demon seemed to think that it was truly foolish. Zac didn’t care. Almost four months had already passed since the world changed, and it felt like ants were crawling all over his body by now.

He opened up the Town Shop interface as soon as he arrived at the spot designated by the city planners and unhesitantly bought an **[E-Grade Teleportation Array]** for 10 000 000 Nexus Coins. A new interface opened up, and his heart sped up when he saw that there actually was a destination available.

**[Winterleaf Village. Public. Fee: 0 Nexus Coins]**

After making sure he had everything he needed in his Cosmos Sack he took out a hooded cape that covered his elaborate clothing and a pair of leather shoes that one of the craftsmen made for him. Ogras told him that it was easy to see that his gear was valuable, and something provided by the System, and since he didn’t want trouble he simply covered it up. Next he set his own Teleportation Array to private in order to

make sure only he could use it. He didn't want anyone using it either to teleport in or out while he was gone.

Finally done, he gazed around at the island that had been his home, and prison, for four months. With a sense of trepidation and excitement he stepped on the engravings on the floor with determination in his eyes.

With a flash of light, he was gone.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 23 chapters ahead) please check out my

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

#### **Chapter 95 - Winterleaf Village**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

I hope you enjoyed the little cliffs in the last two chapters. I've at least really enjoyed reading the comments :)

If you like the story please remember to **rate and review**. If you don't know what to write you can also vote for those reviews that convey what you think about it.

Also, please take the time to vote for me at ! Will help me get a little bit of exposure.

Selas sighed as he stood in front of the teleporter, waiting alongside the rest of the village leaders. His nerves were fraying, as he didn't know what would step through the magical inscriptions. As Leader of the Hunt he had always been in charge of protection of the village, even before the Great Fall, but it was different now.

Everything kept changing, and as an old huntsman it was getting increasingly difficult to keep up. Gone were the paths that he and his ancestors had walked through the mountains, the songs detailing the hunting grounds all but irrelevant by now. In just a few years he should have retired to teaching the art of the hunt to the next generation, but now he was stuck as some castellan of the town.

When the fall arrived he found himself transported to a fantastical world with some of his village members. Determined to keep the youths safe against the twisted challenges of the System he pushed himself beyond what he knew was possible, and from his struggle he was rewarded with a Nexus Node. But even with all his effort he couldn't keep everyone safe, as many of his villagers perished, one of them his son Winterleaf.

Not even allowed to properly mourn the death of his progeny he was instantly pushed into one desperate situation after another since he was returned to his village. Even now the village was teetering on the brink of ruin despite everyone's efforts.

It was their tree whisperer who came up with their current gambit after using his Soothsayer class' limited skill. He said that salvation would come through the light, and urged the town to pool their Nexus Coins to build this teleporter. But as the days passed and nothing happened anger and unrest started to build against the elder.

There were even rumblings about putting the elder in house arrest for the time being. Ten Million Nexus Coins was a huge amount, and could have bought weapons, armor, and precious herbs at the store. Many felt that they should have made a last stand before the beast using everything at their disposal instead.

That all changed when the teleporter blazed into life, its inscriptions lighting up by themselves. Selas had barely managed to gather the elders when he got the notification that a new teleportation point was added before it blazed to life, indicating that someone was already coming over.

Selas stood with his spear at the ready, staring at the light that shone with increasing intensity. Behind him stood his hunting party at the ready to protect the villagers against whatever came through that gate.

Whether it would be salvation or damnation was still to be determined.

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Zac only felt darkness for a bit over a minute before he once again gained his sight back. The first thing he noticed was that the climate was clearly different, with an autumn chill in the air. Next he glanced around and found himself placed in the middle of a village square. The buildings were foreign to him though, being medieval but not of some style that he recognized.

Soon he understood why, as a group of people approached. Zac's heartbeat sped up in alarm when he saw that it wasn't actually humans that greeted him. Did he teleport himself into an incursion? Ogras and the crystal both said that invading forces couldn't build teleporters since the System wanted to limit their expansion, but perhaps they were wrong.

The humanoids that closed in on him made him think that they were a mix of humans and animals. They seemed to have normal hands and feet, but they also possessed clear animalistic features.

They wore simple but seemingly high-quality gear, and carried various weapons, mostly spears and bows. Most of their exposed skin was covered in a brown or white fur, sometimes mottled with spots. They had large black eyes, and a normal face and a mouth. Their ears somewhat resembled those of an elf's though. His assessment was that these beings were a seventy-thirty mix of a human and a fawn.

They didn't look frail though, as even the fur couldn't hide their sturdy frames and muscles. They also carried themselves with the grace of warriors, and these people were clearly different from the hapless humans he encountered earlier. The group stopped some distance from him, and they simply stood staring at each other for a few seconds.

"It's one of the hairless monkeys, what do we do?" Zac heard one of the fawnmen mutter.

"Onyx, you learned some of their words in the tutorial, right? Greet him," another one said as he prodded one of the females in the group.

That made Zac relax somewhat. If these people had been in the tutorial together with humans then they shouldn't be invaders. It looked like when Earth got mashed together with other planets new civilizations were added after all.

She hesitantly looked at the leader of the group, a middle-aged man holding an intricately carved spear with a long line of leather bands attached, and took a step forward after an encouraging nod from him.

"H-Hello human," she stuttered, but before she continued Zac smiled and spoke back. At least he thought he smiled since it almost felt like he had forgotten how to do it by now.

"Hello. No need for a translator, I understand your words," he said.

The group looked a bit surprised, but not overly so.

"Welcome to Winterleaf village human, I am Selas, castellan of this town," the middle-aged warrior said. "May I ask what brings you here?"

“Our town is located in an extremely isolated area, and we couldn’t find a single person nearby. So we bought a teleportation array in hopes of finding other humans,” Zac answered.

It wasn’t exactly his reason as he bought the teleporter in order to start looking for his hometown during the downtime of the quest. He finally had the resources and the time to put his plan into motion, and even though the expense was high he felt it worth it. If he ran out of Nexus Coins he would simply extort some of the demons, as they all made a fortune from his monster horde quest.

“I am sorry, but what... are you people?” Zac tentatively followed up, unsure how to properly frame such a question.

“You must really have been isolated if you haven’t met any of the Ishiate so far. We might be the most populous species apart from you humans on this new world of ours,” Selas answered with some surprise. “Please join us in our town hall. Meeting of new friends is always a joyous occasion. I can fill you in on the area as we walk.”

Zac nodded after some hesitation and followed them. His guard was up though, ready to bring out **[Verun’s Bite]** at moment’s notice. These people were real cultivators who had done the so-called tutorial. Even Ogras didn’t know exactly what benefits you could get in there, but from all accounts they were substantial. He knew his level likely was far above everyone here, but that didn’t mean that they couldn’t pose a threat. They might have received bonus attributes, titles or extraordinary skills in the tutorial, things that could even out the odds.

“Winterleaf village is built upon the remnants of our ancestral home before the fall. We were lucky at least to retain most of our structures. Many towns in the area were pushed together into a confusing mess by the System, which severely harmed their cooperation. It’s thanks to our unity that so many of our clan members are still alive, even with the changes constantly testing us.”

Zac’s heartbeat sped up as he finally was starting to get some information about the world. His words painted a somber picture, but he was mentally prepared that there would be widespread death and tragedy. Even if no incursion was nearby he knew that just the wildlife would create problems.

“Are there any human settlements in the area?” Zac asked. That was the priority. He still didn’t have a picture of just how the reshuffling of the world worked, but perhaps humans had already started to map the locations of their old towns. They still should have technology such as aircrafts that they could use to scout, even though such tools didn’t provide experience when killing monsters.

“The closest one is a four-day journey from here. We don’t have any contact with them though as that place is chaotic and dangerous. No offense,” the hunter answered.

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with a sinking feeling.

“The settlement is run by a man named Roger. He has set himself up as a warlord and rules with an iron fist. Mutilated corpses adorn his walls at all times, and he is known to have kidnapped many women. He even tried to kidnap a few female Ishiate, but stopped after furious revenge from us.

“Still, he is very strong with a few powerful followers, so no one in the area dares to escalate the conflict with them. We keep our distance and put patrols to make sure that they don’t approach, and luckily they keep to themselves mostly,” the beastkin answered solemnly.

Zac was disappointed when he heard the news. He would have to check things out himself to make sure, but he leaned toward believing the humanoid. Since the beginning of the apocalypse he knew that some people would use the fall of order as

an excuse to live out their twisted fantasies. That someone wanted to play emperor sounded not only believable, but expected.

He asked a few more questions as he walked alongside the beastmen toward a large structure. As he looked around he didn't see many structures that stood out. The only building he recognized was the **[F-Grade General Store]** that the system provided. He didn't sense any arrays gathering energy in the area either, and the ambient cosmic energy was actually far lower here compared to how it was on his island.

He hadn't realized how large the difference was from living on top of a so-called Nexus Vein, but his island must seem like a paradise to cultivators. Even better were the mountains, which finally were starting to become habitable again as the poison was mostly cleared out. He reaffirmed his decision to keep his portal closed until at least his beast horde quest was completed and his position as lord was solidified.

As he walked he got more and more confused as to how they could afford the huge expense of the Teleportation Array. Zac only was able to afford it due to the nexus mine and monster horde gave him an absurd amount of Nexus Coins.

But from what he had seen so far nothing really made these people stand out. Certainly, the village were decent sized, and quite a few of these fawn-people he looked like adept warriors. But unless they recently found some extremely valuable treasure they must have collected much of their wealth to construct it.

It didn't take long after they sat down at a round table that he found out the reason behind its construction.

"I am not used to small talk, so I will immediately get to the point Zac. The reason we spent most of our resources on the Teleportation Array was that we're in desperate need of assistance."

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 23 chapters ahead) please check out my

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

#### **Chapter 96 - Terror of the Mountains**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Today's chapter came early.

Remember, please vote on !

If I reach top 5 I'll throw out a bonus chapter. Top 3? Two bonus chapters :)

"Assistance?" Zac asked skeptically.

"As you know wildlife is quickly changing. A beast has appeared in the mountains, and we fear it will evolve soon if left alone. It has started hunting citizens of Winterleaf Village and the neighboring settlements. In the beginning it was just for food, but lately it seems it hunts us for Cosmic Energy judging by the numbers it's killed. The people are unable or unwilling to join us in fighting it.

"Most of the other citizens in neighboring settlements feel they can simply leave the forests if it gets too dangerous. But this is our ancestral home, we can't just abandon it. That's why we pooled our resources in order to find new allies through the teleportation array," Selas said, with multiple eyes staring hopefully at Zac.

"If the monster is causing trouble for your town, why don't you buy protective arrays?" Zac questioned. A beast evolving seemed troublesome, but they could just trap it with an array and then throw something like a Thunder Punishment at it. Zac doubted even the Fiend Wolf would survive if it got stuck in the middle of that crazy lightning

barrage. For the money they spent on a teleportation array they could have blasted even Zac to kingdom come.

The townspeople glanced confused at their leader who only looked a bit depressed.

“Unfortunately my achievements in the tutorial weren’t enough to unlock those items. I have a quest to unlock it, but it is far outside the scope of what Winterleaf village can handle at the moment, much more difficult than simply killing the beast,” he explained.

Zac was surprised but careful to not let anything show on his face. He had no idea that different Nexus Nodes possessed a different collection of options. It wasn’t anything Ogras or the others mentioned either. He thought that the System was uncharacteristically generous by allowing him to buy things such as the Thunder Punishment and the arrays. But perhaps it was because of his achievements. It was either that or the fact that he gained his town by defeating an incursion instead of getting it in the tutorial.

He sighed and looked around the table. He could sympathize with these people, but he was not some savior who had time to go around and save the villages. His goal was simple, find his hometown and his family. It was already a daunting enough task without making detours all the time. He was about to reject their request for assistance, but a window popping up stopped him in his tracks.

**[New Active Quest: Monster hunt (Normal): Slay the beast in the mountains. No assistance allowed. Reward: [F-Grade Automatic Map] (0/1)]**

This development surprised him. Was anyone simply able to give out quests? But it didn’t look like it was something the people around the table did, as they were simply looking at him hopefully. He guessed that it likely was the System which wanted to force him to fight the beast.

“The beast is not only a threat to us, but to all the settlements in the area, both Ishiate and human lives are at stake,” another person added, taking Zac’s silence as hesitation.

“Have you heard about something called an Automatic Map?” Zac suddenly asked, confusing the people at the table who looked at each other.

“I know!” one of the younger people suddenly piped up. “I heard about it in the Tutorial. It’s a spiritual map that shows the area around you almost no matter where you are. It marks any settlements and towns on itself. The better the grade the more detailed it is, and the larger area it covers.”

Zac started to get eager, as this was something that would be really useful for him in his travels. He felt a bit helpless that the System once again dangled something he needed in front of his nose, but was starting to feel that was simply how it operated. Unless the rewards were tempting enough many wouldn’t risk their lives.

“What type of animal is it?” Zac probed.

“It is a mutated Mink. It is around three meters long and extremely aggressive. We have tried to kill it but it’s extremely nimble. It sneaks into the towns at night and kills until it is discovered, and is gone before we can mount an effective counter,” Selas answered with a sigh.

“And it’s level?”

“Last time it was spotted it was level 68. That was five days ago. It might have gained a level or two since, as it levels up quite quickly”.

Zac mulled over what to do. The animal sounded strong, but not overly so. He possessed his new weapon and the Seed of Sharpness which increased his lethality quite

a bit against solo enemies. The monster wasn't evolved either, and wouldn't be anywhere as strong as the Fiend Wolf he fought recently. But it wasn't some weakling if multiple villages couldn't kill it, and he needed to solo kill it to receive the map.

The deer-people thought Zac's silence was an expression of hesitance, and Selas added some incentives.

"Of course we don't expect you to do this for free. I gained two spots to the worldwide treasure hunt in three months during the tutorial. I am willing to cede one of those spots to your town if you decide to help us," the leader added with a serious face.

"Treasure hunt?" Zac asked confused.

"It is a limited event the System arranges seven months after the fall, where participants will be teleported to some unknown area like with the tutorial. It was possible to gain entrance tokens to the event during the tutorial, but it was notoriously hard," the leader explained, and couldn't help but straighten his back as he did. "It contains various valuables, from gear to herbs. There's even limited titles available inside from what the pixies said."

"Can anyone go?" Zac asked interested, as it sounded like a pretty amazing opportunity. He was ahead of the curve in terms of power, and there likely weren't many places on Earth where he could keep his empowerment going. This event sounded like a good opportunity that normally wouldn't have anything to do with him since he wasn't a cultivator.

"Anyone can go as long as one is a native of this planet and has an entrance token. I believe it will be the first gathering of the elites of all the races."

The slot was something he would definitely want. He should be able to sell it for a great sum even if he didn't end up using it. The map itself was reason enough for him to fight the super-mink, and this was a great bonus. Still, he wouldn't jump into it blindly and asked some more questions about the monster. Finally satisfied he was ready to set out, not wanting to waste any more time.

"Ok, deal. Lead me to its den," Zac said as he stood up.

However, none of the beastmen stood up, and instead glanced at each other doubtfully.

"We... um... appreciate your enthusiasm, but killing this beast will take the cooperation and planning of a few villages. We are not ready to challenge it from our end," the old huntsman said with some hesitation.

"I need to observe its habitat and hopefully its power personally to report back home, otherwise they will not send man-power here through the portal," Zac decided to lie. It felt like too much of a bother to convince the group that he was powerful enough to do this alone.

Still, no one seemed ready to set out and just looked down with troubled faces. Finally Selas sighed and stood up.

"I will lead you to its habitat. But beware, it is extremely fast. If it targets us I will only be able to protect myself, if even that," he said. It looked like many of the other beastmen in the meeting were about to protest, but he silenced them with a wave of his hands.

"Give me ten minutes and we will set out".

Soon the two walked along a path in the forest, heading toward one of the mountains in the vicinity. It was believed the mink lived by a river that ran through the mountain, claiming the area as its habitat.

As they walked Zac learned various things of interest. The history of the Ishiate was quite interesting. Apparently, their society was on the cusp of industrialization when they got integrated into the multi-verse along with Earth. However, their society held nature in high regard and even saw the forests and mountains as their gods.

It caused a schism between those who chose to live as one with nature and those who embraced technological progress. Conflict was common lately between the two camps, one trying to stop the desecration of their gods, the other trying to move their race forward. The Winterleaf village was part of the former group, consisting mainly of simple hunters and foragers. Zac believed that this lifestyle likely helped them survive far better in this new reality than the average people of earth.

He also learned that apart from humans and the beastmen there was at least one more race that got thrown into the mix. However, Selas didn't know much about them as he had never seen them himself. From the description they sounded like humanoid insects, and they kept to themselves. They made no contact with the other two races from what the hunter knew, and they were extremely territorial. Anything that came close to their hives was met with furious and unrelenting violence.

There also wasn't any incursion in the vicinity, and Selas had only heard about their existence from the lessons in the tutorial. That gave Zac some hope that they weren't peppered across the globe, so his hometown could very well be in a more peaceful area as well. If he had to choose between the wildlife and the organized forces of the incursions as an enemy, he'd pick the stupid beasts every time.

He also tried asking some questions about the tutorial, but Selas clearly grew suspicions from the questions. Zac didn't want to broadcast the fact that he, or his "faction", didn't know anything about the tutorial, and could only put those questions aside for the moment. Soon they arrived at the foot of the mountains and could see the river cutting a path through it.

"We really shouldn't venture further in than this my friend. There have been multiple reports about the beast in this area, and it could pop up at any moment as long as we walk along the river."

Zac nodded and took out his **[Verun's Bite]** from his pouch. This was the second time he properly glanced at it.

The axe was slightly larger compared to the military axes of the demons, and the adjective that would best describe it was primal. It had a large almost straight edge that ran roughly 40 centimeters long, moving some ways alongside the handle. The metal of the head looked worn, with multiple scratches and imperfections. However, Zac knew that the edge was razor sharp after testing it out a bit before.

On top of the head there were grisly teeth of some unknown beast embedded that were blackened and serrated. The same type of teeth were fastened at the bottom of the slightly uneven handle. The handle itself was made of some wood, and almost fully wrapped in coarse leather. All in all, it looked like something Zac imagined an Orc war-chief would use, and it even emitted an air of danger.

Selas backed away warily as he saw Zac arm himself.

"What are you doing human? You can't possibly be..."

"I am heading in. Please do not follow me. Anyone that approaches me during battle will be considered an enemy, and I will attack," Zac said as he unleashed his presence.

The hunter was clearly shocked by the terrifying force that suddenly was gushing out of Zac, as he further backed away. After making sure that the Ishiate wasn't following he simply nodded and headed toward the river, each step moving him over five meters away.

Soon he was walking alongside the water, carefully on the lookout for any type of domicile like a cavern. The beast was quite large and it shouldn't be too hard to find as long as it stayed somewhere close to the river.

A tingling of danger made him instinctually swing his left hand back as he moved his head sideways. The punch resulted in a deep thud and Zac was actually pushed forward a bit as he heard a pained yelp. He quickly turned around and saw that his target had found him instead.

The huge mink stood a few meters away from him, a bit hesitant now that its ambush failed. Zac wouldn't give up this opportunity and quickly charged up **[Chop]** while swinging down his weapon. The teeth fastened on the axe possessed a magical effect, making it almost sound as the axe growled as it ripped through the air.

The mink was elusive and it felt like it didn't contain a single bone in its body as it dodged the swing, jumping between outcroppings along the rock wall. Zac grunted and copied five large edges to his axe. The new cosmic energy blades looked a bit different now that they copied **[Verun's Bite]** instead of the old blade.

In almost impossibly quick manner he threw out the five blades, both trying to hit the animal and any places where it could try to dodge. Their distance wasn't too large, and five blades each five meters long covered a huge area, cutting off all paths of retreat for the beast. It managed to dodge four of the blades, but the fifth slammed into its front leg, cutting a deep gash.

With a pained screech it fell down toward the ground, and Zac immediately used **[Loamwalker]**. As the beast was falling down, an axe imbued with the Dao of Sharpness rose to meet it. And like that the terror of the area was slain.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 23 chapters ahead) please check out my

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

#### **Chapter 97 - Freedom**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

First bonus chapter for being good buddies and voting on [TWF](#). We not only reached top 5, but top 3 while I slept, thanks for the support!

The second one is coming sometime around this evening.

Zac looked down at the slain beast, very satisfied with his new axe. The swing almost fully decapitated the monster, and he swiftly cut the last pieces off with another swing, bringing the progress in his class quest to 1. He realized that he didn't really need to use Dao of Sharpness on an enemy of this level, his new axe alone was sharp enough on its own.

Since it was only an F-grade item he had been afraid it wouldn't be too strong in the beginning even though it was a Spiritual Tool. But he quickly realized that he was worried about nothing. Its edge was far sharper compared to his old axes, and it had no problem accommodating his power.

As Zac looked down on the weapon he was surprised to see that the mink's blood wasn't dripping off the weapon, but rather got absorbed. He already knew from before that Spiritual Tools needed to absorb various materials to evolve, but he didn't expect one of them to be blood. Unfortunately, the axe didn't come with an instruction manual of what it wanted, and Zac could only try various things.

He already knew that it didn't want Nexus Crystals, which was sort of a relief. After some hesitation he broke off an incisor from the animal and pushed them toward

the teeth on the axe, but nothing happened. It looked like he wouldn't have to go around ripping teeth out of his foes like some demented dentist to feed the Spiritual Tool.

Next Zac started looking around the area for anything that looked valuable since Ogras said that strong beasts sometimes built their nests close to some natural treasures, as living in its vicinity would help the beast grow faster. Since the beast was clearly stronger compared to other monsters in the area there should be something of value here.

As he looked around he was once again astounded by the amount of cosmic energy his body naturally absorbed now. It almost felt like a torrent entered his body to restore his missing energy. He would have to ask around later about whether that was due to reaching E-rank Race, or if it was due to something else.

Even after looking for an hour he couldn't find any treasure, and he could only return with a frown. It appeared that his high Luck couldn't help him out in every scenario. Zac was soon back at where he left the deer-human and found him still fretfully walking about, seemingly unable to decide whether he should follow or go back. As he saw Zac approach he sighed in relief and approached.

"My friend! It is good that you are okay. Luckily it seems the beast was awa-" he said, but his words got stuck in his throat as Zac took out the carcass of the beast from his pouch and let it fall down on the ground with a deep thud. Next he took out the decapitated head and placed it to the side of the body.

"This should be the mink you were talking about," Zac simply said.

The Ishiate hunter blankly stared at the carcass lying in front of him.

"You can take the head as evidence if you wish. Can you help me skin it?" The fur of the monster was extremely soft and luxurious, and it'd be a waste to leave it. But with his self-taught skills he was afraid he'd ruin it. Normally he'd want to take the meat as well, as the stronger the beast was the more delicious its meat would often be. However, it seemed that this monster had eaten quite a few humans and beastmen, so it felt pretty disgusting to eat its meat by now.

"Ah? Yes, certainly!" the hunter said and quickly got to work after grabbing a skinning knife from a pouch on his back.

"May I ask.. Is that a Cosmos Sack you're using?" he tentatively asked as he glanced at Zac.

"Yes, why?" Zac asked. Selas shouldn't have actually seen the pouch as it was fastened to his girdle beneath his cloak, but there obviously weren't many ways that one could make a huge corpse appear from nowhere.

"Do you have any more? Winterleaf Village would love to buy one, we'd offer a competitive price."

"I only have one with me at the moment. But I'll see what I can do next time I pass by," Zac answered, not wanting to commit. He did have a couple of them lying around at his camp since looting them from the demons, and there were quite a few of them waiting up on the mountain tops. But he wasn't sure whether selling them was a good idea or not.

"What about the entrance token to the event?" Zac asked. He already received the map immediately after killing the beast, but there were still rewards to reap.

Selas once again reached into the sack on his back, and took out a smaller pouch. He opened and inside were two tokens. They appeared to be made out of stone and were almost as large as a palm. Zac immediately saw that these things were something made by the System, as the tell-tale fractals completely covered them.

Zac fiddled with his token a bit before he imbued it with cosmic energy and a stream of energy entered his mind. He could quickly discern that this was the real deal, and the only thing needed to enter this so-called treasure hunt was this badge. As long as it was in your possession when the event started you would be teleported there. There was no ownership or restrictions at all, making the item a hot potato.

He wasn't worried for himself, as he felt that there were very few people who were able to snatch something out of his hands. But his eyes turned to Selas, who tensed up from the glare. But soon he resumed working his knife on the carcass.

"Please keep it a secret you got it from me. Very few people know it's in my possession and it needs to stay that way for the safety of Winterleaf Village."

Zac simply nodded and said no more. Soon the beast was skinned, and Selas held up the large pelt.

"It's done, but it needs to be properly treated as well," the hunter said.

"Could you help me with that as well? I need to visit the human settlement before I head back to my hometown. I will be back to your village in a few days,"

"Of course. Their town is that way," Selas answered and pointed east. "I would say be careful, but I feel that it is not you who's in danger," he added as he glanced at the large head next to him.

Zac wryly smiled and turned to leave.

"Oh and Zac? Thank you," he heard from behind, and only answered with a wave. There were obviously multiple meanings to those two words.

As Zac walked he sighed slightly and shook his head. The hunter was clearly afraid that Zac would kill him to take the second token as well. And Zac knew that many might have done just that. Zac didn't even consider it, as he had no real use for another token. Even if he quickly found his sister it wasn't something that he would want her to possess.

Just owning it meant having a bullseye on one's back. And even if you survived and went there, the competition would likely be extreme. The most powerful and ruthless people gathered at one spot, competing for great treasures? It would likely make the battle at the monkey mountain seem like a day at the spa.

He wasn't too keen on going himself, and certainly wouldn't send someone he loved there. Of course, he also knew that going there might be the best opportunity to get a real sense of the situation in the world and get some power-ups. If people from all over the world gathered, someone might even be from his hometown.

Becoming the strongest or whatever wasn't really his goal, and he simply fought to survive so far. He hoped that his visit to the human settlement would give him some answers to what was going on. If not he would try again next month. He only had a few days to spare, after all, and needed to get back to Port Atwood sooner or later.

As he walked he took in a fresh breath of air. It finally felt like he had some control over his actions after months battling. He constantly found himself pushed into one situation after another, putting him in a constant reactive state. But now he had full freedom, at least for a few days. The fact that he would have to get back soon ruined the mood a bit for him, but at least for now he relished the feeling of just adventuring.

He took out a crystal from his pouch as he walked and imbued it with some energy. A window opened up with a rough map inside. It was black and white and didn't contain a lot of detail, but it did cover a large area and marked the towns. He saw Winterleaf Village the closest, and he currently was heading toward Fort Roger.

Both of the towns had crystals next to the name, and after some confusion, he realized it meant that they probably possessed Nexus Nodes or Nexus Stations. Nexus Stations were lesser versions of the Nexus Node that gave access to the class system, but needed quests to unlock the town management systems.

Apparently there were differences between the nodes as well, where he got a throng of options, whereas most of the towns only got the bare essentials. Nexus Stations were extremely common though from what Alyn told him, which made sense as people needed to get their classes somehow. Alyn didn't explain how they appeared, as they generally had been around for thousands upon thousands of years on their home planet.

That Winterleaf Village possessed a real Nexus Node was clear to Zac, but he doubted that anyone in the surrounding towns knew that. At least not for now. From his impression of the small village, he felt that they weren't careful enough. They really lucked out that Zac, and not someone else, walked through that portal.

Zac hadn't inspected anyone out of politeness, but he never felt any sense of danger from any one of them, meaning that they shouldn't have been too strong. Of course, they were strong enough to both get a Nexus Node and gather enough money for a Teleportation Array, so they were no slouches either.

They were even open about possessing the entrance tokens before they even knew him, which seemed crazy to Zac. He had a feeling that unless they wisened up they'd end up in dire straits. Possessing too many valuables was a crime in troubled times after all. If it was the old him Zac wouldn't have felt anything was wrong, but Ogras had started to rub off on him.

Zac kept walking, and out of habit started using [**Axe Mastery**]. It felt like the trajectories were slightly changed to accommodate for his new weapon, making Zac once again marvel over the skill. It was also the first time he properly used the skill since it reached Late mastery, and as he expected it better incorporated his Dao Seeds into the mix.

What surprised him was that it actually even incorporated the Dao of Trees. Until now that Dao Seed remained unused in battle, but the guidance system showed him its usage. Every now and then it told him to imbue his free hand with it as he used it for grabs or blocks. Zac wasn't sure what the exact use was, perhaps except that it improved the resilience of his arm, enabling him almost to use it as a shield. However, he still felt that a low mastery seed was too weak for that kind of usage at the moment.

Zac kept moving throughout the day and the next, unceasingly using his skill. It was almost addicting to be able to once again use Nexus Crystals to restore his missing energy, especially now that it apparently only took a fifth of the time to absorb the energy contained in an F-Grade Crystal.

The hunter said that the town was four days away, but with Zac's huge attributes and speed it went far quicker. Finally, he reached his destination, Fort Roger. And as he looked upon the ramshackle town with its weak fortifications he felt that the description of Selas didn't do the town justice.

It was much worse.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 23 chapters ahead) please check out my

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

**Chapter 98 - Fort Roger**

## A note from TheFirstDefier

Second bonus chapter! Thanks for all the support!

We reached the goal, but I'd still appreciate a vote on [.](#)

It would be more appropriate to call the wall that ran around the small town a large fence. It consisted of trees with their edge sharpened, and was between three and five meters tall, as the length of the poles weren't uniform. There even were some holes in the wall due to uneven placement, giving enough room for a person to sneak through.

The town was located right on the edge of the forest, with large trees giving way to expansive fields. The fields might actually have been farmland-before, as they were flat and he thought he spotted a tractor. But the fields were in complete disrepair, overgrown with weeds and unmanned.

With the new energy in the atmosphere anything would grow faster compared to before, and Zac felt it was very telling about the town that they didn't utilize such a prime source of food. They would only have to clean up the fields and throw some seeds in there, and they would have grain in no time. But he saw no-one even try it.

There was a path leading to an actual gate that Zac stepped out on as he walked the last distance. He didn't plan on sneaking into the town and didn't want to alarm them. He also slowed down his speed to normal walking from his Attribute-empowered movement.

As he closed in on the wall he saw there were two corpses hanging from the wall, one on each side of the gate. It was a man and a woman, both in their thirties or forties. It was hard to tell since they obviously were tortured before they were killed. Attached to their feet were plaques that simply said 'TRAITOR'.

Zac was starting to hesitate whether to actually enter this place, but he knew there weren't many alternatives. There was another town on the Automatic Map, but it would take at least another two days to get there. With his return back to the portal he would barely make it in time for the next wave, and that was barring there were no unexpected incidents on the way. After making sure his odd clothing wasn't visible through his worn cloak he started walking. As he approached the gates two guards perked up and warily glared at him.

"Stop! Why are you here?" one of them gruffly asked.

"I'm traveling to find my hometown," Zac simply answered. There should be lots of people like him who weren't at home when the world got integrated, forcing them to travel to find their way back home.

"Pfft, another idiot looking to be eaten by the beasts," the guard said and the other one snickered in derision.

"Five Nexus Crystals to enter. If you don't have it you can fuck right off."

Zac was a bit surprised they used Nexus Crystals rather than Nexus Coins as a currency. Then again Nexus Coins were only usable in System-affiliated stores, whereas Nexus Crystals were not only used for currency, they could also make you stronger.

Zac pretended to look troubled, but reached inside his cape and pretended to grope around while he took out five crystals from his Cosmos Sack. He handed them over to the guard who quickly put them in a backpack.

"Is there somewhere to get a drink?" Zac asked.

The guards were a bit more amenable now that they got paid, and Zac didn't care whether the entrance fee was real or not.

"There's a bar down the main road, The Royal Oak," the guard answered with a wave.

Zac nodded and headed into the town. He only took a few steps before he stopped, as a wall of stench slammed into him. It wasn't to the level of the imp camps in the tunnels, but it was bad. The town was obviously human, likely from America or the UK as the worn signs were in English.

But four months into the apocalypse the whole town looked ready to collapse under the weight of its own filth. Piles of dirt were thrown into the alleys, and disgusting streams of mystery liquid ran along the pavement. He even saw a corpse lying in an alley, halfway buried under the filth. Zac was infinitely happy that he had decided to put his shoes on, as he'd almost puked at the prospect of stepping on the ground here.

Clearly there was no such thing as sanitation in Fort Roger. People just threw garbage wherever. There were few people on the streets, and they looked worn and malnourished. Zac decided to use **[Eye of Discernment]** on a few of the stragglers and was shocked to see that many were below level 5. There even were a few that still pattered around at level 1. He wasn't sure exactly how much experience was needed to gain levels in the beginning, as he essentially started at level 16, but he couldn't imagine it was a lot.

These people were likely mortals just like him. But different from Zac they had simply stayed within this disgusting town since the integration, afraid to venture out. Zac couldn't imagine that these people would have a happy ending in a world of cultivators and local tyrants. The rule of law was gone, replaced by the creed 'might makes right'.

He didn't know why, but he actually felt some disdain for these hapless people. He knew that it would be weird to expect people to rush out into the forests to risk their lives fighting animals. But for people to just give up, like these people clearly had, felt like a joke.

They could work together to kill some weaker beasts, and slowly but gradually gain the power that would allow them to feed and protect themselves. They would also get Nexus Coins for the kills, which could be turned into Nexus Crystals at any System-run shop. They could even just do some work for Nexus Coins and use that to purchase crystals.

Zac resisted the urge to grab these people and shake some sense into them and instead kept going. He was planning on heading straight for the bar, but something caught his eye. It was a large electronics store, now used by a few people to loiter around. There was no electricity so none of the TVs were turned on, but Zac simply ignored the people and headed into the warehouse in the back.

He found the box containing one of the larger flatscreens and simply threw it into his pouch after making sure no one was in sight. Next, he took a video player and boxes and boxes of movies. It was mainly for Alea, who liked watching movies just like Ogras. But Zac was interested in whether they could actually make some money from these things like Ogras hinted, so he took some technology with him back home.

Finally, most of his pouch was stocked up with electronics and movies, and he headed on toward the bar. He wasn't looking for a drink, but simply to sit down and ask some questions. Soon he arrived at The Royal Oak and saw it was an old Irish Pub. It actually looked like it was in decent shape, with a clean storefront and no garbage piling up around the structure. Clearly there was a proprietor who still had some sense of pride.

He walked inside and saw that the interior was just as he expected. The only difference between this and all other classical pubs he had visited through the years

was that instead of normal lights there were candles burning on the tables. Zac already expected it, but it looked like there was no electricity in the town.

He had guessed that things like power, internet, and water supply would be essentially gone with the integration, as the randomization of the world would ruin the network of tubes and cables that had been built over the years. Perhaps there would be some lucky areas that were right next to a water power plant or a farm of windmills or solar panels that might be okay, but most would likely have to do without electricity.

The bar was largely empty apart from a few tables. Everyone kept to themselves, and the conversations were kept at a low volume.

“A new face I see,” Zac heard and turned toward a portly middle-aged man who likely was the proprietor.

He stood behind the bar which he was cleaning with a rag, looking very much the part. The man was British from the sound of it, and it looked like this town was truly from somewhere in England, as it was the same with the guards.

Zac walked over and sat down on a barstool in front of him.

“What can I get for you?” the man asked, looking neither excited or bored.

“Information,” Zac simply said as he placed a few crystals on the counter in front of the bartender.

The barkeep’s eyes slightly widened, and he quickly swiped up the crystals with the rag, quickly hiding them from view.

“You better be careful of flaunting your wealth young man,” the bartender said with a serious face. “You’re obviously new to town so I’ll warn you to not stick out. Safety isn’t one of the strong points of Fort Roger.”

“I understand. I have been traveling looking for my hometown, and need some information. I need to know if a pattern how the world was reshuffled has been found,” Zac spoke with a low voice.

“Have you been hiding under a rock all this time? Well, in any case, it’s all random from what I’ve heard. I’m from northern England, but the next town over is mainly American. No one knows what’s going on. From what I understand a few governments are working together trying to get order back, but I’ll believe it when I see it,” the man said with a scoff. “How are they going to enforce order when people suddenly are able to shoot fireballs and run around like supermen? Never thought Armageddon would look like this.”

Zac sighed at the answer. He at least hoped there was some discernible pattern to the randomization, but it seemed it was too much to ask for. At least the governments were trying to get things under control. He somewhat agreed with the bartender’s assessment, but the information also provided some hope.

Perhaps the government had some means to map out the world. Maybe there were satellites still in orbit, or at least they could communicate by radio. There were many emergency contingencies in place in case of war or the like. Obviously, nothing could have prepared the countries for the System arriving, but they might have figured some things out by now.

“Is this town under the British government?” he asked, hoping to get in touch with an official.

“Pah, what government? This town is run by Roger, a cultivator. Most towns don’t have any affiliation to any government, they are just run by whoever has the biggest fist,” the barkeep said with a low voice. “However, a town called Fairfield is a week’s journey from here. I haven’t gone myself due to the danger, but I hear that it’s quite

a large town. And supposedly there are some government people from the United States there, they might know more.

“You were quite generous, so I’ll warn you. You should probably leave here sooner than later. Travelers usually have a tough time here,” he said as he made an almost indiscernible nod with his head toward a few of the tables.

“Why are people still here? This place looks a bit...” Zac said as he hesitated how to finish the sentence, but the Bartender understood what he meant and sighed.

“The road to Fairfield has large packs of monsters above level 20, very few dares to go that way without pushing through with a car. There’s also talk of even stronger pack leaders roving about. But Roger has most of the cars and all the petrol, so it’s better to stay here and eke out a living.”

Zac was about to ask something else, but a loud ruckus outside interrupted him. A loud crash and a few angry roars bled into the bar, whose customers slightly perked up. A young girl’s scream came next and the bartender sighed again with sadness in his eyes.

“It looks like they found her”.

“Found who?” Zac asked curiously.

“You should have seen the two bodies out on the gate? The scream probably came from their daughter,” the bartender answered with some disgust on his face as he continued with a low voice. “Roger took a liking to the young girl, but the parents tried to sneak her out of the town. Truly a miserable family.”

Zac’s eyebrows scrunched together, somewhat unsure of what to do. He wasn’t some hero saving the damsel in distress. But could he just watch these things happen with a clean conscience, knowing he could help?

It didn’t take long for him to decide. He couldn’t save the world, but he at least he could save this girl, and only pray someone would do the same for his family in case it came to that. He got to his feet and turned toward the door. The bartender tried to signal him to stop, but he only answered with a wave as he walked toward the ruckus.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

#### **Chapter 99 - Emily**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Back to basics now with regular schedule :)

Thanks a lot for all the votes on [Top Web Fiction](#)! We reached the goals, but if you haven’t voted yet I’d still appreciate you doing so!

As Zac stepped out of the bar he saw that there was already a small crowd gathering. After a quick glance it was clear that no one was there to help, but rather to watch a show. All the noise came from three grimy looking men who cornered a kid.

The men all had somewhat matching clothes, with a large uneven R-patch sewn to their chest. It looked like the leader of the town truly wanted to set himself up as a medieval lord, already making his underlings wear a crest. Zac shook his head and looked toward the inner part of the town where another wall was erected. That should be the residence of this Roger and his cronies.

One of the men was bleeding freely from his head and the glass shards on the ground around him explained what happened.

“You little BITCH! After Roger gets tired of you I’ll fucking feed you to the dogs!” the bleeding man roared at their cornered prey.

It took Zac a few seconds to realize that the kid was actually a small girl somewhere in her teens. She wore wretched-looking rags for clothes, and her face was caked in dirt apart from a few tear streaks drawing clear lines in her face. Even her hair was in a mess, and it looked like she or someone else had randomly cut most off it of with a knife.

The teenager was holding the remains of a bottle as a weapon, and ferociously stared at the three men. The outlook didn’t look good as all two of them took out daggers as they approached her while the last man stood at the ready. Zac sighed and used **[Eye of Discernment]** on the group, and saw that the girl was named Emily.

She didn’t even have a level yet, which meant that she was too young to start using the System. The other three were around level 15 to 17, weaklings in Zac’s eyes but perhaps strong according to the level of this town. Certainly, for a young girl without any powers it was a futile struggle.

“WHO IS SPYING ON US?” the third man without a knife roared as he glared in Zac’s direction.

Zac rolled his eyes as he stepped out from the group of people. He really needed to get a better inspection skill. Anyone with Intelligence above 15 points would be able to sense his scan, above 30 and they’d know it was him. Apparently the homeless-looking man actually focused intelligence, which was a bit surprising.

“Wanting to play the hero? Or maybe you just want her for yourself, eh? In either case you better fuck right off,” the bleeding man said.

Zac shook his head as he wondered how people could devolve to this stage after just a few months. Was the laws and fear of punishment the only thing that held some people back before the integration?

“You better turn back right now-“ one of the men said, but threw his dagger at Zac’s head mid-sentence in an attempt to ambush him.

Zac couldn’t even be bothered to respond as he simply caught the dagger mid-air as he released his aura. Screams of panic immediately erupted as the onlookers frenetically tried to back away. He held the knife in his hand, still unsure of how to act.

“Don’t move or I’ll kill the brat!” one of the men said as he grabbed the girl who had lost focus due to Zac’s aura. He was deathly pale and his whole body was shaking in horror as he maniacally stared at Zac.

Zac frowned and threw the dagger with a quick motion. It tore through the air and punched into the head of the man holding the girl hostage. The force of the throw was so great that his head burst like a watermelon, instantly killing him.

Next Zac took out one of his regular axes from his pouch and charged up a **[Chop]**. The other two ruffians didn’t even have time to react or scream out before two headless corpses fell down on the ground. A large tear was rent through a house as well from Zac’s lightning-quick swings, and it looked like it would collapse at any second.

Zac walked over to the girl who now was drenched in the man’s blood. She still had the bottle in her hand, and though she looked scared at Zac she didn’t flinch. Zac’s impression of this girl was far better compared to the castaways on his island.

“Let’s go,” was the only thing he said to her as he controlled his aura and turned toward the central area of Fort Roger. But he only had time to take three steps before the bartender stopped him.

“Wait, young man! I understand you’re angry, but please don’t do anything drastic. If you kill Roger and his henchmen then most of the people in this town will perish from the animals.”

That made Zac stop in his tracks, and after some hesitation, he turned around and started walking toward the gate instead with some sadness in his eyes.

There wasn’t anything left to do here. Information in a hovel like this was limited, and he’d have to travel to Fairfield in order to find out more. This Roger fellow might know more, but he had a feeling that going to visit him would only result in battle and more death.

He wasn’t sure how to deal with people like Roger. Obviously they were scum, but they were also the ones who kept civilians safe just as the bartender said. There were even level 1 wastrels still surviving to this date in Fort Roger, and that was mostly thanks to Roger.

In his anger he hadn’t thought about the consequences, but he wasn’t ready to support this whole town. He just had no way to migrate a whole town through the forest and through the teleporter in time before the next wave started. And it wasn’t like he could afford it in any case, since each activation cost a bunch of Nexus Crystals.

It wouldn’t help to build his own teleporter here for the same reason, not that he was ready to waste that many crystals on these people even if he could. The wolf waves had tapped almost all his remaining crystals, and he wasn’t about to spend another 10 million nexus coin on a teleporter. He needed that money to ready himself for the second wave.

He learned from Selas during their walk that villages regularly were beset by beasts. It wasn’t to the point of his own beast waves, but there could be hundreds of frenzied animals who heedlessly charged at the villages. Selas believed it was the work of the System, and Zac agreed.

But still, leaving like this gave a bad taste in his mouth and his monstrous aura once again flared out. He turned back around and supercharged another cosmic energy edge, bringing it to over ten meters. With an echoing roar he unleashed the edge right toward the inner wall in the distance.

As it traveled it destroyed the paved road, creating a huge scar that ran right through the village. It smashed through the rudimentary gate, leaving only wood chippings in its wake. Finally when the blade was only twenty meters away from the mansion the blade winked out of existence.

“Deliver this message to Roger. I will return through this area shortly, and if I find him still acting like some wanna-be warlord I will judge him and all his henchmen. Let my strike be the reminder,” Zac said with a loud voice empowered with cosmic energy. His huge aura was still billowing out, forcing people to back away or down on their knees, and the visage of his swing would likely follow these townspeople for the rest of their lives.

All the villagers of Fort Roger quickly got out of the way as he once again retracted his aura and walked away. Their faces were white with terror and they didn’t even dare to look up. Some shuffling from behind told him that the girl decided to follow him.

Soon they were at the gate with Emily’s parents being hung up. And for the first time, he heard the girl speak up.

“Please... please help me take them down,” a weak voice came from behind him, and he turned around to see tears pooling up in her eyes.

Zac worldlessly started to charge [**Chop**] again, preparing to cut down the two.

“HEY WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!” one of the guards shouted and ran toward Zac.

With the bartender’s words echoing in his mind Zac felt no need to keep killing, and only lightly slapped the man to knock him unconscious. The other guards only fearfully stared in the distance, not daring to approach.

He charged up [**Chop**] to a five-meter edge, and with two lightning-quick swings the whole part of the wall that held the two bodies was cut down. Zac freed the two corpses, simply ripping apart the chains that held them. Then with a nod toward the girl he walked toward the forest with the two bodies under his arms.

The remaining guards mutely stared at Zac’s back and the ruined gate, unsure what to do. Soon one of them ran toward the large mansion on the other side of the town.

After a few minutes of walking Zac felt confident that no one was planning on following them so he placed the two bodies down on the ground then put them into his Cosmos Sack.

“What did you do?!” The girl asked aghast, seeing the bodies of her parents simply vanish.

She pointed the shattered glass bottle she still carried at him.

“I placed them in a magic bag,” Zac answered as he started to take off his shoes.

She hesitated a bit then put down her makeshift weapon.

“Why didn’t you kill Roger as well? He is much worse than the ones you killed,” she asked in an almost accusatory tone.

“I am not sure more good than evil would come from me doing that,” Zac said as he glanced at her. He held the shoes who were now caked in all kinds of things from walking through Fort Roger, and simply chucked them into the woods with some disgust. He’d rather get new ones than put these defiled ones back on.

Emily hesitated a bit before she grit her teeth and started to undress.

“As long as you kill him you can do whatever you want with me,” she said with her eyes reddening.

Zac’s eyebrows rose up and using [**Loamwalker**] he almost teleported in front of her and flicked her forehead.

“Don’t be stupid, keep your clothes on,” he said with a roll of his eyes. “I’m not interested in little kids.”

“I’m fifteen,” she said defensively, but she still started to put on her clothes while blushing a bit.

“That Roger isn’t very strong, if you want him killed just work hard and kill him yourself,” Zac said. “I am not some mercenary who goes around killing people, I have my own problems to deal with.”

“Then help me get strong! I’ve never heard of anyone being as powerful as you, and I’ve been to multiple cities,” Emily asked, a burning desire in her eyes.

Zac had initially planned on dumping the girl in Winterleaf Village before heading back, but something in her eyes made Zac change his mind. He guessed that Alyn had her first student for the Academy.

“Why have you been to multiple cities? Traveling is pretty dangerous,” he said.

“I have a big brother and a big sister. Both are cultivators, they disappeared right from our home. We looked around but couldn’t find them. After a bit over a month we heard about the tutorial, but the cultivators didn’t return to our city. We guessed that they were dropped off somewhere else,” she explained. “We decided to look for

them, so we have traveled looking for them for a few months and arrived at Fort Roger a week ago”

She didn't continue from there but Zac could guess the rest of the story from her eyes once again reddening. He sighed and wondered how many people had died trying to find their family members or trying to get back home. The world was fraught with danger, and the incursions and monsters might not even be the worst ones. Humanity had always been its own worst enemy.

“I can take you with me to my town. However, that place is extremely far away and you will not be able to look for your siblings if you do. Where I live is very dangerous, but you can get stronger there. It's up to you to choose your path,” Zac said as he looked at the teenager.

Emily only hesitated a few seconds before she looked at him with determination.

“I'll go with you”.

“Ok. Then jump up on my back,” Zac said as he turned his back to her.

“What?” she asked with a flabbergasted face.

Zac had already decided to head back to Port Atwood after this small excursion. There were 5 days left until the next part of the beast waves and he wasn't sure he'd make it to Fairfield and back within that timeframe. He felt it was more worthwhile to go back and increase his power with his remaining E-Grade Crystals.

Besides, Emily seemed to have visited multiple towns, and she might have even more answers compared to the barkeep or Roger. All in all, he was happy with the result of this expedition. He even got a nifty map, and more importantly, the magical token.

“Come on, jump up,” Zac repeated as he hunched down a bit. Walking with an unevolved human in tow would waste far too much time, so he would have to carry her. Since he wanted his arms free in case of an attack she'd have to climb up on his back.

She hesitated a bit before she climbed up with a slight blush on her face. As soon as she put her arms around his neck he walked off with his usual speed.

A shriek echoed through the forest as Zac strolled through with the speed of a runaway train.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 100 - Travel Companions**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

Vote !

Zac stopped for the night at a small clearing and let down Emily from his back. Even the fading light couldn't hide the fact that her face was deathly pale. Moving almost at the speed of a car through dense forest on the back of another human was apparently quite jarring, and Zac had been forced to stop a few times to let the girl take a breather.

There were many things he wanted to ask the teenager about the Tutorial and society after the fall, but he didn't want to push her either. They buried her parents at a beautiful glade just a few hours ago, and she hadn't said anything since then. There wasn't any ceremony, with Zac simply using a broadsword to rip open a hole in the

ground where he placed the two together. Since the bodies were naked he first placed a cover over them before he refilled the grave.

Meanwhile, Emily carved the words *Remembered by E+J+O* in a tree with a dagger she got from Zac. They simply stood staring at the grave for a few minutes before she silently climbed up on Zac's back, and they wordlessly left the glade. Zac had offered to bury them on the Island, but Emily wanted to bury them closer to their home.

Zac prepared a small fire in silence as Emily was looking at the dagger Zac gave her earlier.

"What level are you?" she suddenly asked as she looked up at Zac, who froze a bit.

"Um..." he said, unsure how to respond. He wasn't sure whether exposing the fact he was over level 50 was such a good idea.

"Well, are you on the ladder?" Emily changed her question when she saw Zac's troubled face.

"... Yes. Can you see the ladder?" Zac asked a bit surprised.

"I knew it. You are way too strong to not be a Ranker," she looked a bit excited. "Everyone can see the ladder. I guess that you are considered role models by the System? So it wants to display you for us as well".

"Do you know if there are any other Rankers close by?" Zac probed, a bit curious.

"No idea. I know that the government is looking for you people," she answered as she started cutting and the air with her dagger. However, her movements and technique were horrendous.

Zac took out a spit and large chunk of meat from his sack and placed it on the spit close to the fire. He had grown tired of the tough dried meat long ago and now preferred to barbeque. Now that he was forced to stop for Emily he had the time to spare.

He sprinkled some salt over the slab and left it to slowly be grilled. He mentally kicked himself for not looking for some spices at Fort Roger as the ones from the camper were used up long ago. Then again, he felt that any food-stuffs should have been pilfered long ago in a wretched town like that.

"Why are they looking for us? No, not like that, move like this," Zac asked as he showed how to properly distribute her weight.

"I dunno. They are trying to get all cultivators to register and become like an army or something? Maybe they want the Rankers to lead the cultivators?" she answered as she mimicked Zac's movement.

"Hmm..." Zac only answered as he kept moving. He felt that it wasn't that simple. The world was collapsing, and from his brief visit to Fort Roger he knew that the Government's control was tenuous at best. Perhaps they needed Rankers to keep people in check. "Are many cultivators complying?"

"I don't think so, we tried going to the government when we looked for Johanna and Oscar, but from what we heard most people haven't joined yet. But new people join every day, and the government offers pretty good things," she distractedly answered without stopping her stabs.

"Like what? Now shift your weight like this, it gives more reach to your stab," Zac asked as he kept moving.

"Access to system-exclusive things like training facilities. Good Salary. Oh, and they have claimed good areas that have a lot of monsters. Anyone that wants to train there has to be a part of the government, otherwise they are attacked," she explained.

“Aren’t there monsters everywhere? Why would that matter?”

“That forest is good because it doesn’t have any very strong monsters it seems, it’s a pretty safe spot to level up. Most places have a random mix of animals, and it’s super dangerous to fight there. Some super-strong monster can pop out anytime and kill you. So finding good spots is very important.”

Zac nodded as it made a lot of sense. His situation was the same. His whole island had turned into a farmer’s paradise in a sense, as the demonic beast hordes killed off any normal animals that could have become a real threat. There was no supercharged mink on Demon Island, only Barghest and Gwyllgi. They were dangerous compared to most animals, but there would never be any surprise beast or boss jumping out of the bushes.

They kept going for some time before they sat down to eat. Zac was by no means a knife-master, but some things he learned from his guidance system was universal.

“Do you know why so many towns have Nexus Nodes?” Zac suddenly asked.

He knew that he wouldn’t be the only one with a Town Shop system, but after seeing Fort Roger he was a bit surprised to see just how low the bar was set.

“Um, because people like to live together?” she answered, looking a bit confused.

“What?”

“Well, those crystals appear when enough people live together in a town, right?” Emily answered.

“Hmm...” Zac only answered.

“Then everyone gets a quest to fight for ownership. It can get pretty crazy. My parents got such a quest once, but we immediately left town and hid out until it settled down. But I heard those crystals are always the worst ones, and only give classes,” she continued after looking at Zac. “Only those who get their crystals from The Tutorial can actually build things with it, and it is different there as well. Like if they impressed the System in the tutorial they get to buy more things. I’m not sure.”

It looked like the nexus stations popped up just from population density, and a quest like the one for the Fruit of Ascension would start. The Nexus Station gave almost no options, but he was sure that the one who claimed ownership would get some quest to evolve the crystal.

He was a bit irritated earlier that others already had towns when he created his since he might have missed out on some good titles. It took him a few days to figure out how to create an outpost, after all. But it seemed their progression was limited. After all, he doubted the people of Winterleaf village single-handedly closed a freaking incursion in order to establish theirs.

Emily soon fell asleep since she was tired from today’s events, but Zac only needed a few hours of rest. He sat down with his back against the wall and started pondering the Dao. There was no Fourth Dao seed he felt close to attaining, and instead he needed to focus on upgrading the ones he had.

He turned his eyes inward toward the Axe-fractal in his mind. Since he gained the Seed of Sharpness the axe had two colors, with one side being dark blue with some brown, and the other a steely grey. The colors represented the two Seeds he possessed, Sharpness and Heaviness. There was a clear line of demarcation between the two Daos, and the auras didn’t mix in the slightest.

He knew that one of the things he needed to do in the future was to fuse these two, but it was very far off. Alyn explained that there were two ways to improve the Dao. The first was fusion, and it was the path he had been walking since the start. Since

the day he saw the vision he knew that the seed of Heaviness he gained was only part of the terrifying aura in the axe-man's swing. He would have to fuse more concepts into it to create a true Dao of Axe.

The path of fusion often walked from simplicity to complexity. It combined simple concepts into something greater than the sum of the parts. The other path was generally referred to as evolution. It meant pushing a Dao Seed to its limit, and from there letting it evolve into a higher Dao of the same category.

That was his plan with his Dao of Trees. There might be a possibility to fuse it into his Dao of Axes as well, but Zac felt it would weaken it rather than strengthen it. Instead, he'd work toward evolving it by itself. Unless he suddenly gained a fourth seed somewhere and tried his hands on fusing that as well.

Neither fusion or evolution was better than the other according to Alyn, they were just different. However, she told him that most focused on evolution since fewer Daos were necessary to progress with that path. With fusion he'd always need to gain enlightenment on at least two Daos.

Dao was generally considered the true watershed in the path to power. Over time most people were able to hit their level cap, and money could solve the issue of Race evolution. But Dao was something you needed to figure out yourself. There were some tools and treasures that could help out, but it mostly depended on personal aptitude and insight.

Zac felt he probably wasn't some genius since all three of his seeds essentially came from his visions. He did gain the Seed of Sharpness a few months later, but the foundation for learning it came from the same vision as the Seed of Heaviness. He was afraid that evolving all three at the same time would be more than he could chew off.

He still was hesitating whether to put aside two of the seeds and only focus on one, or to focus on both the offensive ones. The Dao of Trees was the lowest priority for now, as its use simply didn't feel as readily apparent.

Finally, he made a decision in his mind. He would focus on the Dao of Sharpness, at least for now. It was the Seed he had for the shortest time, but it felt like the most useful one. He stared at the axe in his mind, trying to glean anything out of the silver fractals.

He also played both the vision of the axe-man in his mind, feeling the terrifying force of the strike. Finally, he revisited the fight with the Fiend Wolf. He remembered the feeling of standing in the Dao Field, where even the air turned sharp from the Dao. He remembered how the casual swings of the beast rent long lines into the earth without any cosmic energy needed.

He also pondered upon what sharpness actually meant. It wasn't as simple as the thinner the edge the more damage he could do. Sharpness needed control and technique to be properly applied as well. He remembered seeing clips before the fall where people tried using razor-sharp swords and barely were able to cut anything since their technique was bad.

He kept it going for a few hours before the mental strain became too much and he fell asleep. He woke up a few hours later, only to find Emily intently staring at him.

"Are you Abbot Everlasting Peace?" she asked curiously.

"Urh... what?"

"Well, you look like a monk, and when I woke up during the night I saw you meditate. You already told me you are on the ladder. So are you Abbot Everlasting Peace? Or Boundless Truth? Is that why you weren't interested in me? Is there nothing down there?" she peppered off, almost overtaking Zac's exhausted brain.

“Boundless? Wait, what? I’m no monk, my hair only got singed off in battle recently. And I’m not missing any goddamn parts, okay?”

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Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

#### **Chapter 101 - First impressions**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

I completely forgot that we passed a hundred chapters yesterday :) But thanks for all the congratulations. Here’s to at least a thousand more

By the way, by popular demand I’ve started to announce chapter releases on RR on my **Discord Server** (link at the other author note). If you want a ping you only need to join and get the PingMe role.

After another day of travel they finally reached Winterleaf village. Zac slowed down before entering the town though, not wanting to make it look like he charged at them.

“Careful, this is a beastman village! They are usually very strong,” Emily hastily said as she pulled at his cloak.

“I know, I am friends with them,” Zac offhandedly answered as he entered the town. He slightly frowned as he saw that the village was almost completely deserted, with no one in sight. Had something happened?

He quickly calmed down though as he soon saw Selas run toward him.

“Greetings Zac. We didn’t expect to see you for a few more days,”

“My trip was cut short so I’m heading back, I hope you don’t mind. Is everything okay here, it looks a bit... empty?”

“Stupid, they can’t understand English,” the girl softly said by his side, but Zac only rolled his eyes in response. It was a bit cumbersome when only one party had the language skill in these situations.

“Not a problem, I’ll lead you to the teleporter. Most people are just out working for now,” the Ishiate answered with a cough as he ushered them toward the array.

Zac felt that the beastman was lying, but couldn’t be bothered to untangle that. They simply walked back toward the teleportation array making some small talk, while Emily looked on confused. Next to the array a large package was placed.

“The package contains the fur and a few tokens of thanks by the villagers for the help you provided us. Good luck with your endeavors, my friend. I hope to see you again in the treasure hunt,” Selas said with an awkward smile.

Zac nodded, and after placing the crystals needed to teleport the two of them stepped on the array with Emily in tow. He initially had wanted to discuss some matters of trade, such as keeping a channel open for goods between the two. However, it seemed pretty clear that they were worried he’d go berserk, to the point they even evacuated the town to avoid him.

With a flash followed by some darkness he once again materialized. To his surprise he only saw walls, and quickly looked around. With a sigh of relief, he headed through a door, and the familiar sight of Port Atwood came into view.

It seemed that someone had erected a small house to shield the teleportation array while he was gone. Initially, he thought that Ogras had planned some trap for him, but that clearly wasn’t the case.

“Wow that was so cool, were we teleported?” Emily exclaimed next to him.

“Yeah, it’s a teleportation array. It can take us almost anywhere on the planet, as long as there’s another array there,” Zac answered. The way Selas acted was quite suspect, so he brought up the teleportation interface just to make sure of his suspicions.

Just as he opened the window he saw the line with Winterleaf Village wink out of existence, no longer available to choose. Zac only sighed and closed the interface. It looked like the beastmen were careful after all. His plan to visit Fairfield after the next wave would have to be canceled.

“Let’s go,” he said as he headed toward the temporary town.

Zac noticed that the progress was coming along well as they walked toward the center of Port Atwood. The wall was almost completely fixed, and new poles were erected on the outside. Their use had been limited the last time, but it was better to something than nothing. There was however an extremely unsettling smell in the air, and Zac furrowed his brows.

“Wow your town smells like poop,” Emily exclaimed, and Zac was forced to agree with some embarrassment.

As they closed in on the town the shadows flickered and the familiar demon appeared in front of them. Emily shrieked in surprise and jumped back a few steps, her dagger immediately in her hand.

“This one seems a bit better than the last ones, even if she looks a bit feral. I didn’t know you liked them this... young. If that’s your taste you can always pursue Zakarith, your names match and everything,” Ogras said with a half-smile.

“She was in trouble so I picked her up along the way,” Zac answered with a roll of his eyes. “How are the preparations going, and what the hell is this smell?”

“WAIT! Why is there a demon here, and why is it speaking English?” Emily shrilly interjected as she started tracing large crosses in the air to ward off evil.

“What is she doing? Is she brain-damaged?” Ogras skeptically asked as he gave a glance of mock-pity.

Zac only half-grinned and briefly told him about the demons in Christianity and other folk-lore.

“Hmm, very interesting. It might be a coincidence, or perhaps your planet had visitors from the multi-verse a few thousand years ago and the details got jumbled over the years,” Ogras mused.

“Wait, people could come from the multi-verse even before the integration?” Zac asked.

“Well yeah, but it would be like finding a needle in a galaxy so to speak. Your planet would almost be impossible to locate, but nothing is stopping you,” Ogras answered with a shrug.

“This is Ogras, he’s living here along with a few hundred more of his kind. Actually, the town mostly consists of demons. They’re like the beastmen,” Zac explained to the frazzled girl.

That seemed to calm her down somewhat as she curiously glanced at the demon.

“I know I’m handsome, but don’t go falling in love with me. I prefer mature ladies,” Ogras said as he struck a pose.

She only blushed a bit and moved a bit further away.

“Are there no other humans here except you?” she curiously asked Zac.

“Well, there are a few more, but they arrived just recently,” Zac answered.

“Pah, don’t remind me of those wastrels,” Ogras spat. “Pain in the ass every single one of them. Well, the old guy is okay, I guess.”

“What’s going on? And the smell?” Zac reminded the demon.

“Entitled little shits. They keep complaining and don’t want to work. They just hide in their house after seeing one little barghest, crying and demanding to see you. When they found out you weren’t here anymore they flipped out,” Ogras said with disdain. “As for the wretched odor? You try tanning tens of thousands of wolf hides at once without making the area smell like a Devourer’s asshole.”

“How did they come in contact with a barghest? There shouldn’t be any ones alive this close to town right?” Zac asked.

He knew that they would treat the hides, as the non-combat classes had arduously skinned and salvaged anything of value from the monster hordes. He hadn’t expected this level of stench though. Most of the parts of the beasts were useless since the grade was too low to trade with the Mercantile System, but some things might become useful, and with the volumes they were handling they would make a decent profit.

The hides of the more sturdy ones could be made into F-Grade leather armors, which would sell for a decent penny, especially at a newly integrated world like Earth. With their almost infinite stock of leather, they planned on using it as a selling point for visiting the town when they opened the gates for the public in the future.

“They said they wanted to get stronger, and since none of them are cultivators Ilvere took them to hunt a few barghests,” Ogras answered in response to the question about the humans. “If they worked together they shouldn’t have any problems killing such a dumb beast. But apparently it was chaos, people fleeing for their lives, even pushing down each other to escape. Ilvere had to kill the beast before a fight even started,” he snickered.

Zac could only sigh, feeling a bit embarrassed on their behalf.

“What’s a Barghest?” Emily asked curiously.

“It’s a large demon dog that looks like it has been turned inside out,” Zac answered. Ogras looked like he was about correct Zac, but after some thought nodded his head.

Zac turned to Emily after some thought.

“How do most human towns handle people who can’t fight?”

“Eh... Some get jobs doing various things I guess? There are still people needed for all kinds of things. The people who have simply given up are usually ignored or kicked out of town. I heard the most ruthless leaders have even used them as human shields against monster waves” the girl answered after some thought.

“There’s an idea,” Ogras muttered.

“Where are they now?” Zac asked with a sigh.

“We put them in the infirmary since its empty by now”.

“How’s Alea?” Zac quickly asked, reminded of the demoness.

“She’s up now, but still not completely restored. She’s been asking about you,” the demon answered with a devilish grin.

“Whos Alea?” Emily perked up.

“Why do you care, little brat?” Ogras grinned at her.

“Whatever,” she answered with a pout.

Already starting to regret coming back this early Zac sighed as he started walking toward the infirmary.

“More importantly, did you find any?” Ogras asked.

“Any what? Humans? Yeah, I visited a human settlement.” Zac distractedly answered.

“Who cares about that. Movies, human? Did you find any movies?”

Zac stopped and glanced at the demon.

“Are you really that free right now?”

“The wall is essentially rebuilt, and I still can’t buy anything with contribution points. I’m just waiting around,” he answered impatiently.

Zac shook his head but took out the large box containing the TV, and the small mountain of videos. Ogras inspected the things with glee, but he looked a bit confused.

“What are these things?”

“The large box contains a much larger screen to watch the movies. The small packages each contain one movie or a series. That box over there contains the device to play them. Both the Large screen and the player needs a steady stream of electricity through a cable. You can plug them into the camper, but you need to figure out how to keep the battery charged yourself.”

Ogras nodded excitedly and put all the things into his pouch.

“I’m sure you have many things to do, I’ll help this kid get used to the area,” he said, and as he grabbed the shoulder of Emily both of them disappeared, leaving only a startled shriek in the air.

Zac smiled a bit and continued on toward the infirmary. He wasn’t afraid that he’d hurt the teenager, but rather knew he’d need some tech support. Actually, it even looked like he approved of her ferocity. Soon he arrived outside the infirmary, and to his surprise saw Janos sitting outside the door.

“What’s going on?”

“Kept escaping. Put them in illusion,” the demon tersely answered.

“Uh, ok. You can turn it off, I’m going in,” Zac said with some annoyance. He didn’t know if these people really were a handful, or whether the demons were too heavy-handed, but something needed to be done. He didn’t have the resources to baby these people all the time.

With a sigh he entered the infirmary. As he entered the humans saw it was Zac, and rushed toward him with a litany of complaints. Zac simply released some of his aura to silence the group, then stared at them until they had calmed down.

“I hear you have been asking for me?” Zac said.

“You lied to us! We want off this hellhole of an island. Those demons said you have a method to leave the island, we want to go home,” Megan angrily huffed.

“You’re safe, clean, and fed. That’s better compared to most of humanity right now. You have access to a multi-verse town shop that has the herbs needed to evolve your race. You have a forest full of prey that gives a huge amount of Nexus Coins and Cosmic Energy. And you sit here complaining,” Zac retorted as a twinge of anger flared up at these people. Their situation would likely cause envy from most people, even cultivators, yet they only sat here thinking life was unfair.

“You want off this island with your powers? You’d die within a day. And even if you somehow survived and got to a settlement you’d be made slaves or worse since you’re powerless.”

The castaways hesitantly looked at each other, before the girl once again gathered her courage.

“Those hellhounds in the forest? We saw it bite clean through a thick tree, you want us to fight that? We aren’t suicidal. And do you think we’ll just believe you when you say that the world outside is dangerous?” she angrily said, and from the looks of the faces of the others, they agreed.

“I am sorry we haven’t been able to help out very much young man. Us old folks have some trouble adjusting to this new reality,” the old fisherman suddenly interjected.

“I currently have 46 000 nexus coins from fighting animals on our old island. If possible I would like to borrow 36 000 nexus coins in order to buy the **[Water Spear]** skill from your Nexus Node for 75 000 coins. The remaining coins I would like to use to buy some of your Crystals at 50 coins per Nexus Crystal,” the old fisherman said.

“Your name is Trang, right?”

“My name is Sap Trang. What do you think of my proposal? I know it is a lot of coins, but with it, I hope to be able to kill the demons you call Barghest, and from there slowly get stronger. The crystals are mainly for my fellow villagers, who plan to become what your... friends... call non-combat classes. They have slowly gotten levels from fishing, but the crystals would speed it up substantially. It looks to me that you are founding an island kingdom, and us old folk have lived on the sea for all our lives. We believe we can be helpful even in this new world”.

Zac was a bit surprised. This old man clearly was no fool like the brats. Sap Trang had learned everything he could from Alyn and Zakarith, and formulated a path for himself and his villagers. He also didn’t mention Megan and her clique either, so he guessed he wasn’t too fond of them either.

And it was true, having a couple of seasoned seamen would be convenient. A goal of his was to explore the neighboring islands when time permitted. Who knew what treasures the system had put there.

Besides, what Sap Trang said was true. He did want to create a sphere of influence, and since he was situated on an island it would pretty much have to be an Island Kingdom.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 102 - The Day before the Storm**

“I’ll give you 100 000 Nexus coins as an investment to get you and your fellow villagers on the right track. You should know that the number of crystals I can sell is limited at the moment, as we need them for the war preparations. But enough to last you for a few weeks of cultivation shouldn’t be a problem,” Zac said after mulling it over for a few seconds.

There were only 6 villagers with four elderly men and two old ladies, and their expenditure shouldn’t really impact their daily production. He didn’t mention anything about paying back, as he might as well consider it a gift in case they proved useful. If not, he could always come to collect at a later date.

The Vietnamese villagers looked excited, and quickly got to their feet and bowed toward Zac, who lightly nodded back. However frowns appeared on the other group of people, who also started to glare at the fishermen.

“Why are you only giving them all those resources? What about us?” one of the men angrily asked.

“They seem like they can be useful to my town, you do not. Why should I spend Nexus Coins on you?” Zac said with a dismissive glance, which only made the former tourists angrier.

“There are various tasks that need to be completed on this island. Go earn your keep if you want coins but don’t want to fight. Mr. Trang, take your villagers and come with me,” Zac continued and started to head out.

The fishermen quickly followed in tow, but when the tourists tried to follow a glare from Zac stopped them in their tracks. As he left the infirmary he briefly updated Janos who sighed and reactivated his illusion, keeping the humans inside.

Next he walked over to Adran’s canopy. Adran was a stocky demon who was in charge of the logistics of the temporary town, and one of the people who had been present at the meeting discussing the town design some time ago. He was a common non-combat class called Administrator Zac learned earlier, which was an important reason for his current position.

It was apparently quite similar to the Scribe class that Zakarith possessed, but their differences lay in their upgrade paths. The Scribe class had upgrade paths that veered toward the mercantile class. It could actually also be upgraded into Insciber, a craftsman class that focused on inscribing fractals onto gear.

Administrator focused more on the management of towns and countries. It could be upgraded to things like Magistrate in the future, where the individuals almost became like supercomputers, keeping track of innumerable things in their heads. It apparently also could be upgraded into certain mentalist classes.

There actually wasn’t a too rigid system that split up the types of classes, but it was rather fluid. Some classes were mixes of various things, and the type of class could change when evolving it. Of course, planning out your path from the start often was preferable in order to not allocate attribute points in the wrong direction.

Zac had Adran make arrangements for the humans. He simply provided the Nexus Coins and different lodging for the fishermen. For anything else they first would have to prove themselves. As for the tourists he set some ground rules to whip them into shape. If they didn’t volunteer in doing some tasks around the camp, then work would be handed out. If they didn’t complete it then no food or lodging that day.

He didn’t want groups of people who just drifted about like in Fort Roger. And if they wouldn’t pick themselves up like the fishermen, then Zac would drag them forward no matter their opinion. Besides, he had a feeling that incoming second monster horde would help them realize their new reality. If thousands of monsters charging at them didn’t wake them up, nothing would.

After dealing with his latest citizens he left to look for Alea. After asking around he found she was meditating on top of the repaired wall. He soon found her sitting down with the sun in her back, illuminating her horns to truly look as though they were licks of fire.

Zac did not want to interrupt her meditation and simply sat down close to her and gazed out over the mostly prepared battlefield.

“You’re back,” Zac suddenly heard Alea say after some time and looked over at the demoness.

“I am glad to see you’re better,” Zac said after some hesitant silence.

“Your pill was very effective,” Alea answered as she looked calmly at his face.

The intent stare was starting to make Zac a bit uncomfortable, and he tried to come up with something to discuss. Finally, he detailed his excursion through the

teleportation. The Ishiate, the mink, and Fort Roger. Alea calmly listened through the story, seemingly content to let Zac blabber on, until he got to Emily.

“This human, is she cute?” she asked with a light voice.

“She’s just a kid,” Zac answered with a roll of his eyes. Then he caught himself as it felt like he was defending himself to a girlfriend.

“Hmm...” was the only answer from the demoness as she slowly closed her eyes to keep meditating. Zac felt that he was approaching a weird territory and with a grunt got up to his feet. Before he jumped down the wall he looked down on the meditating demoness a few seconds.

“Thank you,” he said before he left. That was the real thing he wanted to convey. Alea had risked her life to help him in the battle against the Fiend Wolf and was still recuperating from its attack. She was under no obligation to do that but she still did it, and Zac was truly grateful.

With that, he was done with everything he needed to do for now. The demons knew what they needed to do, and Zac’s only goal now was to get stronger. He didn’t want to get mired down in weeks of battle again. The few days of freedom as he explored the new planet made him feel alive, and he was anxious to get back to it.

The fact that the beastmen closed their portal was a bit troubling as it threw a wrench in his plans, but since that small village managed to buy a teleportation array already then many other towns would likely follow suit soon. Perhaps even a government-run one that wanted to gather people.

He went back to his camp and to his surprise saw Ogras and Emily sit under a red canopy in a comfortable chair each, contentedly watching a movie. They obviously were successful in setting up the new Television, as it currently was showing a rom-com movie with an extension cable running through the illusion array, presumably toward the camper.

He wanted to kick the demon and make him do something more productive, but he also felt that it might be good for Emily with some company. The apocalypse obviously had toughened her up, but both her parents were killed just a week ago, and no one could simply shake that off.

“I am going to absorb some crystals before the next horde arrives, don’t disturb me unless it is something important,” Zac said as he looked over at the demon.

“No problem, I can charge up the energy storage of your tin can through that wire, so we won’t need to disturb you,” Ogras answered without taking his eyes off the TV.

Zac blanked out a second before he understood the demon meant the camper’s battery and the extension cord.

“What are you doing?” Emily perked up as she looked over at him.

“I need to train and get stronger,” Zac answered.

“Can I do it too?” she eagerly asked. Zac had noticed her hunger for power since they started traveling together, and was very much in favor of it.

“Not until you turn 16. Find Alyn later, she’ll help you prepare. If you follow her instructions you will have better prospects in the future,” Zac answered with a shake of his head.

“Oh the disgraced teacher will finally have a student again,” Ogras said with a pitying glance at Emily.

“Wait, what do you mean?” Zac asked with a start.

“She got fired because of her, uh, unusually strict training methods in our clan. She was mainly brought over here because she already had the language skill and people

figured she would make a good slave driver,” Ogras said with a widening smile. “Otherwise what use would a teacher have during an invasion? Did you think we would go around opening a bunch of schools for you humans?”

The eyes of both Zac and Emily widened at this, and Zac’s image of the calm and proper lady clashed with the image of Alyn screaming on top of her lungs while whipping a bunch of slaves.

“Well... Don’t let her overdo it. Emily, stay strong,” he said as he entered his camp.

“Wai-“ the teenager tried to interject, but another shield superimposed over the illusion array. It was a **[F-Grade Small Scale Defensive Array]**, the cheapest and weakest defensive option in the town shop.

It wasn’t something Zac bought to protect himself, but rather a means to show the surroundings he didn’t want to be disturbed. It only cost 75 000 Nexus coin, and a random punch by him or Ogras would break it. It was, however, effective against a girl who still hadn’t started on the path of cultivation.

For the next four days he simply sat down and absorbed his **[E-Grade Nexus Crystals]**. He was able to absorb roughly 2 a day, and he already consumed two of them before. He left his 10<sup>th</sup> and last crystal for emergencies though. During the whole time he barely slept or ate, he just sat down and let the huge power wash over him.

He stood up and after a quick shower and dinner he opened up his quest panel.

**Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect town from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, town upgraded to City, status upgraded to Lord. (1/3) [1:03:22:34]**

A bit over a day remained until the next wave started, and only the finishing touches were needed now. He removed his defensive array and walked out to the makeshift movie-canopy. During the four days it had gotten some upgrades, with walls that kept the glare out of the TV, and a rug and coffee table. It was however empty so he headed toward the town.

After asking around he learned Ogras was with Adran, and walked over. As the two saw Zac approach they nodded toward him.

“How are the preparations?”

“Everything is finished. This time we had time over to create a few siege weapons as well. They might be useful, and they can even be manned by the non-combat classes or your new citizens after some training. The only thing remaining is purchasing the aces with Nexus Coins,” Ogras answered. “I have taken the liberty of collecting three million Nexus Coins for the war effort. I mean five million.” He continued, correcting himself after a glare by Zac.

Zac nodded and after some discussion purchased a few defensive measures.

“How are the humans?” Zac asked Adran after that was done.

“The old people are working hard cultivating with Nexus Crystals. Their leader has even gained a decent speed at killing Barghest by now. He has been getting assistance though, of course,” the administrator answered.

“The youth are a bit more troublesome, but they’re getting there. Nothing is as effective in getting people in line as a few days of filling old latrines and digging new ones,” Adran continued with a small smile while Ogras openly snickered. “Oh and speaking of the last little human, here she’s coming”.

Zac turned around and saw Emily approach like a small thundercloud. Next to her a visibly irate Alea and Alyn were walking along. Zac sighed and stood up, and unhesitantly started to powerwalk away.

## A note from TheFirstDefier

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### Chapter 103 - The Second Horde

“Zac!” a few voices shouted after him. And he could only sigh and turn around.

Since he saw her last Emily had undergone a drastic transformation. She was properly cleaned and wore new clothes. Zac noted with some interest she had chosen the men’s style with the pants and leather armor rather than the dress-robos that the two demons by her side wore. Her messy hair also was turned into a pixie-cut instead of the uneven mess of a crazy person.

All three, especially the teenager, carried an angry energy as they approached him, and he could only helplessly shake his head.

“Hello, the three of you look lovely today,” he said, preemptively trying to avoid whatever trouble was coming his way. It was a trick that usually worked on Kenzie back in the day. Unfortunately, it seemed to have quite limited effect, as there was barely any change in expression on their faces.

“These two are crazy! I want to learn cultivation from you instead.” Emily angrily huffed.

“This child has a great talent for the elements, and would become a great mage, healer, or poison mistress,” Alyn interjected. “But she is very rambunctious and keeps demanding to learn how to use axes. It would be a waste of her talent.”

“And also very unladylike,” Alea added on.

“So we have been trying to correct her ways, but she is very stubborn,” Alyn said with a frown.

“So what do you want me to do?” Zac asked.

“Punish the child. Hanging naked on the town square for a few days should make her temper milder” Alea said.

“Don’t be absurd. She needs to get married in the future. Just a public whipping would do,” Alyn retorted with a slight frown.

“I told you, they are crazy! They have tortured me constantly since you left me with them. Let me train with you instead. You saw I learned quickly,” she said while glaring angrily at the two demons.

“How do you know what talent she has?” Zac curiously asked, ignoring the teenager for now.

“I had a few warriors contribute some of their Nexus Coins to buy a simple testing device from Calrin,” Alyn simply answered.

Zac was starting to understand why Ogras thought Alyn would make a good slave driver. He felt it wasn’t as easy as the warriors simply willingly gave away their money after risking their lives. He could only nod and focus on Emily.

“Why do you want to fight with axes? You should be happy that you have the option to become a mage. You can just blast the enemies from a distance,” Zac extorted the teenager. “Poison isn’t a bad idea either. Have you heard about our contribution quest? Alea is on the third spot there with her poison attacks.”

When Alea heard the comment she smiled proudly and looked down at the teenager with a triumphant face, but she only rolled her eyes.

“But you are number one right? Much better than that stupid old hag? And you can blast enemies from the distance as well,” Emily said grumpily, drawing an angry glare from Alea.

“I’ve bled over every inch of my body the past months. There’s almost not a single part of my body that hasn’t been wounded and scarred from my battles. Fighting in melee range is to constantly put yourself in harm’s way. A single mistake and you’re dead. You should think long and hard before you decide to follow in my footsteps. There are innumerable paths to power, and mine is just one. Try to focus on yourself, and think about what would suit you,” Zac said with a sigh.

“Why are you here anyway? I thought only Alyn was in charge of Emily’s education?” Zac asked of the poison mistress.

“When I heard about her talent I wanted to check her out. I noticed she’s also a bit ruthless and crazy, so I think she would make a good disciple of mine,” she said with a slight smile.

“Who’d be a disciple to you?” Emily shot back with a scathing glare.

“I can’t help you train at the moment. Listen To Alyn, she is far more knowledgeable about these things than I am. And think long and hard about your future path before deciding. The choices you make for your class and attributes in the future will impact your whole life,” Zac said as he started to walk away. He didn’t want to comment about the discipleship as that was something between the two of them and he didn’t want to butt in.

“Oh, and no hanging or whipping. She’s a student, not a slave,” he added as he moved away.

All three of them looked like they weren’t finished, but Zac used **[Loamwalker]** to move away. The rest of the day Zac simply relaxed and adjusted his state of mind. He watched a few movies and took a walk along the shore. Finally when the counter reached 1 hour left he walked over to the wall. Not long after Ogras and his four generals joined him.

As time passed more and more of the warriors arrived, and thirty minutes before the next horde arrived every combatant was at the ready. Adran was also there along with the humans, who nervously looked around. It was on Zac’s command they were brought here. They needed to see the reality of this new universe.

They thought they escaped calamity when they fled their island, and hoped to get back to normalcy now. But that was impossible, as their experience with the frenzied rats was only a small greeting gift from the System, and it would only get worse. Unless they started to take things seriously the world would move forward without them.

Alyn and Emily also joined them on the wall. Emily wanted to walk over to Zac, but Alyn kept her close to the stairs leading down, together with the other non-combatants. They didn’t know what would come from the next wave, and they needed to be able to quickly get down to safety if it was needed.

The time slowly crept forward, and everyone gazed upon the battlefield with a solemn expression. Some tried to spark a conversation to lighten the tension, but any talk quickly died out under the heavy atmosphere. The moment his counter went down to zero a huge blinding light appeared in the distance. The next second a large construct appeared, most closely resembling a hive or anthill.

It was looked to be almost a hundred meters tall and was somewhat shaped like a pyramid. The whole construct was a dark grey, almost turning black. There were also

green lights covering the hive, almost making it seem like they were windows wrought out of emeralds. On the ground a few large entrances were visible.

The structure gave an oppressive feeling like the whole thing was a large lumbering beast.

“What do you think?” Zac asked Ogras who was standing next to him.

“Some sort of nest. It looks like this second horde is a bit different compared to the first. There are no pillars unless they are inside that thing. I’m not sure where we go from here. I get nothing when trying to use my identification skill on it,” Ogras answered with slightly furrowed brows before he increased his volume “Anyone recognizes it?”

Only frowns and shakes of heads and a few short answers followed. None of the demons knew what they were facing. The minutes passed and the unsettling feeling only grew larger as nothing happened.

“Should we go in? It doesn’t feel like a good idea to just leave that thing alone. Who knows what’s going on inside there,” Zac asked with a frown.

“I sense something!” a voice suddenly shouted. It was one of the earth mages among the demons. He jumped down from the wall and placed his hands on the ground. “There are subtle vibrations in the ground. I think the things inside the nest are digging downward,” he said with a serious expression.

A few more demons jumped down, and they confirmed the suspicion. Something was going on inside that hive, but it was happening beneath the ground.

“We can’t let this go on. We need to head in,” Zac said as he jumped down the wall as well. “First group follow me!”

Twenty-five demons quickly jumped down behind Zac. They were a mixed group of both ranged, support, and melee classes. They shared the same shift as Zac during the fights with the wolf horde and were the demons Zac was most acquainted with apart from Ogras and Alea. They also had two earth mages in the mix, who would be able to help with the scouting.

They carefully approached the huge hive. It was quite far from the wall, and Zac noticed with a frown that it was outside the range of all his offensive arrays or fortifications. If they wanted to destroy this thing they would have to do it by hand. Perhaps they could construct siege engines that were more designed for structures compared to hordes of enemies.

When they were a few hundred meters away from the black nest one of the earth mages started and went down on the ground. Zac immediately stopped and glanced around carefully.

“They’ve stopped whatever they were doing underground,” the mage said.

In response the group immediately took out their weapons, unsure what would happen. Zac’s eyebrows suddenly rose in alarm as he stared at the large holes on the ground floor of the nest.

“Get ready!” he shouted as he took out a large rock from his pouch.

A huge stream of insectoid monsters was pouring out of the nest, heedlessly charging toward the group. Their colors matched the hive, a mix of black and green. They had large chitinous shells that covered their bodies, both their appendages and mandibles looked like sinister weapons.

There seemed to be three types of insects in the army. The most populous looked like a mix between an ant and a mantis. They had three pairs of legs with three joints much like normal ants, but they were as large as a pony. The front set of legs were

sharp hooks, and it looked they were made for digging or fighting, rather than running. They could be regarded as the normal soldiers of the insect army.

If the first group could be considered eighty percent ant with some mantis peppered in, then the second group could be seen as mostly mantis. They were at least fifty percent larger compared to the normal insects, reaching over two meters height with their bodies, with their torso stretching upward. Their two front legs were huge sinister blades, looking extremely dangerous.

The last group of insects was very different compared to the rest. Their legs were shorter and their bodies were fat, almost bulbous. The other creepy crawlies were mostly black with some green details, but these ones were mostly green. They also had huge heads with oversized circular maws.

Zac immediately threw out three rocks, each targeting a different type of insect. He still preferred this type of test on new enemies.

The first rock slammed into the footsoldier, crushing its head and instantly killing it. The larger mantis-like being actually managed to react and tried cutting the incoming rock. However, the force in the throw was too strong, and the insect missed as the stone slammed into its chest. The shell of the insect actually didn't break as the stone cracked from the impact. The insect was thrown away and fell down twitching on the ground. If it wasn't dead it at least was dying from the impact.

The last insect exploded into a large pool of green goop that instantly started scorching the ground. Zac realized the last things actually were large walking vats of acid or poison with some shock. He didn't even have time to digest the information before the green acid-monsters spit out large balls of the green liquid at the demons.

"ACID! Target the green ones!" Zac shouted and moved out of the way from the incoming projectiles. A few defensive spells were erected as well to protect the group.

Feeling he had a good enough grasp of the beasts Zac charged up his skill and set out to decapitate some enemies.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 104 - The War Council**

"It looks like they are expanding their nest underground, moving downward. We believe they are digging toward the Nexus Vein," one of the earth mages reported to the group who was sitting around a table.

Twelve hours had passed since the hive appeared, and they had made some discoveries. The ants were called [Ayn Hivebeasts] and the three types they encountered so far were called Ayn Worker, Ayn Guard, and the green acid shooters were actually called Ayn Vomitors.

After the initial clash they quickly learned that there was an enormous number of beasts inside the large structure, as they kept pouring out as they fought. But the moment they retreated, so did the Ants. But just a few minutes after Zac and the demons stopped their assault the digging was resumed according to the earth mages.

They were currently holding a war council while two regiments led by Ogras' four generals were keeping the ants busy. They needed to figure out a strategy for this new horde, as their old one wouldn't work. Most of their preparations were in vain as the new monsters didn't seem interested in attacking the town. The wall stood unassaulted and the arrays couldn't reach the hive due to the distance.

Zac almost felt that the System specifically chose this type of challenge since the last wave almost felt like a gift of experience and money rather than a challenge. Certainly, the last waves were tough, but never to the point of true desperation.

"That's it then? We'll head in and destroy it today," Zac said with a frown.

The Nexus Vein was the lifeblood of his island. It created the crystals in the mine and the high concentration of Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere. Anything from cultivation to crafting to even farming would be far more efficient in this area. If he bought an island-wide gathering array in the future it would truly become a paradise. He couldn't risk his city's foundations just for the opportunity to farm some insects.

"Wait a bit," Ogras hastily interjected. "We also have concluded that during our attacks they are stopping their excavation-work to meet our attacks. We can simply farm them without risking the vein as long as we keep the attacks going, letting you keep your lead against the other humans," he added.

It was a fair point, but Zac had a feeling that it was more about the contribution points for the Fruit of Ascension than letting him gain levels. Besides, he held a commanding lead over the others as it was, and didn't really need to gain levels at the moment. He was fast approaching the first bottleneck at level 75.

Zac mainly needed to improve his Dao-insights at the moment. He already possessed a rare class, and his goal was to upgrade it into an E-Rank Epic class. His only options at the moment were Rare or Epic, as the rarity couldn't downgrade when reaching the next tiers. He already knew that his situation was pretty bad since the multi-verse was full of examples of geniuses whose cultivation journey got cut short since they couldn't upgrade their special classes.

Still, he didn't want to give up his advantages. Upgrading to a rare class wasn't the best option. He tread the path of the elite, spearheading the powerhouses of Earth. Since he was already locked into this path he would go all the way, and keep upgrading the rarity of the class. He knew that Early Stage Seeds were not enough for an Epic class, so it was time to upgrade his Daos. If that was at the expense of his lead in levels, so be it. He wouldn't limit his future achievements just to become the first person to reach E-Rank Class.

"Constantly attacking out in the open is different from defending on top of a wall. We will not be able to last as we did during the wolf-hordes. Besides, we do not know whether the insects will grow stronger over time like the wolves did, and it is safe to nip the problem in the bud," Zac said.

To be honest, safety concerns weren't the only reason he wanted to end this horde quickly. He just had a taste of freedom and adventure as he explored in search of his hometown. He was loath to spend the next four weeks slaughtering insects. He knew that the gain of nexus coins would be huge, but he would still net good income if he sent people down into the mines instead.

He was also even more anxious to get home after seeing the life of civilians in Fort Roger. Emily would have met a miserable fate unless he was there, and worry over his friends and family was starting to keep him up at night. He even had trouble focusing during meditation, as the intrusive 'what-ifs' kept popping up in his head.

"Three weeks. Let us fight and farm for three weeks, and after that we will invade the hive," Ogras entreated.

“It’s too long. You can have ten days. After that I’m heading in,” Zac flatly refused. That would leave him three weeks to travel the world before the final wave, twice what he had last time.

“Bah, you’re throwing away a great opportunity,” Ogras muttered in discontent.

Zac only rolled his eyes at the demon. What they gained from the quest was already great, and they shouldn’t get greedy. The longer they waited the more weird things could crop up.

“Did Calrin find any information about the beasts?” Zac asked as he changed the subject.

“He did manage to buy a short missive about the [Ayr Hivebeasts]. They are an extremely prolific species led by hive-queens. As long as they have enough cosmic energy the queens can almost indefinitely spawn soldiers. The stronger the queen the mightier warriors it can birth, and more types as well,” Adran answered. Since he wasn’t part of the fighting force he tried to help the war efforts by gathering information.

“There are examples of the beasts’ insatiable expansion, completely infesting a planet if left alone. We believe that the threat will be over when we manage to kill the queen. After that no more beasts will spawn, and we can simply slowly exterminate the survivors. Killing the queen will likely mark this horde as completed as well,” he continued.

“How strong is the queen?” Zac asked.

“It should be E-Grade Class equivalent. It might also have a few bodyguards close to that in power for protection,” Adran answered.

“Okay, what does it look like, what are its powers?” Zac probed further.

“Actually, the large construct we see is not a structure, but the queen herself. The Ayr Hivebeasts live inside their queen’s body for the most part, and the queen slowly grows to accommodate a larger population. The digging we hear is the insects making room for her body expanding down into the ground,” Adran answered with a grimace.

Everyone’s eyebrows rose in surprise at this.

“How the hell do we kill something that large?” Ogras asked with a frown.

“Apparently it has a core somewhere inside. You need to get inside to its core-room and destroy it, and it will die. The exact details were unclear in the missive we obtained though,” Adran said with a sigh.

“Good job. See if you can find out anything else, as long as the information doesn’t become too expensive,” Zac said.

That the huge construct was an actual being didn’t change much in Zac’s opinion. They’d still farm for ten days, after which Zac would enter, and drag Ogras with him no matter if he was willing or not. Inside they would find the boss and kill or destroy it.

With that everything was settled, and Ogras immediately set out with a company of soldiers, loath to miss even a single Contribution Point. Zac stayed put since he would be needed to relieve Ogras when he ran out of steam so that they could put continuous pressure on the insects. He really didn’t want that huge queen-beast to get her hands on his Nexus Vein, so no expansion could be allowed. And who knew if the hive queen would have some strange mutation from getting too close to the vein.

As the days passed an advance-wall was erected. It was nowhere the size of the regular wall, but it would allow some protection while retreating. The craftsmen also refitted a few of the siege machines so that they would be able to attack the hive

queen. However, the large boulders and bolts only bounced off the black structure without as much as leaving a mark.

Zac tried as well, and ran up to the structure with his movement skill and slammed into it with a Dao-Empowered **[Chop]**. It was effective, creating a large scar, but the response was horrifying. It was like the ants turned crazy and surged against the demons in a frenzy.

The mantis-things actually started throwing the Vomitors in retaliation, and as they sailed through the air they overcharged themselves much in the same way as the suicide attack the demons possessed. Zac was forced to expend most of his cosmic energy in a short time, furiously throwing out projectiles in order to clear the rabid waves. But he still got a few acid burns on his face and hands that would take time to heal, as most of the Vomitors were hurled in his direction.

Seeing that Zac's swing only made a small crack on the gigantic structure they knew that a siege wasn't really possible against this thing, and they'd have to enter the tunnels if they wanted to kill the queen.

On the seventh day Zac's fears were realized, as a new foe started emerging out of the hive along with its three siblings. It was called Ayn Titan and was a hulking insect at over three meters tall. Its shell was at least twice as thick as on the others, and it was impossible to penetrate for most of the demons.

They were forced to slowly whittle it down by first disabling its legs by attacking the joints, all while avoiding its terrifying smashes with its claw-like front arms. Since the thing was so heavy its mobility was quite bad and if they fell down with broken legs they stayed down. After it was downed it seemed the simplest method to kill it was to just boil its head in a fireball.

If Zac or Ogras were present they could penetrate or crush their skulls instead. However, the time it took to kill the titans increased the pressure as the ants unceasingly kept pouring out of the hive. There were no breaks, no lulls, just constant unrelenting battle. The only reason they weren't overrun in just a day or two was the fact that the monsters were quite weak, and even the siege machines they brought had no trouble killing the footsoldiers.

The only thing strong about them was their carapaces' sturdiness, but that wouldn't impede the skilled warriors overly much. In the few cases that they were starting to get overrun Zac or Ogras would unleash their most powerful area attacks. Zac simply threw out his huge edges that created large swathes of death and destruction.

As for Ogras, he created a sea of shadows that moved across the battlefield, where dozens of spears unceasingly sprung up to kill everything around. It wasn't an attack that Zac had seen before, and he suspected that the demon made a breakthrough with either a skill or his Dao some time recently.

With his new skill the demon's killing speed was terrifying, and almost eclipsed Zac's own speed, which was doubly impressive since he no longer suffered from an energy shortage. Zac was shocked by the display of power, as he knew that the power of the demons was still limited by the System.

There were a few more who excelled at area battle such as Alea and Rivea, the pyromancer who learned the Seed of Tinder during the wolf waves. Her fire kept spreading among the ants and was particularly deadly to them. It simply stuck to their carapaces and slowly cooked the beasts, and from there spread to their brethren.

The windfall was so great that Zac relented and actually prolonged the farm-fest another day much to the delight of the demons. Ogras was like a storm, grinding his contribution points at a furious pace.

Zac had thought that this kind of situation was something unique, but he was surprised to find out that most large forces in the multiverse kept zones and forests that were a bit like this, teeming with monsters. It provided their young and their soldiers with ample training and outlet for growth, and the clan didn't need to provide any salary as access to the farming zones were benefits enough to join the army. The elders of the clan took care of the evolved monsters, and immediately rooted out any beast that got too strong.

But all good things must end. The eleventh day approached, and the core warriors started to rest up and prepare their aces. Tomorrow they would assault the hive.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 105 - Into the Hive**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New Month, new plug update :) **Due to reaching the final (for now) Goal the number of Early Chapters has once again increased!** Read up to **26** chapters ahead of what's posted here on RR!

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"Is everyone ready?" Zac asked as he glanced back at the group. It was time to find the queen, and a strike force was assembled. It would be led by Ogras, with Zac second in command. Zac didn't mind not being the leader, as he didn't have any experience leading an operation like this. He didn't want to risk his teammates getting killed due to his inexperience. Besides, he could always overrule him if he felt it warranted.

The group consisted of only 6 people. Apart from Zac and Ogras, Janos and Alea also joined the group. Ilvere and Namys were left behind, leaving them in charge of the main army whose job was to keep the fight going outside while they entered the hive. Janos was a support mage who hopefully could turn the odds in their favor, while Alea's attack had proven itself effective even against the Fiend Wolf.

The last two were Rivea and Herod. Rivea was the Pyromancer with the Seed of Tinder. Herod was the earth mage who first spoke up about the digging on top of the wall. It turned out he possessed the Seed of Tremor, making him extremely perceptible to even small tremors in the ground. His job was to act as a scout in the tunnels, whereas Rivea was just additional firepower.

They didn't bring any more people, as quantity didn't really work against E-Grade evolved beings. Most of the soldiers would only be a hindrance rather than an asset inside the hive. Even Rivea was mostly brought so that she could defend their backs while the rest fought the Queen and the bodyguards.

"Human, why not just wait a few more days?"

“You’re pretty close to affording the Fruit, huh? Remember if I die the mission is failed, and the contribution crystal is gone.” Zac answered with a small smile.

It was true. Since Ogras started using the wide-scale shadow-attack his contribution points skyrocketed. In only 10 days he almost got as many as he did during the three weeks of the first wolf horde, and he possessed over 40 million points by now.

Ogras muttered something under his breath but didn’t seem overly worried. There was a whole third wave after all, and there still were a lot of Contribution Points to be gained inside the hive. Zac got over five million points for killing the fiend wolf, and he heard afterward that both Ogras and Alea got quite a few points as well for helping out. Killing E-Ranked beings at this stage seemed truly profitable.

They were currently at the back of the fight against the insects and started to move forward. As they did both Ogras and Janos cast a skill, shrouding them both in shadows and illusions, making them almost invisible. They easily slipped past the ant-army and headed into one of the large tunnels.

The inside looked just like outside, with black walls and green crystals. The crystals thankfully emanated some light, though it was a lot darker compared to the tunnels in the mines. They could light up their path with the help of Rivea, but held off on that for the moment wanting to maintain their cover. They didn’t expect to be able to sneak all the way to the core room, but the faster they proceeded without being bogged down in fights, the less pressure on the fighters outside.

Groups of ants kept coming through the tunnel to join the battle outside, and most simply ran right by. With Herod’s timely warnings they usually had time to press themselves against the wall while their skills hid them. However, they were still discovered every now and then, and were forced into a furious battle. It was mainly Zac and ogras who slaughtered the ants without using up too much cosmic energy, and then threw the bodies into Cosmos Sacks.

They quickly realized something was wrong as they walked. The inside of the hive actually seemed larger compared to the outside. The hive was shaped almost like a pyramid, reaching about a hundred meters in height and was a few hundred wide meters at the base. But they had walked over 10 minutes in an almost straight tunnel without reaching an end. They were frequently forced to stop as they walked due to the incoming packs, but they should long have crossed the whole structure.

“The hive is likely a spatial being, containing something like a hidden realm,” Ogras said with a low volume when no ants were nearby.

“Not illusion. Unless extremely strong,” Janos added with a nod.

“Does this change anything?” Zac asked.

“Not really, the mission is still the same. But it will be much harder to find the queen, we don’t know just how large the inside of the hive is anymore,” Ogras answered with a sigh.

As they proceeded further into the hive they ran into fewer and fewer packs of ants. Soon the group found themselves at a crossroads. The path split into three, and it looked like the left descended while right ascended. The middle path stayed the course.

“The core room should be in the depths since that place would be safest from external attacks,” Ogras said, and the group veered off to the left paths. There was no talk about splitting up since perhaps only Zac and Ogras would be able to survive if they ventured out alone.

As they moved further down the rocky walls started to transform, looking more and more like flesh. It reminded them that they weren’t actually inside a mountain, but rather inside a huge being.

“Trap!” the earth mage suddenly exclaimed, and soon after the ground opened up beneath them. They barely had time to jump forward, and as they turned back they looked at a pool of acid seething where the floor once was.

“Does it know we’re here?” Zac asked.

“Who knows? The information missive never explained how aware the hive queen is. It might just have been an automatic reflex from us stepping on this path. The ants might know which spots to avoid,” Ogras answered with a frown.

It did not take long for the group to find the answer to the question, as a group of huge ant-warriors streamed toward them. They were almost as large as the titans but far more nimble. Their name was **[Ayn Elite Guard]**, and their front legs looked very specialized. One of the arms had the same sort of long blade like the mantis-like captains, whereas the other was extremely thick almost like a crab’s arm. It almost looked like a shield Zac thought as he watched them approach.

As usual, Janos erected a mirage around them, making it seem they were part of the wall as they pushed against it. The guards looked a bit confused as they slowed down as they looked around. As if in response the green gems in the wall behind Zac and the others started shining more brightly. The guards immediately perked up and resumed their charge.

Seeing that the illusion wasn’t effective any more Zac threw a rock toward one of them. The stone hurtled toward the front elite guard who lifted its thick arm in response. A deep clang resounded as the ant was slightly pushed back, but not a mark could be seen on its arm. Clearly, the thicker arm was extremely reinforced.

The ants approached and Zac moved to the front, and with a grunt swung his axe against the shield to test its might. A massive shockwave pushed both his target and a few of the other guards back, but the thick shell even held against his new weapon. There was a small crack though, and a few more swings would probably do the trick.

Zac was surprised at the sturdiness of these things, as there weren’t many things below E-grade that could survive a swing of his anymore. If they could take the shells of these things they would likely be able to create some pretty damn durable armor. With some treatment and inscriptions engraved onto them, they might even become E-graded gear.

“Don’t ruin their shields,” Zac said with some greed in his eyes. Of course, perhaps only he was actually able to damage them in any case.

In the end it fell to Zac, Ogras, and Rivea to kill the group of guards. Zac was actually forced to use the Seed of Sharpness to kill the ants while Ogras used his black spear to penetrate into the joints of the guards. As soon as the tip of the spear breached their armor spikes made from shadows poured out of the tip and wreaked havoc on their insides. Rivea lobbed a few fireballs that stuck to their heads and quickly boiled their brains.

Herod tried to help with a few earth spears as well, but his power wasn’t enough against these warriors. He could only help out by erecting earth walls to protect the non-combatants. It was a strain on him as they weren’t in an actual cave, but a living being. The earth mages drew power from the ground, which enabled them to do more with less expenditure, but it wasn’t possible in here. Alea was simply staying put. Her poison spikes would be able to kill these things, but they consumed a huge amount of cosmic energy, so it was better for her to wait for more formidable targets.

They threw the most well-preserved carapaces in Cosmos Sacks and pushed further down, not bothering as much about stealth anymore. They were clearly spotted somehow, and it would be better to just rush through.

Soon they came to a large circular room, and after brief hesitation they ran toward the door that seemed to be leading downward. But just as they approached it the pathway simply closed up by the walls moving together.

“If it’s only the entrance that’s closed I can break it down in less than a minute, but if the whole tunnel is collapsed we need to find another way,” Zac muttered as he touched the closed doorway.

“No, let’s retreat befo-“ Ogras quickly interjected but was interrupted by the pathway they came from opening as well. “Shit, break the door we came from!” the demon shouted.

Zac didn’t hesitate and used **[Loamwalker]** to appear next to the door and furiously slammed into it with a Sharpness-imbued **[Chop]**. A large crack appeared in the door but before Zac had time to swing again the floor beneath them opened up.

It was as though the ground was a huge maw that opened up, and the group helplessly fell down into the large hole.

“Grab on to each other!” Ogras shouted, and luckily the demons were quite close to each other.

However, Zac who used his movement skill earlier was over twenty meters away from the others and he had no way to broach the distance while falling. A rope was flung toward him, but the winds in the hole pushed it out of his reach.

Suddenly the seemingly endless hole split up, separating the groups, and Zac was suddenly utterly alone while falling into the abyss.

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#### **Chapter 106 - The Descent**

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Zac was picking up speed as his descent continued through the black hole. He desperately tried to grab onto the wall as he fell but the surface was almost completely smooth. Seeing no alternative he grabbed **[Verun’s Bite]** with both hands and stabbed forward while summoning a sharpness-imbued **[Chop]** at the maximum length he could maintain.

The cosmic energy edge cut into the wall, and Zac removed the Dao-empowerment as soon as it did. Luckily the walls inside the hive queen were quite a bit softer compared to the hardshell exterior. The harsh deceleration almost ripped the axe out of his hands, but he barely managed to hold on as he ripped a large scar along the wall while moving downward. Soon he stopped just as he saw some green light below.

Since his momentum was gone he took out one of his back-up axes from his pouch and stabbed into the wall with another cosmic edge. Like this, he climbed downward toward the exit. He initially thought about climbing up to find the others, but he soon discarded that thought. They should be down here somewhere as well, and going downward might be a better bet to find them.

Besides, their goal was to go further down to find the core room in any case. So Zac started using the fractal edges of his axes as ice picks as he slowly climbed down toward the exit, And as he saw what created the green glowing light his eyebrows rose.

It was a large pond of acid. If Zac hadn't stopped his decent he would have fallen right in, and even with his armor and Endurance he wasn't sure he'd survive the bath. As he hung close to the edge Zac was pondering on what to do. He could see that there was dry ground roughly ten meters away from the hole, but he doubted he could climb the ceiling all the way over there as his axes would just slide right out.

He took out his huge elongated axe from his pouch. It had accompanied him during many of the wolf waves when he wasn't able to freely use his skills, and by now it was mostly warped and dull. It wasn't really as useful lately since he didn't have to be as stingy with his cosmic energy anymore. Its total length was a bit over two meters, and it would make a decent measuring tool for the pond. Careful to hold it completely vertical he simply dropped it straight down.

The axe fell down and just as it was about to be completely submerged it stopped with a thud for a few seconds before it fell down into the pool completely. It looked like the depth was only roughly two meters. Even if it was shallower than he had dared hope, it was still enough to completely submerge him if he dropped down.

He didn't have any more time to ponder, as the edge he hung from with his axes suddenly cracked, and he fell down together with a large chunk of wall. He quickly threw out a bunch of non-essential tools and items from a pouch, such as his large table and chairs, and a few boulders he used for ranged battle. They smacked into the pond with a large splash, and Zac felt a burning sensation on his feet from the splashing acid.

He landed on a boulder that was rapidly sinking, and without hesitation used two of his standard axes as stilts with the help of **[Chop]** as he pushed down with elongated edges. He hoped that he would be able to jump over the pool like a pole vaulter, but the fractal energy edges broke almost immediately, dashing that hope.

Instead he kept throwing out rocks on the ground, gritting his teeth as the splashes hit his hands and face. Luckily the distance wasn't very long and after a few more boulders he was close to the edge of the acid ponds, so he leaped through the air. He sailed toward dry land as the boulders he stood on earlier quickly disintegrated.

He landed in a pile with a grunt, and quickly took out a rag to wipe the acid off his blistering feet with a grimace. After smearing some healing ointment on them he got up and looked around a bit stumped. He couldn't believe things turned out that well. The blisters hurt but wouldn't leave any lasting damage, and he only lost some furniture and two axes in the escape.

As he surveyed the area he found himself in a cave that was roughly 30 by 30 meters. There was no other hole in the roof, meaning that the others couldn't have ended up here. Most of the room was the large pool of acid, and as Zac looked around it almost felt like a digestive system rather than some sort of trap. Perhaps the ant workers normally filled the room they entered earlier with whatever a hive queen ate, and it dropped down into what was essentially its stomachs.

There, unfortunately, were no visible exits in the room, and Zac was afraid that the acid could rise at any time judging by the markings on the walls. There was a clear

line on the walls at roughly the height of his waist that indicated that the liquid at one point reached all the way there. He quickly walked to the wall and started tapping it.

After tapping for a while he heard a hollow sound roughly at the height of his head and started to carve the cave wall using his axe. Even though the walls weren't as hard as the exterior, he was still forced to use the Dao of Sharpness once again. He briefly wondered if a beast as large as the hive queen could feel him ripping a hole in what might just be its stomach, but he guessed that this couldn't even be considered a wound for something this size. In just a few minutes he carved a hole large enough to crawl through and found himself in a large tunnel.

The deserted tunnel looked completely organic, which was an unsettling change from the mostly rocky or chitinous appearance from earlier. The walls even looked like they were slowly pulsating to a heartbeat. He could only hope that the increasingly biological make of the wall meant he was getting closer to the core. He started walking along, ignoring the stinging pain from his burned feet, and since the tunnel was completely deserted he dared take out an F-Grade Nexus Crystal to recuperate his energy as he moved.

He was completely lost by this point and wasn't sure whether to try and complete his quest or try to look for his teammates. Then again, he had no structured method to do either, so he chose to simply move forward and take things as they came. If he found Ogras and the others, great. If he found a core-looking room, he'd try and destroy it.

The power of the queen and her guards sounded daunting, but he made significant improvements since he fought the fiend wolf. He both had his new axe and the Seed of Sharpness, pushing his lethality to a completely new level. He also possessed another ace in the hole he remembered as he touched his right forearm with some anticipation.

After walking through the deserted tunnels for a bit he came to a fork. One of the paths was pretty much the same as the one he was currently walking. The other had a surprisingly low amount of cosmic energy. He unhesitantly walked toward the pathway with a higher amount of energy, but after a hundred meters stopped himself and backtracked.

Something was absorbing the cosmic energy in the other tunnel, and it might just be the queen. It should take huge amounts of energy to keep spewing out all these ants, even to just survive when you're this big. He couldn't even imagine the energy requirements for a humongous hive queen if Zac's own caloric intake increased by a few times since he evolved. That kind of requirement should be impossible to satiate unless it was through cosmic energy.

He held his axe at the ready as he silently crept into the tunnel. As he moved further the energy kept getting sparser, to the point that there almost was none left in the air. The feeling was extremely uncomfortable, almost like there was no air to breathe. It was the first time he felt the atmosphere to be like this since the integration, and he was surprised to see how reliant he'd become on cosmic energy.

Finally, he entered a huge cavern and what he saw made him stop in place and just gawk. It felt like a scene out of a horror movie, with an uncountable amount of monster pods. The whole cavern was filled to the brim with receptacles that shone with the same green light as the crystals embedded in the hive walls. They stood up on the floor leaving only thin pathways and were even affixed to the walls and the roof. Zac couldn't be sure but it felt like there were tens of thousands of pods in the cavern.

Zac quickly entered a path and inspected the closest pods. Inside was an embryonic version of one of the worker ants that made up most of the armies. After walking through the path he quickly saw that all the pods were mostly the same, the

only difference was the stage of growth of the ants. That meant that this likely was only one of many pod-rooms, and the more powerful types were created somewhere else.

He thought a second about destroying the whole cave, but that would take a crazy amount of effort going by how large the place was. It wouldn't make sense for him to completely expose himself when there likely were many more caverns just like this. His goal was to kill the queen, and if he did most of these pods should likely die out on their own.

He stealthily made his way forward toward the other end, but a sudden movement made him freeze. It was a shadow that flickered oddly beneath a pod. Zac frowned and moved toward it, which caused the shadow to actually move away. Zac realized what was going on and started following the flickering shadow until he reached a small path hidden behind a few pods.

Inside he saw Ogras, Alea, Janos, and Herod hiding at the entrance of a tunnel. They obviously met a similar situation as himself earlier, as their clothes were full of burned holes. Zac couldn't help to sneak a peek at Alea, and was rewarded with a pout and a teasing wink.

Herod was even worse off compared to the others with his whole arm singed to the point of pieces of flesh being missing. He was completely white with beads of sweat covering his face, and he was shivering as though in shock. His eyes were alert though, fearfully darting back and forth.

With a furrow Zac noticed that Rivea wasn't with them, but just as he was about to ask what was going on Ogras quickly signaled him to be quiet. The demon pointed to the walls, and for the first time he noticed something was different about the tunnels compared to those walked through earlier.

It wasn't the usual biotic walls anymore, but it rather looked like there were a multitude of cables, or veins, running along all the surface. The veins split up as they entered the large cavern, and Zac could see a thin line was attached to every pod.

Zac's heartbeat started to increase as he started to realize what was going on. He took out a piece of paper and wrote 'Queen?' as he pointed toward the other end of the small tunnel they hid in.

With a serious face Ogras nodded.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have

Please remember to vote on [at least once a week!](#) It helps me a lot!

**Chapter 107 - Assault**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

New Month, new plug update :) **Due to reaching the final (for now) Goal the number of Early Chapters has once again increased!** Read up to 26 chapters ahead of what's posted here on RR!

As today is the 4th you will not get charged a second time until October if you sign now!

Ogras picked out a crystal from his pouch and closed his eyes for a few seconds as he held it tightly. Next, he handed it over to Zac and indicated for him to pour some cosmic energy into it. As he did he suddenly heard Ogras voice in his head.

“This is a communication crystal. The other end of the tunnel is a hundred meters in. We believe it’s the core room of the Queen. There are four more things walking around in the room according to Herod, the smallest of them almost as heavy as the Titans judging by the vibrations caused when it’s walking. These things seem very vigilant, they started running around when we spoke earlier. We believe that they are the Royal Guards.

“Rivea is dead. We fell into a vat of acid and she didn’t make it. We found this place through Herod, and he also sensed your footsteps approaching. Everyone apparently has a unique vibration, and he recognized yours. I was planning on heading further into the tunnel to scout it out before we found you. Stay here and I’ll check things out.”

Zac opened his eyes and after mulling the information over a bit nodded his head toward Ogras, who melded into the shadows. As he waited for the demon to come back he properly looked over the teammates. Apart from Herod the other two looked mostly okay, though they both sported somber expressions.

Zac couldn’t help but agree the situation wasn’t ideal. When they made their plans before the assault, they had escape as an option. That was pretty much the only reason they managed to get Rivea and Herod to join, as they both were clearly unwilling to enter the belly of the beast.

They thought that while the structure was large, in a panicked rush where Zac and Ogras didn’t hold back they could be out in a minute or two even if they were forced to mow through an army of ants. They didn’t expect the inside to be this gigantic. Now that they also had fallen who knows how far down he wasn’t even sure how to get out. Their backs really were against the wall.

Soon Ogras came back and took out another crystal. This one actually displayed a window, but different from the one he borrowed long ago with the information, this window was actually visible for everyone. Zac started looking at the pouch of the demon, wondering what other goodies he kept for himself in there. He already knew that the space inside should be huge since he could throw a whole fishing vessel into it without any problem.

Zac quickly refocused and studied the screen. It was a still image of a large cavern. The whole surface was riddled with tubes that emerged from various tunnels much like the one they were in. They covered the ground and the roof, leaving almost no space free. The tubes converged in the middle of the cave and were latched to a huge green crystal.

Zac had never seen a core of a monster before, but if that wasn’t it then he’d be extremely surprised. The core was guarded by four monstrous ants as Ogras already explained, and they each covered a direction. Interestingly enough they all looked somewhat different from each other.

Two of them looked like supercharged versions of the Mantis and Titan respectively. The titan was the closest to their tunnel and was a huge hulking thing much larger than an elephant. One of its arms was a gigantic shield, and the other looked like a large mallet. Distinctively from the normal ants this thing actually had at least ten pairs of short legs. Perhaps only three pairs wouldn’t be able to carry its weight.

The mantis-looking ant had long serrated blades for front arms, and its long and graceful build seemed built for speed. It was nowhere as large as the hulking centipede-ant, but still larger than the normal Titans.

The other two Royal Guards were a bit different from any ants they'd seen so far. One of them seemed barely mobile, as it almost exclusively consisted of a head. It did have a body, but it looked small and almost shriveled, and Zac didn't understand how the small frame could keep the head floating, as the head alone was as large as the mantis guard.

The size wasn't the only odd thing about the head, as it also had a great number of eyes. The one in its forehead was enormous, and Zac guessed that it was at least as large as himself. The other eyes were generally placed along the main eye, but some seemed to be looking in different directions. He felt it was lucky that Ogras was the one doing recon, as this thing would probably have noticed himself even if he made no sound.

The last guard was mostly hidden behind the crystal, but Zac felt that it almost looked like a spider rather than an ant. It was comprised of a large bulbous torso, with long legs sticking out from it. He couldn't see any head though and had no real idea of how it looked.

Ogras made a motion toward Zac and with a start he handed over the communication crystal. Ogras once again closed his eyes for a few seconds and then handed it over to Zac.

"The green crystal obviously is the core. I say we try an ambush where we destroy the crystal before the guards can react. Zac and I both blast it with the strongest strike we can instantly summon. Me from left, and Zac from the right. We'll bypass that huge buggler by both sides. Alea and Janos try to delay the guard's reaction time as much as possible. Herod, stay in the tunnels, try to sense whether reinforcements arrive.

"We stay silent until the first attack is finished, and depending on the outcome we take it from there. Hopefully, the attack will destroy the core, and we can choose whether to kill the guards as well or flee. Each of them should net quite a bit of Contribution points, so we should kill them if possible"

"We only have one shot of this, nod if you agree and are ready, then hand the crystal to the next person," Ogras voice echoed inside Zac's head.

Zac thought it over as he looked at the still displaying image of the core room for a few seconds. The huge tank-ant was the one closest to their tunnel. The plan meant that Zac would go to the right of it, which would place him between the tank and the large-headed one, whereas Ogras would rush in next to the sword-wielding ant. He mulled it over and felt that it was a decent proposal.

Ogras was more suited to dodging quick swings from a sword than Zac was with the help of his Dao and Class. Zac himself was pretty nimble nowadays with the help of **[Loamwalker]**, but it was nothing compared to the demon and his shadow dancing. The large head was likely some sort of mage if he had to guess, and between his huge endurance and defensive option on his armor he should be able to withstand at least one blast without problem before he reached the crystal.

All four of those things looked quite dangerous, but he was already mentally prepared for a tough fight. He nodded and passed the crystal to Alea. After a while, everyone had listened to the instructions and agreed with the plan. They slowly made their way forward until they were just ten meters away from the exit into the core room.

Everyone steadied their breaths for a few seconds before Zac and Ogras nodded at each other. Ogras already held his black spear and Zac was tightly gripping **[Verun's**

**Bite].** Ogras started blending into the shadows as he speedily moved forward, and Zac unhesitantly activated his movement skill and moved toward the exit as well.

Footsteps behind them told that the others were following in tow, but Zac had no time to think about that.

The tunnel exit was two meters above the ground, and Zac immediately dropped to the floor and started rapidly moving forward. The Royal guards were obviously alert as a deep penetrating screech erupted from the large one that was the closest. The huge armored centi-ant felt even larger as Zac saw it in person, towering even higher than the Fiend wolf.

The Royal Guard immediately started moving its throng of small chubby legs as it rushed toward him, as it seemed it didn't notice Ogras in his shadows. Zac kept infusing cosmic energy into his feet and luckily his skill worked inside the hive queen as well, even though he was technically standing on a body part of a supersized insect rather than the ground. He quickly moved forward through the huge cave, and as he did a blazing cacophony of colors and sounds erupted above him, pushing like a wave toward the guard.

It was Janos who clearly held nothing back as he pushed out a blanket of distraction. A sweet smell in the air that almost made Zac giddy was a sign that Alea had released something that added to the confusion air as well. Suddenly a huge pressure slammed into Zac as he ran, and he almost stumbled and fell. A quick glance showed that all the numerous eyes of the gigantic head ant were glaring at him.

The pressure wasn't physical, but rather a mental pressure. Only the stare made him feel like he was carrying a mountain, but he could also see that the eyes were starting to shine with a green luster. Luckily the crystal was close, and he pushed an extreme amount of cosmic energy into his legs. He pushed away and shot like a cannon toward the core. From the moment he exited the tunnel until now only a bit more than a second had passed, and the huge guards barely had time to start their attacks.

Zac charged up a five-meter edge with **[Chop]** and flooded the fractal edge with the Dao of Heaviness since he wanted the crystal to crack. Ideally, he'd have wanted to use both his offensive Daos, but he still couldn't infuse both of them into a single strike yet.

The large edge slammed into the crystal with the force of a runaway train, as the growls from the teeth on his axe menacingly echoed in the cave. Ogras materialized at the other side almost at the same time, and with a furious stab slammed the spear straight into the other side of the crystal. As he did a beam of darkness erupted from the spear and also hit the target like a laser.

A crackling sound was heard, but Zacs eyebrows rose when he saw that the crystal was completely undamaged. The crackling sound came from the huge tank, who had gotten two wounds on its torso as it stumbled and almost fell.

"SHIT! Life-bound protection! The core is shielded with the life force of the guards, we need to kill at least the large fucker before we can damage it," Ogras screamed as he quickly distanced himself from the crystal as the mantis-guard was rapidly approaching.

Zac was about to do the same, but a terrifying force slammed into his back and shot him forward straight toward the descending scythe of the mantis guard.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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## Chapter 108 - Fighting the Royals

### A note from TheFirstDefier

Guess what? Another plug! Due to reaching the final (for now) Goal the number of Early Chapters has once again increased! Read up to 26 chapters ahead of what's posted here on RR!

Also, dont forget to VOTE on ! I'm slippin' :'(

Zac frantically lifted his axe to meet the incoming swing, and with tremendous power the two weapons clashed. Since Zac was airborne he had no real force behind the swing and was ruthlessly slammed into the ground, creating a small crater and ruining any tubing that covered the area.

Zac spat out some blood but quickly scrambled to his feet even though he felt like every bone in his body broke from the impact. Another swing was already upon him, but this time he dodged with his movement skill and moved under large guard. He didn't hold back and infused a [Chop] with the seed of Sharpness, aiming to tear a large gash all along its belly.

The mantis' speed wasn't a joke though, as it almost teleported away from the swing. But the velocity of Zac's swing wasn't anything to scoff at either, and with a roar one of the insect's legs was lopped off, causing a torrent of green blood to pour out from the guard. It screeched in anger and backed away a few steps, using one of its sword arms as a crutch to keep itself stable.

The brief respite let Zac take a glance around. The huge tank-looking thing was still occupied by the combined distraction of Alea and Janos, and Ogras was fighting the fourth herald that truly looked a bit like a spider, apart from its head that reminded him of a Vomitor.

But instead of acid, small pitch-black ants were pouring out of its mouth, looking absolutely horrifying. Tens of lances were erupting out from the shadows between the tubes on the ground to stab the spider-looking guard and its spawn, but the small things seemed almost endless.

The guard was also conjuring netting toward Ogras, but the nimble demon was deftly dodging any attempt to catch him. Zac felt that Ogras could handle himself for now, which left two of the guards for him. Before he could decide which one to attack next he realized that they were trapped inside.

The tunnels with the tubes were all closed, not even providing enough space for at hand to push through. Blood was streaming out of the exit they used earlier, and Zac realized that Herod was crushed to death. The only upside to the situation was that it hopefully meant that they wouldn't have to handle a horde of small ants as well.

Two elite warriors of his demon army were dead in under an hour, and Zac was reminded of the harsh reality of this new world. Not even powerhouses were safe. A quick glance at the mantis showed that it still was a bit distracted from its missing leg, and its lethality was likely impacted. It clearly was focused on speed and offense, but missing a leg would take away much of the danger.

Zac's eyes turned to the final guard and saw that its eyes were glowing again. He didn't know what kind of skill it used to hit him last time, but it hurt quite bad and he was in no mood to take another one of those shockwaves. Besides, if it hit Alea of Janos he wasn't sure whether they'd be able to keep fighting.

He unhesitantly charged up a **[Chop]** and infused it with the Dao of Sharpness as well, giving the fractal blade a silver sheen. Without any break he sent the five-meter edge right toward the main eye of the large-headed royal guard. But as the edged ripped through the air it suddenly changed color and turned into the normal pale blue.

At the same time Zac felt a heavy atmosphere descend upon the cave, like another type of mental pressure. It was as though he had lost one of his senses, but not one of the normal five. The fractal blade kept moving toward the large eye through, but the eyes blazed into light for an instant, and the attack was smashed into smithereens.

Zac planned on sending a stream of blades toward the eye, but to his shock noticed that he wasn't able to infuse the skill with his Dao anymore. The mental pressure was persistent, and it somehow blocked him from empowering his skills. He quickly looked around and saw that the core of the hive-queen was shining in a brighter light compared to before, emitting a huge amount of energy. It appeared the queen was somewhat sentient and helped her guards from the sidelines.

"My Dao is Blocked!" Alea shouted, telling Zac that he wasn't the only one affected.

He grit his teeth and used **[Loamwalker]** toward the large-headed mage. He might not be able to use his Dao, but skills were still possible to use. He ran around the huge tank-monster who was wildly wailing its thick arms around, trying to hit whatever was blocking its sight. But Janos and Alea simply kept a safe distance, and mainly kept their eyes on the mantis and the eye-monster.

With his speed, he was upon the large-headed guard in no time and felt that he was almost physically punched by just the eye's glare. He didn't understand whether it was some sort of mental pressure or actual air-pressure, but no matter how he struggled he couldn't move the last meter to reach it. As all the eyes stared at him he was even starting to get pushed away, no matter how much he strained his muscles.

Two huge spears slammed into the side of the large-headed guard, eliciting an enraged screech, even though they barely seemed to penetrate the hard shell. Many eyes quickly swiveled toward Ogras, and Zac temporarily felt the pressure disappear. He didn't hesitate and with a roar pushed himself right onto the head of the beast, wildly swinging **[Verun's Bite]** into the large central eye.

A quick glance toward Ogras showed that he was currently beset by both the mantis and the spider, and the attack on the large-headed one put him in dire straits. The mantis was swinging down one of its swords on him, and he was receding into the shadows to dodge. However, the blade somehow pulled him out from safety, and tore a large gash over his chest, blood freely pouring in all directions.

Zac wanted to help out, but he first needed to finish off this one. He took a deep breath and actually pushed himself into the large eye, frenziedly swinging his axe around. The ant was spasming and pushing all around, waves of energy flying in all directions. Zac didn't let up though and kept hacking further into the head until a huge surge of cosmic energy told him his work was done.

He was completely covered in brain and eye goop by now but had no time to clean up. He rushed toward Ogras who was in big trouble at the moment. He was desperately dodging the nets from the spider and the sword swings from the mantis. There were also three small pitch-black ants latched onto his body, and he seemed to be trying to get them off.

Zac rushed toward the mantis and was about to commence an attack when a deluge of small spiders started skittling toward him.

"Don't let them touch you!" Ogras wheezed out, but it was too late.

Two of them instantly latched onto Zac's legs, and it felt like he suddenly was in a gravity array. The spiders were emanating a gravity field in some way, and their effect seemed to be stacking. He tried to rip them off while dodging the other small spiders who ran toward him, but it was to no avail. It was as though they were fused to his leg, and he was unable to remove them with force.

"They are stuck, I think we need to kill the spider to get them off!" Ogras shouted as another sword swing was descending on him.

The demon grit his teeth and a blue sheen enveloped him from a necklace. The sword smashed into the shield, and Zac almost tumbled away from the shockwave the strike created. Luckily it cleared most of the small spiders from the area, as they were blown away from the force. The blue force field was the type of shield that returned the force back to the attacker, as cracks appeared on the arm of the guard and it stumbled back from the recoil.

"Now!" Ogras shouted as shadows were starting to gather around him.

Zac activated his movement skill and sped toward the mantis. With the two spiders attached to his legs it felt like he was slogging through waist-deep water, but he could only endure and push through. He appeared next to the hurt mantis and started swinging towards the insect's side with a [Chop].

The first swing was intercepted by the sword-arm of the mantis, but the huge force of Zac actually destroyed it. It was already cracked by the recoil of the shield, and Zac's power did the rest. Now the mantis only had four legs remaining, and it was forced to choose whether to stand up or attack, as it needed to use its second sword to maintain balance.

It quickly made its choice as it swung its sword toward Zac while it was tipping over. The air was rippling with power from the swing, as it clearly pushed all its remaining energy into it. Shadowspears rose up to meet the falling body and pushed into its torso using the momentum to its advantage. It screeched frenziedly but completed the swing.

Initially Zac was intending to dodge it, but unknowingly another two spiders had attached themselves to him, making him almost keel over. The Dao was also still blocked, and he couldn't use Seed of Trees to increase his resilience. He could only activate his armor, and a green shield enveloped him. The sword of the mantis slammed into the shield, and Zac was launched like a rocket into the wall.

However, just as he was readying himself for a follow-up he felt another stream of cosmic energy, this one quite a bit smaller compared to the last. It looked like Ogras took the main contribution from the kill. That left just the tank and the spider alive. Unfortunately, Janos and Alea were clearly struggling by this point, even though less than a minute had passed since the start of the fight. Alea was carrying a deathly pale Janos on her back as she dodged the huge monstrosity.

"Janos is out of cosmic energy, hurry!" the demoness shouted as she scrambled away from the ant.

Each slam from its huge arms created tremors in the ground as it tried to crush the two into meat-paste. It looked truly irate from being confused for a minute from illusions and hallucinogenic poison, only to wake up to two of the royal guards dead.

"We need to take out the spider first. If Alea gets a gravity ant on her both of them will die," Ogras said, and Zac could only grit his teeth and agree.

The spider was clearly focusing on entrapment, spawning both the gravity-minions and shooting out waves and waves of thread that was starting to turn a large part of the cavern into a sticky trap. However, both of the offensive guards were dead,

and its own lethality wasn't too high unless it managed to stack enough spiders onto someone, simply crushing them from the weight.

When there were no more interruptions from the other guards Ogras had no trouble avoiding both the spiders and the sticky webs, and gracefully moved toward the large body of the guard. It screeched in alarm but the huge armored guard actually ignored it, intent on killing the two pests next to it.

Zac didn't have the nimbleness of the demon and could only do a more simple approach. He launched a large blade that flew toward the head of the spider, ripping any webs or spiders into pieces that were in the way. The attack essentially created a path for him, and he quickly moved through the passage with his movement skill. It took less than ten seconds for the two to finish off the third royal guard.

Zac and Ogras were breathing heavily, but they couldn't stop yet. Ogras was still bleeding from his wounds as well, but he somehow was reducing the blood loss with the help of shadows that tightly twisted around his torso. Zac's whole body was hurting from being slammed by various attacks and shockwaves, but he still got on his feet with a sigh and started charging toward the fourth royal guard.

There was still one to go.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on [at least once a week!](#) It helps me a lot!

**Chapter 109 - The final push**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

Friday chappy. I'm going to play the new Path of Exile league starting today, anyone else going to be blighting? :)

Alea was in dire straits, dodging and movement weren't her strong suits, and she was further impeded by carrying Janos around. The mage was weakly trying to confuse the last royal guard with illusions after having absorbed enough energy from a Nexus Crystal, but it was as though the huge armored ant was locked onto them.

Zac saw with some surprise that the cracks that appeared when both he and Ogras assaulted the crystal were already closed up, making the chitinous armor look as good as new.

"He has regenerated the damage already," Zac said, and Ogras only nodded in response.

Zac sighed and readied his axe, but Ogras held up his hand.

"What?" Zac asked, anxious to help Alea and Janos out.

"When we kill this big guy all the Royal Guards will be dead and we'll be able to attack the Queen's Core. But we don't know if the Hive Queen will be able to unleash some sort last desperate attack when the guards are down and the shield is removed. The queen is a true E-Ranked being, while the guards only seem to be elite F-Grade beings on the cusp of evolving," Ogras said while looking over his wound.

"We should instantly destroy the crystal the second the last guard dies to avoid any unexpected things. If I kill this big fucker, do you have a finisher to use against the crystal?" the demon continued.

Zac thought it sounded like a good idea, and after some hesitation nodded.

“I need ten seconds of time to charge the attack,” Zac said. Actually, he barely needed half that, but the attack he was about to unleash was his current ace in the hole and he didn’t want to give out its details. It put Alea and Janos in danger for an additional five seconds, but he could only make it up to them later.

Ogras nodded and readjusted the grip of his spear.

“Start charging,” the demon said as shadows were starting to gather around him and his eyes turned completely black. Shadows were soon covering every inch of his body, turning him into a being of darkness. Ogras started emanating a sinister pressure that gave even Zac a hair-raising feeling. Whatever the demon was doing was something Zac had never seen before, and it was likely his strongest attack.

Zac didn’t hesitate and started pouring huge amounts of cosmic energy into his right forearm. It was time to unleash **[Nature’s Punishment]**. The eleven days of mindless killing was more than enough to finish his quest to decapitate 10 000 enemies. Luckily the System considered his kills solo battle even though he was part of the demon army, as long as he was fully responsible for the kills of the insects.

The fractal on his arm was like a bottomless hole, and after seven seconds he already had poured 80% of his remaining cosmic energy into it.

“Get ready,” Ogras hissed in a raspy voice, currently looking like a true denizen of darkness. Two ephemeral black wings had sprouted on his back, softly waving back and forth, each reaching over three meters in length. The spear in his hand was throbbing like it possessed a heart, and as the last seconds passed the heartbeat quickened to a frenzied thumping.

Just before ten seconds passed Ogras punched off from the ground, a wave of darkness flooding out from him. He turned into a large black beam that shot straight toward the chest of the last Royal Guard.

There was no impact and no sound from the clash.

Suddenly there simply was a hole spanning three meters in the last guard’s chest, going straight through the beast. The guard’s head was only attached to its body with a small string, which broke and fell down onto the floor with a thud where Ogras appeared once again. He stabbed a four-meter long lance of darkness into the head to make sure it was dead.

Zac didn’t hesitate and put **[Verun’s Bite]** into his bag. He pushed his hand forward in a grasping motion as though he was trying to grasp the huge crystal from a distance. It felt like he was trying to push through solid matter with his arm, but he only roared and pushed forward with his arm as he poured the last of his energy into the fractal.

With a large dissonant sound a huge crack appeared in the air, as a gigantic rough brown hand emerged out of nowhere. It was quickly evident that the hand was not of a humanoid, at least not one of flesh and blood, as the hand was wrought from tree and roots.

The fingers didn’t have any nails, and only got thinner and ended in sharp spikes. Its size was huge, each finger being roughly five meters long, and if one looked closely one could actually see that many of the roots formed what looked like fractals all across the limb.

The wooden hand mirrored the movement of Zac’s hand, grasping toward the crystal. The translucent shield that earlier was somewhat visible around it just gave a bright flash before it winked out of existence, showing that the protective layer that stopped them earlier was gone.

The Core wouldn’t simply lay down and give up, as it started to emanate an even greater pressure from before as its green light turned painfully bright. The energy

emitted was so great that Zac was starting to get pushed back even though he stood almost fifty meters away, but **[Nature's Punishment]** kept moving forward. As the wooden hand pushed toward the crystal it started smoking and steaming due to the light. It looked like the light from the core was burning it, and simultaneously Zac's hand started to blister as well.

Zac only grunted and pushed his hand forward, and the enormous hand gripped the Core like a vise and squeezed. A weird screeching echoed throughout the cavern and the whole structure started to shake, while the large hand actually caught a green fire. However, the power in the hand was enormous, and cracks quickly started to appear on the crystal until it completely crumbled with a huge explosion.

The hand dissipated as an enormous shockwave slammed Zac and his party into the wall of the core room, the force almost enough to knock him unconscious. He shook his head, dizzy from the impact, and looked around. His whole body felt broken and a stinging pain throbbed from his right arm. When he looked down at it he saw that it was completely scalded, looking like he had put his arm into boiling water.

The **[Nature's Punishment]** worked out really well, apart from his blistering hand. The Core gave out a force that kept even Zac away unable to approach, but it managed to push forward without any problem. It was a shame that the Core somehow was able to obscure the Dao from him as they fought since Zac had wanted to try the skill with its full power.

He was pretty sure that the attack would be strengthened with the Seed of Trees since the hand was made of wood and roots. Perhaps the attack would be even stronger, or perhaps the hand would have been more resilient, and he wouldn't have ended up with a burned hand.

At least he gained another level from the fight, as a huge surge of cosmic energy entered him the moment the Core shattered, a far larger amount compared to when he killed the fiend wolf. That was the third level he gained during the ant waves.

It wasn't the same speed he had during the last waves, but it was still apparently an enormous speed according to Ogras. The others on top of the ladder hadn't leveled at all, or maybe gained one level during the same period. He was currently level 54 while Salvation was on the second spot with level 43.

Ten levels might not seem like a lot, but Zac knew the horrifying amount of wolves and ants he killed to bridge that gap. It would probably take months for the guy or girl to reach Zac's stage, and by then who knew what level Zac would be. He put those things aside and took stock of his surroundings.

The others were in bad shape as well. Ogras was out of his shadow-form and coughed some blood as he tried to get back on his feet. Alea and Janos were lying unconscious, blood dripping out of their ears and mouths. One of Janos' legs was in a weird angle as well, clearly broken.

Zac sat up with a few coughs while he fished out his last E-Grade nexus crystal and started absorbing. He only managed to absorb a smidgeon before he was interrupted though. The whole cavern was shaking ominously, some small cracks already starting to appear on the walls.

He hastily got to his feet with a grunt and stumbled to Janos and Alea, and flung them over his shoulders. He was only running on fumes at the moment, but with his attributes it was no real difficulty carrying two people.

"What's going on?" Zac croaked at Ogras who finally had got to his feet.

"It feels like the hidden space is cracking, we need to get out of here NOW. We don't know what parts will remain and what parts will be sucked into oblivion," Ogras answered while he popped a healing pill into his mouth.

Luckily the tunnels they entered through once again were opened with the hive queen's death, and they scurried out through one of them. The shaking started to get worse, and there were even cracks in space itself appearing, making the air look like a broken mirror. The two didn't dare go near any of those widening rifts, afraid to be thrown into the void.

They encountered some ants during the mad dash out, but they were completely immobile, blankly standing still unaware of the surroundings. The two simply ignored them and kept going, the greedy demon not even contemplating stopping to kill the free targets. Ogras usually was in charge of deciding the path, but when he found no clues what to do they simply trusted Zac's Luck stat, letting him choose at random.

As they ran the cracks in space only got wider and wider until they were starting to get afraid they might not make it out in time. Luckily they finally felt the wind and fresh air in the distance, and reinvigorated they increased their speed. As they turned a corner they were met with the light of the outside, and heedlessly ran out.

The duo stumbled out of the tunnels next to each other, overlooking a vast field of dead ants and panting demons. To Zac surprise, he also saw Sap Trang among the fighters, bloodied but alive. Ilvere and Namys came running up to them and took care of the two unconscious generals, with Namys throwing Zac a baleful glare after seeing Ogras' state.

Finally safe Zac opened up his quest screen.

**Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect town from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, Town upgraded to City, status upgraded to Lord. (2/3) [20:02:32:25]**

The second part was completed, though the huge carcass of the hive queen remained. The system never teleported away the corpses of the wolves, so Zac guessed that they would have to deal with the huge hive somehow. That would have to wait until a bit later though, as Zac was completely spent. Besides, entering that thing right now was to toy with death.

Zac was in no mood to help out with the cleanup and slowly started making his way back to his camp. He had already eaten a healing pill, but his arm was still hurting quite badly.

"Good work, young man," a voice said from his side, and Zac looked up to see Mr. Trang standing some distance.

He was currently using a spear to make sure that the insects on the ground were actually dead. Zac guessed that the experience would be a pretty decent boost if the old fisherman found some live ones still around. Zac didn't have the energy to chat with the old man and only nodded at him as he continued on.

Zac made his way past the wall and the small town and soon found himself in the comfortable stillness of his camp. There were very few who dared to approach this area without invitation, giving it a stillness. But lately, this stillness was starting to get interrupted more and more.

"You're the Super Brother-Man, aren't you?" a voice came from the movie-viewing canopy. It was Emily who was watching a comedy series with a blank face.

Zac sighed and sat down next to her.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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## Chapter 110 - Exploration

“Why do you say that?” Zac simply asked, taking out a piece of pre-grilled meat from his pouch.

“I have been going over things since you started fighting those insects. There are many things that don’t make sense. You’re so strong. Like crazy strong. I have never seen or heard anything like it while I traveled with mom and dad,” she answered as she stared at him.

“And while you fought like a madman the Super Brother-Man gained two levels, and a third while you were inside fighting the boss,” Emily continued.

Zac said nothing and only continued eating, tired in both body and mind.

“Besides, these demons are weird. They know way too much. Not even the cultivators in the cities know many of the things Alyn explained. And they’re way stronger than normal humans. They’re not a race that got newly integrated like us. I think you have captured them from an incursion or something,”

“Noone can capture this man, little brat,” a voice said from behind as Ogras materialized from the shadows. “We simply came to an agreement with Zac and ended the incursion.”

“Whatever,” she said with a roll of her eyes.

“What are you doing here?” Zac asked as he turned back to the demon. He didn’t bother trying to refute the demon who essentially admitted to being a foreign invader. It was their problem after all, not Zac’s.

“I am here to tell you that I’m buying the fruit and will be in seclusion for a while,” Ogras answered. Clearly the healing pills that he ate earlier were quite good since the wound on his chest was largely healed.

“Ok. I might be heading out again soon just so you know. Take care of things if I’m gone after your seclusion is finished. If you think it will take a longer while then inform Alea and the others,” Zac answered.

Ogras only nodded and disappeared with the shadows.

“It’s true isn’t it?”

“...Yes,” Zac simply said. “Do the other humans know?”

“Maybe not those idiots with Megan, they’re too scared to think straight. But I think that old grampa knows,” Emily said with a pout.

No one said anything, but as the silence stretched on Emily’s eyes reddened and two streams of tears started falling down her face. She quickly wiped them as Zac ignored his weary body while getting on his feet, and walked over to Emily. He didn’t say anything, but only patted her head.

“I was really worried,” Emily said with a small voice.

“I know. I’m sorry,” Zac sighed.

He sat down next to her as she kept blankly watching the television. He tried to stay up but between the soft chair and finally being able to relax he soon fell into a deep slumber.

He woke up some time later and found that Emily wasn’t around anymore. There was a package on the coffee table with some bread and meat. The farmers had actually started up some temporary fields within the wall to provide the army with some other food apart from meat, and it looked like it finally had started to pay dividends. Zac was amazed at the speed of the growth of the produce, and couldn’t wait to set up proper farms as soon as the waves were dealt with.

He had been afraid that the apocalypse would bring with it a lack of food and drink, but it obviously wasn't the case. The beasts were getting more numerous, and farming was getting more efficient. Noone should starve to death as long as they controlled some land. Besides, as long as people had access to a System-run shop, they could feed a family for just 10 Nexus Coin a day.

Zac sighed and opened up his status screen.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**54**

**Class**

**Hatchetman (F)**

**Race**

**Human (E)**

**Alignment**

**Human (Earth)**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher**

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - Early, Seed of Trees - Early, Seed of Sharpness - Early**

**Strength**

**279**

**Dexterity**

**140**

**Endurance**

**186**

**Vitality**

**113**

**Intelligence**

**69**

**Wisdom**

**57**

**Luck**

**77**

**Free Points**

**3**

**Nexus Coins**

**21 675 103**

Fighting the ant wave the past eleven days gave him ten million Nexus Coins, covering the cost of building the Teleportation Array earlier. It hadn't given any titles or Dao upgrades either, apart from finishing the quest for his new attack skill. He was

very curious about how his new skill would improve when the skill got stronger in the future.

**[Nature's Punishment - Proficiency: Early. Awaken the wrath of the world. Upgradeable.]**

At early proficiency a huge hand emerged out of the void. He wasn't sure whether he was summoning a living being, or whether the hand just was a copy of his own. Perhaps as he and the skill got stronger he would be able to summon a huge avatar that could fight in his stead.

He put one point in Strength and two points in Endurance and closed the window. With his Race boost he wouldn't have to worry about attribute caps for a long while, and now that his other stats were in order he felt he could focus more on his main one once again.

He ate the food left for him by either Alea or Emily and got up and headed to the town. He met a few demons who nodded in respect to him as he walked, and gave a simple nod back. His reputation kept increasing among the former invaders as his achievements increased.

As he entered the town he saw Megan and another tourist scurry about, each carrying a hoe. It looked like they were on farm-duty today. They saw Zac's approach but after a brief hesitation turned their eyes down and kept moving.

The humans had been horrified when they were taken to the battlefield. Zac's intention was to let them see the reality of the new world and made a few warriors escort them to the advance wall while he battled during the fourth day. The sight of a battalion of demons fighting tooth and nail against a horde of mutated ants made them realize that their trials and tribulations on the last island were nothing compared to what they were witnessing.

Since then they never said anything about fighting or getting stronger and stuck to their daily tasks instead. A few started working on the temporary farms and others helping with cooking and other tasks around the village. Zac was a bit disappointed but he also knew that not everyone could become a warrior in this new reality.

The only one from the group of twelve who still wanted a combat class was Sap Trang. Unfortunately for him he was just too far behind in power at the moment, so he couldn't really partake in the grind fest of the monster hordes. At least it looked like he managed to get some kills in at the end of the siege, which should have been quite a boost since each of the ants gave as much cosmic energy as a couple of Barghest.

Zac found Ilvere sitting under a canopy playing an unfamiliar instrument close to the larger tent where they usually held their war meetings. It was a stringed instrument that reminded Zac a bit of Guqin, though the notes generated from the crystalline strings sounded closer to a violin. It was an odd sight, seeing the burly warrior playing such a delicate instrument.

"The triumphant Lord returns," the warrior said as he stopped playing.

"Did you hear about Ogras' seclusion? And what are you doing?" Zac asked after greeting the general with a nod.

"Yes, he will likely be gone for some time," Ilvere answered. "I'm simply relaxing. It's important to properly rest body and mind after an intense battle. Sometimes the tranquility after the battle can give as much or even more insight than the fight itself."

Zac nodded, as it made sense. People couldn't always have a breakthrough in the middle of battle, even though it squeezed out their potential. Sometimes some reflection afterward was all that was needed to take the final step in pushing through a boundary.

“How was the fight yesterday?” Zac asked.

“Four casualties. With Rivea and Herod it makes six, the worst day since the hordes started,” he answered with a sigh.

Zac could only nod, feeling a bit bitter. His army was continuously shrinking. When the wolf hordes started roughly two hundred warriors manned the wall, and today only 160 remained. Twenty percent of his army had died during the last forty days. Of course, some were killed by Ogras and Namys, but the majority died in battle.

Zac had been quite despondent in the beginning losing one warrior after another, but he was starting to get used to it. People dying while trying to get stronger was the most normal thing in the multi-verse, and no one held any real regrets over it. To cultivate was to defy death. Some did it for the increase in longevity, others for power and wealth. But what all had in common was the knowledge that any day might be their last.

“I plan on sending out expeditions to map the surrounding islands. Please assemble four teams. The goal is reconnaissance, but at least one competent fighter in each team. The team members will be compensated in crystals or Nexus Coins,” Zac said.

“You should know that none of us know anything about sailing or naval warfare. There aren’t any oceans on our home planet,” Ilvere said as he rose to his feet to get to work.

“I know, I will send one of the sailors from the humans with each group. So at least one in each team needs to know the **[Book of Babel]** skill. You people should take advantage that it’s available in the contribution store, you are stuck on a foreign planet after all,” Zac answered.

“Many have actually bought it already. Some are just like you, getting antsy from staying on this island months on end. Most came through the incursion to gain insight and wealth, and that can’t be done while staying inside some walls,” Ilvere said with half a smile. “I’m sure there will be many willing scouts.”

Zac nodded and headed off to find Sap Trang and his fellow villagers. After explaining the situation the four fishermen agreed to help out after some hesitation.

“If we find some of our lost villagers, can we bring them back?” Mr. Trang asked after some silence.

“Yes, that’s ok. You cannot say anything about the situation on the Island though before they are here. The situation here is... Special. If you do the soldiers have orders to silence you and everyone who heard it,” Zac answered. It was extremely strict rules, but he simply couldn’t allow any information about his island to leak yet.

He learned some things about Lordship from Alyn and Ogras while he rested during the Ant-Waves. A Lord held various benefits in controlling a town or even a country as they gained access to a so-called Lord-System. Originally the system was used as a method for generals of the Ancient Empire to control their armies, but with the Apostate of Order the system became generalized and gained a host of new features.

As the system evolved over time various functions were added, and today many benefits existed. For example a Lord could automatically enforce a tax on his empire. There were no loopholes either, as the System was in control of the taxation. The only downside was that The System itself took a cut of the taxes.

Lords also got access to more functions on their teleporters and could even get invited to grand happenings such as auctions and special events in the multi-verse that commoners did not have access to.

“Other humans will have to stay put even if they want to come over. Come back and report their situation to me and I’ll decide what to do about it.”

“Very well. We understand the importance of discretion. Those who left before us were mainly the younger generation from our village. They risked their lives to find help for us, but we never heard back from them. If we can find them and bring them back here I’m sure their future will be better than in most parts of the world,” the fisherman answered.

“Good. Start preparing, I want the four teams setting out within three days. I’ll provide the ships for you,” Zac said as he turned to leave.

“One minute please, I was wondering if I could consult you about my class,” Mr. Trang said quickly.

Zac was a bit surprised as he turned around and inspected the fisherman, only to see he actually was level 25. He must have worked quite arduously since he was only level 21 when he arrived at Port Atwood. Zac remembered how much work he himself put into finishing those last levels.

“What about it?” Zac asked, a bit curious about what Class the fisherman chose for himself.

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#### **Chapter 111 - Wave Whisperer**

“I haven’t actually chosen yet, but I’ve seen which options I have. They are Fisherman, Dockhand, Marine, Acolyte, and Wave Whisperer,” the fisherman began.

The first two were pretty straightforward non-combat classes, whereas the next two were classes Zac knew himself. The old fisherman likely got the option for Acolyte since he bought the Water Spear skill earlier. Wave Whisperer was the only one that was unclear to him. It sounded like a water-based class, but more than that he was unsure.

“I am wavering between Marine and Wave Whisperer. Both are uncommon classes connected to the sea. The Wave Whisperer is connected to taming and controlling aquatic wild-life that might be very convenient in this new world. We saw fish as large as sharks while sailing here, and who knows what else lurks in the depths. Controlling the giants of the sea might both help with scouting and protection,” he continued.

“However, my stats are all toward strength and endurance so far, it might be a waste to take a mage class after this. What do you think?” he asked Zac.

“The stats you get before your class are insignificant on the road of cultivation. If you believe that Wave Whisperer will be more beneficial, take it. You can make up the missing stats with natural treasures and training in the future,” Zac said.

“Sounds reasonable, I will do just that,” Sap Trang said with a nod.

Zac nodded and left the living quarters of the fishermen. He knew that the wily old fisherman actually didn’t require help but just wanted to show his sincerity to Zac by divulging his future class. He already tried to show his worth before the ant waves, and after seeing Zac and the other’s power his desire to pave a path for his villagers only grew.

Next, he went to the Creator’s shipyard and ordered four of the small exploratory vessels for a million Nexus Coins each. Karunthel, the spider-foreman, was not around,

as Rahm explained that he was currently occupied with some experiments. For people like Karunthel and the Creators experimentation was in a way cultivation. If they created something functional and new they would gain a huge surge of experience, maybe to the point of gaining multiple levels.

It was generally the same with many of the non-combat classes. A farmer who reaped a whole field after tending it for months could gain a handful of levels. The higher the difficulty and grade of the herbs or vegetables that were grown the more energy would be awarded. That was why many blacksmiths and other crafting professions preferred to craft hard and high-grade items, rather than mashing together an endless stream of low-grade items. The benefits, both in wealth and levels, if the craft succeeded far outweighed anything low-grade items could compare to.

Other non-combat classes were more of the slow-and-steady type, such as Adran's Administration class that consistently gained cosmic energy while handling town matters. There were certain events though that could award large sudden boosts in experience, such as a town upgrade.

Next, he walked over to the small house that Alyn resided in. He found the demoness sitting on the porch in the same comfortable chair she used down in the mines.

"How is Emily doing?" he asked.

"She has started following the methods to attain mage classes, but she still insists on training with an axe for a few hours every day," she said as she put down her book with a sigh.

"Well, it's her decision, so let her proceed. Who knows what class she'll be able to get from the combination," Zac said with a shrug.

"I've read that cultivators of newly integrated planets are far more likely to choose unique and unknown classes, but that is a dangerous game to play. You humans will soon see the folly in your ways. I wouldn't be surprised if more than half the people on your so-called ladder right now will be stuck at F-class forever. If breaking through to the next levels was that easy then Clan Azh'Rezak wouldn't only have a handful of D-rank ancestors after thousands of years of accumulation," the teacher said with a serious face.

"You need to have your people choose sensible and common classes so that you can get some guaranteed E-Rank Uncommon underlings. Who knows, perhaps some of them might even be able to evolve into D-Rank in the distant future."

"I am not going to tell people what classes they choose. None of the people on the island are really my subjects. Of course, it might change in the future when you create your Academy," Zac answered.

"Actually I have a question about class rarities," he said as he changed the subject to the old fisherman.

"He is a normal fisherman but he got multiple uncommon skills to choose from when you said that barely one out of a thousand got uncommon classes after studying at an academy, how is that possible?"

"The first class is mainly based on achievements and experiences since people rarely are in contact with the Dao at that stage. Someone old will have more of those than a youngster who's only 16. However, that doesn't mean one should wait with choosing a class," the demon answered. "The older one is the harder it gets to improve one's race. I am not sure if Mr. Trang will be able to evolve his race even with the medicinal baths. The optimal time for evolution has passed. Even if he managed to evolve it will involve far more resources compared to someone normal," Alyn concluded.

“What about me?” Zac asked curiously.

“Your prime age for evolution had passed, but you side-stepped that with the Fruit of Ascension. Now you’re a thirty-year-old whose lifespan is 500 years, that’s almost a baby,” she said with a slight smile.

“But generally its better to evolve as soon as possible, it will be cheaper and you will avoid any risk of your body simply not being able to withstand another evolution. If it takes too long your body might not be able to take that last step, precluding you from evolving. So as soon as you reach E-Rank Class you should start working on your Race again,” she added.

“On another note. We do not have any cultivation manuals at the moment. Emily is turning 16 in a month and she should be using a cultivation manual from the start. It will help her immensely, as reforming pathways at a later date can be quite painful and dangerous,” Alyn said.

Zac could only grimace while nodding, remembering his own harrowing experience when he improved his pathways from his initial rudimentary ones. That was likely his first large mistake, and it almost got him killed.

Since there were some pretty good cultivation manuals in the Contribution Stone he decided to purchase a few of the cheaper ones. It was not only for Emily, but it would be needed if he wanted to create an Academy in the future. There were not many other things that grabbed his interest in the shop anyway, and the expenditure seemed acceptable.

There was only one thing he was planning on buying before heading out again, a skill called [**Mental Fortress**]. It was a skill that both protected him from skills like [**Eye of Discernment**], and also boosted the defense against mental attacks and illusions. It cost ten million contribution points, which made it one of the most expensive skills, but he could afford it. The battle against the ants almost gave him as much as the whole wolf horde, and he currently possessed roughly 34 million points.

Feeling done with everything he needed to do he walked back to his camper and spent the rest of the day recuperating. His arm was still hurting quite badly, while his feet still had blisters from the acid bath.

Emily came back later that evening, preferring to stay at his camper rather than her assigned housing close to Alyn. He didn’t know it was the familiarity of the camper or the presence of him that made her more comfortable, but he didn’t mind as he had gotten used to falling asleep outside under the moonlight in any case.

“You know, I’m wondering what the world would think if they knew the strongest and the wealthiest man after the apocalypse lives like a hobo outside a camper in the woods,” she said with a grin, obviously having recovered from earlier.

Zac only rolled his eyes and motioned her to sit down. He took out his kit for grilling meat and started preparing some food for the evening. Emily sat down and took out something from her backpack. It was a covered tray, and when she lifted the lid Zac noticed a couple of long pieces of dough.

“Give me two spits,” she said and Zac curiously complied. “Mom made these during the summer, its really only water, flour, and salt, but it still gets pretty yummy when grilled. It’s a shame we don’t have butter though.”

She took out one of the pieces of dough from the tray and wrapped it around the spit. She did the same with the second spit and then she placed them some distance from the fire.

“I think it’s called caveman bread? I don’t remember anymore,” she added as she kept an eye on her spits.

Zac only smiled and salted the large slabs of meat. He made a mental reminder to get some stock of various things when he left next time.

“You’re leaving the island again, aren’t you?” she said as she kept spinning the spits.

“Yes, in a few days,” Zac answered.

“Let me go with you!” Emily immediately burst out, looking up at him.

“You know, I can’t go back through the beastman village. They closed their teleporter the moment after we used it. The portal I will use might lead to the opposite side of the planet, far from wherever your siblings might be.”

“You don’t know that. They might be right where you end up, and you will not be able to recognize them,” she retorted, starting to work up a huff.

It was true. One of the things he learned from Emily about the tutorial was that the end-point of the tutorial sometimes was randomized. Well, not really randomized as much as some were lucky and others weren’t.

As the cultivators were undergoing the tutorial the world was rearranged, and the system dropped off the cultivators at a spot of its choosing when it was over. Some were lucky that the system chose their own turf when they got returned, like the villagers of Winterleaf village. But most were dumped at a completely unknown place.

Zac asked the demons about it and they thought it sounded like a test. Many would start traveling home, braving dangers to find a way back to their families. Most would likely die, but some would emerge stronger from the experience. Others would give up and hide behind walls, becoming despondent shut-ins like the people of Fort Roger.

That explained why Hannah and the others were never returned, and also meant that Emily’s siblings might be anywhere.

“Come on, I will be very helpful. I have visited many towns and know how to find information. I will be useful to you. If you go alone you might just make a scene and get in all kinds of trouble,” she quickly said. “Besides, I’m turning 16 soon. Traveling might help me get a better class.”

Zac kept slowly spinning his spit, mulling things over. He wasn’t sure what to expect from his next excursion, and it was a bit troublesome to keep her safe since she couldn’t use the defensive gear yet. However, she might actually be useful.

During the ant waves there were actually two new choices that cropped up. One was called Cradle of God, and it seemed a bit too weird for Zac’s taste, and not somewhere he’d even consider bringing Emily. He actually had a suspicion that it was the home of Salvation, the second-place holder of the ladder. Judging by the Pseudonym he chose, it wouldn’t be too far-fetched he’d name his town like that. He knew nothing about that person, and he wouldn’t teleport there since it might get extremely dangerous.

The second option made Zac far more hopeful, as it was called New Washington. It wasn’t very imaginative, but it clearly was an American town. The name implied it was government-run as well, and it might be the best bet for him to gain information. He realized it might be a trap, and that was another reason he was hesitant in bringing Emily.

The people who possessed access to an array would generally be elites, and you had to have some balls if you planned on doing something untoward. Besides, he already knew the system restricted the use of the array as some sort of deathtrap. He couldn’t place any offensive arrays around it or place it far underground for example.

Still, he had a very clear goal, and bringing Emily would likely slow him down in addition to putting her in needless danger. He wasn't heading out on a stroll after all.

"I am sorry. You will have to stay here until you have started cultivating. At that point, you can use defensive treasures and protect yourself. I don't know what I'll encounter when I step out of the teleporter," Zac finally said with a sigh. "But I will ask around for you about your siblings. My main goal is to find my hometown just like you, so I understand your feelings."

Emily didn't seem to care about the promise and angrily huffed as she ran toward the camper, completely forgetting about the bread.

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#### **Chapter 112 - Back to the Scene of the Crime**

The next few two days went by excruciatingly slow for Zac who just wanted to get up and leave. However there were more and more things to do in order to keep his town running. He couldn't wait for finishing the third horde in a few weeks. When he became a lord he'd get a system-trained administrator, perhaps Abby, who he could leave most of the work to. Adran was a competent worker, but Zac felt it was much too early to start giving the demons real influence in his future town, especially since their alliances mostly lay with Ogras.

Ogras was someone who would take a bit of advantage and run away with it. Zac still believed that the demon would do his best in order to improve the state of Port Atwood, at least for ten years, but he wouldn't lower his guard until he found some real assurances. Therefore Zac still felt the need to personally oversee some details.

He met up with Alea and Janos who were mostly fine, with the exception of Janos' leg. The poison mistress looked a bit annoyed upon hearing Zac was leaving once again but didn't say anything. Zac also talked with a few of the mages, who promised to start work on an improved home for him. Emily's comment the other day made him realize he'd forgotten about actually improving his camp. He remembered Ogras' lush palace over at Azh'Rodum, and even a tenth of that would be a nice upgrade to his own living situation.

The second thing he did was to travel to the mountains. He brought only Alea with him this time, pushing his speed to the limit. It wasn't some romantic reasoning behind it, he rather needed her to spot any leftover poison.

Earlier when he traveled this distance he usually had to be careful and moved in a normal walking speed, but now he ran, ignoring the occasional barghest. The trip would take over a day back in the day, but now it only took a couple of hours. Surprisingly Alea seemed to have no problem keeping up either.

The mountain valley had finally cleared out enough for him to start collecting everything of value from his killing spree. He didn't want to leave this treasure trove as he left the island again. And it was an especially nice timing since Ogras was occupied with absorbing the Fruit of Ascension. Zac learned that it could take weeks to absorb a treasure of that magnitude. A big reason he almost died in the pond was that the mix of Cosmic Water and the Fruit of Ascension made the absorption only take minutes rather than days, which overtaxed his body.

He didn't set about collecting it all in order to hoard the wealth for himself. He planned on using much of it as rewards and salaries for the demons and other citizens in the future, or even stocking stores with the weapons that lay about. Besides, who knew what secret treasures all the elites of the demon army had pocketed for themselves.

They arrived at the mountain slopes at lunch, and after making sure that there wasn't any poison around, they scaled the mountain from the same side as the demon army once did. From there the two followed along the path of the battle, picking up any armor and weapon that seemed useful. The corpses were quite decayed, but at least the scorching sun and blowing winds had caused them to dry out rather than rot, so the stench wasn't as bad as Zac had feared.

Many of them lay in pools of dried but putrid-looking liquid though, and Alea explained that the poison he threw out would cause them to vacate from every orifice, completely drying them out, as the victims were dying. From that it was pretty clear which ones died from poison and which ones were dead from the battle before.

The number of demons lying in a pool of waste was quite terrifying, even out at the rim of the valley. Zac mentally shut down and wordlessly kept collecting items. Even Alea seemed subdued by the sight as she helped him out with the collection. They kept moving about for most of the day, finally reaching the epicenter of the poison, the scarlet tree.

The tree still stood up, even though many of its branches were destroyed in the battle. However, its trunk was no longer red, but purple, reminiscent of the poison cloud. The once pristine white leaves were also changed, now having purple veins covering them.

It made a bit of sense as the closer they got to the tree it was obvious that the corpses were even more dried out. Perhaps the tree absorbed the poisoned warriors to heal itself in the same way it absorbed the trees earlier. From all the poison it seemed that it mutated somehow.

"How magical! I wonder what kind of fruit a poisoned Tree of Ascension will sprout. I hope it survives its current ordeal," Alea said as she stared at the changed tree in wonder.

"Can we cure it?" Zac asked, more interested in growing normal Fruit of Ascension instead of any weird mutated ones.

"Maybe a skilled botanist could, but the poison has reached its core from absorbing too much of it from the area, it might cleanse it by itself over time, or it might mutate. Or it will simply succumb and die, we'll have to wait and see," she answered with a shrug.

"If it makes a poison version of a Fruit of Ascension I want it," she added as she stared at him with serious eyes. "It might even give me a poison constitution."

"We'll see what happens with the tree before deciding on any allocation. There is a lot of gear to collect," Zac answered noncommittally.

It was true, the area was packed with elite warriors. Many of those who fought close to the tree even owned their own Cosmos Sacks as well, making it easier to collect their wealth. They methodically went through the central battlefield as well, and by the end of it Zac had another Seventy pouches in his possession.

Finally the two walked over to Rydel, lying close to the tree, a large grisly hole in his chest and a broken arm.

"This wound... Did Ogras do this?" Alea asked with surprise.

“I thought the four of you knew?” Zac retorted, equally surprised. “I battled Rydel and that monkey over there, but I only managed to break his arm and expend most of his aces. He was about to kill me when Ogras attacked.”

Zac bent down and grabbed a pouch attached to his belt.

“Wait, check within his clothes as well. Rydel was the unofficial leader of the invasion and a scion of the Azh’Rezak main branch. He should have more than one pouch,” Alea interjected.

Zac nodded and with a grimace started reaching around within the corpse’s clothes. After a while he actually found another pouch.

Zac inspected the two and was shocked by their quality. The one Rydel wore on his waist was quite large, comprising roughly ten by ten meters of space, far larger compared to his own ones which only had two-three meters of space. It mainly contained daily items, such as some foods and clothes. It also contained a couple of thousands of crystals and a few other assorted items.

However, the inner one was on another level completely, to the point that Zac suspected that it was an E-Grade pouch rather than F-Grade. It had a cubic space of roughly fifty meters, meaning it had a whopping 125 000 cubic meters of space. He would be able to fit a small airplane in it if he found one.

The pouch was mostly empty, but there was a small mountain containing tens of thousands of F-Grade crystals. There were also neatly stacked weapons and a huge supply of food. There even were a few siege weapons, looking far more sophisticated compared to the ones the demons built back at Port Atwood. Another corner held a bunch of vials containing pills, labeled and ordered. There also were a couple of ornate boxes, and Zac guessed those things held the real prizes.

The inner pouch held the backup resources of the whole demon invasion Zac realized as his heartbeat sped up. It was a huge amount of wealth, even for him. He recognized a few of the pills by now, and many of them cost tens of thousands Nexus Coins per pop. There were over a hundred of each type of those pills.

Zac took out the various boxes and things one by one and together with Alea categorized them. There were certain fruits that could improve the constitution far more efficiently compared to the medicinal bath, and Zac gave a few of them to Alea after seeing her hungry eyes. He didn’t need them for himself and felt it was a decent reward for having fought two horde bosses with him. He put aside most of the rest for Janos and the others though.

The contribution board clearly was an effective method of motivating people, and Zac was thinking of establishing something similar after the beast hordes. If people contributed to Port Atwood, they’d gain contribution points, and with those points they could buy various things from him.

He immediately consulted Alea about it and to his embarrassment learned that such a thing was pretty standard in the multi-verse, and not some novel new idea he concocted. Many of the things in the huge pouch were likely even meant for just that purpose during the invasion.

Done with the looting they started heading back toward the camp. The amount of wealth he collected was enormous, and including all the armors and tools Alea and he estimated the value easily surpassed a hundred million nexus coins. It was no surprise that war was so common in the multi-verse, it was extremely lucrative.

Finally all preparations were done and Zac prepared to set out. During the return he transferred most of the wealth to the large pouch which he now carried hidden under his E-Grade Robe. He left some of it to Adran so that the warriors could get new gear.

Many of the demons were starting to look pretty ragged after battling two beast hordes, so they needed to swap out some of the broken items.

He actually brought a total of ten of the smallest cosmos bags with him as well, which he hid in a small travel bag. The reaction from Selas when he realized Zac possessed a Cosmos Bag was quite large, and Zac thought he might be able to sell them for quite a nice profit in a human settlement.

He learned from Calrin and Alea that these smallest cosmos bags were worth roughly a million nexus coins. Most people in the multi-verse possessed at least one, unless they were young and still needed to spend all their money on medicinal baths. They weren't overly difficult to create for an experienced inscription master. The higher-grade ones required insight into the Dao of Space to create though, making them far more expensive.

Emily was still angry with him, but she still tried helping out in the end. On her insistence, he carried a large backpack to make it look less suspicious. Zac also wore a new pair of boots, which was actually starting to feel a bit uncomfortable after having adapted to the free feeling of nothing trapping his feet.

Zac gave some final instructions to Adran regarding the scouting missions and some other details before he walked toward the teleportation array. He inserted the crystals and paid the fee, and once again he disappeared from the island.

From the distance, a pair of eyes were observing everything, before receding into the shadows.

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#### **Chapter 113 - New Washington**

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

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

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

There was only one exit to the teleportation room, and it was guarded by the army men. The rest of the interiors gave no clues as to where the house was located since there were no windows. Still, he wasn't overly worried since there were humans in front of him. That meant there was a path to leave, and no door would impede him since he learned the Dao of Sharpness. He could simply cut metal like butter and walk straight through any restrictions.

“What is going on? Do you welcome all guest through the barrels of your guns?” Zac asked with a glare.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Zhix?” Zac asked.

“It's what the government call the insectoid beings, while the Ishiate are the beastmen. We're not sure if that is their actual name, but a scout with identifying skills got that name using the skill on them, so that's what we call them,” Julia answered.

“May I ask who you are and what force you belong to?” she continued.

“Port Atwood,” Zac simply said, not deigning to hide the name of his town. They had no method to get there in any case, and he didn't have any plans of hiding its existence from the government in any case. He actually was interested in some

cooperation with them, as long as they didn't get too greedy for control. He already scheming demons to worry about, and didn't want to add any more headaches to the mix until his position was completely solidified.

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

He needed an alias that wasn't his real name nor Super-Brother Man. He didn't want to give out his real name since he might be forced to show his might, making it pretty clear that he was a ranker. That might put his family in danger if they managed to match him with his hometown or some old internet profile that they might have access to. Who knew what things the government had stored, even after the apocalypse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We have a limited understanding of the world and do not dare to open up the teleportation array to the public before we're confident we won't put the villagers at risk. My job is to scout out the situation and gather intelligence," Zac answered.

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

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

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

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

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

He still wasn't sure about the power of his newly acquired skill, or what kind of skills cultivators from the tutorial possessed, and his reaction came from a fear of his identity being exposed. If someone got both his name and his level they would not only know his full name but also that he was the Super Brother-Man. It would be quite obvious from his extremely high level, and that turn could potentially put his family in danger.

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

The sudden caused quite a few people in the lobby to become highly alert, some even brandishing their weapons as they surrounded Zac and Julia's.

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

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

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

Zac's attack caused widespread anger, but obviously more with some. A young man in army gear brandished an average-looking sword and charged at Zac with a roar. The sword looked about the same as the ones that were carried by the two men next to Julia, and Zac guessed that the army was in the process of switching over to cold weaponry in order to gain Cosmic Energy from fighting.

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

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

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

"Your 'New Government' has an interesting way of greeting travelers," Zac said with a frown.

He was quite relieved he didn't give in to Emily's clamoring to bring her along. Even though hadn't been too optimistic about the government he thought that they'd

at least maintain some order and discipline, and hadn't expected to be in a battle with them within minutes of arriving. Of course, it was his fault as well to a certain degree, but the mostly hostile greeting apart from Julia had made his survival instincts kick in.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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#### **Chapter 114 - Intelligence**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But the undead are only one among many. There are rumors of a rat-incursion far to the east, an incursion in the middle of the ocean that some coastal cities could see in the distance on clear days, even two incursions with humans. The latter seem to consider us earthlings unclean and are among the cruelest enemies. They have built an empire founded on slavery, and are one of our prime enemies. All in all, we have located 11 incursions, but we’re sure there are more.

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

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

Zac was mulling over the information. To be honest the situation seemed better than expected, with various governments working to restore order. However, he knew that it was just a façade. Unless something was done about the incursions these reborn

governments would be crushed one by one when the invaders started expanding for real.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We have learned some rules to the Tutorial and the randomization. Our theory is that the System superimposed the four worlds in the merge, and picked citizens around the same coordinate on respective worlds and placed them together in a

tutorial. That's why some tutorials were only humans, and some were overrun with Zhix for example. Some coordinates would only hold humans, whereas others held all races.

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

"Since the other group seemed largely fine with only a 55% casualty rate we can deduce that Greenworth's Tutorial was one of the human-only Tutorials. This was also confirmed by the cultivators in our neighboring town. That means there was no Zhix hive that eradicated the third group like with many other tutorial villages.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There's no need for that. The program with the information is public domain, and you just need to buy a computer in the town and connect to the WIFI and download it," Julia answered with a smile.

Zac was completely surprised by the convenience. His life on the island and with the demons had made him think in more primal ways, the fact that New Washington Possessed a city-wide WI-FI hadn't even crossed his mind.

"Is the internet still around?" he asked hopefully.

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

"Very well, if it is alright with you I'd like to visit the town now," Zac said.

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

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 115 - Going home**

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

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

"The man calling himself Monk is clearly a high ranker. It might be bluster but he looked at our warriors as though they were jokes, and that was after he used [Eye of Discernment] on them," she reported.

"My guess? He's actually the Super Brother-Man," she concluded.

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

Julia frowned but looked stubborn.

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

“Anyone in this room could do the same with John, and besides he was agitated and didn’t have proper form. I heard he was riddled with openings, so the feat was nothing special,” the general said with a harrumph.

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

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

Thomas only sighed and mulled it over.

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

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

----

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

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

Since he learned the news of his hometown he was itching to move, but Emily had told him about the importance of information brokers so he was currently on the way to an information market, just to compare the info they got from the government liaison. Julia seemed to have been upfront, but Zac wasn’t the best judge of that. After having asked around in various shops and from shady looking people he entered a non-descript office building some ways off from any main road.

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

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

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

“Certainly, we take payment in either Nexus Crystals or Nexus Coins. Unfortunately, we do not accept Union Credits, is that all right?” the receptionist answered.

Union Credits was a new global currency that the government was trying to introduce. They were unwilling to let go of control the financial system and tried quite hard to give it credibility. They maintained a 1:1 exchange ratio with Nexus Coins, and even had exchange station set up across the town. However, their success seemed limited, as even in New Washington many places seemed to prefer the System-run currencies.

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

After Zac agreed upon the price, a text document was shown containing the information. Apparently, they usually put it on an USB-drive, but since Zac didn't have one at the moment he bought one for five Nexus Crystals from the broker.

All in all Zac paid roughly 6 000 Nexus Coins to confirm all the information he learned earlier. He also had the broker download a copy of the government map onto the USB drive.

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

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

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

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

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

"Since you've spent a fair deal of coins at our establishment I'll give you a freebie. There is something going on with the Auction in two weeks. The government seems to be luring strong people there. Your party is only the 5<sup>th</sup> that has arrived through the teleporter in the last week. Do with that information what you will," the man said with a smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But that very mindset had put humanity in a passive state. The government was more concerned about consolidating their power, rather than combatting the real threat. The undead incursion was already as large as a country, and the others were growing as well. He heard no news of any incursion except his being defeated, but there were some rumors going about the city about some Marshall Clan being about to fight one.

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

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

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

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

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

He had finally reached his home.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 116 - Family**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The diary gave most of the information about what happened. It turned out that Kenzie was a cultivator, but his dad wasn't. The troubling thing was how the diary

simply ended with dad visiting this Thom Sullivan. Months of accumulated anxiety was quickly turning into rage as Zac hurried toward his apartment. If that Thom guy had done anything to his family he'd better pray for a quick death.

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

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

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

"Please don't kill me! I'm Ryan! I just squat here, take anything you want!" the guy screamed in fear.

Zac calmed down a bit and used **[Eye of Discernment]** on him. His name truly was Ryan, and he was level 19. Zac let him down on the ground and he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

"Why are you in my apartment?" Zac simply asked

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

"Do you know me?" Zac asked skeptically, as he'd never seen the youth before.

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

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

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

"You don't know? Ah... Well... I'm sorry, but he was... Killed," the youth said with some hesitation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Always nice to end the week at a nice cliff, eh? :)

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#### **Chapter 117 - Judgement**

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

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

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

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

The guards didn’t hesitate and opened fire at him when he came within 30 meters of the gate, but Zac simply activated his movement skill. He was pretty sure he’d survive the weapons, but didn’t want to try it out at the moment. He moved like a phantom, and within a second he was right among the guards with [Verun’s Bite] in his hands.

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

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

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

“Where are Thom Sullivan and the 4 other councilmen?” he asked with a growl.

“Don’t Kill me! They should be at the meeting with Mayor Whitfield at his mansion,” he hurriedly said.

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

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

The man was eager to please and immediately pointed the direction. Zac continuously used his movement skill, which seemed to almost make his captive pass out. A quick walk later led him to a huge compound, composed of three sprawling mansions.

“The house to the right is for business meetings, and they should be in there. The middle is his home, and the left one is... For his activities,” the man said hesitantly between heaves.

Zac nodded and threw the man away after knocking him out. With a few steps he was at the right house, but just as he was about to destroy the door and walk in he was fired upon by multiple hidden soldiers.

A stinging sensation on his neck finally confirmed that he was bullet-proof. Still, the bullets from the AR-15’s hurt almost as much as a bee sting when they hit his bare skin. Zac quickly incapacitated the soldiers with a few throws with daggers from his pouch. Since he looted the mountain he had hundreds and hundreds of throwing knives, and he didn’t even bother to gather them up.

He had somewhat regained rationality by now, and tried to avoid causing any more undue casualties. These soldiers weren’t the real perpetrators and perhaps didn’t deserve a death sentence. Still, whether they survived or not would likely depend on how quickly they got medical assistance, going by the damage he caused.

There were more soldiers inside the house, but Zac was unstoppable. After a short while it was clear that the soldiers had had enough and weren’t about to throw their lives away, so they started to avoid him instead. Zac welcomed their retreat and kept moving through the building, and it was as though like a storm swept through the house until he found a large ballroom that was refitted into a meeting room.

Just as he slammed open the door and entered a sword imbued with freezing energy wooshed toward his head as an arrow flew straight toward his heart. Even the floorboards deformed and turned into spears aiming toward his guts, and some heavy mental pressure descended on him.

Zac was relieved since the attacks meant that his targets still hadn’t fled. He readjusted his grip of **[Verun’s Bite]** and slammed it at the incoming sword. The sword was immediately cut in two, and the axe continued unimpeded right into the head of a dour-looking man hiding right around the edge of the door. His scalp and brain went flying as the axe finished its trajectory, blood staining an expensive-looking painting hanging on the wall.

Zac simply ignored the other three attacks as he proceeded into the ballroom. They couldn’t even impede him or leave a mark on his clothes, as Zac knew that none of the leaders in the town were even rankers. He looked around and saw seven men with either fear or anger on their faces. Four of them were the cultivator councilmen, with the fifth lying dead behind him. Another man was the Mayor, accompanied by was looked like two deputies.

There were also about a dozen young girls in various states of undress who had fled to a corner. The table was laden with all sorts of foods and liquors, and by all accounts Zac felt he had walked into a bacchanalia rather than a government meeting.

From the descriptions he possessed of the council every one of his targets was accounted for, which was a great relief to him. From his quick scan he knew this would be a quick and dirty slaughter. He was a bit disappointed as he'd almost hoped for an epic battle to vent his anger. But crushing the council like dried twigs worked as well.

Zac's slowly walked through the room, each of his step causing a deep thump that echoed through the room. Each step was as though a hammer forcing a nail into everyone's chests. It only got worse as an inhuman aura started emerging from Zac's body, the very air around him distorting. Waves of power billowed out and inundated the room in suffocating murderous intent. The large windows in the room shook as it felt like an earthquake.

Most of the girls could barely remain standing and the faces of the men visibly paled. Zac slowly moved forward like inevitable doom, and his eyes stopped on a swarthy black-haired man with a large beard and a thick hammer. Thom Sullivan. Zac was just about to go to work when someone finally managed to speak up.

"Who are you? Salvation? Why are you doing this?" one of the cultivators squeezed out through clattering teeth.

Zac only looked into his eyes for a few seconds, remembering his father. Perhaps he stood in this very room when he was killed by the men in front of him.

"Salvation? No, I am Judgement."

"Judgement? You are making yourself an enemy of the government with your brazen actions. If you surrender yourself now th-" the fat middle-aged mayor managed to wheeze out, but was abruptly interrupted by a dagger slamming into his gut, throwing him into the wall next to the scared girls.

"The government won't mind me killing trash like you all," Zac said as he looked over the perpetrators of his father's death. "Every debt has a debtor. The day you slaughtered innocent civilians to take control of Greenworth you accepted the fact that one day someone like me could arrive."

He said no more as he winked out of existence as he pushed [**Loamwalker**] to its maximum. A growl and whooshing of air was heard, as one of the men by the table was cut in two, his upper torso slamming into the wall with a wet thud. The growls of Zac's axe kept echoing in the room as body-parts kept getting chopped off, Zac's figure barely registering in the eyes of the helpless onlookers.

The rulers of Greenworth desperately tried to flee or mount resistance but it was a joke in front of Zac's wrath. It was not a battle, it was a slaughter. Their attacks were even weaker compared to the ants back on the island, and as soon as someone moved to flee they were instantly bisected into multiple pieces.

In less than a minute only Thom Sullivan and the mayor were left alive, though the mayor was barely conscious due to the dagger. When Zac entered through the door there had been some fight and brutality left in Thom's eye's but that was long gone, replaced with abject fear.

"Take the town, it's yours! And I have treasure the townspeople and government have collected over the month. You can have it all. Just let me go!" the leader said, any semblance of might long gone.

Zac simply snorted, as he charged up [**Chop**] far beyond his limit and swung down. The edge tore straight through the whole building as it fell down upon the leader of Greenworth.

In a last-ditch effort to survive Thom erected a defense that almost looked like a prismatic diamond, but it was like paper in front of the enormous edge. The axe pushed down and completely destroyed the man, leaving only bits and pieces intact.

The strike continued into the ground, tearing a huge jagged scar through the whole building.

There was no satisfaction or emotional relief from the deed, only a deep and soul-crushing emptiness. He was too late. If he'd left the island immediately he might have been able to stop this. There was a small voice in him that told him that it wasn't true, but it was scant reprieve to his current pain.

New Washington and Greenworth were located almost in the heartland of Pangea, the new continent. Any body of water that could hold Zac's island was an insurmountable distance away. Still, his feelings weren't about logic.

Strained wheezing interrupted his train of thought, and he turned around with a frown. It was the mayor, who had managed to remove the dagger from his abdomen. The man had a surprisingly high vitality, as he was still holding on, even with the huge pool of blood beneath him. However, he was sweating and panting, his face completely pallid.

"Help me. I have strong connections, I can tell the officials these men were corrupt, and I hired you to bring justice. You will become a government-sanctioned leader of the town," he wheezed out.

He was considering what to do about this man. He did not care one bit about his offer. He had no plans on taking over this town, as it would likely completely make him fall out with the government. Besides, he wasn't sure if some sort of quest would trigger if he took hold of the Nexus Crystal, such as a test of sorts. He had no time or desire to fight beast hordes on two fronts.

He was planning on leaving the town to the army, and have the government decide a new leader. He had no desire to stay on here since his father was dead and his sister somewhere else. That still left him with the mayor. From the man's actions Zac felt he should be killed with the rest of the cultivators, but he was a high official of the government.

He had already got off to a slightly rocky start with the leaders of New Washington, and he was reluctant to keep killing their people. There was still a hope that Port Atwood could cooperate with the rest of the world, and he felt that the government was a good tool for that.

Though they hadn't really tackled the invader threat as of yet, their progress in just four months was startling. They had created a network of towns, such as Fairfield, and was slowly starting to adapt to the new world. Perhaps their speed was too slow as Zac knew the invaders weren't lazing around.

The invaders were simply preparing and accumulating while they waited for the limiters to lift, after which they would explode in violence. The reports he read in the information crystal from Ogras was truly horrifying, and humanity wasn't really prepared.

Still, with the help of him and the demons, humanity's odds of surviving and reclaiming the world would be a lot higher. With him and a few other Rankers taking the lead they could keep the leaders under control. Zac knew that none of the Invaders would be able to break through to E-Rank yet due to the System still restricting them.

That gave the defenders a window of opportunity to clear out the incursions before their power started to get out of hand. Zac finally decided to keep the man alive and bring him to the government. Their handling of this criminal would also be a good gauge of how they did things.

However, fate has a sense of humor as just a second after Zac decided what to do one of the scared girls in the corner leaped forward with a piece of broken-off piece

of wood in her hand. With an almost feral snarl she stabbed it straight in Mayor Whitfield's throat.

The man tried to defend himself, but between him losing most of his blood and the boundless anger of the girl it was to no avail. She kept slamming the wooden spike down into the body creating grisly wounds, most centered around his groin. There was no coming back from that, pill or no pill, and he simply bled out in a matter of seconds.

"Uh..." was all Zac could think of saying as he looked at the panting woman in front of him.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 118 - Recruitment**

Zac was stumped, even forgetting his pain for a second as he saw the heaving girl standing over the mangled corpse of the Mayor. It looked like turning him over wasn't an option anymore. The other girls in the room were also staring blankly at their companion and the man who likely had been the source of no small amount of grief.

Not sure what else to do Zac sighed and walked over to the government worker and put the mangled corpse into his Cosmos Sack. The girl warily looked at him, her eyes widening a bit at the magical display of the pouch.

"When these cultivators returned from the Tutorial they killed a group of townspeople who defended Greenworth after the integration. Do you know what happened with the bodies?" Zac asked as he looked up at the girl still wielding a piece of shrapnel.

She appeared to be somewhere around her twenties and was quite beautiful. In fact, all of the girls in the room were, and their skimpy clothing did nothing to hide their curvaceous bodies. However, their eyes quickly told anyone that they were not willingly standing in this house, as they were hard as stone, marred by whatever they had experienced the past months. No one said anything for a while, until a small voice from the back row of women could be heard.

"They... They were buried to the north side of the inner wall. There was a park there before, but it has turned into a cemetery for those the council had killed," a young girl finally answered.

Zac nodded and turned to leave.

"Wait!" the woman with the makeshift weapon suddenly shouted after him.

Zac didn't really want to deal with these girls, as his mind still was on his father's remains.

"You can all leave. I will talk to the leaders of New Washington and have them send a proper Mayor here," he said.

"That's not it. Take us with you," she said with a somber expression.

That made Zac stop and turn around with a serious face. His once again looked over the group, this time using **[Eye of Discernment]**. As he suspected none of the girls were strong, the highest being level 14. If they were powerful they would not have been in their current situation, dressed as belly-dancers or courtesans of a harem.

"I am sorry, but you are of no use to me. I need warriors, not more refugees," Zac immediately shot her down.

“But you can train us! You must be a high ranker from your aura and what you did in here. Thom was over level 30, but he was helpless against you,” she refuted.

“Train you? You are all barely level ten. Helping you attain a power that could contend against the forces of the world would take an immense amount of resources, why should I do that?”

**[Joanna wishes to enter a Contract of Binding. Time: Indefinite. Accept?]**

Zac’s brows rose as he saw the prompt appear in front of him. He knew about the Contracts of Binding from Calrin. None of the demons actually mentioned it to him, even though they usually were his main sources of information. Zac assumed that they were afraid he would try to impose it on them in the future.

A Binding Contract contract was more accurately named an employment contract. It made a person a subordinate who couldn’t betray their employer. His orders would to a certain degree become compulsions as well, unless giving a detrimental order, such as committing suicide or ruining their cultivation. That of course only was true for the type of employment. If he contracted this woman as a soldier he couldn’t order anything about her private life.

Furthermore, one essentially had to enter the contract willingly, and you could set the duration yourself. It was a normal method for Clans in the multi-verse to make sure of the allegiance when hiring people, such as external warriors for war or exploration of a mystical realm.

But could also be a tool to permanently bind a person to a force, as was the case with the prompt in front of him. The time was set to indefinite, and only Zac could rip the contract and free the girl. The only other way for her to get free was to reach a higher level than him. Zac had thought about forcing this type of contract on the demons after hearing about it, but he learned that it was impossible for the same reason.

Apparently it was impossible to use on people of a higher level, and pretty much all of the demons were higher level than him. It was simply that the restrictions on the invaders were still in place, making it easy to forget that almost all of them were at the bottleneck, working at either their Dao or their Constitution in order to evolve. The System wanted to promote the strong, so it wouldn’t allow the strong be in servitude of the weak. Of course, Zac’s power level was actually higher than the demons’, but his situation was a bit unique.

Zac stared for some time at the woman who apparently was called Joanna. She had a steely determination in her eyes that he hadn’t even seen in Emily, who herself craved power.

“... Are you sure about this? You will likely be sent to bloody battlefields fighting both humans and aliens if you follow me. And that is if you even survive training,” Zac said as he stared her down.

An idea was forming in his mind as he looked at Joanna and the others, but she alone wouldn’t cut it.

“As long as you give me power nothing else matter,” she said, not flinching the slightest from Zac’s stare.

Zac finally accepted the prompt, feeling a mental connection forming. It was not like gaining another limb, just an additional awareness in the corner of his mind. He took out a spear and slammed into the ground in front of her, and then took out a female’s leather armor from his pouch.

“Don’t lose these. If you do you’ll have to purchase new ones with your own money, and the amount of slaughter needed to afford them will probably kill you,” Zac said.

Joanna eagerly looked at the gear, and without hesitation took off the little clothes she had on. Zac unashamedly looked on, reminded that it actually had been months since he'd been with Hannah. He forced himself to refocus as Joanna equipped the gear, and after some struggle managed to pull out the spear from the ground.

With demon armor and a spear in her hand her aura completely changed. She already had the steely gaze of a warrior, but now she had the appearance to match it. Of course, some weaponry didn't change the fact that she still was a level 13 weakling, but she did look quite heroic.

"I am leaving Greenworth in two hours. The offer Joanna received stands for all of you. But let me make it clear. I am not offering you freedom. I am offering you power. You're welcome to choose freedom instead and stay behind. Though you should know that things might get chaotic with both the Mayor and the Council dead. Those who wish to follow me, gather with Joanna outside these mansions in two hours," Zac said as he disappeared with his movement skill.

He quickly exited the house and found some soldiers hesitantly standing in the distance. They should have heard the commotion, and unless they were blind they should have seen Zac's final strike where he almost ripped the mansion in two. Zac frowned, not in the mood to start killing the soldiers. He wanted to avoid further bloodshed, already regretting massacring the warriors at the gate in his rage.

"We mean you no harm," one of the older soldiers shouted from the distance. "We just need to know what's going on. Scouts report of a beast horde arriving within the hour, and we need to prepare."

"The council members are dead. The mayor is dead," Zac simply said. "I will eradicate the horde for you, but after that you're on your own."

None of the soldiers looked overly surprised by the news. Their captain simply nodded.

"There are over a thousand boars heading our way from the north. The council usually gather outside the town to fight in order to avoid the destruction of property," he simply said.

"I will join you in an hour," Zac said as he disappeared, once again moving with **[Loamwalker]**.

He kept speeding away and soon reached the park that one of the former slave girls mentioned. The area was filled with mounds of overturned earth, some graves old and some clearly made within the last week. All in all there had to be hundreds of bodies buried across the area, giving it a gloomy atmosphere.

Zac had no idea which one of the mounds contained his father so he could only walk along aimlessly. He noticed a large boulder lying some distance away and walked over to it. With six quick swings a towering monolith was created that Zac lifted up with a grunt.

He walked over to the center of the park and placed it by an intersection of two somewhat overgrown paths. Using his inhuman power he pushed it some ways into the ground, securing it in place. Seeing it was stable he carved two simple lines in the monument.

*Gone but not Forgotten*

*Rest in Peace*

Afterward he simply sat down, reminiscing about the past. The park was empty except for himself and his thoughts, and there was a heaviness in the silence. It was as though it blended with the heaviness in Zac's heart, and became a palpable thing

around him. If a human walked close to Zac at this moment it wouldn't be surprising if they would be physically impacted by the mood.

Zac didn't move as one memory after another flitted through his mind. Finally he opened up his eyes after roughly an hour. He sighed and got to his feet, and took one last glance around.

"I promise I'll find Kenzie, if it's the last thing I do," he said as he lightly touched the monolith.

With that he pushed north, to help out his hometown one last time. With neither his father nor sister around, he honestly didn't care too much about Greenworth. He didn't really have any close friends anymore, rather co-workers and acquaintances. His closest friend died 4 years ago, long before the integration, and he never really looked for new ones after that.

Still, it was the town he grew up in, and where most of his childhood memories were. Even if it wasn't really the same town any more he didn't want to see it fall to some boars. He knew that the soldiers likely could take care of it, but it cost bullets. By now it should take quite a few munitions to destroy a horde of wild animals, as their endurance kept increasing. He didn't know how much reserves the army still possessed, and he didn't want the townspeople to suffer due to his actions earlier.

After running for about ten minutes, he saw the battlefield ahead. There were simple defenses erected, but from experience he saw that it wasn't really enough to impede a beast wave. He walked up toward the man who spoke to him back by the mansion, who nodded at him.

"The beasts should arrive in five minutes, we're making our stance here. There's luckily is no high-level beast amongst their kind, the largest boar is roughly four meters high and level 43. We will likely have to use grenades on it, as bullets seldom work against the ones that size," the soldier reported

"No need for all that. Just stay here and I'll be back in a bit," Zac said.

With that he pushed out toward the forest in the distance, using [Loamwalker] to increase his speed even further. After one minute of rushing he saw the horde approach, and he relished the chance for some no-holds-barred unthinking carnage.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Since this chapter caused some confusion on , I'll also reiterate it once again here:

-Joanna is not under a "slave contract", that's not how a contract of binding works.

-This novel will **not** get a harem tag in the future.

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 26 chapters ahead) please check out my

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#### **Chapter 119 - Army**

The soldiers looked on horrified as Zac returned just five minutes later, covered in head to toe in blood. He still wore the cape above his usual robe, and it didn't have the self-cleaning option.

"It's done," Zac tersely said as he passed the captain without stopping.

"Are you staying in Greenworth?" the captain hesitantly asked Zac who kept moving toward the town.

"No, I am heading to New Washington in an hour," he answered.

The soldiers looked both relieved and troubled at the same time as Zac disappeared. There were a few things he wanted to do before leaving. First he went to a deserted home and cleaned up and changed clothes.

After that he went back to their old house and put everything of sentimental value into a pouch. He also left a note for Kenzie under the floorboard, explaining what had happened here and where she could find him. For all he knew Kenzie might be trying to get home as well, and this note would hopefully send her to Port Atwood if she passed by.

Next he went back to his own apartment. Ryan was still there, fretfully hiding. When he saw Zac walk through the door he looked quite startled.

“You’re alive! It’s a good thing you came back. Those guys are extremely dangerous, you better not do anything rash,” he said with a sigh.

“They’re all dead, the council and the Mayor. We’re leaving Greenworth, going back to my hometown,” Zac answered as he put most of his belongings away into the pouch.

“Dead? Wait, what? What’s going on, what do you mean WE’RE leaving?” Ryan said, seeming he had some trouble understanding the burst of information.

“You are the only one who knows my actual identity. That could be a risk for my sister. So either I kill you here and now, or you come with me to my home town,” Zac answered as he stopped, turning toward the gangly man.

“Your place sounds great, a change in scenery is just what I needed,” Ryan answered, his head quickly nodding.

Zac rolled his eyes and threw one of his empty Cosmos Sacks over to the man.

“This is a Cosmos Sack, its value is around a million Nexus Coins. Take it as compensation for forcibly being relocated,” Zac said as he kept storing away his items. “Is there any place that has good terrain vehicles, such as jeeps?”

“I think those were mostly confiscated by the council and a few other powerful cultivators. It’s pretty much needed if you want to get to New Washington in one piece,” Ryan distractedly answered as he was fiddling with the pouch.

“Right. Do you know if anyone of my neighbor is still alive?” Zac asked.

“I’m not sure. This apartment complex is within the outer walls now, but before the wall was built monsters roamed freely on the streets. I think only something like a third of the whole town is still alive, if even that,” Ryan answered with a sigh.

The answer gave Zac a start. He had been preoccupied by his quest to find his family, but now that he thought about it there seemed to be quite a few people missing, and it wasn’t something that missing cultivators or the randomized missing areas could explain.

Only the core of Greenworth was walled in, while the outside was exposed to all kinds of beasts. As he sped through the outer part it was mostly abandoned apart from the occasional scavenger. Less than a third of the population could actually fit inside the walls judging by the area it encircled. But it didn’t seem cramped at all, rather the opposite.

It was a sobering feeling knowing that so many of the people he had seen growing up were just gone. Old classmates, co-workers, even random people on the streets. Most of them were simply dead, many likely suffering terrible fates. Zac could only sigh as he finished packing.

“Let’s go, we’re picking up some more things before we leave,” Zac said as he made for the door.

Ryan didn't really seem to own many possessions as he was still dressed in Zac's old clothes, so he quickly scampered behind him after safely tucking away his Cosmos Sack. Zac simply knocked on the door of some of his neighbors he was closer to, but only silence answered. He could only shake his head and move on.

They turned toward the core area with the inner wall, and Ryan started to get fidgety as they approached.

"Hey, buddy, I know you are powerful and all, but the army is up there. You might be able to dodge the bullets like some action hero, but I can't," he hesitantly said.

"What did you do in the Tutorial anyway? You got this huge opportunity to gain power and survive, but you're spending your days hiding in my apartment," Zac scoffed with a roll of his eyes.

"Hey! I'm still decompressing from that nightmare. You know the horrors we had to go through. I'm just happy I made it out alive. Besides, I'm still thinking about my true calling, trying to find my way, you know? After that I'll start leveling again."

Zac could only snort in response. Ryan's excuses sounded much like the ones he heard from many in the old world who didn't want to work but only play around.

Of course, there was no guard that challenged his approach this time, and they freely entered the posh neighborhood. The army was clearly uncomfortable to just let him go about as he wanted, but also unwilling to get too close out of fear of getting bisected, so a few people shadowed them but kept a respectful distance.

Zac used them for directions, and with their help he snatched up a group of vehicles that would be able to run in rougher terrains. He simply threw them into his larger Cosmos Sack that had no problem accommodating them. He planned on bringing them back to Port Atwood.

His town had the advantage of housing the demons who had far greater experience with crafting. He hoped that perhaps they could refit the vehicles to run on crystals rather than gas. If the refit was somewhat simple it could become another export of the town.

Soon it was time to meet up with Joanna so Zac went straight to the open space in front of the mansion. To his surprise it was filled with women, far more than the dozen or so that were at the meeting. A quick count put them at over one hundred people. All of them wore wretched clothing and had haggard expressions, but it was clear that all of them were young beautiful women.

The regret that the Mayor died was quickly fading away as he looked out over the victims of the apocalypse with a frown. Who knew what humiliation they had been forced through the past months. Besides, his little sister might have been one of the victims if she hadn't been whisked away, and he could only pray she had found the power to protect herself in the tutorial.

He really felt that his plan might work out as he looked at the group.

He needed a private army. Everything looked fine with the demons on the surface, but he knew that he couldn't trust the protection of his town to them alone. There needed to be a counterbalance apart from just himself on the island. The demons possessed their own interests, and Ogras was a duplicitous character.

Besides, even if these girls entered a Contract of Binding with him it wasn't like he could or would use it for some nefarious purposes, and he'd release them when his force was stabilized. He looked at it the same way as most powers of the multi-verse, just a contract to make sure that he didn't get stabbed in the back after pouring large amounts of resources on their training.

It was becoming increasingly clear to him that women were generally having a worse time in this new world compared to men. Neither gender really had any advantage or disadvantage when it came to cultivation or getting stronger, but scum like the Mayor was simply far more common among men.

He doubted that there were too many female powerhouses who were catching hundreds of young handsome men to trap in their sex dungeons. These girls weren't useless when it came to cultivation or fighting, it was just that they got left behind in the early race for power, which left them helpless against people like Thom.

Their eyes reminded him of himself when he'd been stuck alone on the island, feeling weak and hopeless as he fretfully huddled in his camper while listening to the roars in the woods. Hopefully, they could turn that helplessness and anger into a desire for strength, turning them into a real force with the right training.

The main problem with a lot of people was that many didn't seem to keep pushing themselves after an initial burst of activity, after which they started to feel safe again. However, safety was just an illusion. He had already seen multiple ghost towns while traveling through the area to Greenworth. They were small encampments with basic fortifications just like in Fort Roger.

One or a few cultivators simply didn't have the power to contend with the increasingly hostile wildlife unless they went out of their way to grind levels in between the beast attacks. Just idling around like some kings in between short bursts of monster hunting would only work in the short run. Some of the citizens would be able to migrate to larger and safer towns, however many would die during the travels.

At least these women in front of him seemed driven enough to keep pushing themselves forward if they were given the chance now. And if they started slacking off he had the contract to push them forward. He walked over to Joanna who looked very conspicuous with her spear.

"Who are all these people? How come there are far more people compared to before?" he asked as he looked around.

"Half were kept by the mayor, the rest were split among the council," she answered with smoldering anger barely concealed beneath her calm façade. "When they heard about your offer they wanted to join."

"Is it true you can make us powerful? Strong enough to slaughter assholes like Thom?" a girl, looking about the same age as his sister, asked skeptically.

Zac looked over the field, and the same skepticism could be seen on many of the faces looking at him. He looked over to Joanna who silently stood beside him.

"Are these mansions empty?" he asked her. She looked confused but immediately answered.

"Yes. No staff dared stay there, and all captives were freed," she said, after which she pointed at a pile of sacks "We also removed anything of value as well."

Zac nodded and walked over to the pile, and with a flourish put them all into a Cosmos Sack, which elicited a few surprised gasps. But he wasn't done here, as he felt he needed to display some of his power if he wanted to recruit these people.

He unleashed his aura in its entirety, and it billowed out among the onlookers. By now he had calmed down and it only contained his power, and the murderous intent was far less discernible. Screams and gasps echoed across the square, and many even fell on their knees clutching their heads. With two quick steps he arrived at the gate of the old Mayor's mansion and Charged up three fractal edges with **[Chop]**.

In a lightning-quick manner he made three wide horizontal swings, and just before the fractals flew off he imbued them all with the Dao of Heaviness. The fractals

flew toward one of the mansions each, and with the help of the Dao Seed completely destroyed the buildings from the impact. It looked like a terrorist attack, where a few bombs were simultaneously set off. Rubble flew in all directions and many had to take cover to avoid the falling debris.

He removed his aura and once again glanced at the group whose skepticism was not replaced with fear.

“I will tell you the same as I told Joanna. I can give you power. But power comes through walking over the corpses of your enemies, if you don’t believe me, take a look at this,” Zac said with a loud voice reaching across the square, as he opened up his title page and shared his [Butcher] title, which showed he’d killed over a hundred thousand beings.

Another round of gasps was heard, and Ryan even edged away from him with horror in his eyes.

“Since the world turned to shit I’ve been attacked in all kinds of ways. I’ve been stabbed, maimed, mauled and suffocated. I’ve been blasted with fireballs and mental shockwaves and struck by lightning bolts. But I’ve survived, and I’ve become strong.

“You all have the potential to become powerful, but you need the willpower and determination to fight, and keep fighting. The second you stop struggling someone like Thom will pass you in power. I can only provide you with an opportunity, but your effort will decide whether you will become a hunter or the hunted,” Zac said.

“If you decide to follow me you will become a part of my army, and we will immediately set out to New Washington. From there we’ll teleport to the home base of the Force I belong to, and there your training would begin in earnest. If you can’t keep up during the walk, I’ll leave you in the woods.

“I won’t force anyone to follow me. You have five minutes to make your choice; Power or freedom,” he finished as he summoned a chair and sat down.

There was a subdued silence as he looked upon the women. The silence stretched to a minute until it finally was broken by the young girl who questioned him earlier. She walked right up to him with steady steps.

“I choose power,” she said with determination in her eyes, as a Contract of Binding popped up in front of Zac.

He nodded, as he took out another set of gear and a spear and handed it over. With the first person walking forward it was as though a blockage was removed, and the former slaves walked forward one by one to pledge allegiance and get a set of gear.

With that the first battalion of the Atwood Valkyries was born.

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#### **Chapter 120 - The Return**

Zac kept the lead as he pushed through the woods, his battalion of hapless recruits behind him. Altogether 80 of the women signed up, and were now walking behind him through the wilderness. The last 30 or so decided to stay behind in Greenworth, and Zac wouldn’t waste any more energy on them.

Luckily the gear he pilfered from Rydel and the dead warriors was enough to fit everyone to look essentially the same, with leather armor and a spear. Some of the

gear was bloodied or had some scratches, but there was nothing to do about that at the moment.

He was quite surprised to hear that 9 of the recruits actually were cultivators who possessed experience from the tutorial. However, they had been in the bottom-tier and emerged with even lower levels compared to Ryan. Being a cultivator didn't guarantee safety, and they'd been captured soon after they were returned. Apparently there were safety measures against that in the tutorial, but it disappeared immediately after it was over.

The fledgling soldiers had the willingness but lacked the skill as they stumbled along. Many were already panting from the trek while carrying their weapon. Zac could have put them all in a pouch, but he saw it as an opportunity for them to train and learn to struggle. They should be able to get a few stat points on the way to New Washington this way.

He was also accompanied by Ryan, who for some reason looked the most wretched of the bunch, even though having both the highest level and a Cosmos Sack to carry his things.

"This is torture, why don't we take a break?" he coughed out between pants.

"Just how have you survived until now?" Zac asked, part despising, part curious. The man truly seemed to have no survival skills apart from some quick wits.

"I mean I loved reading and watching Zombie stories before the world turned crazy. So I treated the merge like that, you know? Gather cans of food, scavenge while making no sound, things like that," he answered with some pride.

"The world will keep getting more dangerous. We got upgraded to a D-grade world. Sooner or later a bunch of E-Grade monsters will roam about, perhaps even D-Grade behemoths. How are you going to survive if you run around at level 18?" Zac asked.

"Well, I've got people like you for protection, right?" he answered without hesitation.

Zac was about to refute, but with a start he actually realized Ryan made some sense. It was the job of people like him to protect the town so that the non-combat classes could work and make the area thrive. He also realized that he had developed somewhat of a harsh attitude to those who couldn't battle lately, and it was something he needed to work on if he was going to lead a Force that likely would consist of more non-combat personnel than warriors.

He glanced back at the troop and saw that they should be able to keep going some more. He'd gotten pretty good at understanding the limit of endurance after battling the hordes. If people were sweating and panting they had more to give, but if they were glassy-eyed and robotic in their movements they were at their limit.

He was also happy to see that they seemed to be quite united. When one stumbled someone close by would help her up. Unity in a troop was extremely important. It was true before the fall, and perhaps even more so now. A soldier needed to be able to rely on their squadmates. Now with the system there also were the issue of war-arrays.

Alyn had explained the reason there were armies in the multi-verse. Zac had some problem understanding before since he felt that a D-Grade old monster was enough to decimate an endless amount of F-Grade soldiers, making them worthless. But there was such a thing called War Arrays. They were part array and part skill. A troop would combine their power, and exhibit a strength far above their individual power, even eclipsing ranks sometimes.

He didn't possess such a thing at the moment, but the simpler ones shouldn't be too hard to get hold of, especially with his cash infusion from the pouches on the mountain.

With such a large group moving they were almost constantly beset with attacks. Zac kept using [Eye of Discernment], and if the beasts were low-leveled he let the girls fight them. He only put his finger on the scale to make sure there were no deaths.

However, after half a day of walking most of the new recruits had bleeding gashes and bites hastily wrapped with some cloth or even leaves. There were even quite a few who leveled up during the day. The first levels were quite quick, and thanks to Zac maintaining vigil they could keep fighting without worrying that some high-level beast would arrive.

There were a few of those huge beasts that attacked the group, thinking they were easy pickings. Zac simply crippled them with a swing or two, and let someone from the army finish it off. Zac still got over 95% of the cosmic energy, but even 5% of a high leveled beasts gave quite a boost to the women who were barely level 10.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity for everyone except Zac, they stopped for dinner. Zac threw out two of the huge carcasses of the higher leveled beasts and bisected them with a few quick swings.

"Everyone gather up," he said.

The women were tired but moved up to him.

"There's 80 of you so we'll create eight squads for now, ten per group. One squad will take care of the camp every time we stop, such as cooking, and the group will rotate. The rest of you will use these," Zac said as he took out a small mountain of Nexus Crystals.

"What the HELL! Just how rich are you?" Ryan couldn't help shouting as he saw the pile of wealth.

Zac ignored him as he looked over his new soldiers.

"My goal is for you all to gain one level every day during our march, it shouldn't be too hard since you're all so low leveled. For those who don't know, these are Nexus Crystals. You can absorb the energy inside to gain levels. I want everyone except the squad in charge of the chores to use these every time we rest as a supplement to the battles while we walk," he said.

"What about me?" Ryan said with some greed in his eyes.

"You want crystals? Join the army," Zac simply said. Honestly, he had more than enough crystals to hand out a few, but he wouldn't do it right after the 80 women in front of him essentially got drafted to get this chance.

"Uhm... Nevermind then. I'll just have something to eat," Ryan muttered and slunk away.

Zac let the women divide themselves into groups since he knew it was all temporary in any case. He was pretty sure Alyn would rearrange it when they came back to the island.

He helped the chore group clean the large carcasses, as they generally still were too weak to cut through the tough hide of the high leveled beasts. They could do it on low leveled ones, but it was better if they all ate stronger beasts. It gave no cosmic energy, but it was far more nutritious compared to the normal animals.

As he was cleaning everything Joanna walked up to him.

"Um... Sir?" she tentatively asked Zac who looked up at her.

"Yeah?"

“Well, some of us were wondering... Who you are,” she asked with some embarrassment.

Zac simply stared blankly at her for some time, realizing he still hadn't introduced himself.

“It's not really important, really,” Joanna said a bit flustered from Zac's blank stare.

“No, it's ok. Wait a second,” Zac said as he flashed next to Ryan. “Sorry about this.”

Ryan barely had time to register his words and let out a screech as a chop on his neck knocked him out cold. The sound woke up the people who focused on absorbing energy.

“My identity is a bit sensitive, so I had to knock this guy out. Since you all have signed a contract with me there's no point in me hiding it. My name is Zachary Atwood, and I'm originally from Greenworth. My other nickname is... Super Brother-Man,” he said.

If Zac had to be honest he expected some shock and awe, but was pretty disappointed. Some looked skeptical, some were surprised, and some looked like it was an obvious thing.

“Cough... well. That's about it,” he said with some embarrassment. “Keep both my identities secret, I'm known as Monk to the government. We're leaving in an hour, rest up.”

“Wait, why do you have that weird name?” one of the girls suddenly asked.

Zac told them the story of the origin of Super Brother-Man, and got many looks of approvals. He still felt a bit embarrassed about the lackluster reaction earlier, so he sat down and closed his eyes as he took out another Nexus Crystal for himself.

He wasn't really focusing on the crystal, rather the feeling he had earlier at the grave-site. The hour he sat reminiscing gave him an insight into another facet of heaviness. He would treasure the insight, even though he didn't love the way he gained it. He wasn't sure, but he felt it was the first clue to take the next step to upgrade his Dao Seed.

He knew that his seeds needed to improve quite a bit if he wanted an Epic class. Some low or medium ranked seeds wouldn't be enough according to Alyn. He had already asked Calrin to be on a lookout for treasures that helped with the Dao, but those were among the most sought after treasures in the multi-verse. They were always in low supply but high demand and the huge consortiums snatched them up long before people like Calrin had a chance to even see the listing.

As he was meditating he sensed some light steps moving his way, and he was just about to open his eyes when he sensed more movement. Three of his new guards moved to intercept the person. He sneakily opened one of his eyes and saw one of the younger girls trying to approach him with a water bottle. Her efforts were foiled by Joanna and two of the girls who were cultivators though.

Zac felt the whole thing worked out pretty great. He was in no mood for some girl trying to woo him for benefits. Besides, he knew he wouldn't get too close to these people. They would become soldiers, and many of them might be dead in a year or two. To defy fate and grasp for power was to dance with death, there was no getting around that.

Soon the hour was up, and Zac opened his eyes and got up. The recruits still weren't rested, but they got up to their feet with no complaint. Ryan was still knocked out where Zac left him, so he splashed some water on his face to wake him up.

“Wha- whu? What the hell, man?” he groggily spluttered.

“You must have passed out, it’s time to go,” Zac said, hiding some embarrassment, as he started walking again.

The days passed as the girls went through a baptism of fire and blood in the forest. Some even managed to attain a few of the solo kill Titles while fighting some of the weaker beasts. When they followed Zac out through Greenworth the only thing strong about them was the determination in their eyes. But now they exuded an aura of warriors. Zac knew that they still were only paper tigers, and not someone who would be useful in the third wave, but their progress was impressive.

After roughly a week on the road they reached the area of New Washington, and Zac sighed as he saw a group waiting for him by the gate. He wasn’t surprised as he spotted a few scouts in hiding earlier. He didn’t do anything to intercept them, as this wasn’t avoidable.

This was going to be a pain in the ass.

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#### **Chapter 121 - Thomas Fischer**

“Stay here. If they start firing at you, scatter and hide until I’ve incapacitated them. Joanna, Riley, and Tamira with me. Ryan too I guess,” Zac said, not wanting to give the man an opportunity to slink away.

“Um I can keep look-out from over here, no need to bother you,” Ryan said as he nervously looked at the armed soldiers lined up, but after a glare from Zac sighed and followed.

The other three, each a leader of one of the squads, followed Zac expressionlessly. They were the first to sign up to his employ, and among those who had improved the most during the death march back to New Washington.

All of them were around level 20 by now, which was a huge improvement compared to before. While none had gained the one level per day he hoped they weren’t far off. It shouldn’t be more than two weeks until they could get their class as soon as they got back to the island

Zac walked in the front, ready to intercept any nervous soldier with a hair-trigger. There were a few official-looking people in the front, Julia one of them. Another of them clearly was a general from his attire. The final man was in his late forties or early fifties.

He was clean-cut and good looking, looking very much like the politicians of old. He even wore a navy suit with a silk tie. However, intuition born from months of intense battles told Zac that he was no weak mortal, but at least decently strong.

There were a few more of them who hid further in the back with fear on their faces. The whole group held around a hundred people and formed quite a welcome for Zac’s party.

“It is good to see you again Mr. Monk, though I hoped it would have been under better circumstances. We have heard some troubling things from Greenworth,” Julia said.

“Like a barefoot lunatic going on a murder-spree, killing all the strongest warriors of the town, putting all the civilians at risk,” the general gruffly added with a glare.

The three women behind Zac glared at the general, but he only balefully glared back. Zac slowly looked over the group and with a sigh removed the corpse of the mayor and threw it over.

“It was very disappointing seeing the lawlessness your government displayed just one town away from here. I arrive and find this animal has been capturing young women for slaves, filling large mansions equipped with disgusting torture devices. This apparently went on for months, where he was left to his own devices, protected by the army. Yet you stand here looking all self-righteous,” Zac said with a calm face.

Julia frowned and looked at the women behind him, and then to the small army in the distance unsure what to say. However, the general didn't have the same problem.

“Bah, that's just your story. And even if it was true, since when was it up to you to be judge, jury, and executioner? You should have reported it to us and we would have looked into it,” the general angrily retorted.

“The information brokers in New Washington already knew about it, so there's no way you didn't. I have 80 victims with me as well that can testify. Of course, you could just ask anyone from Greenworth if you actually gave a shit, since the council's activities were no secret. There's a whole park filled with unmarked graves that's a testament to their wanton slaughter in the town,” Zac spat back with an angry glare.

Memories of the mounds where his father was dumped somewhere came back to him, and his temper started rising. He knew that these people were not to blame since it was the cultivators who did it as soon as they got back from the Tutorial. Still, he had some trouble maintaining his cool.

“Monk wasn't the one who killed that pig, it was me,” Joanna suddenly interjected from behind.

“Well, there you have it, a confession,” the general said.

“Don't mind her,” Zac said, and then turned to Joanna. “You, stay quiet for now.”

She looked like she wanted to interject, but she could only close her mouth and step back.

“So, is this why you have a squadron waiting for me outside your gates?” Zac asked.

Finally the clean-cut man opened his mouth.

“A society cannot function without order, and the rule of law is the most basic of protections for the weak against oppression by the strong. These are chaotic times, and unfortunately some chose to look out for themselves instead of the common good,” he said as he looked down on the mutilated corpse of the mayor.

“There will be an investigation regarding your activities in Greenworth, and if it turns out what you say is true, then that'll be it. If they truly acted as you say, hiding behind the authority of the government while acting like monsters, then they deserve their fates. If we find you are lying, then you and Port Atwood will be listed as terrorists, and barred from this and any future Government towns on threat of death,” he continued.

Zac simply nodded, not really worried about the latter threat. To him it felt like something the government needed to do to save face. They couldn't just let it go as that would make them look weak. He was even prepared to pay some fine just to smooth things over, but things turned out even better than expected.

“However, I’m more curious about why you have brought an army to our doorsteps. From what I can see the quality of their gear is not trivial. What is your goal?” the man continued.

“I plan on taking these people back to Port Atwood immediately. I have taken the liberty of taking them in as refugees. I was worried about their fate staying here,” Zac said with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Are you not staying for the Auction?” Julia suddenly asked.

“I plan on attending. I’ll go back and report, and then return. I might bring someone back with me,” he answered.

He thought of having Sap Trang act as a village elder so he didn’t have to keep having these conversations, as it was a bit tiring. Mr. Trang was of simple origins, but he was wily, which might just be what was needed to deal with these bureaucrats.

The man in the suit, who clearly was some sort of leader, nodded in response. There was something about the man in front of Zac that felt familiar, but Zac couldn’t place his finger on it.

“By the way, who are you? Why do I recognize your face?” he asked with some doubt.

“I am Thomas Fischer, and I was once the Deputy Secretary of Defense. For now, I’m the leader of New Washington,” Thomas answered with a nod.

Now Zac realized he must have seen the man in some news article or on the television. The guy once was a pretty high-ranked official. It even looked like he was a cultivator judging from his aura. Zac reminded himself to be careful around this man, not letting himself be used as some sort of puppet. If there was one thing that was common among all high ranked politicians, then it would be their ambition, and he had no idea what goals this man had for himself in this new world.

“And the president?” Zac asked. He hadn’t actually thought about it until now, but he wondered where the de-facto leaders ended up.

“President Hughes, vice president Clark, and much of the old executive branch unfortunately have passed away. We recently found out that the part of Old Washington with the Capitol and the White House was randomized to close proximity of a Zhix-hive. We do not expect there to be any survivors,” he said with a sigh.

“However, their sacrifice will be avenged. Any attack on humanity will result in a thunderous response,” he added with a higher volume.

Many of the soldiers nodded in agreement, and Zac even heard a ‘damn right’ from somewhere. Zac was overall pretty impressed with the man in front of him. It looked like the government could be in worse hands. Still, he seemed like a purebred politician, and everything he said and did likely was to maximize benefits and not a testament to what he truly believed.

At least the man seemed intent on working together for now, and swept away his problems with one fell swoop. Zac felt it was nothing odd by now, and it reminded him of the pragmatic mindset of Ogras. There was no benefit in clamoring for justice for some dead rapist, it was much more beneficial to keep a good relationship with a potential powerhouse.

“So, can we go?” Zac said, wanting to get on with it. The scouting missions should be done as well, and Zac was curious to see what his four teams had discovered on the neighboring islands.

“Of course, but understand that your group will need to have an army escort for safety reasons. We can’t just have a hundred armed warriors running rampant inside the town,” Thomas answered.

Zac thought it over for a second before he nodded and turned to his three guards.

“Get the others, we’re heading home,” he said, and in short order the small army of spearmen walked through the town.

They still didn’t give the air of a real army as their ranks were a bit disorganized, but at least the women gave off an intimidating aura. Between the inscribed spears and the high-quality leather gear they looked like real warriors and the various wounds that covered them only heightened that impression.

They were accompanied by soldiers both in front and behind the squad. The soldiers weren’t really hostile, but rather looked a bit curious at the girls, and even a bit jealous at Zac. They were quickly ushered to the teleporter, and Zac stayed behind letting the others enter first.

“Just exit the building and stay there. Oh, and stay calm, they won’t hurt you,” Zac only said, drawing confused glances from both the new recruits and the people of New Washington.

Finally everyone except Zac had passed through, and he turned to the leaders of New Washington.

“Our first meeting was a bit bumpy, but I hope we can work together in the future. We’re well aware that the invaders are our largest threat. As a sign of trust I’ll give you this treasure. It contains much information that will aid humanity in general. My hope is that the content will be made public to any forces that stand against the enemies of our new planet,” Zac said as he threw over the crystal containing the information of the incursions.

It was the very same one Ogras threw at him long ago, and he’d kept it all this while. He knew all the content by heart by now, so he had no problem giving it over to the people here. While some of their motives were suspect he felt their desire to protect humanity was true. Furthermore he had no desire to profit from this information, as his very planet was at stake.

“What’s this?” Julia curiously asked as she snatched the crystal out of the air.

“It is an information package containing quite a bit of information regarding the incursions. It details both the forces of the multi-verse, and many other important facts that will help us anticipate the invader’s composition and strength. It was taken from the body of a high ranking invader,” Zac simply said, drawing surprised glances.

“Is the forces of Port Atwood fighting an Incursion?” Julia quickly asked.

“I’m not at liberty to discuss our situation. See you in three days,” Zac said with a small smile as he entered the teleporter.

The leaders of New Washington seemed to have follow-up questions, but Zac simply winked out of existence, cutting any questioning short.

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#### **Chapter 122 - Homecoming**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Sorry, a bit late chapter today. Drank some beer, fell asleep, and forgot.

Zac appeared in the familiar teleportation house and immediately heard some ruckus. He grimaced and quickly walked outside to see what was going on.

The response of the demons was surprisingly quick, with over twenty of them standing at the ready to blast his new soldiers to high heaven. The former slaves looked shocked at the sight of the demons, but Zac was happy to see that they didn't forget their training, and formed a decent defensive line.

"That's enough. These are new recruits of Port Atwood," Zac said as he stepped in between the two groups.

Luckily the demons followed his standing orders, not wantonly killing anything coming through the portal. The array was only possible to use with his permission after all, so anything that came through should be an ally.

"You keep bringing back young girls to the island every time you leave. I'm starting to get jealous," a light voice drifted over from the group of demons as Alea stepped out.

She scrutinized the girls, who warily looked back at her.

"Well, they're pretty weak, but at least they're better than those from the ship," she said with a smile.

"Oh, you're not happy with the assessment? You want to test your mettle, little girl?" she added as she saw one of the cultivators in the new group glare angrily at her.

"That's enough. Where is Alyn? These people need basic training, I want them at fighting capacity as soon as possible," Zac said.

"I'll take you there," Alea answered as she walked up to his side while throwing a teasing smile at the girls behind him.

Zac knew she was mostly messing around and didn't mind it as he started walking, following the poison mistress' directions.

"Um... What's going on? Why are there... demons here?" one of the squad leaders hesitantly asked as they moved toward the temporary town.

"Well, that isn't really important. You can see it as they're another foreign race sharing our new planet. Besides, there are humans here as well, just not that many," Zac said, still respecting the demons' wishes to stay incognito as much as possible.

"Can you update me on what's been going on since I left?" Zac asked as he turned to Alea.

"Ogras is still in seclusion, absorbing the fruit," she started, looking prepared for the question.

"There was almost no reconstruction needed from the ant-wave. We have sent a few exploratory parties inside and killed off most of those still alive inside the hive. Unfortunately, those kills awarded no contribution points. Space inside has stabilized by now and is barely larger than the exterior. There are some interesting developments there, but I'll let Alyn discuss that with you," she said, drawing confused glances from the others.

"Ok, what about the exploratory missions?" Zac asked next.

"The last of them returned yesterday. Three of the vessels met no real troubles. Surprisingly most of the islands around us are populated. Most are populated with humans, but two are comprised of beastmen who seem to have a rudimentary grasp of the Dao of Technology. The parties mostly kept some distance to them apart from a few minor altercations or meetings. However, the last group only had two survivors of the 6 crewmen. Apparently they stepped on an island and after walking a bit they were assaulted by extremely aggressive insectoid beings", she finished.

Zac was a bit surprised that there were so many encampments scattered around his island. The beastmen were obviously the Ishiate, and it sounded the camps close to Port Atwood were those that were starting to industrialize before the integration. He

was a bit curious to meet these beastmen, but he didn't have time for that at the moment.

It was more troubling to hear that a neighboring island held a Zhix Hive. Zac still knew very little about that race, apart from the fact that they were even more hostile than the Forces of the incursions. It was like having a crazy neighbor, never knowing when trouble would come knocking at your door.

"How far is the island with the Zhix? That's the insectoid species," Zac asked.

"It actually is one of the closest islands, just an hour or so away on your vessel to the northeast. It was the last island the group planned on visiting before returning," Alea said with a sigh.

That was even worse news. It meant that the danger only increased further, and the Zhix might even land on his island without him noticing since almost all of the shoreline was unguarded. The last time the humans were only intercepted since they specifically sailed toward his shipyard.

He really needed some alert system and would take some time to look through the shop for something fitting, and even consult with Calrin if he didn't find anything.

After ten minutes of walking they reached a house some distance from the town encampment, roughly somewhere around where the Academy would be located in the future. Still, the building looked very temporary, and the work done was mostly clearing out forest and smoothing out the ground.

A large area was covered in gravel, and it resembled an outdoors gym from the various boulders and contraptions there.

"I see you got me some more students after all. I had a feeling you would want to increase the population soon, and had a few people arrange this space for me," Alyn said with a smile as she exited the house.

"Low levels, but decent attitude. They are lacking in bloodlust and ruthlessness though, but that can be fixed. Not a bad first squadron," she said after quickly glancing over the girls behind Zac and Alea.

"A few of them are cultivators, but the rest are mortals. I hope you can look over options for a good cultivation manual to give them," Zas said.

After traveling with Ryan and the other cultivators for a week he'd learned a lot about the Tutorial. They had all been shocked when they learned that he wasn't actually a cultivator himself, rather a mortal.

Everyone who entered the Tutorial got the same low tiered cultivation manual. It was without any element and not very powerful, but helped set a foundation to the pathway system that could later be changed into whatever pattern their class provided. To get a better and more suitable manual they had to earn them.

The first day in the tutorial was pretty relaxed. Everyone had been teleported to a large town and greeted by the workers of the system. They had gotten an orientation that explained what was going on and basic information about cosmic energy, the System and the Multiverse.

Many were skeptical, but it was hard to refute what was said when it came from a flying pixie who showed examples of magic as she explained it. They were even stuffed with some propaganda, as it was explained they were the 'chosen ones', and the hope of humanity. The mortals were essentially called lower life-forms by the pixies, not deserving of the system's attention.

They were given the manual, which was simply called **[F-Grade Cultivation Manual]** and taught how to meditate to absorb Cosmic Energy quicker. They were also given a choice of a skill, ranging from weapon skills and spells. From the description of

the skills it sounded to Zac it was an improved selection of the beginner skills available for sale in the Nexus Node.

People had been amazed by suddenly being able to strike out with weapons with the power to create cracks in the ground, or even shoot fireballs. They were even given an exclusive Title for being the 'chosen', that gave 5 points all attributes, just to show them how the Title system worked. However, the fun times didn't last forever. Those five points also guaranteed that everyone, young or old, essentially was in peak condition for the following trials.

On the second day everyone was teleported away from the town. Some arrived in some dingy cave, others in some sort of frontier towns. There were all kinds of scenarios that appeared and the groups that got placed together ranged between five and over a hundred, but they had one thing in common. They all got a quest to either defend from monsters or to explore somewhere filled with monsters.

That first mission was one of the bloodiest, with almost a tenth dying. People weren't able to adapt to the new change. Some took too large risks, feeling invulnerable with their new skills. Others simply froze like deers in headlights, getting mowed down by unforgiving monsters.

The missions were actually quite easy though, and the monsters very weak. It was only due to ineptitude people died this early. After the mission people got graded by their performance and rewarded accordingly.

Everyone got a "Tutorial"-Title after the first mission that started with no benefits. However, after the first mission its rewards increased. Some got a few stat-points while others with bad quest performance got nothing, their titles still giving out zero attributes.

What followed was a schedule of three days of quests, followed by one day of rest and meditation. After the first three missions a new option was added, where people could choose their difficulty, ranging from Easy to Impossible. There was even a mortality rate at the quest, with Easy having 5% and Impossible had a 99% chance to perish.

The higher quests obviously gave much higher returns, but most people still chose easy. However, a few people chose the more difficult ones, such as "Normal". Their death rate was higher compared to the advertised stats, but that was likely from being unskilled beginners. Zac himself remembered his early battles, and he was still surprised he was alive today.

Over the weeks the distance between those who strove for power and those who only wanted to survive only got larger and larger. The elite's Tutorial-title continuously filled up with more and more bonus attributes, and their levels were far higher as well. They also got other rewards, such as better gear, and in some cases even skills, Nexus Crystals, and Cultivation manuals.

Meanwhile, the weaklings, such as the cultivators like Ryan and the formerly captured girls, barely survived through the Easy quests, mainly relying on others to keep them safe.

They got almost nothing from the tutorial in the end, only the initial 5 to all stat bonus, plus on average ten additional attributes. Zac couldn't help but grimace when hearing them squander such a once in a lifetime opportunity. Even the monsters that they fought gave huge bonuses to cosmic energy and Nexus Coins compared to normal beasts on New Earth.

Of course, that was only discovered when the cultivators returned and found further progression extremely tedious and dangerous. That's why many plateaued in level and power soon after returning.

Ryan was an example of this. He was somewhere in the average middle of the cultivators during the tutorial. He only chose easy quests, but he was one of those who actually fought during the missions, instead of hiding. He left the tutorial as level 14 and having 15 bonus attributes on his Tutorial Title.

He tried to keep his progress going by heading out into the forests fighting beasts but was dismayed by the amount of cosmic energy he gained by the low-level critters. He gave up after a week when he had only gained a level. It wasn't due to laziness, but rather a brush with death when a level 30 or so monster found him, and he barely survived the escape.

His last three levels he gained from his F-Graded cultivation manual, and he was close to becoming level 19. He, unfortunately, wasn't able to get a real cultivation manual, and the basic one from the tutorial was tortuously slow in progress after the initial ten levels.

Zac knew that the system rewarded the brave, and he knew that some likely had survived through Hard, and even Impossible missions. He wondered what kinds of bonuses and rewards they'd gotten. Ryan and the others weren't sure, as there were no real powerhouse in their group. Thom Sullivan was the strongest, but he reportedly mainly did a mix of Easy and a Normal missions.

It had reminded Zac that just because he had his titles and his level advantage he wasn't invulnerable. Salvation and Thea Marshall were perhaps just as strong as him since their rewards from the tutorial might have been extremely extravagant.

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#### **Chapter 123 - Neighbors**

"I seem to remember that you possess a gravity array, is that right?" Alyn suddenly said, bringing Zac out of his musings.

"Yes, it's currently placed in my camp. I can bring it over if you want it," Zac nodded.

"I would like if you upgraded it as well, I want it to cover the entire Academy Area," she said with a smile.

Zac frowned and opened up his town shop, and found out that the upgraded small scale gravity array cost 500 000 Nexus Coins. It wasn't a huge fortune, but also not negligible since it was 5% of his current amount of nexus coins. He expected that quickly bringing the army up to a decent power would cost millions on top of that, and he couldn't wantonly spend his money.

"It's a bit expensive, are you sure it's needed at this stage?" he tentatively asked.

Alyn simply smiled at him, and something about that smile gave Zac a hair-raising feeling, and he could only sigh and acquiesce.

"Follow Alyn's commands. You can consider the first week with me a warm-up, the real training begins now. It might be grueling, but the path to power is paved with blood," he said after turning to the newest citizens of Port Atwood.

Alyn nodded approvingly at Zac's comment while Alea simply rolled her eyes.

"By the way, Alea said you had some idea regarding the hive?"

“Yes. When the warriors traveled through the hive we found that a new queen has been born,” she said.

Zac immediately frowned and looked toward the huge structure in the distance.

“Don’t worry, the queen is still an infant, and is still busy incorporating the old body into itself. It will take years, perhaps decades without nurturing, before it can start creating new warriors,” she added.

Zac could only sigh in relief at the news. He was in no mood to fight another ant-wave on top of the third wave.

“So what was your idea?”

“You need Beast Tamers, people with a Class that’s based on controlling beasts,” she explained.

“It would be extremely beneficial. The biggest boon would be that we might be able to tame the Ayr Hivequeen. That would essentially give control over the whole hive. It would also be good for you, with all these barghest around. They’re currently slowly turning feral, as we have no beast tamers with us who can keep them in line.

“They aren’t very dangerous, but they can still become a good weapon. The barghest with us are just youth, and with the help of a good trainer they can get stronger, the alphas even reaching E-Rank with time” she kept going, some excitement glistening in her eyes.

“Do you have means of guaranteeing them getting a Beast Trainer class if I can get some more people to train?” Zac curiously asked.

It sounded like a pretty good idea. There was an extreme amount of barghest in the forest, and from what he learned they would start multiplying in a few years when they became real adults. If he could use the dumb beasts as meat shields in battle with incursions or others it would protect the lives of his people.

“Well, no. Clan Azh’Rezak didn’t possess any heritage of that type and hired experts from an Association to take care of their beast hordes. But I have a few ideas that might work. I think if you can recruit a few of those beastmen I heard about it would be for the best. They might have a better affinity for those kinds of classes,” she said.

“I will see if I can get some more recruits,” he said with a nod before leaving the burgeoning academy.

Of course, with Alyn at the helm, it might turn more into something like an Agoge, the Spartan training regiment. It seemed that Alea chose to stay behind as well, and Zac didn’t mind. After he pawned off his new squadron to Alyn he went to find Adran.

Since Ogras was still in seclusion the portly administrator would be the one with the highest authority. There were also the generals, but none of them really cared about management and preferred to focus on their own training.

“I heard about the mixed results of the expeditions,” Zac started as he sat down in a chair in Adran’s office.

“Yes. Mostly it went fine, with the exception of the last group. Nasty things, that species. Not something we’ve met or heard about before. However, insectoid species are usually the same. There generally is a queen in command, holding absolute power,” he answered.

“They’re called the Zhix. They’re insanely aggressive from what I’ve heard during my excursions. Anything that comes close gets relentlessly attacked, no matter if it’s a native or an incursion,” Zac added.

Adran frowned at that information.

“I’m sorry to add to your troubles. But I’ve talked with our remaining earth mages a bit. They say that it’s technically possible for there to be tunnels between our island and theirs. The Nexus vein beneath this island has hardened the subterranean walls, and they should be able to hold even under the sea. So if those things keep digging, following the thickness of cosmic energy, they’ll end up in our mountains sooner or later,”

Zac groaned at the news. The prospect of hyper-aggressive ant-men flooding out from his crystal mine was something that sounded like a real pain in the ass, both to his wallet and his town. Besides, who knew, they might dig for the vein and ruin it as well, which would make Port Atwood a far less valuable piece of property.

“How strong were the warriors?” Zac suddenly asked after mulling things over.

“Not too strong. Their attributes were equivalent of someone somewhere around level 20 to 25. They were assisted by quite hard bodies though, which should count as at least an additional 30 or so endurance. And there were a lot of them. Our scouts killed quite a few while they fled toward the vessel, but they simply kept coming,” Adran answered.

“Very well. I will travel there myself,” Zac said with a grimace. “Perhaps I can get someone of them to talk if I display my power. And if they don’t want to talk, I’ll just chop down their numbers a bit. I am in need of some battle in any case.”

Adran looked surprised, but after considering it for some time nodded.

“A tip, if you can get them to as an ally you should. Insectoid populations are usually quite strong in the multi-verse. They have high reproduction rates and high average powers. The queens of the higher species are extremely feared, being able to channel their whole hive’s power into devastating attacks,” the administrator added.

“What about the other islands? Anything of interest?” he continued.

“It is clear that the nexus vein beneath our island has affected the whole region to a certain extent. Most of the islands have higher concentrations of cosmic energy than usual. Together with the temperate climate, it means many can be made into farming islands that can provide Port Atwood with a continuous supply of food and cultivation materials.

There is also a mountainous island not too far that look promising for setting up a mining operation for metals. We still haven’t found anything of the sort in our own mountain, and need supply to keep our industry going,” Adran answered.

“All in all 18 of the closest islands were scouted. Surprisingly we saw signs of habitation on 10 of them. 7 were humans, 2 were the beastmen, and the last the so-called Zhix. We suspect the total populations to reach roughly twenty thousand, excluding the insectoids, of course. There might be people on the other islands as well, and we simply didn’t find them.”

“TWENTY thousand?” Zac exclaimed shocked.

It was nowhere near the population of places like New Washington, but most larger towns had been fragmented into smaller bits, and a population of twenty thousand would be respectable at this stage of the world. Of course, it was just a fraction of the millions required in a population that most of the proper buildings in the Town Shop required, but it was a start.

“Yes, but most of them are concentrated to three larger settlements, two human and one beastkin. The largest town alone has an estimated population of over ten thousand,” Adran answered.

“How are their quality of lives?” Zac asked.

“Mostly pretty wretched. The largest human settlement I mentioned earlier has organized themselves at least and erected a decent wall around a coastal village. The rest are barely hanging on, and we even got a few requests of them to come with the scouts, even though they were demons. We did hide our appearances under hooded capes though.”

It seemed that it wouldn't be impossible to gather a real population to get his town up and running. He wasn't sure whether it was better to start gathering people immediately or wait until after the third wave though. He still had no idea what to expect from the third wave, but he couldn't imagine it would be easier than the last two. At the same time he felt that with his power and equipment there really shouldn't be a lot of suspense unless the System went crazy.

He still had a couple of days before the auction started, and about a week before the last horde arrived. Time was limited but it might be a good idea to start building Port Atwood in earnest. He'd start with the Zhix though, as that was the most pressing matter. The hive had been right under his nose for months, who knew how far they had dug by now.

It didn't take long until Zac was sailing alone on one of the Creator vessels. He'd gotten the route from the fishermen, and it was only an hour away. He hadn't even checked in on Emily or his camp, eager to set sail. The vessels were as quick as speedboats but far more stable, so he pushed through the waves like an arrow.

What he said to Adran was true. He still felt stifled with his emotions in turmoil ever since Greenworth, and he almost hoped that these Zhix kept up their hostility. He had forced himself to keep it together for his new recruits, but he really needed the solitude of this excursion.

He wasn't very worried either, as from all accounts he wasn't in any real danger. If a fisherman and a few of the normal demons could fight them off and leave, though with some losses, then he wouldn't have any real trouble. These Zhix were just like humans, newly integrated into the system, and there should be almost no warriors their kind that could match his power, especially not the ones stuck on an isolated island.

Just as the fishermen described he arrived at the island in roughly an hour. It was far smaller compared to his own, and he judged it might just be a tenth the size altogether. The climate of the island was essentially the same as his own, but there was less vegetation as most of the island was covered by a large mountain. It almost looked like a large volcano with some jungle on the edges of the island, but he wasn't able to tell whether it actually was a volcano or if it just looked like one.

He disembarked at the closest beach and threw his creator vessel into a Cosmos Sack and headed inland. From what he understood the Zhix were mainly subterranean, so they should be somewhere in the mountains. As he walked further inland toward the mountain he was having a somewhat unsettling déjà vu from the first time he entered the mountain valley all that time ago. The island was deathly silent, not a single chirp could be heard.

Until suddenly a twig snapped, and all hell broke loose.

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**Chapter 124 - The Zhix**

Tens of warriors poured out from nowhere and mindlessly charged at him making some loud clacking noises and Zac immediately took out a weapon. However, since his goal was to see if an alliance was possible he didn't bring out [Verun's Bite]. Instead, he took out a black wooden club made from the extremely dense trees he'd found on the island long ago.

After a roughly a minute of thwacking twenty-seven antmen lay down on the ground unconscious, and Zac was finally able to take a good look at them. He realized it was a misnomer to call these things ant-men, as they were even more human-like than Ishiate.

Their faces were mostly human, apart from their noses that were mostly two holes and a slight protuberance. The same could be said about their ears, almost looking like the cauliflower ears of professional wrestlers. Their eyes were almost human, though a bit larger and their irises were purple.

All in all their faces could have passed as ugly humans if it wasn't for the two antennae on their heads and the fact that their skin was tinged a bit purple. Their skin was quite hard as well, but not to the point of being a chitinous exoskeleton of the Ayr Ants back on his own island.

They also had four normal appendages and even wore clothes. When people spoke about the Zhix earlier he had almost imagined them to look a bit like the Mantis-ants, having swords for arms. But they held actual weapons in their pretty human-looking hands.

Zac picked up one of the Zhix at random and walked some distance away from the others before pouring water from a canteen over it. It quickly woke up sputtering and clacking, desperately waving its arms.

"I know you understand me. I need to speak to your leader. Don't make me knock you unconscious again.," he said as he held the warrior down with his foot.

The Zhix warrior gave no response apart from struggling and screeching, and Zac could only sigh and knock him out again. At least the intel was good, and these people were not very strong.

Actually, as Zac walked through the forest he was starting to guess why. There was not a single living thing on the island. Perhaps they had already hunted everything to extinction. An island like this might not have too much wildlife from the start, and they might have found themselves without anything to kill to gain levels.

Zac kept meeting groups of warriors, but he kept knocking them out. He was surprised by the sheer number of them, wondering exactly how they could survive on this island. Could ant-men eat leaves and bark? Were they excellent fishermen? He had seen no boats though, and it felt a bit unlikely for a species that lived underground to be used to the sea.

After walking for almost an hour Zac reached the central mountain, and by this point he'd clobbered well over a hundred of the warriors. Finally, he saw something that seemed man-made, a pretty even mountain path that led along the wall.

The path was only a meter wide, and after walking for ten minutes the drop was high enough that Zac wasn't sure he'd survive the fall. Luckily he didn't need to walk much longer until he reached a great plateau. It was even larger than a big town square, and roughly a third of the way up the mountainside.

More impressively it was clear to Zac that the whole plateau was actually carved into the mountain itself, rather than a natural formation. Enormous statues lined both the sides of the squarish plaza, with the inner side looking almost like the entrance to some ancient tomb.

He didn't have time to admire the beautiful craftsmanship though, as there was a whole army standing at the ready between him and the entrance. A quick estimate put them at roughly a thousand warriors, most of them hefting daggers or short swords.

Zac remembered it was the same with those he'd encountered so far on the island, and he guessed that their choice of weapons was a result of mainly fighting underground where ranged weapons and large unwieldy things like spears weren't as effective.

The army stood without moving, balefully glaring at Zac who walked up from the small path and entered the plaza proper. He looked back at them for some time and decided to make one last attempt at communicating. He empowered his voice with Cosmic Energy to make sure that everyone on the plaza, and any hidden leader, could hear his message.

"This is the last time I try for diplomacy with the Zhix. I am Zachary Atwood from a neighboring island. I am a human, one of the two other races that were affected just like you when the so-called System decided to merge our planets together into the current mess.

"I mean no harm to your population. All the warriors I have encountered so far are still alive. But I need to speak to your leader or leaders. As a token of trust I can give you a piece of information you might not know. You are not alone, your kind are spread all over this new planet," Zac said.

*Being god damn lunatics who attack everyone*, he silently added in his mind.

There had been no reaction during the beginning of his speech, not even with his last sentence. Zac suddenly realized why, and wanted to smack himself. Unless they were idiots they should understand that their kind were still alive just from checking their own Ladder.

Still, there was some movement in the army. Generally it was just small glances between the troops, but it was enough for Zac to know that they understood his words. After being relentlessly attacked so many times he had actually started doubting the effect of his language skill.

"Why should we trust someone who reeks of impurity and chaos?" a sharp voice came from the distance as a group of Zhix walked out from the huge gate in the mountain.

In the front a Zhix that was almost twice as large compared to the others walked, and it was accompanied by two elders and eight guards dressed in far more intricate gear than the army in front of it. The Zhix army quickly made way to create a path for the new group.

Zac honestly couldn't tell whether the supersized Zhix was a male or female, as it looked completely androgynous. He was expecting a female since the information he possessed from Adran said that most insectoid species were ruled by a queen.

Then again, the same could be said for the warriors as well, he had no real way of telling their genders, they all pretty much looked the same.

The party stopped a decent distance away from Zac, the two advisors clearly looking unhappy.

"Your holiness, you mustn't talk to the fallen. It's against the precepts. The impurity must be cleansed, lest it keeps spreading. We're already sullied, but we might still be redeemed. But if we start consorting with agents of chaos we will truly be lost," one of them hurriedly said.

"What the hell are you talking about? Fallen? Sullied? Do you even know what's going on, being stuck here on an isolated island?"

“Do you think your tricks will work on us, fallen one? Your kind might have taken a new face, but you can’t hide the impurity coursing through your body. We eradicated your kind in the olden days, and we will do it again,” the other advisor huffed, and it looked like most of the warriors agreed with the sentiment.

“You mean the Cosmic Energy? It’s not like I asked to have it. But our worlds got merged together, it’s not like we had any say in whether the System crammed our world full of the energy. And you call me fallen, but aren’t you the same? I sense that you are at a decent level,” said with a frown.

“More lies, just like the Dominators always spewed,” the other elder scoffed.

“You said you’re from another world than ours? Explain,” the large Zhix interjected ignoring the entreating looks from the others.

Zac thought for a second before he started narrating an abridged version of what he’d learned the past months. First, he explained the system, with the classes, attributes, and ranks. Next, he told them about the history of the multi-verse, and about the Apostates. Finally, he explained their current situation, mostly composed of information from New Washington, and some information about the incursions.

Honestly, he would have rather just captured the large Zhix and forced a contract of binding on it, but it wouldn’t work for multiple reasons. First of all, a contract couldn’t be enacted under coercion. The contracting system was created by the Apostate of Order, and something like using it under threat of violence was the opposite of what he envisioned.

Besides, it appeared there were special restrictions in place on New Earth. It appeared it wasn’t possible to enter contracts with the other races at the moment. Zac had been curious about how the girls had known about the contract back at Greenworth and was told that it was common knowledge in the new world.

People had also found out that entering a contract with the Ishiate simply wasn’t possible, the system blocked it. The general theory was that the System still considered the three races on Earth in contention, and blocked certain systems cross-races. Perhaps a leader of the planet had to emerge before all systems were completely unlocked.

“I don’t know anything about your kind, but from your words it sounds like there were some people on your old world who could use Cosmic Energy, and who used it for evil. That has nothing to do with us humans, or the Ishiate. We come from our own separate worlds, and are busy struggling with our own problems to have time to plot against your people,” he finished.

“I sense no falsehood from this being, and what it says has some merit. We have called the strange events of late a Dominator plot so long that we have almost convinced ourselves of it. But our hive is dying and we need to open our eyes, even if what we see is not what we hoped for,” the large one slowly said.

“No! Impurity must be cleansed!” one of the well-equipped guards suddenly roared as it ran toward Zac, who immediately readied himself with furrowed brows.

However, the huge Zhix moved with amazing speed and suddenly held the royal guard by its neck.

“Order is not lost just because some things change. You dare defy the hive?” the leader said as it held the warrior by its throat.

“It... is... heresy,” the guard squeezed out, looking unwilling to back down.

The leader only snorted and with a sickening crunch crushed the neck of the warrior, and threw its body away like a piece of garbage. Zac was amazed at the power

of the thing, as the corpse was thrown over twenty meters away, without it seeming the leader used much force.

He had a feeling that the high power was something it was born with, rather than something it had gained from the System.

He already knew that many species were far superior to humans, or even demons, when it came to innate power. Some species were born at E-Ranked Race or even higher, and many had naturally higher stats.

Others were extremely adept at grasping Dao seeds, making it seem as though the universe itself handed them out as gifts. The universe simply wasn't equal, and some were just better than others.

"You call yourself a human, is it? You have told a fantastical tale. But how will we know you are not lying?" the leader said as it turned back to Zac. "You told us that the reason we lost a part of the hive was the so-called Tutorial, but why was no one returned after a month?"

"If no one was returned they either all died, or were dropped off somewhere else. I'm still searching for friends and family as well, as they might have been thrown anywhere in the world. As for proof... Well, what kind of proof do you want?" Zac asked, to which the large Zhix only turned toward the huge gate.

After a few minutes another Zhix came running through the gate, and it was dressed quite differently from the others.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 125 - The Dominators**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

The new Zhix seemed to have once been dressed somewhat in the same manner as the advisors to the side of the so-called holiness. However, the robe was singed and damaged all over, making it look like the Zhix had walked through a fire or an explosion. It also had a huge back-pack on its back, which jumped up and down with every hurried step it took.

"Your holiness," the new Zhix panted with a bow as it reached the leader.

The large Zhix leader only nodded and turned back to Zac.

"You have come to our hive, told a fantastical tale. But you still are leaving us wondering. What brought you to our doorsteps?" it said, cutting straight to the chase.

"No offense, but your kind is known to be insanely aggressive, and a danger to anyone who is placed close to your hives," Zac said.

It was with some mixed emotions he saw that the Zhix in no way took it as an insult, but rather a point of pride.

"I am the leader of my town, and I have citizens to take care of. I needed to find out whether you are a threat or if you could become allies," he said, hiding nothing.

"And if you deem us a threat?" it lightly continued.

"It is not my style to leave trouble in my own backyard," Zac said, unflinchingly staring at the Zhix leader.

Suddenly the ground cracked under the feet of the large Zhix as it exploded into motion. It blasted toward Zac, almost matching the speed of himself when using **[Loamwalker]**. Zac was shocked, but battle was hardwired into his body by this point, and he summoned his axe and swung out. It clashed against an elaborate dagger that was aimed straight toward his throat, and the power in the strike shocked Zac.

From his estimation the Zhix leader had almost as much strength as he did, and they were both pushed away from the strike, the collision creating a shockwave that ruined a large area of the plateau. Even one of the huge statues was impacted and showed some spider-vein cracks, much to the dismay of the advisors.

Zac growled and got ready to fight as he summoned **[Chop]** and created a huge edge. However, the leader jumped back as swiftly as it attacked, once again standing by the advisors. Zac relaxed a bit, but didn't unsummon his weapon.

"You talk about genocide, but you have power to back up your words. If we die it will be weakness that gets removed from the swarm, and it will be just," it said.

Zac was confused, but could only assume that it did not mean to actually fight him to death. Still, he wouldn't let things rest like that, as he launched the edge as a projectile straight at the leader. The guards immediately moved to intercept, but the leader pushed past them, grasping two daggers this time.

It intercepted the edge by using both its arms but was pushed backward from the force, slamming a few of the guardian Zhix out of the way like bowling pins. It was only after twenty meters it stopped. However, it did manage to successfully block the strike without getting hurt, surprising Zac even further.

"Attacks on humanity will be avenged. Sometimes it will be immediate, sometimes it will take years. But it is coming," Zac said as he stared at the bleeding insectoids that were crawling back to their feet after being crashed into by their leader.

"A good creed to have," the Zhix simply said, seemingly not taking any offense.

"You reek of corruption. But then again, so do I by this point. We will not attack your people unless they provoke the Zhix or our precepts. The Zhix are not used to cooperation with outsiders of the hive, but we must adapt to the situation," it continued.

"To that end... lbtep," it said as it turned to the Zhix with the backpack.

"I'd like for you to bring my advisor with you to your hive and return them at a later point. lbtep can answer questions about our customs and learn of yours. lbtep will be responsible for the cooperation between our hives, as I rarely leave my shrine," the leader said as odd Zhix stepped forward.

"That is fine. I'm sure we can come to an understanding. What the Zhix do is their own business, we only ask that you do not dig underground toward our island that's in that direction," Zac said as he pointed southwest. "If you do we will consider it as a direct attack. And we will retaliate with everything we have."

The leader looked at Zac for a bit, the silence stretching to the point that Zac believed another surprise attack was incoming. However, it simply nodded after a while as it started moving toward the gate.

"Very well, we accept this premise. lbtep will take it from here," it said as it started moving away, accompanied by its advisors and guards.

"Hello, strange being. We are hungry," lbtep said with a bow.

Zac stared blankly at the advisor for a few seconds, unsure whether **[Book of Babel]** was on the fritz.

"Uhm.. Come again?" Zac hesitantly said.

“We are hungry. Your kind eat for sustenance too, no doubt?” it said, pointing to its mouth.

“Uh... yeah. Do you mean you need food?”

“Yes, we are very hungry,” it solemnly said with a nod.

“Well, what do you eat?”

“Anything that once lived except Zhix,” he quickly answered.

Zac could only hope that the list would be amended to also exclude humans, but for now he simply threw out a bunch of huge beast carcasses from his pouch. During the week of travel with his new squad of soldiers he'd stuffed multiple bags full of meat just in case he'd ever need it. The plateau suddenly filled with everything from boars, to huge snakes, to great birds.

“Do all of your kind possess the power to create food out of nothing?” Ibtep eagerly asked, and even the leader who was starting to move back to the entrance into the mountain stopped and looked back at Zac.

“No, these were beasts my soldiers killed before, I simply store them in a magical bag that has increased room and preserve the food,” he explained as he showed a Cosmos Bag to him.

“Very convenient,” Ibtep said with a nod. “I want a pouch.”

Zac had some trouble getting used to the directness of this Zhix, but he couldn't just keep giving things away.

“They are a bit rare, you can buy one from me for a Million Nexus Coins,” he said.

Ibtep froze for a few seconds before he rushed back toward the army who still stood in place. After some subdued chattering warriors came up to him one after another until Ibtep returned. A prompt appeared and Zac received a million Nexus Coins from the insectoid, and he quickly handed over one of his spare pouches.

“How do I use it?” it curiously asked.

“Drip a drop of blood on it. That will bind it to you. After that you only infuse some cosmic energy in it,” Zac explained.

It quickly followed Zac's instructions, and in short order it was putting his backpack into the pouch and retrieving it again, over and over.

“I am done. Let us go,” it said after playing around for a bit, and Zac nodded.

“What about all the meat?” Zac asked just in case.

“It will be taken care of. Your donation was very generous,” it simply said as it started walking away.

Zac and Ibtep walked back the same path as he entered the island, following the mountain road down to the jungle. Zac was quite curious about the Zhix, and thought a compliment would get the insectoid talking.

“Your leader was quite powerful.”

“Administering last rites makes the holiness very strong since what you called the integration happened,” the Zhix answered.

“Administering rites? What does that mean?” Zac asked confused.

The Zhix called the large one “your holiness”, so he guessed their society was some sort of theocracy led by priests.

“The holiness cuts out weakness from the hive by administering last rites. To die by the holiness instead of from starvation or age is a great reward,” Ibtep explained.

“Wait, the holiness kills its own people?” Zac asked surprised.

“Our hive faced starvation. Many of our gardens and farms collapsed or disappeared suddenly, leaving us with too little food. We dug to find sustenance, but the stone was unusually hard, making progress slow. We even ate everything above ground, but it didn’t last us long,”

“Dying from lack of food is a great injustice, and the holiness administered last rites, giving the citizens a warrior’s death,” Ibtep explained. “Many tried to stop the rites since every ceremony forced an infusion of more chaos into the Holiness. But the Holiness kept going, ignoring the damage it caused itself.”

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“Your holiness, is this truly wise? That thing might be tricking us? Besides, he contains a terrifying amount of corruption, or Cosmic Energy as he calls it. He can be a great threat to the hive,” Mammaki hesitantly said as they stood in front of the throne.

“We all knew that it was unlikely that the Dominators were the cause of our current situation. If they were powerful enough to rearrange the whole world we would have been enslaved again long ago. It was just a convenient enemy to keep unity during troubling times. The Zealots might buy it, but you are no fools. Besides, I believe it has no real reason to lie to us,” Nonet said as it showed its congregants its hands.

They had multiple broken fingers and were shaking, and the advisors were extremely shocked by the sight.

“That is-“

“Sacrilege!” multiple shouts erupted at once, but order was quickly restored by a wave of Nonet.

“It is just weakness leaving the body. I will be reborn stronger. But that so-called human had no reason to lie, since I sensed it was not blustering when it said it would eradicate the hive. The powerful have no real reason to lie to the weak. He could just destroy or enslave us if he wished,” Nonet continued. “Just the fact that he didn’t proves he’s not a Dominator.”

“Immediately stop all digging toward the human’s island, refocus efforts on creating new farmland,” it said next after some deliberation.

“Are you sure? We are almost half-way there,” an advisor asked.

“For now. We built the tunnels to have a chance at a final assault at what might have been a Dominator stronghold, but it looks like that was not the case. But reinforce the tunnels, we might need them in the future,” Nonet said.

“I think we will need to work with these foreign life-forms. The Dominators was a huge threat before the world changed. One of their warlocks took hundreds, often thousands of sacrifices to kill. Imagine their power now when the very air is full of corruption, and every death is an infusion of chaos,” the large Zhix said with a somber expression. “I wish that it was all just speculation, but you have seen the signs as well. The Dominators are back.”

A troubling silence was the only answer as the advisors fearfully looked at each other.

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**Chapter 126 - Ibtep**

On the way back Zac wasn't accosted by any Zhix warriors, leading him to believe the Zhix had some sort of non-verbal form of communication. He already suspected it when he saw the so-called holiness summon Ibtep by just turning toward the entrance to the hive.

It turned out they possessed some sort of sonar sense and could create small vibrations that were too subdued for human ears but could be picked up by the Zhix through a unique organ. It was also this organ that helped them sense Cosmic Energy, or corruption as they called it, since the energy caused interference to their sonar sense.

It was a bit jarring to speak with the Zhix, who seemed to only follow its own conversation flow. For example, a question regarding leadership in human society was immediately followed by 'Do humans poop?'.

"What about genders? How do I tell who's male and female?" Zac asked.

"Gender? Explain?" Ibtep asked, looking confused.

Zac did a simple explanation of the mammal reproductive system, and Ibtep seemed to understand.

"The Zhix are neither. Or both. We both carry the seed of life and possess the ability to germinate it, but we need the blessing of the Anointed to create life. Without their blessing no child can be conceived," Ibtep explained.

"So you give birth?" Zac followed up.

"No, we create eggs," Ibtep answered.

Zac glanced over at the Zhix, having a hard time imagining it squatting over a large egg like a bird.

It was clear that their society was more humanoid than ant-like, though the holiness was some sort of equivalent to a hive queen. However, there were no "worker-Zhix" or "warrior-Zhix", as everyone except the holiness, or the Anointed as they were collectively called, were the same.

Unfortunately, any further questions about the Anointed were unhesitatingly rebuffed. The only real information was that the hive on the island was quite small, only having one Anointed. The large hives could have quite a few of them, one of which would be the alpha.

That information was quite troubling since the leader of a small remote Zhix hive was far stronger than any human he'd encountered so far. He wondered just how strong one of these so-called alphas would be, as they might even eclipse his own power. That might only go for attributes though, Zac still had the advantage of multiple Dao Seeds and a Rare class.

"Do you have a Nexus Node?" Zac asked next.

"What is that?" the Zhix answered, to which Zac simply explained the appearance of the crystal.

"Yes, it appeared next to the holiness soon after the integration. However, it was sealed away, as it reeked of corruption. I wanted to study it, but it wasn't allowed," the Zhix answered. "Tell me, what does it do?"

"Well, it has a few functions. It can sell skills, and-" Zac started, but was interrupted.

"Like that large blade of corruption you created?" Ibtep interrupted.

"Yeah, although I got that one from my class. You get a class from the crystal as well," he explained.

"Can anyone get a class?" the insectoid continued.

"Yes, at level 25," Zac nodded.

“I want to use your crystal later.”

“Sure,” Zac answered with some surprise. “How did you reach level twenty-five already?”

There were quite a few of the Zhix, and Zac had a hard time imagining them gaining 25 levels from some island critters.

“Stones of Corruption,” Ibtep answered as he took out his backpack, and produced a raw Nexus Crystal. “These Stones of Corruption appeared beneath our hive after the integration, and they were thrown away due to the chaos they contained. I took a few for experimentation. There are also many things to kill underground, though few proved edible.”

Zac frowned when he saw the crystal, but after asking a few follow-up questions it seemed that they didn’t come from his mine. They were scattered about beneath the surface, but with far less concentration compared to his mine. That was in line with what he knew about the crystals. This island wasn’t too far away from his Nexus Vein, so it wasn’t too surprising that some crystals would be created here as well.

However, he made a mental reminder to consult the earth mages to construct some sort of warning system, making sure that these Zhix weren’t getting too close for comfort. They kept discussing various subjects until they reached the ocean.

“What now, human?” Ibtep asked as it turned toward Zac, who took out his creator vessel from a pouch.

“Get on,” on Zac said as he jumped up on the boat, but was surprised to see the Zhix not moving.

“What is this contraption, human? It is throbbing with corruption,” Ibtep said skeptically.

“It’s a magical boat of sorts. We use Nexus Crystals, the ones you call Stones of Corruption, to power this vessel to travel the seas,” he explained.

“Have humans always used corruption for such purposes?” it asked.

“No, before the integration I don’t think our world had any corruption. At least it wasn’t known to the public,” he answered.

“Then how can you possess such a thing now?” Ibtep asked while looking looked up at Zac.

“The System gives out various things, and we have a shop on our island where you can buy things from all over the multiverse. It is very convenient,” Zac explained, skirting the subject of the Creators.

The Zhix only nodded and got up on the boat after a bit. Soon they were cutting through the waves, almost flying like an arrow toward Port Atwood. Zac was surprised to hear that there were no oceans at the old Zhix homeworld, only subterranean basins. Perhaps that explained why there was so much land on the new world, essentially forming a supercontinent.

There were a few large sea creatures that seemed interested in the boat, but the Creators’ reputation wasn’t unwarranted as the boat quickly sped away. However, Zac slowed down his vessel every now and then to catch one of the huge fish swimming about, wanting to create some variation in Port Atwood’s diet.

The Zhix didn’t mind the interruption, rather the opposite. Since the hive was at the brink of starvation due to the randomization ruining their infrastructure he was very interested in alternative food sources, and kept asking questions about the wildlife of the ocean.

Finally they reached Port Atwood and disembarked some distance away from the shipyard. The advisor was very curious as it saw the structures of the Creators from the

distance, but Zac gave the same excuse as he used to. The shipyard was a private area, and entering would result in death.

Since the Zhix was very eager to get a class they headed straight toward his camp. Zac looked forward to the day the third wave done with, so he could become a lord. By then he could buy Nexus Stations and place them around the town, making it so that no one had any reason to barge into his private home.

However, as they closed in on his campsite Zac stopped in amazement, as the area was completely reformed. Large gardens had replaced the woods, creating a beautiful scenery for the newly erected mansion. Some were created with various flowers and bushes, others with stones and gravel like a Zen garden.

Rather than a huge building as with Ogras' palace in Azh'Rodum his new home more felt like a compound with many smaller buildings. Still, the main building was about the size of the mansions he'd visited in Greenworth.

The architecture was much the same as the one the demons used, with eastern architecture getting fused with nature. There were courtyards and pagodas apart from the gardens, and trees were a constant part of the structures.

To his surprise he saw that they'd even used his camper, pushing it up a few meters into the air by lodging it on a tree, and growing a large patio outside made of intertwined branches. Honestly he felt that the camper was the most interesting place, but he quickly saw that it was occupied as Emily peered out from the patio.

"Why didn't you come home immediately, I was pla-" she shouted but got her tongue stuck when she saw Zac's companion.

"What the hell is that?!" she shouted, quickly retreating away from the edge.

"Emily, come down here," Zac said with some embarrassment.

Only after some time did the teenager climb down the tree from what looked like stairs naturally growing out of the tree trunk.

"Is this a young of your species?" Ibtep aksed as it turned to Zac.

"An adolescent. Emily is soon 16," Zac answered.

"Hello young human. Here, have a snack," Ibtep said as he took out a dead grub from his backpack.

Both Zac and Emily blankly stared at the large larvae for some time, until Zac's mouth started tugging upward.

"Don't be rude, have a snack," Zac said smilingly and received a scathing glare in return.

"I am not sure if we can eat that, humans have a more delicate palate," Zac could only say before things got awkward.

"How inconvenient, these are very tasty," Ibtep said as as it chomped down on the fat larvae. "I had to hide this from the others, saving it for a special occation."

"This is Ibtep, an ambassador for the Zhix hive on the neighboring island," Zac explained to Emily who was still warily examining the Zhix.

"Your constitutions look a bit different. Is this due to the genders you mentioned earlier?" Ibtep asked.

"Yes, Emily is a female while I am a male," Zac explained.

"So this Emily will take your seed and bear children in the future?" the Zhix continued Zac to cough uncomfortably.

"Chough... Well, no. Not in this case. You generally only do that with your mate," he helplessly explained before he turned to the teenager, eager to change the subject.

He could only thank the stars that neither Emily or the ambassador had the language skill yes. "Where is the Nexus Crystal?"

Emily quite wary of the Zhix, and kept a constant vigil at it while she quickly led them to the largest building in the area.

"We had to take down all the arrays while rebuilding, the poles are over there," Emily said as she pointed toward a closet.

"The crystal is in there?" Ibtep asked, following Emily's finger.

"No, I keep a few arrays in there," Zac answered.

"Arrays?" Ibtep asked, curious about the new word.

"I can show you later," Zac said as he led the Zhix to the crystal.

"It will automatically start when you touch the crystal. If it works the same as for humans for you, it will give you five choices. Increased rarity of the class will generally mean it is stronger, but it will also be much harder to upgrade in the future. Some classes are meant for combat, some are meant for other things, such as crafting," Zac briefly recapped how it worked.

The Zhix didn't hesitate, and just walked straight up to the crystal and placed its hand on it. It stood still like that for a few minutes until it let go and move away.

"So, what did you get?" Zac curiously asked, but was only answered by a toothy grin.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

#### **Chapter 127 - Setting the Course**

"I picked something called Seeker," Ibtep relented after a while, "I am unclear about the details, but the description was interesting. *Knowledge, Treasure, Power. The search never ends.*"

Zac had no idea about what kind of class it was either, and could only guess it was something of a mix between a scholar and a scout. He actually found it a bit fitting, since if there was one thing that personified his new tentative ally it was an unrelenting curiosity. He was starting to get the feeling that the Holiness picked Ibtep for this mission party to get some peace and quiet.

After they'd done what they needed he brought the Zhix with him to the town, and the reactions were quite expressive. A group of warriors quickly gathered close-by, balefully glaring at the Zhix. Zac sighed as he knew this reaction was coming.

"Greetings people of Hive Atwood, I am Ibtep, liaison of the holiness," It said, looking unperturbed by the bloodlust in the gazes.

Noone answered, but only kept glaring at the Zhix. Of course, Zac knew that only a scant few in the audience could understand him.

"They're mad about the friends they lost on your island recently, so making friends might be a bit hard," Zac said.

"It was weakness leaving your hive. But if anyone feel it was unjust I can arrange a death match against those who felled your warriors. Hive Kundevi is always welcoming a test to hone their purity."

Those with **[Book of Babel]** translated the Zhix's words, and his words gave the demons a start. Many started hesitantly glance at each other, looking a bit unwilling to

enter a death battle for the fallen demons. Zac wasn't sure what to do about the situation either, and he felt it wasn't right for him to start meddling. After all, no one had killed more demons than he had.

But he also knew that the demons wouldn't be angry forever. Sudden death was a much more expected part of life for them, as most of them didn't expect to die of old age. Dying in an effort to gain power or wealth was the norm, and the scouts had all volunteered for the missions.

"I'm sure you want to explore our, uh, hive on your own for a while. You will need to have an escort at all times though, since our alliance still isn't set in stone," he said, and the Zhix looked excited rather than offended.

"Very well human, it has been an interesting experience to travel with you. We'll speak again soon," it said as it walked away.

"You two, please escort him for now, keep him away from any critical areas. And no death matches against this one, I am trying to form an alliance with their kind. But they are a bit crazy, and if any you want to fight in the future I'm sure they won't mind," Zac said as he looked at two of the demons in the group, who nodded and followed the Zhix.

Zac was quite relieved to leave the Zhix a bit to its own devices after a day of odd questions. So far he felt that the Zhix might not be the worst groups of people to form an alliance with. They were a bit insane, and Zac felt they might be crazed zealots, but he didn't sense much duplicity from them.

If he could help them understand that cosmic energy wasn't some corruption, but rather a natural part of their new world, they might not attack everyone and everything. If he could use this hive to make alliances with the Zhix all over the world they might be in a far better position against the incursions. They clearly loved battle, and if they could change their focus from the so-called Dominators to the foreign invaders, then Zac would have allies that were likely even more useful than humanity.

Still, it was a plan in its infancy, and he wouldn't risk his town just for such a goal. If they showed any signs of betrayal he wouldn't hesitate in eradicating the hive. Luckily they were completely isolated in their island, as seafaring was not their forte. With the waters being filled with dangerous things they were essentially stuck where they were unless Zac helped them.

With all that in mind, he was once again heading for Adran's command tent and found the administrator neck-deep in various documents.

"Call the various leaders, I'd like to have a meeting in an hour," Zac said as he immediately left, only hearing an acknowledgment as he left the door.

Next he walked back to the Academy and found the schoolmistress lounging in a chair while overlooking the training field. Zac took out an intricate box from his pouch and handed it over to Alyn as he walked up to her.

"The upgraded array," he simply said.

"Perfect, I will set it up as they are resting," she said happily.

"How are things going?" Zac asked.

"Splendid, no permanent disabilities as of yet," Alyn answered with some pride, drawing a pained grimace from Zac.

"They've had a tough life. I want them strong, but not to the point where half of them die or get crippled to get there," Zac said as he glanced down at the demoness.

"Of course, I have it under control."

Zac looked out over the field and saw the recruits stand in proper lines, following the movements of one of the demon soldiers who held the same type of spear as the others.

“I will need roughly a million nexus coins to get these recruits started. After that I expect them to be self-sufficient by hunting barghest or mining,” Alyn said.

Zac simply transferred the funds over to her, actually being a bit surprised by the low quote.

“From the way you equipped them I understand that you intend to follow my advice, giving them all uniform classes?” she asked as she looked up at Zac, who nodded affirmatively.

“It would be good if you could find more recruits. Having a male battalion would be good as well, creating some friction between the genders. Add some rewards and punishment and we can probably see much higher improvements,” she said.

“There’s roughly a week before the third wave appears, I’ll see what I can do during that time,” Zac said. “There’s a meeting within the hour, I could use your input.”

“Very well, I’ll set up the array and have them work on their attributes. They’re quite fragile at the moment and there’s much room for improvement,” she said.

Zac made the rounds and invited those that needed to be at the meeting before they all conveyed at Adran’s tent.

“I have gathered everyone here to discuss the coming week,” Zac began as he looked out over the gathered people.

It was the various leaders that were part of planning Port Atwood, but also Sap Trang, Janos, Alea and Ilvere. He couldn’t find Namys, and guessed she was guarding Ogras while he was in seclusion.

“You should all have seen the new people of Port Atwood. They are my first troop who will be training under Alyn,” he began.

“Poor bastards,” Ilvere muttered with a snort, eliciting a few chuckles around the table.

“There is also one of the insectoid beings on the island called Ibtep,” Zac continued. “Earlier today I traveled to their island and brokered a tentative peace with them. My wish is to incorporate them into Port Atwood, as they would be another strong addition to our forces. Their strength was surprisingly high even though they were stuck on an isolated island with few targets to hunt.

“Even though they had such a disadvantageous starting point, they are born warriors, and their leader was strong enough that maybe only the rankers and a few more in the world could contend with it,” he said.

The people looked quite surprised at the information, and the surprise only increased as Zac quickly recapped their battle. The surprise turned to shock when he explained Zhix society, and that the holiness was only in charge of this small hive, while there were leaders of huge hives out there in the world.

“It’s lucky that they will attack anything with cosmic energy, as that puts them against the invasions as well, but I think you humans are in for trouble in the future unless you manage to broker peace. I recommend making use of the hive, turning them into ambassadors for other hives in the future. Not all hives will be on the brink of starvation, and as open to communication as these ones were,” Ilvere said.

“Ibtep is here for that very purpose. Show him around, and teach him about cosmic energy. I think the first step we need to take is to normalize the energy in the world, so they not think of it as corruption, and us as Fallen or Dominators,” Zac agreed.

“But do not tell him anything about the incoming monster horde. I don’t want to risk them taking the opportunity to attack from a second front while we are already besieged. I also need you to figure out a way for us to be warned if they actually start digging toward the island. Something with vibrations, maybe? Like how the earth mages felt the vibrations from the Ayr Ants digging.”

What followed was some discussion regarding who’d be responsible to be the main liaison to Ibtep and the Zhix. Zac couldn’t keep going back and forth or answer all the questions, as he was busy with so many other things.

In the end it fell upon Zakarith to take care of it. She had been trained to become a merchant, which included both the language skills and knowledge of how to converse with people of various cultures. In fact she seemed pretty excited at the prospect of getting some real responsibilities instead of just babysitting the first group of humans.

“Next on the docket is my last trip,” Zac said as he changed the subject.

He briefly recounted the events during his trip, skipping over any sensitive information about his family.

“My goal is to get to the border towns of the Undead Incursion as soon as possible. Toward that end I will finish the last horde as fast as humanly possible. There will be no ten-day grind spree. Everyone has already gained years of wealth from the first two hordes, it is time for me to properly establish a force,” he said as he looked out over the group.

The warriors looked disappointed, but the others were generally positive. There were so many projects regarding the town that were put to hold due to the looming threat of the hordes, but as soon as they were dealt with the town building could begin in earnest.

The reason Zac wanted to move as quickly as possible was since he wasn’t willing to wait around any more in his search for Kenzie. He didn’t wish for his experiences in Greenworth to repeat.

“I believe your best opportunity in the short run is the Auction you mentioned in three days,” Adran said after some deliberation. “Both for your personal goals and for Port Atwood.”

“Oh? How so?” Zac asked, intrigued.

“It sounds that your human leaders are putting on a big show for some reason. They likely have some goal in mind with gathering so many elites into one spot.”

Zac could only nod, as it was in line with his own belief and the information from the broker.

“That means there won’t be only locals there. If they have a public array they likely have multiple private ones. They wouldn’t open up an array to the public unless they felt safe doing so, and having reinforcements come from various towns around the world would generally do the trick.”

“I believe that the auction is announced to local powerhouses at most Government Towns around the world, and the powerhouses who wish to go will use the private teleporters to get there. Them opening up the portal to the public two weeks before is likely in an attempt to find various unaffiliated forces like ourselves,” the administrator continued.

Zac hadn’t even considered that fact, not having analyzed Julia’s too hard. She’d said that they had a teleporter since they were ahead of the curve, and Zac took it at face value. But there was nothing to say that there weren’t multiple towns around the world that had private Teleporters. If a somewhat small village like Winterleaf Village

could pool their resources to build the array, then so could the government-owned towns.

“What you’re saying is only making me less willing to go, not more,” Zac said skeptically.

“Well, it is a risk, but also an opportunity. First of all, you might find some force that is located by the Undead Incursion. That way you can both gain more in-depth information, and perhaps even gain access to their teleporter, and save months of travel time,” he said.

“This also sounds like a great opportunity to make a great deal of money,” Zakarith added. “Natives seldom know the worth of many treasures, often since they might not be useful in the beginning when everyone is weak. Those treasures might only show their worth when making E-Grade gear, or trying to break through bottlenecks.”

“So you’re saying we should go there and gobble up any treasures that humanity have no way to evaluate at the moment?” Zac asked, his heartbeat slightly speeding up in anticipation. No one hated making a lot of money.

“Precisely,” the demoness said with an impish smile.

“Well, it’s fine by me, but I don’t think I can learn all these kinds of things myself. I would either have to bring one of you or one of the Sky Gnomes. Can I even take the gnomes with me through the teleporter?” Zac said.

Everyone looked around hesitant, not sure about the answer.

“I think... Yes?” Zakarith finally said with some uncertainty. “There are restrictions to their activities, but if the purpose is mercantile, such as attending an auction, I think it is fine? But you need to check it out with them though.”

“Ogras would go.” Janos suddenly said.

“Huh?” Zac could only ask.

“Well... Ogras kind of loves auctions...” Ilvere said with some hesitation, and it looked like a light dawned in the eyes of most of the old clan members of Azh’Rezak. “He was somewhat known to attend various auctions, spending his grandfather’s money. I believe that trait of his was not part of his fake persona. He would definitely want to go if he is out of seclusion by then.”

Zac started to feel a headache as he imagined the haughty demon running around rampant in New Washington. If his current relationship with the government was strained now, he couldn’t imagine the demon making it better.

He truly hoped the demon would still be in seclusion in three days. Then again, bringing the crafty demon might be even better than bringing Sap Trang. It would probably be more beneficial having him take care of any negotiations with the government.

“Well, he’s busy at the moment so we’ll see how it goes,” Zac said noncommittally.

“The last thing I want to discuss is what to do about all the refugees scattered about our neighboring islands. It’s time to make Port Atwood a proper town.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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## Chapter 128 - Excursion

### A note from TheFirstDefier

Announcement regarding some changes for October copy-pasted from post:

**Spoiler:** Spoiler

There are some updates for October that I feel is best to communicate immediately, so I might as well post this right now.

**Tier Rewards:** As you've seen we've overshot the goal by quite a bit, and I'll just go ahead and increase the tiers for October. The tiers will now give **2/7/15/30 early chapters**, and it will be from October 1st.

**Priorities:** As some of you know I've been studying at full speed in conjunction with writing DotF, which has resulted in me working between 12-16 hours a day between the two since mid August.

This is not sustainable, so as of today I've changed my Uni schedule, so that **from the middle of October I will change to 25-50% course load** so that I can focus on my writing.

**Quality:** While I am generally happy with the overarching direction and content of the story I feel that at times the individual chapters haven't been up to my personal standards lately.

I believe this is mainly due to the time constraints which has caused me to not be able to properly plan everything out. I will not do any re-writes apart from general improvements for the RR releases though. I would rather focus on my future chapters and arcs being better instead.

It is my goal that I will be able to use my freed up time in the future to better plan out the story, so that the quality is higher, and the level of excitement is more consistent.

**Employee 34:** As a few have noticed there haven't been any new chapters of this since mid August or so. This is due to me having no time to write it. However, it is a pet project I am still excited about, and my hope is that I'll resume writing it when more time is freed up.

It's the same with bonus Side POV chapters I had wanted to write now that a larger cast has been introduced. Hopefully I'll be able to crank some out in October? :)

**Break:** As I mentioned I will be lowering my course load in October, but right before that I have midterms. I am therefore announcing that **there will (likely) be no chapters on the 14th-17 October** so that I can focus on my studies. If I have a decent stock at that point I might go ahead and use that, but the main scenario is no chappies.

That's it I think. Questions? Throw a comment!

"I am thinking of extending an invitation to the various people in the area after the third wave is dealt with," Zac began. "However, are there any groups that might won't make it until then?"

It was a fair question, as the refugees he took in last time were forced to set sail since conditions got too harsh on their island. Since then a few weeks had passed, and things were only getting worse out in the wild.

"There are 3 settlements we can bring back before the auction, and another 2 before the last wave," Mr. Trang said after some deliberation. "All of them are teetering on the edge of destruction, and they did not seem very organized. There were no real fortifications around their settlements, and the beasts must have done a number on them. However, we can't take too many each trip with our vessels, 15-20 people at the most per vessel."

Zac sighed but nodded, indicating that they'd follow Sap Trang's lead. It was pretty clear that the groups they'd pick up before battle wouldn't be able to contribute to the war efforts.

"Is there any force that seemed strong amongst them?" Zac asked

"Both the bestman camps looked pretty strong," Mr. Trang said. "There was also one human town that was... Odd."

"Odd how?"

"I'm not sure, it wasn't me who went there. It was the largest human settlement. They looked quite organized and no one seemed to be starving. However Mr. Nguyen said it was very eerie,"

"Eerie?" Zac asked doubtfully, to which Mr. Trang could only shrug his shoulders.

"Fetch those who went on that expedition," Zac said after some deliberation.

If it was one of the small camps that was a bit off, then it was ok. But if it was the largest one he might need to intervene early.

Soon a couple of demon soldiers and a very nervous old fisherman stood in front of Zac and the others.

"Can you explain what was odd about the town?" Zac said as he looked them over.

The scouts hesitantly looked at each other, until one of the demons from the expedition spoke up.

"I can't say for sure... It was just a feeling, like there was something wrong about the people," he said.

"There were no children," another demon added after some additional silence.

Zac didn't react for a few seconds before he gave a start at that. He had not really thought about it since there naturally were no children in Port Atwood, but he realized that wasn't really normal in a large settlement.

Children had a rough time of it in general since the integration. The system awarded them no special protections, not even those who had the potential to become cultivators, letting them fend for themselves. The only exception was that children below the age of 7 were teleported with their parents if they entered the tutorial. Of course they weren't part of the missions but were placed safely to the side.

Otherwise the System was uncaring about the children of earth, and it was the same in the whole multi-verse. But the old factions and forces had established order long ago. Their towns weren't on the brink of destruction from some monster hordes, and there was functioning training infrastructure within clans and at academies that would protect and prepare the young until they could gain strength. Children were seen as a resource and fiercely guarded, as it only took one genius or powerhouse to elevate a whole clan to a new level, and each child held that potential.

On Earth the adults could at least get stronger to defend themselves, but children could only hope to their parents were still around to protect them. Zac heard that the government was trying to set up something up for the young, but it was still in planning stages from what he understood. Many were already calling those below 16 when the integration came 'The Lost Generation', and Zac felt it fitting.

Emily was part of the lost generation, though she was a bit better off with at least being 15 when the integration happened. But her fate before meeting Zac was indicative of how powerless children were in this new world.

Zac had seen children in both New Washington and Greenworth, though they were generally accompanied by their parents. But if all children of a whole settlement were missing as the scouts indicated something nefarious was might be going on.

There was no real proof however, only some circumstantial odd facts, and since the people were both protected and looked fed he couldn't use his limited time on that settlement. He would have to check it out after the last wave.

Everything was dealt with by now and the meeting was soon adjourned, and only an hour later four ships set sail together, with Zac standing on the fore of one of them. They were heading toward one of the islands that required immediate help, and Zac came along since he wanted to see the situation for himself. There was not much for him to do apart from pondering on the Dao at the moment in any case, and he could do that while sitting on a boat.

Zac wasn't the only human on the vessels. He not only brought Sap Trang with him, but also a few of the stronger girls to give them some experience, and to let the refugees not only see people with horns. All of them, Mr. Trang included, were currently sitting down absorbing Nexus Crystals, not letting a second go to waste.

The island they were heading for was about three hours away, and when they arrived Zac saw that it looked about the same as any tropical island. This one was even smaller than the Zhix island, though there was no mountain taking up most of the space. They sailed around the shore for a few minutes until a run-down town came into view.

It became increasingly clear that most of the settlements were various coastal towns taken from around the world placed on their own islands. Zac could only assume that the patch of forest he was located in before the integration was added on to the main island to increase its size.

The town looked quite colonial in its architecture, and Zac guessed it was from some island in the Caribbean. The town might have been the type of idyllic place you saw on postcards back in the day, with brightly colored houses and beautiful cobblestone paths, but now it gave off a far more dour feeling.

Many buildings were marred with scratches and cracks, and some even had splotches of blood on them. It looked like only part of the town was randomized to this location, as it seemed that the part with any marina or harbor was missing. The section in front of them was mainly lined with beautiful pristine beaches, making it seem like a perfect tourist destination.

The four Creator vessels simply ran up on the beach itself, their inscribed hulls taking no damage at all from the somewhat rough landing. The eight people Zac brought for the expedition swiftly jumped off and were led by one of the demons who initially scouted out the town.

"There are a few fortified buildings in the center, we think most of the survivors are holed up there," the demon said.

Soon they reached the buildings the demon mentioned, and Zac saw it was likely once a small hotel that was turned into a base. It was lined with a simple wall of sacks filled with sand and spikes were erected among them.

It was also clear that the place was populated since the hotel was currently under attack by gigantic rats. A quick glance at Sap Trang showed him blanching, perhaps remembering his own ordeals. Zac wondered if this kind of vermin had some sort of advantage, as overgrown rats was a problem in almost all settlements from what he heard.

Having the capability to quickly grown in numbers was a huge asset when Cosmic Energy ensured that anything would grow large. Even if a bear got stronger it might only have a few cubs in its lifetime, whereas a rat could have hundreds of kids.

Zac could see a few people desperately fending off the rat tide that pushed against the defenses, there were a few breaches where a few people desperately swung everything from clubs to frying pans in an effort to keep the monsters outside the

perimeter. The rats were around level 15 to 25, and Zac felt it was a decent target practice for the girls.

“Go help them out,” Zac said as he stayed put. The monsters weren’t too numerous, and there was no point in him or the demons going out and stealing the experience.

Soon the three girls and Sap Trang were wildly swinging against the mice, quickly getting splashed in rat blood. Zac saw that Mr. Trang now was using a sword resembling a cutlass. With his old patchy cloth and leathery skin, he looked very much the part of an elderly pirate. Every now and then he also unleashed a few small water sprouts that impaled the rats, but it didn’t look very effective. Likely the skill would be stronger if he was at sea and had free water to use.

In just a few minutes most of the horde was dealt with, and Zac felt it was enough at this point. He walked up close to the battlements and simply released his aura. Pandemonium erupted among the surviving rats, and with panicked screeches they fled in all directions.

Zac quickly retracted his aura and looked over his panting soldiers.

“Good job,” he said with a small smile as he saw them looking down with disgust at their drenched bodies. “You’ll have to wipe that grime off before we return, I don’t want rat blood all over my ships.”

Afterward he turned over to the people hiding behind the battlements or were peering out from windows of the hotel.

“Hello, I’m Zac. I understand you requested some help from my scouts the other day,” he said to the people of the island.

He could hear some muted voices for a bit until a man spoke up from behind.

“Are you from some government?”

“No. They are an endless distance away on the mainland, and they’re barely able to maintain order in their own towns, let alone sending out rescue missions to our archipelago,” Zac said.

They seemed disappointed in the news, but a few people still stepped out from the barricades, warily hefting their makeshift weapons.

“What’s the catch?” one of the women suddenly asked. “We’re all fighting for our lives here, I don’t believe you’re just traveling around the sea to save people.”

“I need workers. I am building a town from scratch, and need everything from farmers to fishermen to local business owners,” Zac said. “Of course, if you want to keep fighting that is more than welcome. Warriors are always needed in this messed up world. But let me be clear; there is no social security, no freebies. There are no monsters and no risk to your lives in my town, but I have no use for freeloaders.”

They all perked up when he mentioned the safety. Zac didn’t mention anything about the third wave, feeling that it would only complicate things.

“Besides, how long can you stay like you are? You barely fended off these little guys,” he said as he waved at the rat carcasses. “The monsters will keep getting tougher, and there is safety in numbers.”

It didn’t take much more convincing than that, and soon four Creator vessels filled to the rafters with refugees were heading back to Port Atwood.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 26 chapters ahead) please check out my

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

## **Chapter 129 - Final Preparations**

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Last chapter of September, hope you guys have enjoyed!

Don't forget to vote on !

Zac sat in a secluded area of the academy with his eyes closed. They returned yesterday with the first batch of citizens, with them being given a brief introduction while they sailed. The demon's appearance once again caused quite a stir, but since they were stuck on a boat with open ocean all around they couldn't just run away. After some talking down they were somewhat okay since both Zac and the warriors who fought the rats were human after all.

Almost as soon as they arrived at Port Atwood the boats set out again for the next island. If they were going to rescue all groups before the third wave started they would have to essentially keep sailing around the clock. There was the option of buying a larger transport vessel from the Creators, but they cost over ten million nexus coins.

Zac could afford it, but he wanted to hold on to his money with both the auction and the third wave coming up. Zac didn't join the following expeditions, instead choosing to focus on his meditation. The new townspeople were mainly guided around by Megan and her group.

Megan and the others had quickly improved their attitude since Zac brought the women from Greenworth. Zac hadn't given any order to keep the state of the world secret, and soon everyone on the island knew about how much the world had actually fallen. Emily had already told them as much, but she was considered biased since she essentially lived a cushy life in Zac's mansion.

But hearing one horror story after another helped the former refugees realize that being stuck on this island wasn't too bad. There was food, and there was safety. There even were a steady amount of Nexus Crystals available for purchase, so they could quickly advance in levels without risking their lives. Zac was even providing them with a modest salary as long as they completed their daily tasks.

Currently it came out of Zacs own pocket, but as soon as he became a Lord he could start taxing his citizens. At that point he'd want as many citizens as possible to add value to the town.

Instead of helping out with the rescue efforts Zac went to the Gravity Array in the Academy. His original plan was to focus on the Dao of Sharpness, but his recent inspiration into Heaviness in Greenworth changed his mind. He chose to sit and meditate in the Gravity Array cranked to the max since he thought the feeling of heavy pressure all over might assist him in his venture.

He'd been sitting there for almost a full day by now, and finally got up to his feet and stretched. The improved array brought the pressure up to 25 times the normal amount and could cover a large field rather than just the small camp. The trainees still normally trained in ten times the gravity though, since they generally collapsed in a heap when they tried anything higher than that.

He nodded toward Alyn who was busy screaming at one of the girls as he walked away. During his day in the array he would sometimes spectate the training while he was resting. What he'd seen had been quite jarring. He could understand why the woman was fired from her teaching position since she truly held nothing back when she was instructing these people.

She normally was very calm and adorned a smiling face, just like when she was teaching him in the caves. But she could also explode into a furious tirade when someone didn't live up to her expectations. Her verbal assaults could even put most drill sergeants to shame. That wasn't all, she even had gotten a hold of a tool that could best be described as a grenade.

It was a small inscription powered by a single Nexus Crystal that exploded in a concussion wave when thrown. It would blast away any unaware person, though not dealing any real damage. She used it any time she felt someone was lazing about. Worse yet, Zac learned that the cost of the bomb came out of the pockets of the one she attacked. He considered stopping her then and there but judging by the reactions of the recruits they didn't mind, and it only spurred them on further.

He went to the Thayer Consortia next, and an excited Calrin moved to welcome him.

"Lord Zac, it is good to see you. I hope the pills I procured for you met your expectations," he said, his eyes shining with greed. "Incidentally, I heard a customer mention an auction taking place soon?"

Zac's mouth couldn't help tugging upward as he looked down at the little Sky Gnome that was almost bouncing around in excitement.

"I thought you couldn't leave this compound, why is this of interest for you?"

"We're not some prisoners. We can leave the building any time we want, but most of our family are quite weak. Once upon a time we had mighty warriors to protect the Thayer Clan, but all of them defected, not wanting to impact their future cultivation. Shortsighted fools," he explained in a huff.

"We can leave anytime, though we generally need to stay within your town. We have the same restrictions as all other foreigners on this emerging planet, and our special protections doesn't expand outside our buildings. We are also barred from various things such as most types of quests and procuring land," he explained.

"However, I actually got a quest! A money-making quest! I can leave with you and go to the auction. Who knows what precious things that you idi- ehm, you newly integrated humans, will sell off to a fraction of their value," Calrin exclaimed.

It looked like his reason for visiting the consortia had sorted itself out.

"Very well, you can come with me. I need someone who can spot the valuables after all. However, you are representing Port Atwood and the Thayer Consortia, not just yourself. You might also need to assist in negotiations," Zac said.

He wondered what reactions the little blue gnome would elicit, but he didn't really mind exposing him since he was just a mercantile user whose origins were easily explainable. He was not only good at sniffing out treasures, but he was also quite a talker, and could maybe help smooth out Port Atwood's somewhat harsh first impression.

As he walked back toward the inner area he quickly heard the bustling noise of activity. Since only the inner wall was completed the real construction of the town couldn't start yet. Anything built in the future residential or crafting districts would likely be reduced to rubble as soon as the next wave arrived. All the new citizens would need a temporary place to stay though, and a large number of buildings were being added to the temporary town inside the walls.

As he walked the streets he saw many unfamiliar faces. It was the refugees that were continuously pouring in from the ships shuttling back and forth between islands. As more and more humans joined the town the shock the demons created was getting smaller. Still, many had just arrived and glanced curiously or fearfully at the demons who passed them by.

The infusion of people was quickly increasing the liveliness of the town, especially as he even heard some children's laughter as he walked. He curiously looked over and saw a few children actually gather some distance away from the Zhix, with their parents fearfully keeping them from rushing up to it.

Zac was surprised to see the insectoid actually being able to wave his antennae, and he kept waving them at the children who excitedly waved back. It also held a large larva in a hand, but it was clear no one was interested in his greeting gift.

As soon as the Zhix spotted Zac it perked up and put the larva away as it walked over, the two demon guards following closely in tow, both balefully glaring at the insectoid. Zac briefly wondered if there would actually be people who would take the Zhix's offer of combat to the death.

"Greetings. I have something to discuss with you if you have the time?" Ibtep said as it closed in on Zac.

"Sure, let's head over there," Zac said as he pointed toward Adran's command tent that was just around the corner.

Soon they found themselves at a table in a partition of the large tent.

"I have walked among your kind and the horned ones for two days, and I can almost certainly conclude that you truly are not part of the Dominators or the Fallen," the Zhix started.

"Uh, thanks I guess?" Zac said with some confusion.

"I would like to report back to my island, detailing my findings. I understand your vessels are continuously moving between islands, and would like to ride along," he said.

"You're heading home already?" Zac asked.

"No, I would still like to keep observing, so I would hope that you can pick me up again as well. More importantly, I wish to join your expedition through the magic transfer construction," he said.

"The first part is no problem but the second part... Uh... Might be a problem. The last time Zhix teleported to where we are going they went berserk and started killing everyone," Zac said hesitantly.

"It sounds correct. Zealots passing through the array for a death assault against the Dominators. Their progeny will be well taken care of. Of course, a misguided action in this new world. However, I find it very troubling that there is a Zhix settlement that has so readily built a such a transfer device," Ibtep said.

"Troubling why?" Zac asked confused.

"I explained what happened with our so-called Nexus Crystal. The Holiness sealed it away since it was overflowing with corruption. Most of the Anointed should have acted the same, avoiding usage of such a device. That a hive already is using it to the degree of sending out death assaults is... a problem.

"Either they are even more open-minded than us. That is unlikely since what the holiness did by speaking to you was unprecedented. If our situation wasn't so dire you would have been assaulted to our last man. The other alternative is... That the hive is not adverse to using corruption," Ibtep said with a frown.

"You're saying that they might be the so-called Dominators from your old world? Didn't you say they were eradicated in a great war?"

"That's the official belief, but there should be traitors surviving. The power of corruption has always been alluring," Ibtep said.

"I don't understand what this has to do with you coming with me?" Zac questioned skeptically.

“I wish to find out more about the other hives, and information here is limited. It seems I also need to warn you humans about the Dominators, for both our sakes,” lbtep said with some worry.

“Why do you believe that they will be such a problem that humanity needs to be warned? They sound dangerous, but everyone is getting powerful, erasing their advantage,” Zac asked, feeling a bit unconvinced. “Besides, your kind already defeated them without any power.”

“Well, I will breach a precept since I think this is too important not to discuss. Discussing the powers of the Anointed is taboo, but you should know we have a ladder just like you. Most on the ladder are the Anointed, since between administering rites and their natural superior constitution they should be far more suited to this new world than you or me.

“However, there are a few who have not shown their true names, using various pseudonyms. Some thought before it was due to shame, not wanting to show how many of their hives had died under their watch since every death makes the Anointed stronger. In fact, all the top five names on our Power Ladder use pseudonyms.

“But there has always been another possibility. Those with the fake names might be the Dominator traitors, who were afraid to be exposed. That would explain why their power is higher. They started already being full of corruption before the integration,” lbtep concluded.

“I still don’t see your point?” Zac probed.

“Those with pseudonyms are all around level 100.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have a

Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

**Chapter 130 - The Motley Crew**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

New month new plugs :) If you don’t wish to wait to see what happens next, give it a try! The amount of early access chapters are also getting increased for **every single tier** this month!

What are you waiting for? Treat yo’ self!

“WHAT?!” Zac asked, shocked. “That’s impossible.”

He wasn’t saying that without any reason. He had proof in the form of his own titles. He was the first to reach level 25 and attain a class, and it was just impossible that someone not only caught up to him, but even gained another 50 levels.

“Can you please show me, I need to verify the truth of it,” Zac finally said.

After explaining how to show status screens or other menus of the System, he soon blankly stared at a small hovering box.

**[3. Inevitability. Level 98]**

The Zhix was unwilling to share the whole list, but that single line was all Zac needed to know the Zhix wasn’t lying.

“Holy shit...” Zac could only mutter.

Countless questions whirled in his head suddenly, the foremost one being how the hell this was possible. The only explanation he could come up with was that these Dominators didn’t start at level one since they already used Cosmic Energy before the integration. He actually had no idea what happened in that case, and missive didn’t

really say anything about it either. It did, however, mention that sometimes the invaders encountered extremely strong resistance.

As for the titles they were either split up between the races like the ladder, or old cultivators weren't eligible for them. Zac could only hope it was the latter since it was bad enough if the Dominators were level 100 E-Rank powerhouses. If they also had the "First"-Titles as well with all their big percentage bonuses they might as well pack it up and look for ways to get off this planet.

Level 100 was no joking matter. It was a full 25 levels past the bottleneck at 75. Since they were actually past the bottleneck it meant that they all held Dao seeds and an E-Ranked Class by now. Not only that, the improvements per level after the bottleneck were a lot larger compared to before. They would be in a completely different league compared to beasts like the Fiend Wolf he fought earlier, who barely had passed the threshold.

If you combined that fact together with the extremely strong bodies the leaders seemed to possess, it made a truly terrifying image. He held no illusions that he'd be able to defeat something at level 100 even with all his titles, especially not considering their natural endowments.

With that amount of power, they were even a larger threat than the incursions. After all, they didn't just possess monstrous individual power, they also had large Zhix hives full of zealous warriors who were happy to go on a rampage against anything with cosmic energy. He even suspected that many had no idea they were following a so-called Dominator since they clearly were hiding and biding their time for some purpose.

"I think you understand my worry, human. I need to gather more information, and hopefully we can warn other hives," Ibtep said.

Though it was like a risk Zac felt he had no choice but to bring Ibtep by this point. The Zhix was right, humans needed to be aware of this fact. And a real walking and talking Zhix would be far more effective than just him saying it without any real proof.

"Ok, you can come. Talk to Adran and get a crystal for the language skill [**Book of Babel**]. Otherwise, the humans won't understand your words. We leave in the morning in two days, so make sure you finish your report home before that," Zac finally relented.

The crystals came from various demons who bought it at the Contribution shop and then traded it for Nexus Crystals or Nexus Coins with Adran. Since Zac felt it was an extremely important skill, and Calrin still wasn't able to buy a batch through the Mercantile System, he offered quite generous prices for them.

"Oh, and figure out a way to pass the message to the hives without anyone approaching. There are few humans who are willing to do what I did, and force themselves into a hive to leave a message. We can probably drop a message down from the sky or shoot it at them from a long distance though," Zac added after some thought.

The next day was quite uneventful, as Zac simply trained most of the time except when he went back to his mansion to eat something and perhaps watch some movies. The new building held a proper viewing room almost looking like a luxurious cinema. Except for the fact that there were large soft leather couches placed in groups and a myriad of pelts and pillows created with soft wolf fur. Unfortunately, with the new looming threat it was hard to relax, even with his improved living conditions.

Finally the day of the Auction arrived, and Zac got himself ready. This time he didn't wear any shoes as he didn't know what would happen when a blue Gnome and a Zhix stepped through the teleporter, and he needed to be able to block a potential attack.

He'd already handed the Zhix one of the armors that held a single defensive charge through an inscription, the very same type that he'd used in the beginning before he got his upgrade. As for the little Gnome he wasn't as worried since he was quite sure that many of the various items he wore were defensive treasures.

He said goodbye to a brooding Emelie who was angry she wasn't allowed to come with them this time either and headed toward the array. Everyone else was already waiting outside the teleportation building, the Zhix once again donning his huge backpack instead of using the Cosmic Sack.

It wasn't the first time he did it, and when Zac asked why the first time Ibtep explained that his snacks couldn't enter the pouch while they were fresh.

"I hear there are exciting things going on. Count me in," Zac suddenly heard as the shadows of the building congealed into a familiar person.

Zac felt a headache coming on as he saw Ogras emerge with an excited face.

"I thought you were busy training," Zac could only say with a sigh.

"It's all done. I can't leave all the fun to you and that blue little bastard," he said with a sneer at Calrin, who responded with a gesture that Zac could only assume was offensive.

"What about your identity?"

"I got the report from Ilvere. There are supposedly four worlds that got knocked together, right? So why shouldn't there be a fourth species? I'll just say that we didn't spawn in your mainland area since we prefer hotter climates. That should match well with your silly old depictions of us demons," Ogras said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Clearly, nothing would detract him from joining in on the fun.

"Hello, demon leader. I am Ibtep, ambassador of the Zhix. Would you like a snack?" the Zhix suddenly said as he walked up with a large squirming larva in his hand. "It's freshly caught."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Ogras. Here's a fruit that you can't find on this world, give it a try," the demon responded as he took out a nasty-looking thing from his cosmos sack.

The fruit looked twisted and shrunken and had quite an acrid smell. It wasn't anything Zac had seen before, and more importantly not something he'd ever put in his mouth. He suspected it was a prank Ogras pulled as a response to being fed insects, but clearly the Zhix didn't mind. Soon the two of them were munching away, and Zac wasn't sure who he should be more grossed out at.

"Um, Ibtep, why do you keep offering... Snacks to people?" Zac couldn't help asking, as Ibtep and his larva were starting to become a talking point in Port Atwood.

"I learned this trick from the previous Anointed. If you need to make a good impression offer the other party a snack, and they will be more amenable afterward," it said with some pride in its eyes, and Zac had to admit that it made some sense, though it might need to change what was considered a snack.

Zac was silently looking over his small team that would represent Port Atwood, and couldn't help but start sweating. He wasn't sure whether the team looked like an alien invasion or a traveling circus. They were only missing Karunthel, the Creator Foreman with his monstrous spider legs, to round out the image. Sap Trang seemed to understand what was going through his mind, and could only wryly smile and shrug.

Zac still brought the old fisherman as he wanted to have someone represent humans, and not just bring aliens, and it felt even more poignant now with Ogras entering the fray. Mr. Trang had even gotten a makeover for the occasion, now donning

clothes similar to the E-Grade Robes Zac wore. Of course, they were without the powerful inscriptions.

Zac could only sigh shrug his shoulders and turn toward the array.

“Wait a few seconds before entering. I have to warn them or something. And don’t do anything stupid,” he said as he activated the array.

In a short moment he once again arrived in New Washington. To his surprise he found himself in another building compared to the one he arrived in last time. They had moved the array from the claustrophobic little room without windows into a huge lobby.

For a second he felt that he was at an airport, as in front of him there was a security checkpoint. There was a counter with thick bulletproof glass, and a person sat behind it. There were also quite a few soldiers walking around, and a prickling sensation told him that a gun was pointed at him from some hidden angle.

Before he had time to do much of anything a man rushed toward him.

“Mr Monk, it is good to see you again. I am Adam. We have be-“ the man began, but Zac quickly spoke over him.

“Sorry to interrupt, but instruct your soldiers to not fire. A few more are arriving from Port Atwood, and they are not human,” Zac quickly said.

The man looked surprised but acted quickly as he turned around and shouted a few orders.

Not long after the array flashed again and the party arrived one by one. The first who entered was Mr. Trang, making the greeter throw a confused glance at Zac. However, with every new person emerging after Sap his eyes widened a bit further.

The last to emerge through the teleporter was Ibtep, who curiously glanced around until his eyes landed on Adam, who by now was openly gaping as he stared at the odd party. Any activity had stopped in the lobby as well, as everyone was warily looking at the group, the silence almost palpable.

The Zhix didn’t hesitate and resolutely walked up to Adam, making many aim their weapons at Ibtep.

“Hello, human leader. Would you like a snack?” he said, holding a large wriggling grub up to the startled man.

“This is Ibtep, he’s a part of Port Atwood and not an enemy,” Zac quickly added.

“Ah.. uh... Well, welcome everyone,” Adam managed to say as he hesitantly accepted the large larva. “I am sorry, but could you please wait here? I am not sure about the protocols when encountering new species. I need to contact my superiors.”

“That’s fine,” Zac said and ushered the group to a group of sofas closeby.

“What’s with all these rules and regulations?” Ogras muttered annoyed, but still went with the others. “It shouldn’t be so complicated. If people make trouble after arriving, kill them. If not, leave them be.”

“Basic bureaucracy is a cornerstone of a civilized society,” Calrin said after casting a scathing glance at the demon. “Not like you demons would understand, with your clusters being lawless hellholes.”

Ogras didn’t seem to mind and only grinned back at the Gnome.

“What other laws do you need except the law of the jungle?” he retorted.

The two had developed a rapport over the months that made Zac unsure whether they were good friends or bitter enemies. It was clear that the two were gearing up for an argument, but luckily something interrupted them.

The teleportation array flashed into life once again, and not long after a group of people emerged. They all wore high-quality gear that Zac assumed could only be bought through the system as he could spot fractals on various spots.

There were three of them, with the one in the front being an elderly man in at least his sixties. However, he looked to be in good vigor with sharp eyes and a ramrod-straight back. His beard and hair were meticulously cut, and he even radiated a bit of an aura. Everything about him oozed authority, and Zac guessed he was someone in power before the fall. Either a prominent businessman or a politician.

Another man looked like a bodyguard, warily looking around. He also had a large shield fastened to his back, and Zac assumed he was able to equip it at moment's notice if needed. When the man saw Zac and the others his brows furrowed, and he slightly repositioned himself toward them.

His movements were ignored by the old man who looked straight ahead, but they were noticed by the last person, a woman somewhere in her twenties. She was quite tall, reaching over 170 cm, and she seemed to possess an almost feline grace. Her movements reminded Zac of the demon scout he fought long ago. She had been slippery as an eel, freely moving through the treetops as easily as walking on the ground. But the woman in front of Zac right now gave even him a distinct sense of danger, far more than any human he'd met thus far.

She was beautiful, but not overly so. The most memorable thing about her, however, was her piercingly blue eyes. She looked quite intrigued as she glanced at their odd group, particularly at Ogras and Calrin.

"Grandpa," the girl softly said, bringing the old man's attention to Zac and his group.

When he saw the Zac's motley crew his face changed the first time since exiting the teleportation array. The trio was known clearly known to the people of New Washington, as another representative hurried up to them and wanted to show them the way out.

However, the old man simply ignored the liaison and walked toward the sofa group.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 131 - The Marshall Clan**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New Month, new plug update :) **Due to reaching the final (for now) Goal the number of Early Chapters has once again increased!** Read up to 29 chapters ahead of what's posted here on RR!

As today is the 2nd you will not get charged a second time until November if you sign now!

The old man stopped a few meters away from Zac's group, slowly looking over each and everyone with a frown.

"Humanity is on the brink of extinction, and you're consorting with the enemy?" he said with a terse voice.

“Allies are allies, enemies are enemies. Why bring race into it?” Sap Trang answered with a congenial smile. “We old folk need to learn to embrace change in this new world if we wish our children to flourish in the future.”

The old man only snorted and left it at that, leaving with his two companions in tow. The girl took a last glance at the party before they passed the security checkpoint and left the area.

Zac looked over at his company, but saw that none of them had taken offense at the words. Calrin didn't care since there was no money involved, and Ibtep kept looking around the structure with fascination. As for Ogras, he seemed to consider the short exchange a form of entertainment.

“Finally some interesting things are happening after all these dull months,” he said with a smile.

Zac only sighed in response, thankful he had Mr. Trang with him to take care of things. They didn't have to wait for long until he saw Julia rush toward them.

“Mr. Monk, it is good to see you again. You never told us that Port Atwood was such a... Cultural melting pot,” she said with a forced smile.

“Well, as I said, we're living in an isolated place, and we needed to cooperate to survive,” Zac answered with a shrug. “We just spoke with an interesting group led by an old man, who were they?”

“They, ah, are VIP guests,” she said and leaned over after glancing around and continued in a whisper.

“They were the Marshall clan. As in Thea Marshal, the strongest woman in the world. That was her in the flesh,” she whispered, unable to hide her excitement.

“The strongest woman huh? Too bad she's a bit plain,” Ogras said with a sigh.

“This is Ogras Azh'Rezak, the, uh, representative for the demons of Port Atwood,” Zac said with a sigh.

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance Mr. Azh'Rezak. Welcome to New Washington, the beacon of humanity,” Julia said with a smile, seemingly unperturbed to see a foreign species.

“The mapping of our new planet is a bit limited, and we have yet to encounter either you, or your other friend's, kind before,” she asked, obviously hoping for some sort of explanation, but Ogras only smiled in response.

“Calrin Thayer of Thayer consortia. From the moment I lay my eyes of you I felt you were a woman of principle and discerning taste. I am therefore extending a ten percent discount on your first purchase in one of our stores as a greeting gift,” the gnome said as he stood up and made a simile of an aristocrat's bow.

“How generous, thank you. I hope to visit your store soon. I unfortunately have nothing to offer except this pamphlet about the rules and regulations of New Wash-“ Julia said while handing out a brochure, but stopped herself and looked over at the Ibtep who had stood up and moved toward her during the conversation.

“Hello female human. I am Ibtep, ambassador of the Anointed. At your convenience I'd like to discuss matters of grave importance. Also, please accept this snack as a greeting gift,” he solemnly said, this time holding up a decently large caterpillar.

Julia couldn't help but grimace when she saw the wiggling insect, almost going so far as taking a step away.

“I am afraid can't accept this gift of yours. Unfortunately I am a bit sick and has trouble eating at the moment. However we are very much open for a dialogue. We have been hoping to establish diplomatic relations with the Zhix for some time.”

“That leaves Mr. Trang. He represents the humans of Port Atwood,” Zac finished his introduction and Julia cordially greeted him as well before turning back to Zac.

“And what is your responsibility?” Julia asked with a questioning glance.

“Uh... Spiritual guidance?” Zac answered as he scratched the back of his head, prompting a snort from the demon.

His head wasn't bald like a monk's anymore, but it was still extremely short. Apparently hair grew slower and slower as Vitality increased, rather than the opposite. It had something to do with the fact that hair was made from dead cells, and cells died at a much slower rate for the evolved.

It was possible to quickly grow it out again with the help of Cosmic Energy, but he felt it was more convenient to let it be, as it both saved time on maintenance and he wouldn't get anything in his eyes during battle.

Julia clearly looked skeptical, but let it be.

“With your identities being a bit unique we unfortunately can't let your group venture out into the town until all details have been confirmed. However, I will personally take you to the venue for the auction,” she said.

“This way gentlemen, the auction is starting soon, and you are amongst the last to arrive,” Julia continued as she guided them out of the building.

“Oh? There are many parties that have arrived through the teleporter?” Sap Trang asked curiously.

“There are a surprising amount of forces around the world that has a private teleporter. It is unfortunate, there is in a way a huge network of nodes over the world that could assist humanity's war efforts, but it's currently not useable,” Julia answered, skirting any actual numbers.

All of the people, even Mr. Trang, curiously glanced all around, as it was the first time they'd seen a proper human town. Sap Trang was interested as well, as he'd spent most of his life in his small fishing village, except for when he was in the army.

“The Auction will take place at the National Opera, it is most convenient if we take a car there, please this way,” she said as she led them to a limousine that was waiting.

“Your kind has made some interesting things,” Ogras said as he fiddled around with the mini-fridge inside as they drove through the town. “We should bring a few of these things back to Port Atwood.”

“I brought a few back last trip, they are more suited for our terrain than this one,” Zac only answered.

“Excellent.”

“Your hives are quite spread out. It seems inconvenient to defend,” the Zhix commented as it looked out through a window.

“Our defensive systems have evolved over the years to not really depend on things such as walls anymore. However, with the change to our world, building proper walls has once again become a priority,” Julia answered with a smile.

After driving for fifteen minutes they arrived at the venue. There clearly had been some beasts roaming about once upon a time, as there was some damage that had been fixed up at various spots. However, the structure still looked quite grand. The ceilings were over ten meters high, and the whole area was covered in red carpet.

“I will leave you here as there are quite a few matters I need to arrange. There are spots reserved for you, just show an attendant this ticket when the auction starts,” Julia said to Zac as she handed him a piece of paper. “Oh, and please remember to...

follow the guidelines in the pamphlet. Your party will stand out, but please try to avoid causing conflict. We will speak again after the event.”

With that she sped away, leaving the group to gawk at the gaudy display. However, there were quite a few hints that the event was not some posh gala. Zac spotted a few military vehicles parked outside, and the entrance was lined with a row of soldiers. There were also dozens of cultivators with various weapons who stood at the ready, decked in riot gear.

The actual guests were actually fewer than the soldiers and the attendants, but Zac was still surprised by the numbers as they walked inside. The doors to the actual venue were still closed, so the guests were milling about in the huge lobby, making small talk and mingling. It was an extremely weird contrast, seeing people in armor and sword holding glasses of champagne or eating canapés.

Zac noted with some surprise there were even some groups of Ishiate present, mostly standing by themselves. Zac even spotted a familiar face among their kind standing by the side of a few other ishiate who were similarly dressed in simple but sturdy gear.

It was also the first time he saw the other type of Ishiate, who wore far more urban clothing. Their gear was almost modern, and they even carried rudimentary hot weapons like blunderbusses and muskets. It was clear that the two groups still were at odds, as they stood in two separate cliques.

As Zac and his group made their entrance a lull in the conversation spread over the floor as most parties curiously looked at them. They likely struck quite the image with three types of aliens and the odd clothing of himself and Mr. Trang. Zac stood out even further as he walked around barefoot, as he refused to lose the ability to use [Loamwalker] with this many powerful people around.

“Wow you human’s auctions are a bit dull, I’m not seeing a single fight,” Ogras said as he looked around with some disappointment. “And I’m also starting to wonder if you are mentally sound. You humans can obviously build decent structures not just in the movies, but you chose to live in a tin can in the woods?”

“I told you I was out camping with friends when the integration happened,” Zac said with a sigh.

“I just don’t understand why you would like to live like a poor person surrounded by trees,” the demon retorted, but let the subject go.

“Okay, it’s some time before the auction starts. Please behave, and keep information about Port Atwood at the minimum. Mr. Trang, please stay with Ibtep,” Zac said, but immediately groaned when Ogras turned into shadows.

He appeared again next to a startled waiter, and snatched up two glasses of champagne and downed them in quick order before starting to walk around. The Sky Gnome didn’t linger either and unhesitantly moved toward a party of humans, likely eager to make some business connections.

He turned around and looked at a helpless Mr. Trang and was about to leave to speak with Selas who stood amongst the other beastkin, but stopped with a frown as he saw a party heading his way. It only took a second to realize that these people weren’t moving toward him to socialize, but to create trouble. It was also clear that he wasn’t the target, but it was rather the Zhix who still curiously looked around at the luxurious interiors.

Zac could only sigh as he knew that this would likely happen sooner or later when he brought Ibtep. The Zhix might not go out of their way to kill people, and mainly holed themselves in their hives, but that didn’t change the fact that quite a few humans

had died by their hands since the integration started. It was inevitable that some would want some revenge, even if it was only at the species responsible for the atrocities.

“You have a lot of balls bringing one of those *things* here,” one of the front men growled as he balefully glared at the Zhix.

“I don’t know your history with the Zhix, but we have brought Ibtep here in order to help facilitate peace between our species. Our main priority should be the incursions rather than fighting amongst natives,” Sap Trang said, trying to defuse the situation.

“Hello human, I am Ibtep,” the Zhix said, ignoring Zac’s attempts to signal it to let Sap Trang talk. “I am sorry there has been some confusion between our people, resulting in accidental deaths. On the bright side it is only weakness leaving your swarm, making it stronger.”

Zac could only shake his head as he heard the words. He knew that the Zhix truly thought the words were consoling. The Zhix were really pragmatic in that way, believing that if someone died like that they can’t have been too strong anyway. It was pure Darwinism in a sense, though Zac didn’t feel that type of mindset really worked in this new world with Cosmic Energy.

“What the FUCK is this thing saying? YOU BASTARDS KILLED MY WHOLE HOMETOWN!” another of the threatening men roared, his eyes bulging in anger.

It seemed to have been some sort of a signal as the whole group drew their weapons, all of them radiating strong killing intent.

Zac could only sigh and bring out his wooden club.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 132 - New Friends**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

New Month, new plug update :) **Due to reaching the final (for now) Goal the number of Early Chapters has once again increased!** Read up to 29 chapters ahead of what’s posted here on RR!

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The roar put a damper on the conversation in the whole area, and the guests curiously looked at the source of the commotion. Mr. Trang glanced worriedly at Zac, who could only move up next to the two. Mr. Trang’s power had improved quite a bit recently, however Zac sensed that Sap would barely manage to handle one of these people, let alone the whole group. He had to take over from here.

There were also multiple guards who moved closer with their guns at the ready. However, they didn’t seem interested in breaking up the fight, and Zac could understand why. Most of the people in this room were likely powerhouses, and butting in was a good way to get yourself killed. The army was likely there to protect the venue and government officials from attacks rather than mediating disputes between cultivators.

“Let me take it from here Ibtep,” Zac said as he turned toward the group. “Ibtep is not from any hive you have encountered, as their hive hasn’t harmed any humans. Our goal is to stop the fighting between our species, so please go away.”

“Fuck you, insect-lover,” another in the group spat as they all rushed forward.

Zac briefly considered pushing out his aura but decided against it. The Marshals were in the room, and they should have no problem comparing Thea’s power against his, and from there figure out his identity.

Instead he decided to rely on the same wooden club that he used to subdue the Zhix warriors as he walked forward. The air screamed as the club danced through the air with almost impossible speed. There was a quick succession of deep thuds followed by flying bodies, and in just below 5 seconds the whole group was lying unconscious spread out on the floor.

Zac grimaced when he saw that most of the eyes in the room suddenly were upon him. Some looked intrigued, others afraid, and some calculating. He even saw the people from the Marshall clan intently stare at him from a group of sofas in the distance, where they were surrounded by a group of sycophants. It almost felt like the intensive stare of Thea Marshall was going to burn a hole in his head, so he quickly turned away.

“HA HA! GOOD THWONKING!” a booming voice was heard across the whole room as the largest man Zac had ever seen walked toward him, holding a whole tray of canapés.

The man was so huge that Zac wondered if humans could mutate like beasts, growing out of proportions. He was well over two meters tall, and not the thin and wiry type of tall. Thick bulging muscles covered every inch of him, giving him the impression of a walking behemoth.

He also carried the nastiest weapon Zac had ever seen on his back, a huge club as large as a tree trunk, where the head of the club was actually the cranium of some unknown beast. The skull was extremely uneven with many bulges and bumps, and looked quite gnarly.

Its make was actually a bit reminiscent of his own weapon, **[Verun’s Bite]**, as it carried the same type of primal aura. Zac instinctively felt it might actually be a Spiritual Tool just like his own. All in all the man gave out a dense aura of power, and Zac knew this man was far stronger than the rabble he just clobbered. His size and muscle clearly weren’t just for show, and he gave off a quite imposing feeling.

The Zhix by his side obviously had a similar impression of the giant.

“Greetings your Holiness,” Ibtep immediately said it walked up to the large human and gave a deep bow. “I am Ibtep, ambassador of Nonet, Anointed of the hive of Kundevi. Strength to your hive.”

The huge man blankly stared at the Zhix for a few seconds, and even Zac blanked out for a bit before he understood what was going on.

“Uh Ibtep, the humans don’t have any Anointed, he is just very large.”

“Impossible, with this frame he must be anointed by the God of War,” the Zhix staunchly rebutted.

To Zac’s surprise, a well-dressed middle-aged man next to the giant stepped forward and gave a proper bow in response.

“Greetings Ibtep of hive Kundevi. This is Mayor Thwonkin’ Billy of Billyville. We are pleased to make your acquaintance,” he said with a proper British accent.

Zac’s eyebrows rose when he heard the introduction, and he shot another glance at the giant. Thwonkin’ Billy had been on the top ten of the ladder since day one, and

he currently held the 7<sup>th</sup> spot with level 38. Zac had to admit that the true appearance of the ranker even trumped what he imagined the first time he read the pseudonym.

“Hello, I’m Monk.” Zac said to the giant.

“What’s an Anointed?” the huge man said looking extremely confused.

“The Zhix are theocratic, their leaders are called the Anointed,” Zac explained, but the giant once again started blankly at the two.

“They are the insect big bosses,” the man next to Billy explained to his companion without missing a beat.

“Ha ha, you are stupid Insect man. I am a leader of humans, not insects,” the giant guffawed. “Hey, you look smart and good at thwonking, do you want to come and beat ratmen? They give a lot of money and make you stronger. We’re looking for people to help with the ratlight,”

“I’m sorry, what’s a ratlight?” Zac asked confused.

“An incursion. Billy is the leader of our town that is situated next to an incursion claimed by Ratmen. We keep killing them, but they seem to propagate at extreme speeds, making it hard to make any headway in closing it. We’re here looking for allies,” the butleresque man next to Billy explained.

Billy clearly wasn’t lying about killing Ratmen giving a lot of benefits, since he obviously received huge gains from the incursion. He wasn’t only on the top ten of the power list, but also on the wealth list. Zac didn’t think it would be too hard to get some eager volunteers as soon as they announced Billy’s name.

“Billy has been thwonkin’ rats for months, I’m tired. I wanna do something else, but they keep coming,” the giant sighed.

“Oh, unfortunately we are a bit preoccupied for the moment with some problems with our own town, but we’ll help out if we can,” Sap Trang answered after seeing a small shake from Zac.

“Give them the time Nigel,” the giant said to his companion as he stuffed the last canapés into his mouth.

“That’s... A bit early Billy,” the man hesitated.

“Give them the time Nigel,” the giant simply repeated.

“Sigh... Seventeen days from now. At ten AM in New Washington time. We will make the Billyville teleportation array public for 15 minutes. We hope to make some allies here that will join us in fighting the Ratmen Incursion at that time,” Nigel said.

“Oh?” Zac said intrigued.

It was a novel idea to set predestined times to make teleporters public. Of course it was a bit impractical, but there were not many other options before people started to become Lords and gain access to more sophisticated methods to control their domains and teleporters.

“We’ll try to make it. If not us then perhaps others from Port Atwood. We have many people there who like, uh, thwonking,” Zac said to Billy.

“Good!” Billy loudly exclaimed as he turned to leave. “I’m hungry. These people are stupid, why make food so small? See you in two weeks!”

“If you are serious, who do I speak with regarding details?” Nigel said as he stayed on after throwing the huge man an exasperated glance.

“I represent the humans on Port Atwood, but I can’t speak for what the demons will do,” Sap Trang answered.

“I see an old friend, I’ll go talk to him while you figure things out. Ibtep, please stay with Mr. Trang for now. Your kind has made a lot of enemies the past months, and if we want to make a pact against the Dominators we can’t create trouble at this stage,”

“I understand, human. I will stay here,” Ibtep said as it looked down on the incapacitated people. “Should we take these one’s possessions while we wait? They are spoils of battle.”

“Leave them, let the government figure it out,” Zac said as he looked toward the soldiers.

As if summoned by his word a few of the soldiers rushed forward and carried the unconscious men away. Zac waited for a bit longer to see if anyone from the government would want to come over to talk, but it looked like they considered the matter over as he was left alone.

Satisfied he put away his club and moved toward the Ishiate. Altogether there were about 40 of the beastmen, spread quite evenly between the two camps, and none barred his path as he moved forward. He wasn’t very surprised after his display of power, and soon he was in front of Selas who stood next to an old man.

“Long time no see, Selas,” Zac said with a slight smile.

He wasn’t angry at the beastman for closing the teleporter a few weeks ago. Keeping it open would have put the whole village in constant danger, as anyone could just enter as they wished. Still, the beastman looked a bit awkward as it slightly bowed with an embarrassed smile.

“Hello Zac, it is good to see you again. I am sorry about the discourtesy the other time. Keeping the array open would have been a risk to the villagers,” the Ishiate said.

“No problem, I understand. We all keep our teleporters private for a reason.”

“You two know each other?” an elderly and kind-looking Ishiate asked with some interest.

“Yes, Mr. Zac here passed through our village and helped us kill an extremely strong beast that was threatening the villagers,” Selas explained.

“Oh, such a thing happened? You’re a friend of the Ishiate then. I am Willow, Druid of the Mountain” the old man said with a bow.

“Nice to meet you. I didn’t expect Ishiate to be here, to be honest,” Zac said as he looked at the pretty large group.

The comment about being a Druid was something he’d ask around about later, as it might be considered rude to do it right away.

“We are mainly here for information. You humans have proven to be far more adept than us at exploring our new world. There are many of us who are searching for their ancestral homes and families, and New Washington is our best bet to find news,” Willow explained.

Zac nodded as it made sense. The Ishiate were not very technologically advanced. Even those of the other group looked more like steampunk cosplayers than high-tech people. Both groups would clearly benefit from the programs that the government provided. Perhaps in the future there would be arrays or evolved scouts who could provide information even more efficiently, but Earth was far from that point.

“What about you?”

“We’re mainly here for the excitement. And who knows, we might pick up something nice as well,” Zac answered with a smile.

“Your group is quite interesting. There has already been some speculation about companions amongst the groups in this room,” another elderly man dressed very much as Willow said. “You’re only missing Ishiate in your party.”

“Our village is extremely remote, we had to team up with whoever is available. As for the blue gnome, he’s actually from a store we purchased through the Town Shop,” Zac answered with a smile. “And we actually found two ishiate settlements just the other day but still haven’t made contact. Perhaps next time our party will be even more diverse.”

The comment caused some interest amongst most of the beastmen, who curiously looked over at him.

“Do you have any information about those who live there?” an Ishiate hurriedly asked, and Zac realized that many were hoping it was one of their home villages, even if it was a long shot.

He took out a full report from his pouch detailing the expedition. He had all types of reports typed up, but honestly, he almost never read them. But sometimes it was quite convenient, such as now.

“The two towns both hold an estimated 1000 to 2000 citizens. They seem to be from the group of your friends over there though,” he said and pointed to the other group of ishiate who stood some distance away. “They had erected proper walls and seemed to be in decent shape, not in need of saving at the moment.”

Many of the beastkin sighed in disappointment, but a few still held on hope.

“We know that sometimes our groups have joined hands to survive, perhaps some of our people are there as well. Were there any markers on the towns?”

“Uh, yeah, there were some kind of flags on both walls. One held a picture of a sun with a branch underneath, the other was a cogwheel with a lightning bolt running through it on a white background,” Zac answered as he read through the report.

The Ishiate looked at each other and after a few moments shook their heads in disappointment. However, two beastkin from the other group quickly walked over. Even though they belonged to different camps the Ishiate stood a bit clumped together, and the ishiate probably overheard the conversation with their keen hearing.

“Is what you said just now true?” one of them asked and they had hope in their eyes.

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**Chapter 133 - The Auction Begins**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

New Month, new plug update :) **Due to reaching the final (for now) Goal the number of Early Chapters has once again increased!** Read up to **29** chapters ahead of what’s posted here on RR!

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The Ishiate who followed the way of nature frowned as they saw the two steampunk beastkin approach, but one of the elders spoke up.

“We can’t focus on old conflicts anymore. If our kin is to survive we must work together,” he said, but couldn’t help himself from continuing. “The universe has shown us the right path, and I’m sure the lost ones will return into the fold soon enough.”

Zac sort of understood the old druid meant. The two camps of the Ishiate essentially fought over the issue of Nature versus Technology, and it was pretty clear which of the two camps the System sided with. He actually felt a bit bad for the technologically inclined Ishiate, as their situation wasn’t very optimistic.

Of course, it was possible to become a powerful force in this new environment with the aid of technology. The Technocrats was one of the strongest forces in the multi-verse and still lived well even though multiple forces were gunning for them. However, the technocrats were approaching the limits of technology, having the means to travel the universe and unleashing terrifying weapons.

These Ishiate were no Technocrats, and had barely started on the path of technology. Their progress was a few hundred years behind humanity, and their weapons were probably already approaching obsolescence against the increasingly durable beasts in the wild. Zac guessed they would perish unless they turned back to the more simple ways.

“Progress is the basic path of life. To stick to the old ways is to perish. That hasn’t changed with the System, it has only been reinforced,” one of the two Ishiate retorted with a glare.

“Human, is what you said true? There is truly a town with those flags close to your town?” the other ishiate asked.

“Yeah, our scouts found them a few days ago,” Zac simply answered.

It wasn’t really any secret information, and he could very much sympathize with these people. He understood what it was like to desperately search for his home in an endlessly large new world.

“Please let us come with you when you leave. That is Cogstown, our hometown,” they asked with hope in their eyes.

Zac mulled it over for a bit. He felt it wasn’t too problematic to bring a few people with him through the teleporter. Besides, bringing these two should make forming an alliance considerably easier when they made first contact.

“Our town is extremely remote. In fact, it’s not on the mainland. It’s not sure that you can get back without using our teleporter. Do you still wish to go?” He said.

“Yes,” both of them answered without hesitation, and Zac only nod.

“Talk with my companion over there, the human. He can make the arrangements,” Zac said as he pointed to Sap Trang, who was still speaking with Nigel.

Suddenly a couple of speakers crackled into life, playing the classical intermission sound.

“Seems the auction is starting, if you will excuse me. I need to gather up with my group,” Zac said as he moved away.

“It was nice meeting you, Zac,” Willow said with a smile. “We hope to see you again.”

Soon he was back with the others. By this point Calrin had already returned, and soon he saw Ogras saunter over as well, holding a bottle of champagne he’d snagged somewhere.

“Not many interesting things happening so far, everyone is just sticking to their little groups, barely talking. The liquor wasn’t bad though, we should bring some bottles with us back home.”

“Not sure how many there are left, I think a lot of people has turned to the bottle to calm their nerves over the past few months,” Zac said with a sigh. “But it doesn’t hurt to give it a try.”

Actually, he agreed with the demon. While he didn’t really like champagne he really wanted to bring some beer with him back to the island, but he felt that most of it would have been consumed after almost five months since the integration.

“Then we simply get some brewers,” the demons said off-handedly, but the sentence sparked an idea in Zac as he turned to Sap Trang.

“Start thinking of a list of any type of occupation we’re currently lacking. Everything from chefs to sanitation workers to scientists.”

He hadn’t really planned to start recruiting in earnest yet, but since he already had brought hundreds of refugees he might as well go all the way. Who knew if all the useful people would be snatched up if they kept holding off. It might be a bit unethical to start moving more people to the island even before the third wave was dealt with, but if worse came to worst he could just have people flee through the teleporter back to New Washington.

The number of people in the venue was a clear indication that quite a few forces possessed a teleporter by this point. Zac knew that it wasn’t that people were extremely wealthy like him, rather his force was quite small compared to many towns. Taking New Washington for example, it held hundreds of thousands of citizens, and every person just had to contribute a handful of Nexus Coins for them to afford the Teleporter.

He needed to start thinking ahead if he was truly planning on creating a flourishing town. There might still be a window of opportunity where the other forces mainly looked for powerful warriors or rankers to join them, overlooking the long term benefits that non-combat classes could bring to an area.

Port Atwood on his island was quite a lot safer compared to most places on the mainland, which should allow him to focus more on recruiting and nurturing many people showing skill in craftsmanship. He already had an almost insane amount of raw materials for creating armors, now he just needed craftsmen to actually craft and inscribe them.

“Good, now you’re thinking in the big picture,” Ogras nodded. “I’m tired of living like a castaway.”

The group walked together and was ushered to a couple of seats near the front by an attendant who took a quick look at the ticket. It was clear that Zac’s rampage in Greenworth had left somewhat of an impression on the government, as they clearly sat in one of the best seats in the house.

This was further confirmed when both the Marshals and Billy were seated not far from them.

“Nigel told me the strong sits in the front. I knew you were smart, bald guy. But Billy is not only smart, Billy is also rich,” the giant said with a loud voice as he thumped down close to them, taking up two seats by himself.

“I’m sure there are enough good things for the both of us,” Zac answered with a smile.

He liked the giant so far, he seemed genuine enough. He’d take that kind of ally any day over calculating ones like the demon next to him.

The Marshals seemed a bit surprised to see Zac’s group once again, and Zac saw the guardian whisper something in the ear of their attendant. He glanced at Zac’s group but only shook his head looking unsure.

“Hey girl, I hear you’re the strongest woman amongst the humans. We saw your jump in the Dao ladder a while back, did you find something good? Are you interested in selling it?” Ogras said with a toothy grin at the looked in Thea Marshal’s direction

“I am sorry about him. Different cultures and all,” Zac could only sigh.

“Weaklings often have big mouths to compensate. I’m more curious about you. What are you called?” she lightly said as she stared at Zac.

“Uh, people call me Monk,” Zac said, uncomfortable by the intense glare.

“She’s got a mouth on her,” Ogras said, not minding the insult. “You should kidnap her back to Port Atwood. You’d have strong babies.”

The bodyguard frowned at the comment and prepared to move forward, but Thea lifted her hand to stop him. At the same time a spurt of blood erupted from Ogras’ throat, surprising both Zac and the demon.

Even though Zac was looking at the exchange from the start he wasn’t quite sure what exactly cut him. At first he thought it might have been a Dao Field of the Seed of Sharpness, but he believed he would have sensed the familiar feeling if that was the case.

“Watch your mouth,” Thea said as he looked at the demon with loathing.

Shadows squirmed and covered the shallow wound, and soon the bleeding was quelled.

“An interesting attack. But be careful about starting things. You might be strong, but can the same be said of your companions?” the demon smiled, and Zac’s eyebrows rose in alarm.

But before Zac had time to stop anything the bodyguard grunted as a shadow spear pushed through one of his legs, almost making him fall over. Thea looked around in surprise, and a frown appeared on the old man.

“What do you think? Can you kill me before I kill your two companions?” Ogras said while grinning.

“Despicable,” the girl said, throwing scathing glares at not only Ogras but the whole party.

“Enough,” Zac said while glaring angrily at Ogras, already regretting bringing him. “What will you do if you get us thrown out before the auction even starts?”

“Relax, we’re just having some pre-auction fun,” Ogras said with a smile.

“I am sorry about him, this is a healing pill that will help with your friend’s recovery,” Zac said to the Marshals as he took out a small glass bottle and threw it toward them.

However, the bottle got rebuffed in the air and shot straight back toward Zac through some unknown means.

“The Marshall Clan is in no need of your little baubles,” Thea simply said as the trio sat down in their seat some distance away.

“Mama always says you should be nice to women, as being mean will bring you big trouble,” Billy muttered to himself, but with the giant’s standard volume it turned into an exclamation.

“She sounds like a wise woman,” Ogras only said to the giant, making him perk up happily.

He looked ready to say something but was distracted by the large curtains getting lifted on the stage and some musicians play classical music. It was beautiful, but it wasn’t what Zac came for, so he was happy to see that almost immediately a well-dressed man in a suit walked out on the stage and stood behind the podium.

“Welcome all to the first Grand Auction held by New World Government. It is an amazing sight to see so many coming from all corners of the world. It is truly a testament to humanity’s resilience in face of adversity. We’re also happy to see friends from other races joining us here today. I am hoping this is the start of a long and fruitful cooperation between our species.”

The man was clearly used to public speaking, and smoothly took command of the room.

“To make sure there’s no confusion in the event, I will go over the ground rules. This auction is a classical English-Style auction, and for those who are unsure of what that means, don’t worry, I will go over it with you. Beneath your chairs there are numbered paddles that you use to bid. Simply raise the paddle to make a bid.

“The standard increase bid increase is based on the size, but generally around ten percent. For example, if the price is ten thousand Nexus coins, each standard bid will be a thousand nexus coins up to fifty thousand, at which point the standard bid changes to five thousand.

“Of course, you can increase the bid by a higher amount by shouting it out, but not by a lower amount,” the auctioneer said with a smile.

“If you are the highest bidder your number will be seen on the screen behind me. And don’t worry if you’re sitting in the back. I have three people all with scout classes and eyesight skills with me who will all help me in making sure that no bid is overlooked.”

“Payment accepted is World Government Credits, Nexus Coins or Nexus crystals valued at a 1:50 ratio. Be aware that no coercion, threats, or other disturbances are allowed during the auction. A first offense will result in a warning, but repeat offenders will be escorted out of the venue.”

“With that I hope you will enjoy the auction and that you all find something that will help you in the fight against our foreign invaders. The first item for auction is a set of five E-Grade Nexus Crystals,” the auctioneer said as a cart was rolled in by a beautiful woman.

On the cart was a briefcase, and when the showgirl opened it the light of five genuine E-Grade crystals radiated out. There was almost a collective intake of breath in the hall, and even Zac was interested.

The New World Government was clearly not holding back.

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**Chapter 134 - Emma**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

New Month, new plug update :) **Due to reaching the final (for now) Goal the number of Early Chapters has once again increased!** Read up to **30** chapters ahead of what’s posted here on RR!

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"I am sure you're all aware of the efficacy of an E-Grade Nexus Crystal by now. They are still not available for sale in the stores, and only a scant few have been found or rewarded from quests. Just one contains enough power to gain a whole level for most people. They can also power your defensive structures or arrays when defending your towns, making them a must-have for aspiring Lords.

"The five crystals will be sold as a set, and the price starts at 25 000 Nexus Coins," the Announcer shouted, trying to hype up the wares.

That put the crystals at roughly 5 000 Nexus Coins per crystal, which was the general market price, as one E-Grade Crystal was worth roughly a hundred F-Grade ones in the Multi-Verse. However, their value was far higher on earth at the moment.

There was a desperate demand, but almost no supply. Zac knew that on a D-Grade world like theirs E-Grade crystals wouldn't be anything special in a couple of years when the world had acclimatized and the crystals had been given time to grow. But for now they were extremely rare as the shops didn't sell them.

Still, they would give a huge leveling boost for most people, and Zac expected their price to go far higher compared to what they were actually worth. He was quickly proven right as the price increased to over a hundred thousand in no time, people desperately shouting out higher and higher prices.

"110 000, thank you B183," the auctioneer said, but barely had time to finish the sentence before the price increased again on the large monitor behind him.

"Two hundred thousand," the elder of the Marshall clan suddenly said, and the hall quickly stilled.

The crystals would no doubt be a big help to most, but they would at the best give two, perhaps three levels over a few days. Spending that much for saving two weeks of time, even less if the crystals were shared over multiple people, was a bit much for most people.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand," Ogras said with a grin while waving at the paddle at the old man.

"That's coming out of your own pocket," Zac only said.

"You have a thing or two to learn about auctions. You need to let people know you're a force to be reckoned with. That you have more money than sense. That will discourage people from bidding against you, helping you save money. No one likes to lose a bidding war after all," Ogras said with a low volume, clearly enjoying himself.

"Three hundred thousand," the old man responded with a snort.

"The second thing to remember is to push up the prices for things you don't need, especially if your biggest competitors are bidding," he continued, and for once Calrin seemed to wholeheartedly agree.

"An auction is not only a battle of wallets, it's also about wits," the gnome said.

"People are stupid. Just thwunk rats for a week and you get as much energy, and you gain money, not lose it," Billy muttered, and Zac had to agree as he threw a glance at the old man.

He knew that Thea Marshall was once on the top ten of the wealth ladder, and there actually were two more of the Marshall clan on the wealth ladder since some time ago. Still, three hundred thousand nexus coins was by no means a small amount of money, especially for just a few Nexus Crystals.

Certainly, he gained almost two levels from absorbing his own E-Grade Crystals, but those levels had very little impact on his power in general. Besides, he knew that it wasn't a good idea to rely on crystals too much.

One of the requirements of advancing one's class was achievements, and if you just sat at home continuously absorbing crystals you likely wouldn't be able to upgrade to E-Rank, forcing you to risk your life in various mystic realms or the like.

Ogras didn't bid any further and smilingly watched two guards bring the case to the old man, who just put it in a Cosmos Sack without looking further at the contents.

The auction continued, and to Zac's disappointment it quickly became clear that the crystals were an opening salvo to increase the excitement as the following items were nowhere as good. Still, it gave Zac a very good insight into what people lacked and what was in surplus.

Weapons and gear were among the most common items to be put up in the auction, many of which being even worse than the standard regiment items the demons brought.

Zac learned some time ago that those weapons were things that the apprentices made, and most of the real soldiers of Clan Azh'Rezak bought their own, far superior, weapons as soon as they could. The reason so few brought strong weapons through the incursion, apart from Ogras and a few others, was that it cost money to do so.

To Zac's surprise these items had no problem getting sold, and many of the weapons even created heated bidding wars. Of course none of the true powerhouses bid on these types of items, but they clearly held value to even warriors who were powerful enough to attend this kind of event. This made Zac redouble his desire to find capable craftsmen who could help his demon craftsmen quickly churn out a huge amount of items.

Various resources such as metals, woods, and herbs weren't as popular, showing that the craftsman classes on earth were still in its infancy. Herbs were usually quite popular in the multi-verse, and skilled alchemists were amongst the wealthiest people around.

Calrin managed to snatch up one item after another, meeting little resistance in his bidding spree. However, he didn't look overly excited, which told Zac that the materials weren't too good.

Ogras also bid a bit, mostly to piss others off it seemed. However, he still bought a few things, mainly liquors from old Earth. They actually didn't go cheap, and Zac was surprised to see the demand for fine spirits.

Perhaps Ogras was truly on to something when he spoke about finding brewers. He had a lot of land after all, and with the temperate climate and highly concentrated cosmic energy he'd have no problems growing either hops or grapes.

The process kept going for almost two hours, and Zac was starting to get bored. However, the Auctioneer stopped bringing out new items after selling off a beautiful bow to a woman in a back row.

"This concludes the first half of our auction. I am happy that so many of you have found something of interest. We will take a short break for thirty minutes where refreshments will be served. The second half contains far fewer items, but I am sure that each and every one of them will astound you," he said with a smile.

With that the doors at the back of the venue once again opened.

"What paupers, nothing exciting for sale," the demon sighed.

"You still bought some things," Zac said.

"Just minor purchases to pass the time. Hopefully the second round will be more exciting," he said, and the Sky Gnome could only nod.

Zac sighed as they walked out.

“Is this type of activity common amongst humans?” the Zhix asked as they exited the hall.

“Well, rich people did it a lot I suppose,” Zac said with some hesitation.

To be honest it was the first auction he personally attended as far as he could remember.

“Excuse me, I need to look around a bit,” Zac said as he headed for a group at random.

For the next thirty minutes he went around the human groups, trying to find anyone who was close to the Undead Incursion. Of course, he wasn’t completely obvious, and instead brought up the topic of incursions, and asked whether any of them was close by to their home. He tried to make it look like he was looking for good spots to fight and gain levels.

If New Washington was a bit to the west of the central area of the new continent, then the incursion was rather to the southeast. From the information he got from Julia the cultivators from Greenworth should be somewhere on the eastern side of the incursion, so that was where he needed to go next to look for his sister.

However, the results weren’t too promising, as no one was even close to where he wanted to go. Almost the whole intermission was spent going from party to party, forcefully inserting himself in the conversation to ask about their origins. Zac was starting to despair as the time for the break was almost running out.

But finally, as he accosted a stocky man with a greatsword on his back he actually hit jackpot.

“Yes, we are quite close to the undead bastards, they really are a pain in the ass. Luckily there are a few frontier towns between us and the fallen areas where quite a few cultivators reside, making our town quite a bit safer,” the robust man said with a sigh.

“Really? Which side of the incursion?” Zac asked, trying to hide his excitement.

“The North side,” the man answered. “It’s lucky too. From what we’ve gathered the worst of their kind generally keep to the central area, but when they venture out they mostly head south or east. Huge Chinese and Indian cities in those directions, gives the wraith and liches many soldiers.”

“I would like to make use of your teleporter in the future if possible. The undead hordes seem like an ideal spot to get stronger. I can pay quite generously for passage,” Zac said, trying to seem interested, but not overly so.

“Ah.. That’s... A bit complicated, I can’t really promise anything,” the man said.

“Complicated how? If there is someone else making those decisions can talk with them as well,” Zac said, burning with eagerness on the inside.

The man was just about to say something, but the speakers sounded, marking the end of the intermission.

“Well, you will find out soon. Just stay behind after the auction. The government will make everything clear then,” the man said with a low voice.

Zac was confused but knew there was no point in trying to convince the man. He already knew the man’s face, so he would wait until after the auction to see what was going on. From the way he spoke it was connected to whatever the government was planning, the real reason they called this gathering.

Soon he found himself back at his seat. However, he wasn’t in any real mood to focus on the auction. He finally found a way to get to Kenzie. Even if the man’s town was on the north side Zac felt it wouldn’t be a problem to push straight through the

Incursion to the eastern side. If he pushed himself to its limit it shouldn't take too long to traverse, even if it had grown quite huge. A week maybe, two at the most.

He was so consumed by his planning he didn't really react to the curtains once again opening, and a person walking out on the stage. However, the exaggerated reaction of the demon next to him dragged him out of his musings. Ogras almost stood up in his seat, gaping at the scene.

Zac quickly looked at the stage and saw that the man from earlier had been replaced, and Zac actually knew this person. It was Emma MacHale, the movie star. She had starred in quite a few movies recently and was one of the hottest names before the integration happened. She was also one of Ogras' favorites after having binged an unhealthy amount of movies.

Zac suddenly had a foreboding feeling as he looked over to see shadows gathering around the demon.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have a

Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

#### **Chapter 135 - Mystery Stones**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New Month, new plug update :) **Due to reaching the final (for now) Goal the number of Early Chapters has once again increased!** Read up to **30** chapters ahead of what's posted here on RR!

As today is the 7th you will not get charged a second time until November if you sign now!

Zac's hand gripped Ogras' shoulder, firmly embedding the demon in his chair. During the past months Zac learned that the shadow-skills of the demon were not invincible and there were ways to counteract them.

For example, if he got hold of the demon and pushed out some cosmic energy through his hands the demon wouldn't be able to turn into shadows and disappear. It was very convenient at a time like this when he clearly was up to no good.

"Are you insane?" Zac wheezed out. "You will get yourself killed and me kicked out. For what? To meet an actress?"

"You're too hesitant all the time. Going around calling yourself Monk. Not wanting to make a scene. Being low-key. You're a powerhouse, act like it. That's Emma, from all the movies. This might be a once in a lifetime opportunity to court her. You shouldn't be stopping me, you should be fighting me of who gets to take her back," Ogras wheezed back, unfortunately loudly enough for the last sentence to be heard by a few of the closest people.

Zac cringed under the glares, but at least the demon seemed to have listened to him as he stopped trying to teleport up on the stage. In fact, he was wondering if the demon was correct. Not about the starlet, but about his demeanor. Both Billy and Thea were walking tall and proud, not hiding who they were. But he, the number one powerhouse of humanity, was still hiding around.

Displaying who he was might actually help him out in various ways. People would bend over backwards just to be able to make some connections with him and provide various types of support in the hope of becoming friends, or at least allies. Scrubs like the men earlier wouldn't trouble him either, even if Ibtep started flipping them off.

However, Kenzie still held him back. He would stay incognito as long as he could. Honestly, after his actions in Greenworth the government should already have some pretty strong suspicions about his identity unless their information-gathering capabilities had turned to shit. But hopefully, they hadn't found his real identity yet, which in a sense was even more important for him.

"Whatever. There seems to be an important meeting after the auction. You can go flirt with her then," Zac said.

A sweet voice echoing through the speakers cut their conversation short, and both turned their gazes back to the gorgeous woman on the stage.

"Welcome all to the second half of the New World Government Auction. I am Emma MacHale, your new host," she said and threw out a radiant smile.

The area erupted in cheers and whistles, and Zac could only shake his head when the demon joined in. Ogras had almost become addicted to the movies over the past months, and Zac wondered if he even remembered his promises about turning the movies into sellable items.

"As my colleague said earlier there will be fewer items in this second half, but each and every one is a true treasure. At least we think so, since honestly we do not know exactly what some of the things for sale are!" the hostess said with a laugh.

"Also, Thomas Fischer, the Mayor of New Washington will say a few words afterward, so please stay behind. It will definitely be information you don't want to miss!"

It didn't take long until the first item was rolled out, and to Zac's surprise he actually recognized it when a picture was shown on the large monitor. It was one of the entrance tickets to the Treasure Hunt that would take place in roughly two months.

Zac wasn't surprised however to see a token come up for sale here. He wasn't sure how many were awarded during the tutorial, but they shouldn't be too rare if Selas was able to snag two of them. There surely were many who didn't want to risk entering such a place, competing against both the environment and all the powerhouses, and instead chose to sell it for a profit.

"You should all recognize this, the prize for the elites of the tutorial, an entrance ticket to the Treasure Hunt happening soon! Not much is known about it, apart from the fact there will be chances to gain both titles and rare treasures. Having a few extra friends to go with you might make all the difference. The starting price is 250 000 Nexus Coins or equivalent!"

It was a hefty sum, but it was clearly worth it for the forces who were planning on heading in.

"Two hundred and fifty," the guard next to the Marshals said.

"Three hundred fifty!" a thundering exclamation came from Billy.

"Five hundred thousand," Ogras shouted as well, surprising Zac.

"Can you even use it?" Zac asked Ogras in a low voice, surprising him.

"Why shouldn't I?" he asked back.

Zac only fished out his own token from his bag and handed it over.

"See if you can use it before you spend all your money," he said.

The demon snatched the token up and fiddled with it a bit, a frown quickly forming on his face.

“Is this a fake?” he warily asked.

“Why would I have a fake? I got it on one of my excursions. I knew that only natives could go,” Zac answered with a roll of his eyes.

“Bah, Ruthless Heavens indeed,” the demon muttered angrily as he threw back the token to Zac. “There should be some mystic realms opening soon in any case, who cares about your stupid treasure hunt.”

Mystic realms were something that covered all of the multi-verse. There were quite a few types of them, with everything from tombs of powerful warriors leaving an inheritance to mysterious zones created by aberrant energies.

The most common type though was spatial pocket realms that simply had been detached from a main dimension for some reason or another. Some of these realms were desolate wastelands, but others were pristine areas filled with various rare and precious materials.

It was quite a common thing for adventurers to make their living exploring mystic realms, hoping to either strike it rich or rack up enough experiences to help with breaking through their bottlenecks.

The Mystic Realms were usually accessed through finding soft spots, where the membrane between the main dimension and the mystic realm was at the weakest. At these spots one could place specific arrays whose job was to create stable portals through the dimensional barrier.

Finding a good Mystic Realm and claiming it could become a huge steady stream of income to a Clan or force. Some could be turned into training fields for armies, as long as there was a prolific species living inside. Others were even larger than planets, making it worthwhile for adventurers to keep heading through, as many treasures might still lie in wait.

The most sought after ones were those holding ruins from old civilizations. Many of the mystic realms came from quite highly ranked original worlds, such as A and B ranked continents. There needed to be quite a bit of energy involved for a whole section of a dimension to be ripped out and thrown into the folds between universes after all.

Usually the energy had mostly dissipated in the Mystic Realm, making the Cosmic Energy far scarcer compared to that of a real A-Rank continent, but if there was a civilization in the pocket realm the chance for finding a huge treasure was great. Any small gadget or information crystal from an ancient A-Grade civilization would be worth a fortune.

It didn't take long until Billy snagged the tag for a whopping 1 Million Nexus coins. Actually, any time Billy started bidding on something there was simply no stopping him. He truly treated money like water, not caring in the slightest what the prices became. His confidante had tried to rein in his spending, but the giant had only laughed and called him stupid.

Following the first Token they actually sold another 4 of them, and they all sold in the same range. The Marshall clan was showing off its muscles, actually buying two of them. One went to an old man among the Ishiate, with the final one being sold to a hooded person in the back.

“Next up we have a unique material an explorer found deep in a cave. It is not a metal that was previously found on earth, and it doesn't conform to the laws of physics,” Emma said as a larger reinforced tray was rolled out.

“It is only as large as a fist, but it weighs over two hundred kilos. More amazingly, its weight drastically changes depending on its temperature, and inside a fire it actually floats,” she said. “Perhaps a skilled craftsman can make something amazing out of this thing in the future.”

Zac thought it was an interesting item, but he was unsure how he personally would go about using it. Perhaps someone who used either fire- or ice-based attacks could somehow take advantage of its unique properties and creating some strong weapon.

“Ten thousand,” Zac suddenly heard from his left and saw the Calrin holding up his paddle.

He was actually standing in the chair as to be seen, slouching on the backrest. However, Zac had gotten to know the gnome a bit over the past months and saw that the lackadaisical expression was mostly an illusion. He really wanted this stone.

“Fifty thousand,” a voice in the back shouted, starting off the bidding in earnest.

The item was interesting, but not many people were willing to go too far in the bidding. Most likely knew that it might be valuable somehow in the future, even if they didn’t know how to utilize it today. But money was limited this early into the integration, and few were willing to spend hundreds of thousands on an investment that might give a return in the distant future.

Luckily for Calrin it seemed that Billy wasn’t interested in the stone, and he managed to secure it for 350 000 Nexus Coins. As soon as the tray came close the gnome bounced down from his chair and immediately put the stone into his Cosmos Sack after paying, and he couldn’t stop a grin from appearing as he walked back to his chair.

“Congratulations my friend. Next item is another mystery stone,” Emma said with a wink. “This one might look like a normal stone, but it is anything but. Apart from being extremely hard it also emits a weird aura. It is hard to explain so we will show you.”

A stone about as large as a soccer ball was rolled out on another tray, but this time it was accompanied by a girl holding a vase with a normal flower in it. After the tray was placed at the usual spot for the items they simply placed the vase down next to it.

Everyone looked at the stone and the flower, unsure what was going on, but soon their eyebrows rose as the flower was wilting with a speed visible to the naked eye. Murmurs and exclamations erupted over the whole area, but Emma once again stepped forward.

“As you can see the stone made the flower wilt. Actually, according to our scientists who have studied the stone it actually absorbs the life-force from the flower, rather than emitting some deadly radiation. In fact, it emits no radiation at all, which any Geiger-counter can testify to. And don’t worry, it is not able to absorb human lifeforce. At least not what we know.”

Zac barely listened to the explanation from the starlet, as he was preoccupied with something else. He was holding on to his cosmos sack with a frown on his face, unsure what was going on with **[Verun’s Bite]**.

Even from inside his Cosmos Sack he could feel his axe throbbing with an almost palpable hunger.

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**Chapter 136 - Joint Ventures**

The only explanation Zac could find to the weird behavior of his axe was that the stone in front of him was something it desired. He knew since long ago that it needed to absorb various materials to improve to E-Grade.

However, the only thing he'd found so far that it actually wanted to absorb was blood. And not any blood either, since it was completely uninterested in both the humans and the ants he'd killed since acquiring it. The only thing it had actually drunk was the supercharged mink in the forest.

He had tested various things that were lying around in Port Atwood but with no luck. Unfortunately different Spiritual Tools craved different materials, so there was no guide lying around. However, it seemed that at least some of the ingredients would need to be E-Ranked in order for it to upgrade, as that was the same with all Tools.

Zac had the money and decided to purchase the stone. Who knew when another chance would crop up. He surreptitiously glanced over at the Gnome, but he only slightly shook his head while looking unsure, indicating he didn't know what the stone was.

"One hundred thousand," a voice from the back said, once again starting a bidding war.

It was a bit more heated this time, as perhaps the prospect of creating a weapon that could suck the lifeforce out of their enemies was quite intriguing.

"One million," a voice suddenly came from the front, quickly silencing the bidding.

It was Thea Marshal, holding up her paddle with an indifferent face. Zac frowned as he glanced over. She had just upped the bid by a whole 700 000 Nexus Coins, and it felt like she wanted to close it out.

"One point one million," Nigel said as he held the arm of Billy.

"One point five," Thea said as she threw a glance over at Nigel.

"One point six," Nigel followed up without hesitation.

Zac felt there currently were two possibilities. Either they both knew what the stone and its approximate value was, or they both received a clue in the same way that he did. That would mean the both of them had a Spiritual Tool. The felt that the first option was a bit unlikely, as there shouldn't be anyone more knowledgeable about precious metals compared to Calrin on Earth as of yet.

Since both were high rankers the second possibility was by no means impossible. The Tutorial gave out all kinds of good things, and these two were clearly at the top of the Tutorial. It seemed not only possible, but almost likely, that they were given proper weapons. And if it wasn't from the tutorial, then perhaps from some sort of quest.

But if that was the case he felt it was a bit odd that all three weapons wanted the stone, as the weapon's appetites should vary more than that. Perhaps it was something else, some sort of treasure that all tool spirits wanted. When he came to that conclusion he didn't wait any longer and entered the fray.

"Two million," he said as he held up his paddle.

"Two point five," Thea answered after throwing a glare at him.

"Three million," Zac unhesitantly responded.

From there the bids started to get smaller, and at 4 million Billy dropped out with a disappointed sigh. However, Thea was adamant.

"Five million Nexus Coins," she said, now keeping constant baleful glare at Zac.

"Six million," Zac answered with a helpless smile, uncomfortably scratching the back of his head.

He finally found something that was quite valuable, and he had a huge amount of wealth at the moment. He might only have 17 million in pure Nexus Coins, but he also had mountains of crystals. He wasn't first on the wealth ladder for nothing, while Thea had dropped down to the 17<sup>th</sup> spot recently.

When Zac reached six million she finally relented and sat back in her chair with an angry harrumph.

"Wow, six million Nexus Coins. Congratulations to the handsome Mr. Monk on the front row," Emma said with a wink, seemingly unaffected by the tense atmosphere.

As the tray with the stone was rolled toward Zac various murmurs erupted through the hall. Zac felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up after being stared at by hundreds of people, but it couldn't be helped. Six million for a stone was beyond extravagant, and by far the largest bid so far in the auction.

"What the hell, why does she know you?" Ogras suddenly asked from next to him with a glare, obviously referring to the movie star.

"How should I know? She works for the government, they might have told her," Zac said with a shrug.

He quickly put the stone into a different pouch than the one that held Verun's bite. Zac wasn't sure if something odd would happen if he brought them together, and wanted to wait until he was back on the island.

The items kept coming out one by one, and quite a few were natural oddities. There were various roots and flowers, stones and metals. It seemed that the Government had put everything they found that was weird and without an apparent use in the second half of the auction, hoping to at least make some money.

The interest was quite weak, apart from a few groups who bid a surprising amount. There was one group of people that sat a few rows behind that bid on many of the various plants. Zac guessed that they had an alchemist in their ranks, or at least an apothecary or herbalist.

The modern Ishiate bid for many of the metals, perhaps wanting to use them in metallurgy experiments. But the absolute foremost force in the bidding was Calrin, who flexed his muscles.

"How are you actually paying for all this?" Zac finally had to ask after the gnome snatched his tenth item in the second half.

The Gnome had been destitute when he arrived on the island, and he shouldn't have made enough profit from the demonic warriors to afford all these purchases, as the amount he spent was over ten million by now.

"You are, of course. And the demon to a certain extent," he said with a shrug.

"WHAT?" both Zac and Ogras screamed, drawing quite a few glares by the people in the room.

"You went in as external investors in The Thayer Consortia. When we spend money you spend money. See it as a cash infusion into your business," he said with a widening smile. "I'm on your planet as a mercantile business owner. I'm not allowed to spend my own money on business ventures, since us merchants are usually wealthy enough to destroy the economy of a baby planet. If you didn't enter as co-owners I would never be able to get this quest."

Zac was having a bad feeling and quickly brought up his status screen.

He immediately turned back to the gnome, ready to strangle the little bastard. Eight million Nexus Coins were missing apart from those he spent himself.

Ogras wasn't looking much better, even though he should've only lost two million or so.

“YOU LITTLE BASTARD!” he roared, completely ignoring the guns that were suddenly pointing at them from the balconies.

Roar completely stopped the auction, and Emma backed away a few steps, warily looking at Zac’s party.

“You better cough up my money real quick or I’ll poke you full of holes you greedy little shit,” he growled as the shadows beneath them were starting to shudder.

“You brutes, don’t bring attention to us. Why do you think I’m buying all these things? To make money. My quest is to make a profit, not a loss, you imbeciles. Just smile and open your wallets, and we will all walk away happy men,” he said, not caring in the slightest about the frothing demon.

“You know Port Atwood’s situation. You can’t spend an endless amount of money,” Zac said with a glare, having no intention of stopping Ogras this time.

The gnome had gone crazy with greed and was using their money to satiate it.

“You still have all the things you prepared for the ants, right?” he protested, but still looked a bit deflated from having both Zac and Ogras stare down at him.

“Fine, fine. I’m sorry, ok? Write down a spending limit and I’ll stick to it!” he said as he handed over a paper.

Zac once again felt the veins on his forehead throb when he saw that the gnome had already written seven zeroes on the note, and Zac unhesitantly scribbled over the last one to the Calrin’s dismay. As they were arguing a man in a suit walked up on the stage with a microphone.

“Gentlemen, please remember the rules of the auction. This is your first and only warning,” he said with a somber expression.

“Sorry sorry. How about I take Miss Emma out for dinner to show my contrition?” the demon said as he smoothed his hair and shot off a winning smile.

The hall immediately exploded on boos and demands to throw them out, but Emma only smiled in response.

“I don’t know, judging by the bidding your blue little friend is the one to go to dinner with. He seems quite generous,” she said with a wink.

The comment made Calrin proudly stretch his back, and even Zac couldn’t stop himself from smacking the gnome in the back of his head.

“It’s easy to be generous with other’s money,” he muttered in a low volume. “Five million, that’s your limit. And I expect to make quite some profit from your escapades. Otherwise, I’ll hand you over to Ogras.”

With that the auction continued and kept going unimpeded. Zac had somewhat large hopes that the final items would be something exciting, but was disappointed to see that they were high-grade gear. He had hoped that there would be some stat or Dao-improving fruits for sale, but Zac guessed that they wouldn’t go on sale even if the Government had them.

Of course, the others in the audience didn’t have the same reaction, as there were harsh bidding wars for the last pieces of items. None of the items were Spiritual Tools though, but Zac felt it wasn’t anything odd. Any truly good piece wouldn’t be put up on auction this early into the integration, and in general he was actually surprised the government was willing to part ways with so many interesting items.

Perhaps it could be considered a display of power as well, the capability to sell so many treasures. In addition they made quite a bit of money, and the total value of all the items in the auction should approach almost 70 or 80 million.

With that amount of Nexus Coins they could do some quite large upgrades to New Washington, provided they had unlocked enough options in their Nexus Node.

“As for this final item of the evening, I present to you the [Sword of Storms] an E-Rank sword fitting both wind and water cultivators,” she said.

Sap Trang looked quite interested for a bit but soon shook his head.

“You want it?” Zac asked as he looked over

“Thank you, but no. It is a fine weapon, but sword fighting isn’t really the point of my class in the end,” he said.

The Marshall Family didn’t seem interested either, and in the end it went to a strong-looking cultivator for the whopping price of 2 500 000 Nexus Coins.

“Thank you all for coming and bidding today! I hope to see you all again at our next event. With this I give you Thomas Fischer,” Emma said as she quickly left the stage followed by applause and hooting.

Thomas Fischer came up to the stage soon after and was followed by multiple officials who stood in a row behind him. Zac recognized Julia, but the rest were unknown to him.

“Welcome all. I have already had the pleasure of meeting many of you, but for those who do not know me, I am Thomas Fischer, the leader of New Washington. I was once the Deputy Secretary of Defense for the American Government, but today I stand before you as a representative for The New World Government.

“The arrival of the System and the Incursions have resulted in extreme upheaval to our society, and I am sad to say that there are only approximately 1.5 billion humans left on Earth,” Thomas began.

“Six Billion. Over six billion dead in just above 5 months. Every day our brothers and sisters fall due to either the harsh environment we have been thrown into, or the invaders who aim to take our land for their own,” he continued, somberly looking over the subdued audience.

“It is time for humanity to unite.”

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### **Chapter 137 - Clearing the Air**

The beginning of Thomas Fischer’s speech created a subdued silence in the whole venue. Even Zac was a bit shocked at the numbers. He knew that the Undead Incursion had done a number on both India and China, the two most populous countries before the fall, but that wasn’t enough to explain that amount of casualties.

Six billion lives lost, which meant that only twenty percent was still alive after less than half a year. And Zac knew that the world wasn’t done with its transformation. There were still barely any E-Ranked monsters roaming about, which would change sooner or later.

The new planet Was graded D-Ranked in both mass and energy by the System, meaning that it would be able to sustain D-Rank powerhouses and beasts. There was one small solace in the fact that the animals were getting stronger though. As monsters evolved they became smarter and created their own societies in a sense.

They wouldn’t go randomly attacking settlements, especially not if they knew it was guarded by arrays or powerhouses. Of course, that was predicated on there actually being those kinds of defenses, otherwise the town would be fair game.

“We will take a short break in just a minute. After we reconvene we will go through all the information we have gathered about the incursions and the foreign invaders. There will be much exclusive intelligence there, and I urge everyone to stay behind and listen. It will not only help with your survival in the future, but it might also help with your path to power. For this part everyone here will be welcome to participate, as we’re all together in the fight against the incursions,” Thomas continued.

“After that we will focus on the organization of humanity. This part will have little information of value for our Ishiate friends, so we have prepared a separate venue for you at that point. Waiting for you there are representatives of The New World Government’s information branch, who will do their best in helping you locate your brethren across the world.”

“I hope to see you all again in a bit. Thank you for your attention.”

As he finished the lights once again brightened, and people began to stream out. However, just as Zac and the others made to leave as well an official ran up to their group.

“Excuse me. Mr. Fischer would like to have a word with your group if you’re available,” he quickly said.

Zac just shrugged and followed the man, the others in his group following in tow. They were left to an area backstage, where Thomas and a few other officials waited.

“Mr. Monk, it is good to see you again. I want to thank you once again for the information you provided us the last time. It will be a huge asset to the coming war efforts of humanity,” he said with a smile. “These people with me here are representatives of other major hubs of the New World Government.”

“Johana Yakovna,” a somber lady in her fifties said. “Former Russia and Eastern Europe,”

“Francis Girardot, France,” a man in his sixties said with a slight frown.

“Asano Kobo, Japan. Pleased to meet you,” an Asian man said.

Soon all of them had presented themselves, and even Zac felt a bit intimidated to stand in front of so many of the world’s leaders.

“What’s on your mind?” Zac asked.

“We know about the Zhix, but the identity of the two others is cause for concern,” the Russian delegate said, not mincing her words.

“How’s so?” Zac asked, having a sinking feeling.

“You should know as well as us that there have been no sightings for anywhere else of these species,” another delegate continued. “Their origins are suspect. There is belief that they might be alien infiltrators.”

“Oh? Wouldn’t that make this a prime opportunity for us to kill you all and create some chaos?” Ogras answered with a grin, making a few of the delegates flinch.

“Ogras is just joking,” Zac quickly said, and added with a glare at the demon. “But he’s not very funny.”

“I am Calrin Thayer of the Thayer Consortia,” the gnome quickly said as he stepped forward. “Your eyes are astute, as expected of the people at the forefront of this newly integrated world.”

“You are correct, I am not of this world. I came here to Earth when Port Atwood bought a shop from our Consortia. I am here on a mercantile Visa so to speak. Here is my proof, you should know what these Mercantile Licenses are from the tutorial,” the Sky Gnome continued as a golden glowing parchment appeared floating over his hand.

“I am no threat to humanity or any other Native race. I can’t buy land, conquer towns, or even attack anyone. The system bars me from doing anything detrimental to this planet. However, what I can do is offer you an offer of a lifetime. Aren’t you tired of the high prices of the System-run stores?”

“This is a great opportunity for you to take a lead compared to other towns. While others pay 70 Nexus Coins for a Nexus Crystal, you would only pay a measly 60 in our stores. In fact, our rates are better on almost all materials and treasures, and we even stock various things that never are available in the general stores,” Calrin animatedly continued. “Your forces could save millions!”

The merchant’s little pitch actually garnered some interest as a few of the delegates actually looked tempted. Zac was actually hoping it would work, as a few branch stores would boost his revenue by quite a bit.

“That doesn’t explain the devilman,” an Italian delegate said with a frown, actually holding a rosary in his hands.

That brought the delegates back from their own scheming, but many still threw glances at the small gnome who stood next to Zac with a smiling face. Zac could understand them, as he knew how difficult it was to get a real mercantile force to build a shop in your town.

Perhaps if you were a leader of a flourishing town on a C or B Ranked planet many consortia would fight for the opportunity, but at this point in time, the investment cost for the companies was just too high.

“The invading forces are banned from using Arrays for a while longer. They wouldn’t be able to use a teleporter, but Ogras clearly came with us through the array,” Zac said, signaling Ogras to not make things worse. “Isn’t that proof enough he’s not an invader?”

“Yes, we did read about that in the information missive you provided, and it seems to match our own observations. However, while we haven’t seen any invading forces make use of arrays as of yet it doesn’t mean there aren’t workarounds. We simply cannot verify it.”

Zac frowned as he looked at the delegates, going over their words once again and came to an infuriating conclusion.

“You are implying that Port Atwood is consorting with the invaders, helping them against their fellow humans,” Zac said, a fit of smoldering anger starting to burn.

“It wouldn’t be too surprising that some people would betray their race to benefit themselves,” Francis said. “Your faction is simply suspect, as no one has been able to verify it even exists, even after weeks of searching and asking around.”

Enough was enough. Zac felt that Ogras was right, there was a limit to staying low, and sometimes it caused more trouble than it was worth. There was likely no one who had done as much for humanity as him.

Not only had he already closed an incursion, he had also provided vital intelligence. But even though he had been constantly fighting since the integration he was looked at like he was a traitor, by some bureaucrats who hid behind their armies no less.

Zac’s towering aura was released like floodgates, drowning the whole group of politicians. Gasps and groans escaped from their mouths, and a few even fell down on the ground. Only a few could remain standing, Thomas Fisher being one of them. But even he paled noticeably from the pressure of Zac’s aura.

“You think I am a traitor, trying to learn your strategies and plans? Don’t flatter yourselves. Ogras was right about one thing. If I was an enemy of humanity I would

simply kill you all and seize control of New Washington. There is nothing you can do to stop me. But you want proof? Fine.”

With a wave of his hand his aura disappeared and instead a prompt was summoned and hovered in front of the group.

**[Planetary Aegis: First to stop an incursion in world. Reward: All stats +5, all stats +5%.]**

“You want to know how I am so strong? How we knew so much about the incursions? Port Atwood has been fighting tooth and nail since day one of the integration. The information missive you received was taken from one of the invaders,” Zac growled.

The delegates who were on the floor from Zac’s forceful aura embarrassedly climbed to their feet, and was shocked when they saw the Title screen hovering in front of them. There simply was no way to fake a System-run screen, as the System itself disallowed it. And his title was ironclad proof he had fought against the invaders, not for them.

“We have done our part. We have even defeated an incursion, and now we’re in the process of brokering peace with the Zhix in order to benefit all humanity. Port Atwood is standing on the forefront protecting humanity,” Zac said as he glared at the delegates.

“I was shocked to hear that all of you together hadn’t managed to destroy a single incursion while our small force was able to do it. Perhaps it is time you started get a move on instead of playing politics.”

His outburst had various effects on the people present. Ogras only grinned, looking very much in favor of his actions, whereas Calrin looked sick. Zac could only assume the gnome was fearing his sales pitch from earlier was for naught now.

The delegates ranged from angered to embarrassed, with a few looking at the screen thoughtfully. Thomas Fischer only sighed and shook his head.

“I am sorry about my colleagues’ words Mr. Monk,” he said with a contrite face. “We simply needed to make sure about your allegiance. If our plans for the future were exposed, it would risk them not working, which would impact all of humanity. We have been fighting the incursions on multiple fronts for months, and honestly it is a losing battle.”

Zac frowned as he listened intently.

“They are gaining power quicker than we are. After reading your information package we learned the reason is that they are far stronger than us from the start, and simply temporarily limited by the System.

“We believe that the longer things drag on, the harder it will be to expel the forces. Some of our analysts even believe that unless we defeat them within the year then humanity is doomed. This is why we called so many forces here today.”

Zac sighed as he had calmed down by now. He regretted his little outburst either. Not because he acted like a brute, but because he might have given out too much information just to defend himself. He quickly realized that showing the title would have been enough, but he got angered into releasing his aura.

“But your victory gives us hope that our mission is doable. We hope we can rely on your power and expertise in the coming months, and together rid this planet of the invaders,” Asano added from behind Thomas.

“Port Atwood will do what we can in the war efforts, but we have our own things we are dealing with as well. So we can’t promise any specifics. And also I’m sorry to rain on your parade, but the Incursions isn’t our only problem,” Zac said, feeling tired.

“Oh? What do you mean?” Thomas asked with a frown.

“Ibtep, please explain to these people about the Dominators,” Zac said as he turned to the Zhix who had stood by silently until now.

The Zhix ambassador took a step forward, obviously prepared, and without preamble started explaining the situation and history of the Zhix. The delegates seemed slightly intrigued by hearing about the history of the Zhix, but when they learned that the Zhix homeworld actually possessed cultivators even before the integration they started frowning.

When Iptep showed them the level of the one who called itself “Inevitability”, they were completely pale.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

#### **Chapter 138 - Consequences**

*Those assholes*, Thea thought as she moved back and forth.

“Analyze them,” Henry said as he looked at Thea.

“They’re assholes,” she only muttered as she kept pacing about.

“Thea,” the old man said with some reproach in his voice.

She rolled her eyes but took the exercise seriously this time. She knew that her grandfather wouldn’t stop until she gave a satisfying answer. Some things hadn’t changed just because the world ended after all.

“The monk is very strong. He beat up those people without breaking a sweat. The demon is also strong. I barely had time to react before John’s leg was pierced. Are you OK by the way?” she said as she turned to their guardian.

“I am fine my lady, with the help of the pill I will have no problem fighting,” John quickly assured her.

“Focus,” Henry reproached.

“Well, they are also rich. They spent even more than we did,” she said, still feeling a bit peeved as she remembered that monk’s stupid face as he kept increasing the bid.

She didn’t know what that stone had been, but her [**Petalstorm**] craved it. But with the family’s operation underway she had handed over much of her wealth, and she really hadn’t expected to need such an amount of money in the short run. Who knew those useless bureaucrats of the New World Government would actually have good things to sell?

“You’ve listed things that anyone with eyes could see. Focus, what happened in your altercation with the demon?” Henry said, obviously not satisfied with her performance.

Thea stopped pacing about and thought back to that moment. She had directed one of her petals to nick the throat of the glib demon, putting him in his place. She hadn’t been ready for the shameless response and still felt a bit flustered the tactic. She knew the question the demon asked was rhetoric, but she wondered what the answer was.

Would she have been able to kill the demon before grandpa and John died? Thea quickly refocused, knowing her grandfather was expecting an answer. She went over

the whole incident, focusing on every action and every facial expression of the members of the odd group.

“They weren’t afraid,” she blurted out with a start.

“Good. Continue,” Henry Marshall nodded with a small smile.

“The demon called it ‘a little pre-auction fun’, and while he was mostly joking he did truly not seem to take the situation too seriously. The monk seemed worried, but about the wrong things. He seemed afraid that the demon would actually hurt us, rather than me hurting them. All in all, he seemed more annoyed than anything else,” she continued with a frown.

“What does this mean?” Henry urged her on.

“Neither the monk nor the demon really saw us, or me, as a threat. Ignorance can’t explain it, as they clearly knew of our identity. The same can be said for their whole group, only the old Asian man seemed worried, but he was clearly just a weakling. They believe the demon is stronger than me, even though my third spot on the power list.”

“What was the power dynamic between the Monk and the Demon?” her grandfather asked, switching the line of questioning.

“Friends. No, wait,” she said as she frowned a bit. “The demon acted out two times, both times he stopped after the Monk intervened. It might not be official, but the Monk is in the dominant position.”

“Good. Revisit the earlier question,” the old man said.

Thea stopped for a few seconds and went over her earlier line of reasoning.

“The demon might believe himself stronger, or at least equal to me. But judging from his personality he would not take orders from a weakling, so the Monk should be at least as strong as the demon,” she said, her eyes widening in realization. “The whole group believes that not only the demon, but even the Monk can defeat me.”

That was an uncomfortable realization. She hadn’t stopped pushing herself for a second since the start. She’d even actually underwent with the suicide mission and assassinated the incursion leaders, which made her clan’s current advances possible.

Anytime she walked the streets she was met with fear or reverence. She didn’t care about all that, but the fact that she was looked down upon after all her struggles was quite maddening.

“Excellent. Remember, a small glance or an innocent conversation can expose far more than was intended. Everything has causes and consequences. That’s why it’s important to always act in a measured and deliberate manner. But you still are missing details,” Henry said.

“You seem to consider the demon an impulsive character, your opinion perhaps discolored by preconceived notions of what a demon should be like. I see the creature as a planning schemer hiding behind a guise. Just like we gained valuable information from the exchange, so did they.

“Your time in the wilderness has made you extremely strong, but your actions have become unnecessarily simplistic. If you remembered your old lessons you would have gained information without giving any up,” Henry continued, and it looked like he was gearing up for another sermon.

Luckily for Thea he was interrupted by an extremely dangerous feeling erupting from something in the area.

It was as though a monster had been released in the Opera House, making even Thea’s neck-hair stand on end. Even the invisible petals of her weapon started shivering as they danced around her.

“It seems the New World Government angered the Super Brother-Man. Causes and consequences,” Henry said with a small smile as he looked in the direction of the ominous feeling.

“What do you all think?” Thomas said as he looked at the group.

Many of the delegates still looked a bit frazzled from the earlier encounter. Thomas couldn’t really blame them, as there was a huge amount of adrenaline coursing through his vein at this very moment.

It was one thing to read a name on some ladder, and a whole other thing to be confronted by the very power that the list represent. The first spot on the power ladder wasn’t for show, and Thomas didn’t doubt for a second that the Super Brother-Man could make good on his threats if he wished.

They might be able to take him down in the end with concentrated focus-fire, but not before he’d killed all of them.

“He could become a great asset. He has already shown goodwill with the information crystal,” Asano Kobo said hesitantly.

“It’s too dangerous. We can’t have such a person running lose,” the French representative said with a frown.

“How would we stop him? He would simply kill us if we tried to interfere,” Johana retorted.

“He wouldn’t be an asset if we can’t control him. We would be running the risk of setting up a global network, only for him to swoop in and crown himself king,” the french delegate added.

“Is there anything we know about him? You have met him before Thomas. What have you found out?”

“We have strong reason to believe he is American, and has some connection to the town Greenworth. It was one of the towns he asked about when he arrived at New Washington the first time, and he immediately rushed there after visiting an information broker,” Thomas began narrating.

“Not long after he arrived at Greenworth he massacred the whole leadership of the town and erected a large monolith in a graveyard. Our hypothesis is that the cultivators who took control of Greenworth killed someone close to him, and he killed them all in revenge. Unfortunately, we have no way to find out exactly who were killed by the cultivators.

“We have been asking around as much as possible, but information is sparse, and our government workers have some trouble with cooperation as our last representative ruined our reputation a bit. We have also been showing a picture of Monk to citizens of Greenworth in hopes that he would be recognized by someone. Still, we haven’t had any luck.

“There is one more morsel of information. I just received a report that Mr. Monk went around asking parties where their cities were located. When he found out that Mr. Bernard’s town was close to the Undead Incursion he tried to broker a deal to use their teleporter.”

“How is this important information?” Johana asked.

“One of Greenworth’s cultivator groups were dropped off close-by to that location. Mr. Monk might be trying to locate someone important to him that might be in that group,” Thomas said.

“You’re saying we should capture his friends or family?” the Japanese delegate asked with a frown. “That seems to be playing with fire.”

“For now we should focus on locating them, and from there try to extrapolate Mr. Monk’s identity. We already believe that his town’s name should be named after himself, and that him saying the town is run by a council largely a lie in order to keep his persona hidden. So if we find an Atwood in the cultivator group we can almost identify him for sure,” Thomas said.

“And then what?” a delegate asked.

“See if we can place or make use of someone close to his inner circle. We would then gain a great asset, both for intelligence, and if needed, covert action.”

“I believe he will be instrumental in fighting off the incursions. You all know how bad it looks. If we can push him to the frontlines we would have a far better chance of succeeding,” he added.

“And after that?” a delegate asked worriedly.

“After that we don’t need that kind of trouble in our backyard,” Johanna said with a steely expression, and Thomas made no efforts to refute her.

“I am not sure about this. I want wealth as much as the next guy, but you need to be alive to enjoy it,” Davon said with hesitation.

“It will be fine as long as we are careful and plan everything out,” Red retorted with a sneer. “Remember, it wouldn’t be the first ranker we killed.”

“Still, that guy looks seems pretty strong. I get the goosebumps just thinking about him. He clobbered those poor bastards like they were just some target practice. Didn’t even break a sweat,”

“He isn’t an immortal or god just because he can clobber some people. His head will still explode from a high caliber sniper round. No one is powerful enough to survive the strongest old-world weapons yet, so this is a small window of opportunity before they get too strong. If we shoot a few rounds in a staggered manner no treasure or skill will be able to protect him,”

“His companions will be scrambling for safety, giving Ricky the opportunity to snatch the body and disappear,” Dany added.

“He easily dropped 6 million on a stupid rock, who knows how much stuff he has in is Cosmos Sack,” Red sed enticingly, and even those hesitating couldn’t help nodding.

“We’ll skip the last part of the government stuff, and set up our trap instead. We’ll go with the same setup as the last time, you all know what to do?”

The small group of eight somberly nodded.

“Good. In a few hours we’ll be filthy rich.”

“Good job standing guard over the boss for so long,” Alea said with a smile as she handed Namys a cup of tea.

“It is my duty. Our duty, you would do well to remember. I have seen you cavort with the human. Never forget it was Lord Ogras who brought us out of misery and provided us a place in the multiverse,” Namys tersely responded, but still accepted the cup.

Alea slightly smiled as she sat down next to the scarred demoness in the small gazebo at the outskirts of the town.

“I truly miss the crimson skies. Looking up at this endless blue makes me feel that I’m continuously walking through a dream, or that I am stuck in one of Janos’ illusions,” Alea said with a sigh as she took a sip of her own cup.

“Lord Ogras will bring us home in glory someday after he’s taken control of this planet. We’ll show Clan Azh’Rezak who their true leader is. Either they will bend the knee or they will perish,” Namys answered, a fanatic sheen glimmering in eyes.

Alea glanced over with some sadness in her eyes and sighed again.

“I remember when I was a child in the slums of Ter’Ferizan. My mother was a prostitute, and who knows who my dad is. Mom always resented me since I came in the way of her business as she saw it. ‘Stole her youth’ she called it. She beat me, abused me, and forced me to beg for food just to survive.

“Still I adored her, and I always felt she was the most beautiful person in the world as she donned her beautiful dresses and make-up for work. She was perfect in my eyes, and I was the one in the wrong,” Alea said, her eyes moistening as she looked at her sister of over twenty years.

“What are you talking about? Wh..” Namys asked, her words slurring a bit at the end.

“I am talking about the fact that strong emotions such as love or devotion can create an image of reality, even though reality might be different. You see Ogras as the dashing scion of clan Azh’Rezak who once saved you, and will once again reclaim his place as the leader of us demonkind. From there he will walk the time tested path to become a true Arch Demon.”

“But haven’t you seen? He’s changed. He’s found solace and happiness as he cut his ties to Clan Azh’Rezak. Returning back home is the last thing on his mind, as this is truly his home now. But you have been walking around trying to get Ilvere and Janos to help you assassinating Lord Zac, unheeding of the fact that you are actually trying to destroy Ogras’ sanctuary. We tried talking you out of it but you were too adamant,” Alea said as she looked sadly on Namys who was slumping down in her chair. “Something needed to be done.”

“Wh.. how..? Lord Ogras.. avenge...” was the last words that escaped Namys’ mouth as her eyes glazed over and she exhaled her last breath.

“The carriage will not move forward if one of the wheels is aligned in the wrong direction,” Alea said, her eyes reddening. “Silly girl, do you think I would kill you unless I was ordered to?”

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

#### **Chapter 139 - Heaviness**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Turns out we reached 1k pages with Chapter 138 :) Thanks for all the congratulations, here’s to 10 000 more!

”Feels good, doesn’t it?”

Zac was interrupted from his brooding and looked over at the grinning demon. The two were currently sitting in a secluded group of sofas, and the heavy atmosphere kept any curious onlooker far away.

“I think I might have shown too much of myself,” Zac said with a sigh.

Zac looked at Ogras for a second and shook his head ruefully.

“I have a little sister. I believe I have found her whereabouts, but I am afraid that my identity is exposed, and they will use her to get to me.”

Since the beginning he hadn't really told the demons anything about himself, and he hadn't even explained why he wanted to keep going on excursions through the teleporter. He was afraid of the same thing he was now, that someone would use his family to get to him. But he was running out of ideas, and Ogras usually had some methods up his sleeves.

To Zac's surprise, he saw that the demon had turned uncharacteristically serious as he looked at him.

“The Undead Incursion?” Ogras asked with a somber face.

“In a town close by,” Zac nodded.

“You need to find someone who has a teleporter in the area,” Ogras mused

“I did, but there seems to be some problem,” Zac said and retold the conversation with the stocky man.

“I think I know what's going on, but we'll find out for sure in a bit,” Ogras said. “However, I have an idea that will ensure it doesn't matter what little schemes those politicians have.”

“Oh?” Zac said with some hope.

Ogras took out two glass vials from his pouch and threw them over to Zac.

“The black vial contains a poison pill called **[Ten Steps to Hell]**. If ingested the victim will wake up every night with searing pain in his chest, as though as his lungs are on fire. Every night for ten nights the pain will keep getting worse. On the tenth night you will die. It is extremely painful, and only the most skilled E-Ranked healers would be able to treat it. It should be incurable on this baby planet,” Ogras said with a sinister grin.

“How does this help me?” Zac frowned.

“The other vial contains the antidote,” Ogras explained. “Feed the poison to the man with the portal. Tell him to open the portal in 9 nights. You promise you will give him the antidote when you arrive in his town. If you do or not is up to you. He might try to heal himself, but it will fail. The inevitable pain every night will be a painful reminder to comply unless he wants to die.”

Zac blankly stared down at the two small bottles in his hands, hesitant at what to do. He felt that if he actually went through with this he would be stepping over some sort of threshold, arriving at a place where anything goes. The owner of the town by the undead incursion hadn't done anything wrong, and this poison sounded like something horrifying to be subjected to.

Then again, it might be his only means to reach his sister. The more he thought about it the more he felt that he had left a trail of breadcrumbs that lead right to his identity. He remembered the feeling of walking through the park filled with unmarked graves, his father's one of them.

Zac's eyes hardened and he put the two bottles into his pouch, which made a small smile emerge on Ogras' face. If he had to become a villain to make sure his sister was alright, then so be it.

“Thank you. I will use these if I see no other option. What do you want in return?” Zac asked.

He was quite clear about the demon's personality, where everything was weighted in benefits.

“Let's just say you owe me one,” the demon said with a small smile.

“Sigh, fine. Now can you tell me what your actions were about in there? And don’t tell me it was pre-auction joking around again.”

“Aren’t you getting more astute? From what I’ve gathered she is an elite from a well-established clan on this world. This Marshall Clan will be one of our biggest competitors for the dominion of Earth, provided we don’t get slaughtered by the invaders or these so-called Dominators,” Ogras said, his face turning serious.

“You were busy shrinking away from her glares, so I had to do something. We needed information about her powers and temperament. The returns were above expectations,” he continued.

“How was you getting your throat slit and us ruining our relation count as good returns? And I have no interest in world dominion” Zac frowned.

“You need to think deeper, because other people are. Even if you say you don’t care, who would believe you? Your very existence is a threat to anyone trying to unify this planet. Unless you stop progressing and become mediocre you will be forced into conflict, no matter what you want,” the demon snorted.

“And we gained a lot of information about Thea Marshal. For one, we know she has a bit of a short fuse. She could have just ignored me, but she didn’t. Such a thing can always be exploited in the future. We also know that her family is a liability for her. When I attacked that man she clearly got frantic but tried to hide it under a guise of disdain,” Ogras said.

Zac was surprised, as he’d only seen the exchange as an embarrassing diversion from the auction.

“It seems the Marshall clan is quite large, which is a huge liability for a caring powerhouse. Having a large group of weak people to protect acts like an anchor, tying you down. Finally, we learned a bit about her method of attacks,” he concluded.

“Oh, you figured out her trick? I couldn’t see what she did at all.” Zac asked.

“I’m not completely sure, but I know for certain that it was a bladed attack. I’ve been cut enough times by various things to know the difference between a Dao, skill, and blade-cut. My belief is that she has one or multiple hovering bladed weapons out around her at all times,” he concluded.

“You remember Rydel, that asshole? I think she’s doing the same thing with a sword or a few daggers, but through either the properties of the weapons themselves or through a skill they become invisible. She’s essentially creating a field of death around her, where a strike can come at any time. Quite a good method. A shame I wasn’t able to gauge her range,” Ogras concluded with a sigh.

Zac was stunned. Earlier he really regretted bringing the demon along, but by now he felt quite thankful that he actually did. He did not only provide a last-resort solution to get to Kenzie, he even helped him realize his mistakes as he scouted out his enemies.

“What about almost kidnapping the movie star? Was that you wanting to gauge someone else’s reactions?” Zac changed the subject.

“No that was just for me,” the demon said with a grin. “I haven’t given up yet, you should know. We should go rampage a bit, kill a few people. When she sees our powers she’ll be much more willing to come back with us.”

Zac snorted but didn’t say anything. He didn’t know why, but like the demon was a bit on edge about something since he left his seclusion. Perhaps his gains weren’t as good as he’d hoped, and he was a bit antsy. He’d explained his reasoning for accosting Thea, but at the same time it felt like the demon was simply trying to create trouble to take his mind off of other things.

It wasn't the time to start digging into those murky waters. If it was related to the demon's cultivation he would never be truthful, and they were neither close enough or drunk enough to have any sort of heart-to-heart about anything troubling. Besides, the demon wasn't the only one with problems.

Various troubles and issues were whirling through Zac's head as he closed his eyes for a bit as he lay back in the sofa. There was the issue of Port Atwood, how to ensure the safety and progress of his emerging island kingdom. The third wave was coming as well, and he still had no idea what he could expect.

There was the issue of New Washington and their shrewd politicians. It felt as though the situation was getting out of hand, and a schism was forming between himself and his fellow humans. He even felt more comfortable around demons and the Zhix ambassador than his own old countrymen by this point.

There was also the heaviest responsibility of finding Kenzie. The feeling as he stood in front of the newly erected gravestone was etched into his memory, and he would rather die than not live up to the promise.

The issues of the Incursions and Dominators were also a constant buzzing in the back of his head. Any other issues like those of Port Atwood, or even finding Kenzie, was all for naught unless something was done about these enemies. Time was running out and unless something changed the invaders would soon be too powerful to handle.

Felt he was weighted down by a mountain of responsibilities, and heaviness shrouded his mind. However, suddenly it was as though various scattered thoughts and impressions crystallized, and ordered themselves up into something structured.

Zac fell into a trance as he somehow felt connected to the universe. He'd pondered daily on the various facets of heaviness lately, and now it was as though the universe suddenly was showing him the answer sheet. His current emotions were actually represented in a small section of something far greater, and in another corner he sensed his original insights.

The Dao of Heaviness was a low tiered Dao, or a foundational Dao as Alyn called it, but the vastness of that he sensed was extraordinary. He desperately tried to imprint the impression of it, but it was as though almost all of it slipped through his fingers. He managed to absorb some small snippets that were related to the emotional heaviness that he'd felt lately at least, and it seamlessly integrated into the fractal axe in his mind.

The dark color of the Heaviness-imbued half of the axe got deeper, and it radiated a stronger aura than before. Still, it was nowhere near the vastness he just felt.

He opened his eyes, only to see Ogras' face plastered just centimeters from him.

"What the hell are you doing?" Zac asked with some trepidation.

"God damn it, did you just have an epiphany? Just disgusting," Ogras said with a frown as he moved back, and even the little merchant who had appeared from nowhere sitting closeby threw an envious glance at him.

"Why were you so close that you almost straddled me though?" Zac asked with a weird look.

"Don't flatter yourself. I was trying to sense anything to get some hints of how to get an epiphany of my own. Since your Dao Seeds are low leveled I needed to get closer to sense the fluctuations," the demon spat.

"Did you find out anything?" Zac asked curiously.

"No, it was just a chaotic jumble. No idea how to get anything useful from that," the demon answered with a grimace.

“So, what did you upgrade?”

Zac didn't answer, instead opening his menu with a smile.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

**Chapter 140 - Dao Seeds**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

Quick reminder, no chapters 14th-17th (see Ch 128 Author Note for full info)

He let the demon stay curious as he looked at his current status.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**54**

**Class**

**Hatchetman (F)**

**Race**

**Human (E)**

**Alignment**

**Human (Earth)**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher**

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - Early, Seed of Sharpness - Early**

**Strength**

**287**

**Dexterity**

**144**

**Endurance**

**187**

**Vitality**

**109**

**Intelligence**

**69**

**Wisdom**

**64**

**Luck**

**77**

**Free Points**

0

**Nexus Coins**

**308 353**

Zac could only grimace as he saw his Nexus Coins. He had felt extremely wealthy when he possessed over twenty million coins and went to buy the four Creator vessels, but in just a few hours he'd spent around 17 million with the help of the insatiable little merchant. He couldn't help but glare at the Sky Gnome, who studiously examined the roof after seeing Zac's face.

Zac knew that he would benefit from it in the end unless the gnome messed up badly, but it still left a bad taste in his mouth. Together with the expenditure of the boats he was almost completely tapped out. Of course, he could convert some of his Nexus Crystals to quickly gain back what he spent and more, so he wasn't too worried.

Next, he opened up his Dao window to see how it looked.

**Heaviness Middle Strength +15, Endurance +10, Wisdom +5**

**Sharpness Early Dexterity +10, Intelligence +5**

**Trees Early Endurance +5, Vitality +10**

The total attribute reward from the Dao Seed had only doubled but he knew that would be the case, so he wasn't disappointed. The reward would keep doubling at Late, then Peak Mastery. Finally it would get a large boost if it was evolved or fused. This time he was given +5 Strength, +5 Endurance and +5 Wisdom, likely due to the psychological aspect of the heaviness he gained insight into.

Then again, the extra attributes were only a small bonus from the system. The main boosts came from the usage in battle. Adding the force of a middle-ranked Dao Seed compared to an early would be quite a boost.

And that wasn't even all. Zac looked over at the demon and with a small smile unleashed his Dao.

"Urh... What the hell?" Ogras said, with a face looking like he'd just bitten into a lemon. "What's up with your Dao of Heaviness?"

It was the Dao Field he finally was able to emit. It looked like he could only extend it a bit over two meters, but that would improve with time. At the same time, two meters was all that was needed in a melee confrontation.

"I just added the aspect of Heaviness I gained from my insights," Zac said.

"So weird. You chose emotional heaviness? Don't get too maudlin and go killing yourself, ok? But I have to admit it is a pretty interesting addition to your Dao Seed. It will even serve as a mental attack apart from a normal restriction if you hit someone with your Dao Field in the middle of battle," Ogras mused.

Everyone's Dao Seeds weren't the same. Even if Heaviness was a low tiered Seed it was a vast concept. Zac had clearly felt it during his epiphany, and his current seed only consisted of two small snippets of a larger whole. The two parts he had gained insights into created his unique Dao Seed. A peak Seed was only a couple of more parts added to his current insight.

If he wanted to delve further into that Dao he would have to upgrade it from a seed to a real Dao Path. He wasn't sure whether he would do that though, or try to fuse it with sharpness at an earlier point. All in all, there was no right or wrong path when it came to Dao, only suitable and unsuitable.

Of course, if you were following a heritage guide there would be a wrong and right choice. Sometimes one or two parts of the Dao Seed usually needed to correspond to the requirement for the Class upgrade, with the remaining ones enabling some customization to personal preference.

Apparently, there were even more stringent classes though, where all parts needed to match. Generally, the more specific classes and the higher rarity ones had more stringent requirements, whereas the common classes were more forgiving.

In Zac's case there was no roadmap, and he could only hope that there was some Class waiting for him at the end of the tunnel. If not he would have to take some risks to rack up achievements or meditate in order to gain more insight into his Daos or gain new ones.

Zac simply followed his heart, as he had no real way to gauge what any potential Class upgrade would require. He gained insight into a mental component of heaviness through his harsh experiences, and that was what was added. If he kept going down that path he might turn into a spectral axeman instead, whose strikes cleaved souls rather than the physical bodies.

Suddenly he noticed something was off. Only their small group was sitting in the sofas, as the rest of the venue was empty.

"What's going on? How long was I out?"

"I don't know? An hour?" Ogras shrugged. "They started their information meeting not long after you Zoned out. Since you were out of it the insect and the old man went inside. We figured they'd be safe after your little outburst earlier, so we stayed behind here. Not like those guys will tell us anything we didn't already know."

Calrin nodded, looking a bit bored.

"So how did it go, did you finish your quest?" Zac asked, a flash of irritation once again rushing through his mind as he was reminded of his almost completely emptied bank account.

"I need to resell the items first, but I believe I will make it. The quest was for me to triple my... ehm, your... money, and I believe that will be possible. Depending on the skills of your demon craftsmen it might get even higher, but they don't seem very skilled," Calrin said looking a bit proud.

"What are you smiling for? Rob me like that again and you better never leave your ratty compound again or I'll find you and show you the Thousand Tortures," Ogras snarled.

"Brutes," Calrin only muttered, but he still shrunk down a bit.

"I will need my Nexus Coins back before the wave starts. You have three days," Zac only said.

"30%. I can return 30% before the wave, any more than that and I'll be forced to sell at a discount, which will hurt both you and me."

Zac only stared at him for a while before sighing.

"50%. Not a penny less."

The Sky Gnome hemmed and hawed, but Zac was adamant about that level, and finally the little merchant could only acquiesce.

Zac once again closed his eyes after some more small talk, wanting to acquaint himself better with his new and improved Seed. He was eager to find out whether his guidance system from **[Axe Mastery]** would be able to adapt to the new aspect of his insights, but now was not the time to start swinging his axe around. He could see the pathways, but others could not, so it would look like he had gone insane and started to attack everything around him.

The sound door of the doors opening to the venue woke Zac up from his meditation, and after a bit he saw Sap Trang and Ibtep hurry back toward them.

"Ah it's good you feel better," Mr. Trang said as he looked relieved.

"Better?" Zac said with some confusion.

“Ah yes, I told you not to drink that much. Passing out with your attributes, embarrassing,” Ogras said with a shake of his head.

It seemed the two were putting up a play, but for who Zac had no idea, still he could only play along and hesitantly nod.

“Was there any useful information?” Zac asked Mr. Trang.

“Not much, most of it came from us, to be honest. They have released an updated version of the computer program you showed me the other day. It more clearly shows the Incursion zones. They also provided a decent amount of detail about each and every Incursion, and even provided docketts,” the fisherman answered, showing a pretty thick stack of papers.

“They also brought up new information from Ibtep. However, though they didn’t mention you at all. They only said that an ally of the government had provided the info. They never gave Port Atwood any credit,” he said with a frown.

“That’s okay, i didn’t share it to gain anything from it. I simply wanted people to be aware of the situation, so they could start preparing themselves,” Zac said with a wave of his hand.

“You should be a bit more caring in the future. That information was valuable, and it would have helped boost our reputation. While it might not seem important, but the image the commoners hold of us might become essential in the future. If we come to conflict with the World Government, what then? Whose side would the people take? The government who, at least from the looks of it, tirelessly is fighting against the invaders? Or us, the unknown force?” Ogras said.

“Ok, ok. I’ll be more selfish the next time. Was there anything else? Did they talk about the teleporters or anything like that?” Zac asked.

“No, but it seems they have some big plan, they alluded to it multiple times during the presentation. I think they’ll tell us more in the last part.”

Zac nodded as he looked at the three aliens in the party.

“I’ll go to the last meeting, you stay with these three, Mr. Trang. There are a few Ishiate who will come with us back, please arrange things with them. They are actually cultivators originally from one of the two towns we found and might be a great help in bringing them into our fold.”

Soon the break was over, and people once again streamed into the venue. This time it was only the humans, and Zac saw the Ishiate being shown to a side-area by some attendants.

He went to his original position and nodded to Nigel who sat beside a snoring Billy. He looked over at the Marshals, but the trio was pointedly ignoring him this time. He wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or peeved but simply shrugged it off. Ogras’ lesson was still fresh in his mind, but he knew he still didn’t possess the means to act and talk in a manner that gave away no information. So he was happy being left alone.

Thomas Fisher walked up to the stage with his group, and the murmurs in the venue died down.

“Welcome back to the last segment of today’s activities, and perhaps the most important one. Those here today are a significant portion of the world’s elite, with over twenty of the rankers present in this room,” Thomas said, creating some surprised murmurs.

“Humans are beset on all fronts by enemies. And let me be honest. They are stronger than us, they are more used to Cosmic Energy, and they are more brutal. In less than half a year only twenty percent of humanity is still alive, and it honestly looks bleak. But we are not without hope.

“A large reason why the invaders can run rampant is that there haven’t been concentrated and organized efforts in rebuffing them. The local forces have fought valiantly, but they have stood alone against a vastly superior force. Too many brave men and women have already died in this ignoble way.

“The solution is simple. We need to unite and fight as one entity. Alone we might be weak, but together we will stand strong. And we have found a way to make this happen.”

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 141 - Forming Factions**

##### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

We’re back! Early chapter since this Defier is heading out.

Zac frowned as he listened to Thomas’ speech. While the words sounded good it felt to him that it wasn’t that simple.

“Why don’t you just drop a few nukes on the Incursions? It’s better we get some radiation than having to risk our lives,” a man in the back row shouted, and many seemed to agree by the nods.

“Honestly that was our first thought,” Thomas said with a sigh. “Better we create no-go blast zones than having people get slaughtered or turned into Zombies. But soon after the integration happened we made a troubling discovery. All our weapons of mass destruction, and most of our high capacity arsenals are simply... Gone.”

“WHAT?” multiple shouts erupted in the hall, many looked fearfully at each other.

Zac was surprised at the news, but not overly so. He had the same idea as the man who shouted earlier, but if they hadn’t dropped the nukes even after billions of people died, they simply weren’t able to. Seeing as the system wanted a struggle to create powerhouses it didn’t make sense for it to leave behind technological weapons that simply erased all struggle. A nuke at every incursion in the beginning would swiftly have ended the invasions after all.

He also noticed that while some seemed shocked, many took the news with stride. It obviously wasn’t a too tightly guarded secret.

“All nukes, chemical warfare and high capacity bombs are gone. Most of our airplanes, carriers, and battleships are gone as well. They weren’t stolen or destroyed, but simply removed. We are quite sure it is the doing of the System itself, as even any reference to an atom bomb is removed from all computers and even books. If you find an encyclopedia you’ll notice that there is just a blank space in the pages where the restricted information once was.”

Even Zac was shocked this time, once again reminded just how powerful the system was. To remove even any mention of the things it didn’t like was a horrifying capacity. However, they were still all talking about it, so hopefully it meant that the System at least couldn’t alter memories.

“To make matters worse, we can’t build them. We are not allowed. An atomic bomb is not an extremely complicated thing, and many of our scientists are able to

construct them. But as soon as we make some headway the prototypes vanish out of thin air,” Thomas added. “In essence, the System wants us to fight with our own hands.”

Many in the room looked despondent. Clearly they had hoped the government would solve the problems for them, and perhaps that something was just holding them up. But Thomas Fischer’s declaration dashed any such hope. Obviously rifles and handguns were still around, but their efficacy was limited.

“But do not worry, we have a plan.” Thomas said, brining back the attention to him.

“We have representatives present from all corners of the world, meaning we have the means to quickly travel and assist everyone, no matter where they are. However, this doesn’t happen in practice. Why?” Thomas asked as he looked over the audience.

“It’s simple. There are only two public teleporters at the moment. Ours and the Cradle of God. And you should all know by now that whoever enters the Cradle never comes back. We do not know if it’s controlled by a traitor, a powerful Dominator, or even a foreign force that somehow has circumvented the rules. So in essence, only New Washington is accessible to the forces of the world.

“All other teleporters are closed, and I do not blame you. Leaving the teleporters open would subject your towns and citizens to danger at any time. But there is a solution. The New World Government is happy to announce that we are on course to have the first System-approved Lord within the month.”

Murmurs started through the area, many looking surprised at each other.

“For those of you who do not know, it means that new forms of settings of the teleporters can be enabled. It is possible to create a closed system where all the portals of allied towns are public to each other, whereas everyone outside the network can’t access us. That would give us an immense edge in the fight against the invaders.”

Many nodded, but there were a few people who looked like Zac felt, troubled. There was no such thing as a free lunch after all.

“We would be able to coordinate both defense and assault. Our warriors would be able to go from hotspot to hotspot and keep reaping the rewards. Because remember, while incursions are dangerous, they are also a huge opportunity to gain power. It is not without reason that many of the high rankers have their base of operations close to incursions,” Thomas added.

“This network would not only help with battle, but with all manner of society. It would help with trade, information and even relocation efforts for those who try to reach their loved ones. And every time a new town join the collective, we all grow a little bit stronger.

“Throughout history mankind has bleen splintered and our own worst enemies. But if there is one thing that has always marked our species; our adaptability and ingenuity. We haven’t really come together as one race before, but we haven’t been tested like this before either. The New World Government is a living testament to the possibility of this.

“Thirty-eight government towns are already slated to join the network as soon as we can create it. It would allow us to travel through large parts of our new world,” Thomas said, letting the audience sit in the silence and ponder the implications.

“Can anyone join?” a voice shouted from the back.

“For now, yes,” another man said as he stepped forward next to Thomas Fischer, and Zac recognized him as one of the delegates of another government town.

“However, we need to make sure the safety of the network. We will do a site visit to your town to ensure no atrocities are going on, or that letting you join the network would impact the other negatively in some other way. We would also place a permanent government liaison at your town to keep an open channel of communications,” he continued.

“But do not worry. The control of the town and its development is not something the New World Government will interfere in. There are only two requirements. The first is that the town accept the newly drafted Rule of Law that is there to ensure the human rights of all citizens. The second is contribution to the war efforts,” Thomas added.

“Let no one forget. The largest reason that we need to combine our forces is to fight back against the invaders. Someone who is not interested in contributing to humanity has no place in our network,” he said as he slowly looked over the population with a steely gaze.

“Edmonton is ready to fight for humanity,” a large man suddenly said with a booming voice as he stood up.

“Little Creek is ready to fight for humanity,” another woman with a huge scar across her face soon added not long after.

One by one a lot of people stood up and professed their readiness to fight for humanity. Zac silently looked on the spectacle with a small frown. His time with Ogras had made him a bit more cynic, and he instinctively felt that the audience participation in this last meeting were plants by the governments.

The forces might be real and their town were ready to join, but their participation was likely already negotiated and done before this meeting started. This was only reinforced as he saw the stocky man who ruled the town close to the Undead Incursion stand up and profess his allegiance.

Zac knew then and there that any hope of him using the teleporter through normal means wouldn't be possible. It was clear that the government was setting up a sphere of influence. There was no way that Zac would join them at this point in time, so he would be cut off from the teleportation network.

They would use the safety in numbers and promise of becoming stronger to rope more and more forces into joining. It was true what Thomas said, each time someone joined their alliance it would get stronger, and the outsiders would get more and more ostracized.

He threw a glance at the Marshals, and was somewhat relieved to see that the three seemed to be completely unaffected by the commotion in the room. A quick look over at Billy showed that the giant was still snoring away, obviously uncaring about what was going on, but the slight frown on Nigel's face showed that they weren't one of the forces that had made a deal with the government.

“What if we don't join?” a loud voice suddenly asked after the hubbub had died down a bit.

“We hope that as many as possible will join us in our fight, but we understand that some have their own aspirations. We will not force anyone to join unless they feel comfortable with it. However, please beware that New Washington's teleporter will become private again a month after the network is set up,” Thomas answered.

“Having an open node in the network will risk the whole alliance, and we can't allow that. The month is so that all forces of the world will be given ample time to consider our offer. It will also hopefully allow a few more forces to gain a teleporter and join us. But after that we need to think about the safety of our citizens, and from there on there will be no more admission,” the politician continued.

“At certain intervals the teleporter will open though, to allow teleportation to New Washington only. That would be an opportunity to join us at a later date,” another delegate added.

“As soon as the members have been finalized and the network secured we will begin our campaign to retake our land from the foreign invaders. I will not go into specifics at this time due to security concerns, but our goal is to completely close all the incursions plaguing New Earth before the anniversary of the integration,” Thomas said.

A stunned silence spread through the hall from the strong declaration. Clearly the New World Government wasn't messing around. Zac personally was skeptic. They talked big for a group of people who still hadn't closed a single Incursion. At the same time he didn't want to create a scene since he couldn't do the job alone, and if humans could organize and pick up the slack it would be for the best.

The meeting kept going, and the government officials spoke a bit more about the specifics of the future alliance and fielded many questions. It became increasingly clear that the New World Government had adopted a polite “you're either with us or against us”-approach. On the surface it was completely up to anyone whether to join or not.

But in practice they meant that unless you joined the fold you would be alienated from the rest of humanity. You wouldn't get access to the teleporters, and it even became apparent that trade and information sharing would only happen within the alliance as well.

Zac was sure there were some additional caveats that were not disclosed at this time. He was pretty sure that the government wouldn't try to freeze out the Marshall Clan, since a retaliation from them with Thea as a poster child might splinter the alliance. He could only hope that type of courtesy would extend to himself as well. His problem was that while his pseudonym was well known, he was not.

Personally, he was unsure what to do. He should be happy that the government was trying to organize people to fight against the incursions. But more than that there was a deeply rooted unwillingness to hand over the reins of Port Atwood. They said they would let everyone have autonomy, but the stronger the alliance got, the more power would become centralized.

He sighed as he kept trying to think of solutions of what to do, as his eyes every now and then darted to the leader of the town close to the Undead Incursion.

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#### **Chapter 142 - Heading out**

Zac walked out of the concert hall with a frown on his face from the information. He still hadn't found any answers what to do in his situation, and could only turn to his teammates for answers. After a quick glance around he found them sitting at another group of sofas the whole table in front of them filled with various foods and drink.

Zac had thought the demon was once again the culprit, but seeing the little Gnome lying prone with his belly protruding like a little ball, while the Zhix was constantly burping he wasn't so sure anymore. He also saw the two Ishiate he was

talking to earlier sit next to the group. As soon as they saw Zac arrive they quickly stood up and slightly bowed.

Zac was a bit confused, but thought perhaps his group's wanton spending during the auction was taken as a sign of great power. Ogras looked over with a glass of whiskey in his hand.

"So, they are trying to create a force with access to their teleporters?"

"You knew?" Zac asked a bit surprised.

"Well, they didn't have a lot of other options if they wanted to remain in charge. Of course, they will sooner or later realize that the distance of a continent is just a small inconvenience, and controlling the arrays aren't enough to seize control."

"It seems they already have quite a few members already though," Zac retorted with a sigh as he sat down.

From there he detailed the general outline of the New World Government's plan.

"Just weaklings banding together to feel strong. It's not too bad. There are various ways to circumvent that. You can just take control of a town close to a Government member. If you need to use their network just teleport to your own town, and run over to theirs," Ogras said with a shrug, clearly not being worried about the situation.

"Besides, the multi-verse is a place where power holds sway. Power-structures like theirs never work out in the end, with just a few notable exceptions," Ogras said, and even the Gnome who was fond of bureaucracy seemed inclined to agree, as he gave an unwilling nod.

"Your world is still in its infancy, and you still hold notions of equality. But you will soon see the reality when people will start to evolve. A D-Grade Powerhouse could destroy half of New Washington with a flick of his hand, what would he care about their little schemes? He'd just seize the whole network if he wanted it. A dragon doesn't negotiate with ants," Ogras said.

"You might be right, but that is still far off. In the immediate future they will have a commanding advantage," Zac retorted with a frown.

There was not much left to do in the venue, apart from one thing. It had become increasingly clear during the meeting that using the teleporter to get to the undead incursion would be hopeless, no matter what he said. It was time to go with Ogras's plan.

"I have no choice, I will need to use your method for access to the teleporter," Zac said with a grimace.

The demon only nodded, whereas the others looked at them a bit curious. Zac wouldn't explain what he was about to do, as he felt pretty sick about it already, and instead looked out over the floor. It appeared luck was on his side, as he saw the robust man head toward the area of the toilets. They were around a corner some distance away from the general area and was quite secluded.

"I will be right back," Zac said with a somber expression, and while using **[Loamwalker]** he disappeared.

Between his attributes and the skill it essentially looked like he teleported, as he was one second sitting, and the next second gone, only a flash of his afterimage leaving a trace. In no time he was by the toilet and was relieved to see that there was no one there at the moment.

Zac grabbed the neck of the robust man from behind without a word, and before the poor man had time to react he was dragged into the handicap bathroom with his throat gripped in an iron vise.

Zac was now holding him up in the air with one arm, having taken out his axe with the other. The large man was held a decimeter above ground, his legs swinging widely and his face quickly turning red.

“Scream and I will start cutting off body parts,” Zac said with a deathly stare.

He had already decided to go through with this despicable act, so he would go all the way with it. He’d play the villain if it meant getting access to the teleporter.

“To help you understand your situation I’ll show you something,” Zac continued, as he displayed the part of his status screen that showed him being level 54.

Of course, he didn’t display any of his stats or his name, as the level was enough to convey his message. The man was still unable to breathe, but after having seen the prompt his eyes widened in terror and he stopped trying to get himself free.

“You should understand who I am by now. You can try screaming for help, but the government do not dare make an enemy of me, and would probably sacrifice you rather than getting themselves into trouble,” Zac continued as he placed the man down on the ground.

He didn’t actually know if it was true, but it did have a note of truth in it. The man took a few deep steadying breaths, but he did comply, as he warily stared at Zac.

“What do you want? You were at the meeting, they have set up all kinds of rules that I can’t just break as I wish. Don’t you think I’d have taken the money if I could?”

“What’s your name?” Zac simply asked.

“I am John Bernard,” the large man hesitantly answered.

“Are you under a contract of servitude?” Zac continued.

“No, why?” the man answered with a confused stare.

“Good,” Zac said as a small glass bottle appeared in his hand.

Zac opened the stopper and took out the pill which emanated a pungent odor.

“Wh-“ the other man said, but didn’t get further before Zac slammed the pill down into his throat with lightning-quick speed.

John was so surprised that he instinctively swallowed the pill, and Zac nodded satisfied.

“The pill I just had you eat is a unique poison called **[Ten Steps to Hell]**,” Zac said, hiding nothing. “Every night you will experience a tremendous pain that will be so bad that you will think you have gone to hell. Every night the pain will get worse, and on the tenth day the pain will be so bad that you will die.”

“WHAT? Why are you doing this?” the man said, looking positively horrified.

“Because I have the antidote,” Zac answered as he took out the other bottle. “One week from now, open your teleporter for five minutes at 3 am New Washington time. If I do not pass through the teleporter, do so again the next night at the same time. When I come through I will hand you the antidote. And a handsome reward,” Zac explained, adding the sentence about a reward after a brief hesitation.

The man looked at the glass bottle in Zac’s hand like a drowning man looks at a liferaft.

“Why not just give me the bottle, and I promise I will open the portal. There’s no need for all this,” the man entreated.

“I prefer to do things my way. And you might be scheming all kinds of things right now, but the following days will show you the reality. Feel free to visit as many healers and you wish. I didn’t get to the top of the ladder without having my own means. No one on earth will be able to save you except for me.”

Zac felt a sour taste in his mouth as he played the villain. He simply channeled his inner Ogras, thinking of what he would say to get what he wanted in this situation.

“Remember. One week from now, 3 am sharp,” he finished and disappeared before the man had time to say anything else.

Soon he was back at the table and saw Ogras grinning at him.

“The things we do for love, huh?” he said.

Zac recognized the quote and only rolled his eyes in response.

“We are done here. We should have them take us to a hotel. I want to stock up on various things for port Atwood, and hopefully we will find some experts in various fields that will accompany us back,” Zac said. “That is provided they will let us stay though.”

There was no point in pretending that he wasn't in charge anymore. No one would believe Sap Trang was the leader instead of Zac after his display of power earlier.

He was unsure what the government had decided regarding his party. They were ushered straight to the venue after arriving, and it seemed they were considered somewhat a risk. But at the same time they had clarified their position here at the auction, and hopefully the government wouldn't bar them from exploring the town a bit.

Last time he was here he hadn't really explored New Washington, as he was eager to get to Greenworth. But this time there were various things he wanted to get for his city. There were all kinds of things the town was in need of, from seeds to materials, and even technology. Most of it could be bought through Calrin, but Zac suspected such things would hold almost no value to the current settlements, which meant they could make huge savings.

He was also hoping he could snag a couple of solar panels for himself, but he wasn't too hopeful. The government was clearly searching for them as well in order to power their town, and now they had around fifty towns to power.

“If the things in the auction were the best of the best, then there might not be much of value in the town,” the Gnome said hesitantly.

“There is a bazaar where independent cultivators and hunters can sell their things. Who knows what they've found while out farming kills in the forests. I am sure that many of those here are hoping to sell their own things as well,” Zac said, causing the little merchant to perk up.

“Can we even go? That little lass didn't seem willing to let us into the city,” Ogras interjected.

As if summoned Julia actually emerged from a door not much later and started walk toward them.

“I hope today has been satisfactory to you all,” she said with a smile as she arrived at Zac's table. “I understand you have spoken with the leaders of the New World Government, who have given your party access to the town. Will you be staying here for a bit, or are you heading back to Port Atwood immediately?”

Zac's brows rose, as he didn't expect the government to be so amenable after their little altercation. Especially not considering their stance with their plans for a closed network.

“We're planning on visiting the bazaar and leave tomorrow,” Zac simply answered.

“Excellent. In fact, there will be an informal gathering at the bazaar in roughly two hours, where many of the guests here will sell some of the things they've found, or trade them for other treasures more suited to them,” Julia answered with a nod.

Zac wasn't surprised, as the government didn't sell commissioned items, but only their own. Many should have found things that they had no use for, and desired to trade them for something that could give immediate benefits.

"The car is waiting, I will take you to one of the still-operating hotels who is located close to the bazaar," Julia said and the group started to walk out.

"It was an impressive spending spree you had, Mr. Monk, even outbidding Ms. Marshal," Julia said with a smile as she shot a glance at him as they walked toward the exit. "You and two high rankers fought tooth and nail over that stone. It must have been something quite impressive. A few of our scientists are a bit unsure whether they made a good deal or a horrible one after seeing your bidding war."

"Well, it was an interesting stone. Who knows if it will be worth the sky-high price though?" Zac answered with a shrug of his shoulders. He wasn't about to disclose the fact that the stone seemed to be something that all Spiritual Tools wanted.

Zac went over to the Ishiate before they left to exchange some pleasantries. Unfortunately there was no way for them to create an alliance or create their own network at the moment as none of them were lords, so they could only make some loose promises of future cooperation.

The plan of the government was to create a network by piggy-backing their Lord's access to the improved teleporters. Every non-lord who wished to join would become a vassal. In practice, they wouldn't go by feudal rules where the lord actually commanded the vassals, but that was just what the government said. Who knew if this lord would get a taste for power and want more. Then again, Zac suspected the government had some sort of failsafe for that situation.

The group finally exited the opera house accompanied by the two steampunk Ishiate, and went down toward the stairs toward the waiting limousine. Julia had been a bit curious about the two new companions, but it was easily explained. Zac could only hope there wouldn't be any further complications if they managed to recruit some people back to the town.

Suddenly Zac froze after having walked down the small set of stairs, as an intense hair-raising sense of danger exploded in his mind.

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#### **Chapter 143 - Assault**

A lot of Zac's actions were born from instinct since he'd been in constant battle for months. Without hesitation a green shield encapsulated him, and the Dao of Trees spread through his body as he brought out his axe.

However, he didn't even have time to look around before an extremely strong impact slammed into his shield, soon after accompanied by an enormous gunshot. Luckily the shield held true, as a large caliber bullet turned into hot molten metal that fell harmlessly on the ground in front of him. However, the danger sense only increased and he once again summoned the second charge of his gear, this time gearing to move away from the group with his movement skill.

The others in the group looked on gapingly, with only Ogras quickly reacting. Shadows gathered around him and he safely disappeared from the line of fire.

Zac was just about to step forward to disappear with [Loamwalker] when a second impact slammed into his new shield, leaving him defenseless. He barely had time to inch his head away when a third bullet grazed the side of his forehead. Everything turned white for a second before he found his bearing, only to find himself on his back on the ground.

He felt a scorching pain on his head, but a quick mental check showed he was largely fine. Since he upgraded to E-Grade Race he held a greater command of his body, and could generally tell the state of all his bodyparts. He was extremely relieved he'd focused almost all of his stat points in Dexterity lately in order to match his other monstrous stats.

He wouldn't have been able to avoid that last round without the quick movement Dexterity allowed, and after feeling the power of those bullets he held no delusions he would be able to tank them like normal rifle rounds. Just as he was planning on getting up he saw an unfamiliar man almost teleport to his side, and immediately touched his chest.

Zac frowned as he stared at the man, who looked back at him with a horrified face. He immediately moved to flee, but an iron grip held him in place. Zac didn't know what kind of skill the man used to approach him, but he used the same method as he utilized against Ogras to keep him in place, infusing his hand with cosmic energy.

The man struggled to get free, but a punch with the force of a truck in his gut made him curl up like a shrimp in the air. Zac looked around like an enraged beast as he got up, looking for any co-conspirators to this man while holding his captive like a shield. This clearly was some sort of assassination attempt, and this man was only responsible for taking his corpse.

"Are you ok?" a frazzled Julia asked from the distance as she waved soldiers to search for the culprits.

"Just this much won't kill me," Zac succinctly said as he turned his eyes to the man he caught.

"Who ordered you to attack me?"

"Please, mercy," the man croaked, still shaking after the punch to his stomach.

"Mercy? We don't do that," Ogras with a sneer said as he materialized back by the group.

In his hand he held a sack which he summarily threw to the ground, causing six decapitated heads to roll out, each one with a horrified look on its face. On his back the demon had two huge sniper rifles that looked strong enough to blow holes in tanks, and he was completely covered in blood.

"What the f-!" Julia screeched and backed away as she saw the grisly scene.

"Answer him or you will join my collection," Ogras said with a demonic grin at the captured man, who looked horrified at the heads.

"Please, we weren't ordered. We only wanted your Cosmos Sack," the man cried.

"That's why you tried to shoot me in the head with those rifles?" Zac retorted with a glare as he touched his forehead with his free hand.

It came back bloody, and Zac was enraged even further. It didn't matter whether they were ordered or simple bandits, they had almost killed him even though he had no connection to them. If it wasn't for his large amount of Dexterity and his defensive Dao his head would have exploded like a watermelon.

Zac slapped the man hard enough to knock him out, and threw him over like a sack to Ogras.

"Can you properly question him later?" Zac said.

“I guess. They did give me these new toys after all, so I should give something back,” he said as he looked at his two rifles.

“I am sorry about this incident, this is partly due to our oversight. I actually recognize this man, his name is Ricky. He’s part of a small elite group called the Red Mercenaries. Your friend is... holding... most of the other members in his sack. Including Red himself,” Julia said apologetically to Zac.

“Where are they from?” Zac tersely asked.

“They came through a private teleporter, we do not actually know which town they are from. More importantly, please let the government take over from here. A crime has been committed, and these men attacked you in the middle of New Washington. Please hand over the criminal, and their restricted equipment,” Julia said, shooting a glance at the two rifles on the demon’s back.

“What equipment?” Ogras said with a blank face as he slowly put the rifles in a Cosmos Sack one by one, drawing a glare from Julia.

“This one is coming with us. If you have any complaints you will have to take it up with Thomas Fisher. There has been no discussion of the details of our future cooperation. For now, we will maintain the status of diplomatic immunity, and we will deal with our issues by ourselves,” Zac said with a glance.

In a sense it was a declaration of independence. He was essentially saying that he and his group would do whatever they wanted and that they did not agree to follow any regulations from the New World Government. It was both a show of strength and a way for Zac to test the government’s patience. But more importantly he was pissed off and was in no mood to accommodate the government, who might even be responsible for the attack for all he knew.

Julia frowned as she looked down on the unconscious captive, but after some hesitation she didn’t bring up her demands again. She simply walked over to a soldier and whispered some things before she led Zac’s group back to the limousine.

The atmosphere in the car was quite oppressive after the events, and any discussions quickly died out. Soon they arrived at their destination, a large luxurious highrise hotel. Ogras caused quite a scene as he walked in like a bloody devil, but Julia quickly smoothed things over. Zac had already eaten a healing pill in the car and wiped off the blood on his head, so he was essentially looking normal again, apart from his frown.

It seemed like the hotel was managed by the government at the moment, which made sense as there shouldn’t be too many travelers needing temporary places to rest at the moment. That might change though when New Washington becomes a hub in their network in the future, and Zac couldn’t help but be a bit jealous.

He was fighting tooth and nail to simply avoid his emerging town becoming overrun by beasts, but these people had quite a laid back life. It seemed that this town hadn’t really been tested at all since the start, and Zac wondered exactly how this kind of environment could create a system-approved Lord.

They were given their own wing on a floor, but only a few actually went up to check the rooms out. Zac sat down in the bar and ordered a bottled beer. It cost 1000 Nexus Coins, which was far and above what food usually cost, but to Zac it didn’t really matter.

Everyone came streaming down one by one, and soon only the demon was missing. It only took 20 minutes for Ogras to come back looking freshened up, any sign of blood scrubbed away and donned in new robes. When he came back he didn’t carry the man they captured either, giving Zac a clear indication of Ricky’s fate.

“So, what’s the plan?” Ogras said as he looked a bit excited, with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“We have two things to do. Buy materials and find people. I think we can split up,” Zac said, still feeling angry over the attack earlier. “I’ll accompany Sap Trang who will focus on acquiring talent, acting the part of the bodyguard. Calrin I assume will go to the Bazaar to make some deals.”

The gnome nodded, looking a bit excited.

“If you can try to get talks going for a few branches. I don’t care if they’re a part of the new government network or independent forces. It’s all money into our pockets,” Zac said.

“I agree. We have a great opportunity here, it will take some time before competing consortiums deign to come to this planet, giving us a good head start to seize control of the market. If they arrive at a later point we can just squeeze them out. Even a dragon can’t fight the local snake,” the gnome said with a grin.

“I’ll go with the little blue bastard, seems more fun,” Ogras said.

“Good. What about the prisoner?” Zac asked.

“He’s in my pouch,” the demon answered with a grin, confirming he was dead.

“Ibtep, who do you wish to go with?”

“I will join you. I am curious to see what professions you humans have. I feel your societies are more diverse than that of the Zhix, and learning more might strengthen our hives,” the Zhix answered.

“Good. As for you two,” Zac said as he turned to the two Ishiate who had joined their party. “You’re free to do whatever.”

“We will go to the bazaar to look for things that could help Cogstown,” Shea, the female Ishiate, said.

“Very well, we will leave early tomorrow, at 7 am New Washington time.”

With that they were done and started heading out of the hotel. Their odd party kept getting glances from all directions, but they were used to it by now. However, four men walked up to them just as they were about to exit.

“Mr. Monk and company. We’re from the New World Government, and we have been tasked with accompanying you during your excursion. Please do not take it the wrong way, it is simply to allay any troubles that your... unique party composition might bring,” a man politely said.

“Fine,” Zac lightly said after some consideration.

He didn’t really care if the government employees saw their activities. It was not like they could hide it if they brought new people with them through their teleporter tomorrow.

Soon they were walking through the bazaar, which was a huge square and the neighboring streets. There was a surprising amount of hawkers, selling everything from hides of mutated beasts to Old World luxury objects such as Perfume and jewelry. There were also quite a stalls with street food. All in all it created a bustling atmosphere that made a jarring contrast to the fact that 80% of the world’s population had perished the last months.

As soon as they entered the commerce area Calrin and Ogras veered off, with two of the government employees following in tow. As for Zac’s group they looked around for a bit before they stopped.

“Just how are we going to recruit people?” Zac asked with some hesitation as he looked around.

"I have an idea, but it would require us to expose a bit about Port Atwood," the old fisherman said.

"Oh?"

"Well, it's already well past lunch as the auction took up much of the day. We only have a short time to convince people to actually join us and move to an unknown area. They would be taking a huge risk compared to the relative safety of this town. We need to give them a good enough reason," Sap Trang said.

"Money?" Zac asked hesitantly, but the fisherman shook his head.

"You."

"Me? What do you mean?" Zac asked confusedly.

"You're so strong so you might not realize the reality of most people walking these streets. They might look happy, but they are scared. Terrified. There are real-life monsters just outside the gates, and any day those monsters might break through those walls and kill them," Mr. Trang explained.

"But if they know Port Atwood is protected by the strongest man alive, and that it is safe enough that we only need to recruit non-combat classes, a few might risk it."

Zac mulled it over for a few seconds, but then finally nodded. The government leaders would have to be mentally challenged if they still didn't know he was either The Super Brother-Man or Salvation by now. Since the milk was already spilled they might as well use his identity to their advantage.

"So what do you propose?" Zac asked, and the fisherman only answered with a big toothless grin.

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#### **Chapter 144 - Gaining Reputation**

"Come join the town of the strongest man alive. We need all sorts of non-combat classes. Doctors, scientists, blacksmiths, and farmers. Come one, come all! Carpenters, janitors, brewers, and craftsmen! All are welcome to sign up! Join Port Atwood, home of the Super Brother-Man, the safest place on Earth!"

Zac could barely stop himself from blanching as Sap Trang walked back and forth in front of their gaudy stall, tirelessly shouting out superlative statements about the Super Brother-Man and their town.

He understood the reasoning. They needed to create a buzz that propagated like wildfire since they only had the afternoon for recruitment. The third wave started in three days, and they needed to go back tomorrow to finalize preparations.

Mr. Trang's plan for this was to create a recruitment stall. They had simply bought out a large stall on prime location of the square, and changed the sign. It now said "THE SUPER BROTHER-MAN IS RECRUITING! BECOME THE ELITE OF THE WORLD!" in huge lettering, and nothing else. Meanwhile the old fisherman was sounding like a street hawker as he kept throwing out one bombastic proclamation after another.

Normally their proclamations might have been met with scorn and maybe even ignored. But the fact that there was a living, breathing Zhix sitting in the stall reading a book seemed to somehow increase the legitimacy of the stall. Who but the Super

Brother-Man would keep a pet Zhix? The two government officials looking on the proceedings with troubled faces only furthered the impression.

Still, it had been thirty minutes without anyone coming up to the stall. But clearly a buzz was being created, as a small crowd of onlookers had gathered, and some people seemed to arrive just to look on at the excitement. But finally there was some result from Mr. Trang's tireless efforts.

"You talk a lot old man, but do you have any proof?" a man shouted from the group of onlookers.

"I understand it is hard to imagine such a great opportunity has presented itself to you. But it is one hundred percent real. If you have friends who attended the auction you should know of Port Atwood already. We spent over twenty million Nexus Coins during the Auction, defeating even the Marshall Clan for the battle of precious relics," Sap Trang shouted back.

"Don't forget, Super Brother-Man is not only the strongest man in the world, he is also the wealthiest. And he is ready to spend some of that immense fortune on you, in order to help you advance your non-combat classes."

Some subdued murmur spread through the crowd. Twenty million Nexus Coins was a crazy amount of money, and most counted their wealth in the hundreds, or perhaps thousands. The low tiered monsters only gave a handful of nexus coins after all, far less than the more profitable barghest.

Actually, Mr. Trang had initially wanted Zac to stand and swing around his axe and show off his might, but that had summarily been rejected by Zac.

"We stand at the forefront of the world, and we're the only town in the world to hold all four of our new world's species, creating a true metropolis of our new planet," the fisherman continued, seeming to gain vigor the more he boasted.

Zac started to worry about the people's reactions after they arrived at his temporary town filled with demons. From Sap Trang's description it was as though he offered them a spot in paradise, and not dubious employment on a desolate island. Still, the effect was limited until suddenly another shout gathered the crowd's attention.

"It's the Marshall Clan!" a man shouted and pointed to a group walking toward the stall.

"Hehe, I guess their boasting reached the Marshall Clan's ears. I think we're in for a good show," another person muttered, eliciting some chuckles.

Zac looked over and the shouting man was correct. It was the old man, Henry Marshal, who walked in the front, with the bodyguard from before accompanying him. It looked like Thea wasn't lying before. They truly didn't need Zac's pill as the bodyguard was walking with no problem, looking as fit as a fiddle. There were also a few more people accompanying the duo, but Zac noted that Thea Marshall herself was not part of the group.

"Mr. Monk, we meet again. Do you mind if we chat a bit?" Henry Marshall said as after he reached Zac's stall.

Zac wished that Ogras was here to do the talking, but could only nod and take out another chair from his pouch for the old man.

"Is this about Mr. Trang's claims just now?" Zac asked.

"No, that doesn't matter. Port Atwood is currently lacking renown, and the Marshall Clan isn't so frail that we can't provide some assistance on that front," the old man said and gave a nod to one of the men in the group who quickly left the stall and blended into the group that looked on.

“I am more interested in your plans for the future, and wish to offer an alternative to what you heard today,” the old man said.

“Oh?” Zac said with piqued interest.

“Truthfully we had some plans for a network as well, though the government beat us to it. So we have had to find an alternative solution. We have no intentions in joining the frail government alliance, and I have the feeling that neither do you,” Henry continued.

Zac only nodded in response.

“We aim to create a network as well, but it will not be as formalized as the government’s. However, only lords will be able to join, and the extent will only go as far as providing means of movement and trade. There will be no centralized organizing body and no vassal-superior relationships. How the lords manage their domains is up to them,” he said.

“What about defense and concentrated war efforts?” Zac asked.

“That would be up to the individual members to organize. The network should only be seen as a means to facilitate various private alliances,” the man answered.

“What’s in it for you to do this?” Zac asked skeptically.

“The government still lives as though we are in the old world, playing bureaucracy. They gather the mediocre, but to what avail? We worry that their narrow-mindedness will steer humanity into a path of no return. We need to provide an alternative, one that’s made for the elite, the powerhouses of the world. We believe that is more in line with how our new reality functions.

“Perhaps the alliance will crumble in the future, with all of us vying for supremacy of our planet. But we need to kick out all foreign scum before we can get to that point,” Henry finished.

“When we first met this morning you seemed less than pleased by my party’s composition. But now you are inviting us?” Zac asked skeptically.

“My views are that it is only a matter of time before humanity will be pitted against the ilk of your... friend... over there, and the information you provided only proves it.” Henry said as he waved at the Zhix. “We humans haven’t even been able to coexist with ourselves, but suddenly we are supposed to coexist with two other sentient species?”

The clan leader only shook his head, clearly showing his position. Zac didn’t really agree, but he felt no point in arguing.

“Either of us will be proven right in the future, but for now that’s not important for this potential cooperation. Destroying the incursions comes first,” Henry finally added.

The two talked for a few more minutes, with Zac mainly asking for some clarifications about the planned alliance, while the old man mainly asked about the information on incursions and the Dominators that Zac provided the government.

Zac learned there were some planned requirements for the alliance after all. One such requirement was that they would have to keep their teleporters public for a week every now and then, and that they would take turn in doing so. The reason was to attract new blood to the alliance. Zac felt that was reasonable enough, as he was even thinking of making his teleporter permanently public as soon as he had stabilized his position as a Lord.

At the same time they would be allowed to turn their teleporters private for even the alliance members, but only for a limited time. This was in case there was some internal upheaval or an important mission they didn’t want to be interrupted.

Zac gave no definite answer, but he said he would discuss it with the others. Henry Marshall took the tepid answer with stride and nodded as he left the stall.

“Excuse me, Lord Marshal. Is it true?” a voice from the back of the group shouted as the old man planned to leave.

“Is what true?” Henry retorted with a strong voice as he looked over at the crowd, who seemed subdued from the power of his stare.

“Is it really the Super Brother-Man’s force?” the same voice asked.

At this point Zac noticed that the one shouting was actually the man who diverted from the Marshal’s group earlier, albeit covered a bit in a hood.

“... Yes,” was all Henry Marshall said as he left, but that was all that was needed as the group exploded into commotion.

The looks at the gaudy stall changed from skeptical and derisive to interested and contemplative.

“Why are you recruiting so many people?” someone suddenly shouted from the group, this time not a planted person.

“Port Atwood did not exist prior to the integration, we are building the town completely from scratch. Currently we have the strongest fighting force of humanity, but we’re lacking in many other compartments. We have money but nowhere to spend it. We need driven craftsmen and other non-combat classes to make the town to a truly thriving metropolis,” Mr. Trang answered without missing a beat.

The declaration of having the strongest force also made some waves in the crowd.

“Are you also recruiting warriors?” another man asked.

“Security is currently not a concern for our town, and we are mainly looking for non-combat professions at this point,” Sap answered. “But if you are a stand-out talent or have some unique skills that an army can benefit from, then you’re welcome to apply. But be advised that fighters will not enjoy the same type of freedom as the non-combat classes, as we expect warriors to be in the thick of it fighting. Of course, the benefits we offer our soldiers are also unmatched on planet Earth.”

Sap’s answer made a few people frown, even though he promised high rewards. Zac felt that it was natural. They were in the middle of the New World Government. If any strong warriors around still were unaffiliated they did not want to be tied down. He wondered a bit what would happen with independent warriors like these people after the government enacted their plan. Would they be booted from the safety of the city?

Suddenly a woman in her forties walked over to the stall where Zac and Ibtep sat. Since Mr. Trang was busy fielding various questions to the crowd Zac had to take care of this.

“Can I help you?” Zac asked.

“Is it really true that you welcome all sorts of non-combat classes?” the woman asked hesitantly.

“Yes. What is your profession?” Zac answered.

“I am an anthropologist,” she answered with hesitation. “I wish to join you and study your society. Are there really four species living together in Port Atwood?”

“Well, the Zhix and Ishiate have their own towns, though that might change in the future for security reasons,” Zac offhandedly answered.

“And there is a fourth species?” she pressed on, seeing that Zac was amenable to answer questions.

“Yes, there’s one of them here in the bazaar somewhere, accompanying our Sky Gnome, who I guess is a fifth species,” Zac answered.

“What are the rules to join? Do I need to sign a System-enforced Contract?” She asked.

“No. Your benefits are tied to your contributions to the town. If you contribute nothing, you get nothing,” Zac answered, getting down to brass tacks.

These rules were set with the help of Ogras and Calrin, who explained how heterogeneous forces worked in the multi-verse. Very few actually used contracts, as that was usually seen in bad light. Skilled people in high demand would seldom sign them, apart from for very limited times, such as for the duration of entering a mystic realm.

Forces who consisted of all sorts of people, like academies and Sects usually only had contracts for the very top of the organization, those who also had the largest amount of benefits. The body of the force generally was kept somewhat honest with the help of contribution systems. Homogenous forces used contracts mainly for external elders who wanted to become a permanent part of the clan.

Zac had been surprised that contracts were such a small thing until he understood that the number of contracts one could have active was limited. He was already reaching his limit by using it on the whole squad of girls he brought back from Greenworth, and there simply was no way for him to have contracts for a whole force.

The Apostate of Order created the contracts as a way for two people to work together without fearing betrayal, not for lords to enslave their whole population. Therefore there were also limits on using a branching tree, such as having contracts on 100 captains who each had contracts on 100 soldiers. Every contract within the network would be considered directly subservient to Zac, which would count toward his limit.

“But how would you compare my work in anthropology to a blacksmith, for example?” the woman asked skeptically.

“We use multi-verse standard, with an automatic contribution allocator,” Zac answered, drawing interested eyes from both the Zhix and the scientist.

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#### **Chapter 145 - Craftsmen**

“What do you mean?” the anthropologist asked confused.

“Port Atwood is the only force on Earth who has access to a real multi-verse shop. That has allowed us to gain knowledge of the larger world that is still not publically available on earth. For example, most of the New World Government’s intelligence about the incursions is coming from us,” Zac explained. “It also has allowed us to create a structure that is more in line with our new reality.”

“Port Atwood will use a standardized contribution system. You can see it as a supercomputer who judges your performance. Your actions will generate contribution points. Working at a pet project of yourself with no application will probably not generate many points, but teaching at our academy will,” he continued.

This was the goal of Zac, though it wasn’t done yet. There were various ways to do this. You could set it up yourself with the help of a few administrator classes and a

few specialized arrays, or just buy a contribution management store in the town shop. A few Golemoid forces similar to the creators had made a big business of providing various administrative systems and had perfected their algorithms over millions of years.

Contribution management was a very common concept in the multi-verse as forces were huge, often having millions, even billions in their fold. Making the administration of salaries and benefits automated saved a huge amount of work. It also saved lords a lot of money, as people were only paid for contribution, rather than time.

There were many more functions to an established contribution system, such as levels. If someone made large contributions over a long time they would get upgraded to the next tier in the system, giving them better exchange rates and more precious things to trade for.

“What does contribution points do?” the woman asked.

“You trade them for whatever you want, like an internal currency. There is access to cultivation manuals and skills. Gear and weaponry, healing pills, materials for race evolution are also included. We are stocked with all kinds of things,” Zac answered.

Zac had wondered a bit why not just give Nexus Coins or Crystals, but Ogras explained it in a very simple manner; the lock-in effect. If they got Nexus Coins they could just leave whenever they wanted. But if they held a lot of their internal currency people were more likely to stay on.

For the same reason the rates for expensive things such as manuals or skills were pretty decent. There were permanent Skill and cultivation crystals in the multiverse where anyone could learn the skill imprinted. The lesser versions only worked once, such as the ones containing **[Book of Babel]**.

That meant that Zac could keep stocking up on various skills and cultivation methods as he gained wealth from taxes and other sources. Each new addition would bring a steady stream of revenue to his force, as any time a subject used their points to learn a skill instead of cash out materials or Nexus Crystals he would gain pure profit in a sense.

“However, for new people we will provide a base salary in the form of crystals to help everyone reach level 25 and get their classes. From there they will have to rely on their own efforts,” he added.

Making his people stronger was part of the reason, the other part being the simple fact that the contribution system wasn't set up yet. They had the things to offer, but not the framework in place.

“How interesting, your way of management would make for a good dissertation,” the woman muttered. “What about our freedom? Can we leave whenever we want?”

“The teleporter is currently closed, and if you come with us you will not be able to leave for at least a month. You should also know that Port Atwood will not be joining the World Government at this point in time, but stay an independent force,” Zac said, hiding nothing.

The two government officials were listening intently to the whole conversation, but Zac didn't care. In fact, he wanted the information to spread. Who knew, their way of doing things might actually snag some experts from the government to their side. Besides, Sap Trang was shouting out the same information, though while using a bit more bombastic wording.

In no time the whole bazaar and surrounding neighborhoods knew about Port Atwood's recruitment, and that the Super Brother-Man was looking for non-combat

experts. Still, many were hesitant, even with the Marshall clan's assurance. Perhaps not about the legitimacy of the force, but whether it would be a good idea to join.

Zac wasn't too surprised about people's reluctance, as New Washington was one of the most thriving cities in the world right now. While the people might not have all the tools to progress in their crafts in the current city, they were at least safe. They didn't know what would await them if they stepped through the teleporter.

Still, one after another surreptitiously stepped forward and asked a few clarifying questions to Zac, who patiently answered them all. There also were a few troublemakers that tried to cause a scene. However, they were quickly and ruthlessly dealt with by Mr. Trang.

Finally the fisherman met with trouble he was unsure he could actually handle. With a sigh Zac stood up and walked forward to the group or instigators. He released his aura causing widespread panic, and with a Heaviness-induced stomp created a small crater with his foot, throwing the troublemakers off-balance.

After that there was no more trouble, but at the same time the onlookers asked their questions to the old fisherman instead, afraid to bother the monster sitting in the stall with closed eyes. Still, Zac was listening intently to the conversation between Mr. Trang and the various people and wordlessly communicated with the old fisherman.

Anyone who Zac felt could be a good asset was asked to gather their belongings and come back as soon as possible. He didn't want to risk the government trying to intercept his talents, so he would have them stay with them at the hotel. For those he could do with or without he simply said to come to the teleporter at 7 am tomorrow. These were mainly unskilled workers who he essentially could gather from the neighboring islands as well.

After a few hours there were actually over thirty people from various fields who were gathered close to the stand, some who even brought their families. Judging by their appearance some were doing it as a last resort of sorts, as they looked a bit emancipated and haggard. Others were doing it in order to take a chance and improve.

The group consisted of a wide array of people. Apart from the anthropologist there were all kinds of experts, such as a few engineers, two doctors, a botanist, and even a brewer. Zac almost felt a bit bad for the corpulent man with the handlebar mustache, knowing that he would be hounded by a few hundred thirsty demons as soon as he arrived on the island. Complaints about lack of liquor were one of the most common grievances among the demonkin over the past month, as their own stores had largely run out.

He also managed to snag a few artists and a watchmaker, who were quite surprised their talents were wanted. He didn't actually need painters or a watchmaker, but Zac had a feeling that someone who was adept at working with a craft that demanded steady hands and precision would make a great future inscriber. In fact, anyone he felt might turn into good, or at least passable, inscribers were quickly recruited.

Zac's goal was simple. He wanted to unleash a mountain of inscribed armors created from the wolf pelts and ant carapaces on the surviving humans. His materials were enough to create thousands and thousands of pieces of gear, and with his current demon inscribers, it would over a decade to complete all the equipment. His desire to get more inscribers only increased after he saw how sought after even mediocre gear was at the auction.

If Calrin also managed to open up a few branches, all the better.

As it was getting late Sap Trang simply shouted out the meeting spot and rules for any interested parties before they led the group of non-combat classes back to the

hotel. By now the group had grown to over fifty experts plus their families, and the group who had been told to go to the teleporter was five times that number. If all of them actually showed up it would be quite an improvement for Port Atwood, though Zac expected a decent amount of them to get cold feet.

The group took over a few floors of the hotel, racking up a bill that would be insurmountable for most people. Later that night Calrin and Ogras returned, the gnome having almost a rosy glow. Zac noticed that the gnome had spent a bit more of his money earlier while he was recruiting, but he stopped not long after.

“We made a haul this time. It actually seems that the System created a patch of Aetherbloom close to this town, as quite a few sold it. No one has figured out its use yet, so we bought out most of the city’s supply. The city’s leadership will puke blood when they realize what they’ve missed out on,” the gnome said with glee.

“Aetherbloom? What’s that used for?” Zac asked curiously, as he’d never heard of it.

“It’s one of the main components for a popular medicinal paste that’s used for race improvement. It’s more effective than the standard baths, and it even has some effect when trying to improve to D-Grade race. A single stalk cost over ten thousand nexus coins normally, we paid less than a hundred coins per stalk,” Calrin explained, almost looking aroused when explaining the gains

“More importantly, it is quite rare and takes decades for it to regrow, and it probably only existed here due to the System creating some opportunities on this baby planet,” Ogras added with some schadenfreude.

“These bureaucrats lost out on enough materials to bring almost 300 warriors to E-Grade Race. For Port Atwood that could be huge. You saw that many soldiers among the demons still haven’t upgraded their race. These stalks can help us create an elite squad that will shake fear in the world for hundreds of years,” the demon said with a gleam in his eyes.

“The government caught on to our actions after a while though, and hurried to buy stalks as well, but not before we snatched a good 80% of what was on the market.”

Zac was quite impressed with their haul, as that sort of paste would be a great thing to add to the future contribution system. It would make the warriors work far harder if they could get that sort of panacea to help them with their evolution.

“We also got quite a few promising people to sign up to join Port Atwood,” Zac said, not wanting to be outdone as he listed the various occupations of their new hires.

As Zac expected Ogras eyes lit up when he heard that there was a brewer on the list, but his next question confused him a bit.

“Are there any filmmakers like Directors and editors in the group?” the demon asked.

“No, why?” Zac asked confused.

“It would be fun to try to making my own movie,” he said with a wide smile.

“Eh... I think those kinds of people should be in Hollywood, and I don’t know where that town’s located anymore,” Zac answered hesitantly.

Since there was not much left to do everyone returned to their quarters, where Zac spent most of the night better acquainting himself with his improved Dao of Heaviness. He also tried to use the experience of improving his first Dao seed to also make some inroads on his other seeds, though progress was slow there.

After sleeping for two hours he sat down in the lobby to wait for everyone to gather up. Soon most had gathered up, though it appeared that a few of the experts had left during the night. Two also backed out before they set out, looking quite

embarrassed. Zac assured them it was no trouble, and they quickly left as well, leaving only 38 experts. All in all, it was still a good number who stayed on in Zac's opinion.

More troubling was the fact that Ogras was not around, and that he'd only left a note at the reception that he'd meet up with the rest at the teleporter. Zac got a headache thinking about what the demon was up to, and could only gather the rest of the people.

The teleporter was decently close to the commercial district and they opted to walk the twenty-minute promenade rather than trying to get hold of enough cars for the whole party. A few of the more cerebral of the experts were panting when they arrived, and Zac could only shake his head. The general level of some of the more niche experts was quite low, some even still below level five.

As they arrived Zac immediately tried to find the demon who had promised to be here, but Ogras was nowhere in sight. Zac was starting to get worried that he had gotten into some real trouble, but a voice from the shadows allayed that worry, though a new worry soon replaced it.

"I can't show myself at the moment. Hurry and start the teleporter, we need to leave."

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have a

Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

#### **Chapter 146 - Home Sweet Home**

"What have you done?" Zac asked with a sinking feeling while looking at the shadows, drawing confused or concerned glances from the others.

"Aren't you the curious one? I just solved a few future issues for us, but the government might take some issue with my methods," the voice responded.

Zac could only close his eyes in despair as he'd seen Ogras' methods in action before. Something crazy had happened during the night. But he would rather sort it out at his own island than here, so he chose to drop the subject for now.

Not a large distance away many of the recruits from yesterday stood waiting with large backpacks and trunks of their things in tow. Zac noted with some disappointment that less than half of those who promised to be here actually showed up.

However, he was overall quite content with their haul. Over 150 people had decided to drop their lives here in New Washington to come with him into the unknown, based only on the pull of his own, or the Super Brother-Mans's, reputation.

Zac walked up to the waiting group, and with a swipe of his hand put all the luggage into a Cosmos Sack. Next, he walked to the teleporter with everyone in tow, passing right through the security check. It seemed the guards of the teleporter was already informed that his group would be significantly larger when leaving, and simply waved everyone forward.

Zac threw out a small mountain of crystals, enough to let everyone pass through, and opened the channel to Port Atwood.

"I better go first, make sure there's no confusion with the guards," Ogras' voice once again sounded, and he appeared encumbered by a huge box.

Zac's eyes widened when he realized that said box was not some crate, but rather an elaborate coffin. He planned to close the array, but the demon jumped through without waiting for an answer.

Zac's bad premonition only got worse, but he could only swallow his unease and wave people through one by one. People walked through, some with fear and others with anticipation plastered on their faces. Zac wondered what their faces would be like when they saw that the town was not even built yet.

He did feel a bit bad about the whole situation, but the town would start getting built within the week, so he wouldn't lose sleep over it. Especially considering how safe his island was compared to the rest of the world. He knew people in New Washington might feel safe, but Zac truly doubted that the System would allow them to create a Lord without a proper challenge. Perhaps a true calamity was waiting New Washington. Besides, he would keep the town protective array ready to protect the inner Zone from the third monster horde so that no civilians got hurt.

The transfer kept going smoothly until suddenly Julia and multiple guards came rushing toward the teleporter. Roughly two-thirds of the recruits had passed through by this time, including the Ishiate and the other original members of the group apart from Zac. He'd expecting trouble, so he chose to send the most important people through first.

"Stop!" Julia shouted, causing Zac to frown and look over.

"Ignore her, keep going through," Zac said as he walked over to intercept the people.

"What's going on?" Zac asked with a sigh.

"You tell me, Mr. Monk," one of the guards said angrily. "Witnesses report a shadowy figure abduct Emma MacHale from her highrise apartment a few hours ago, and your companion, the demon, was spotted carrying a suspicious coffin outside this building earlier."

Zac already had some suspicions before, but still groaned when he heard the man.

"That's an odd coincidence. Ogras bought that coffin for a friend who died in the fight against the invaders," Zac said with a blank face, though he felt his earlobes redden a bit from his shamelessness.

"Why don't you call him back to New Washington and let us question him?" Julia said with a baleful glare.

Zac was surprised by the reaction, as the government worker was looked far angrier this time compared to when he wreaked havoc inside their buildings or when he killed the leaders of Greenworth.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," Zac refused without hesitation.

He knew Ogras quite well by now. If he had actually put the starlet inside that coffin, then he was long gone from the teleporter by now, and not even Zac would be able to find him unless he wanted to be found.

"You understand your wanton actions are testing your cooperation with the New World Governement?" Julia spat out through grit teeth.

The new citizens of Port Atwood hesitantly looked on, no one currently passing through the portal.

"Wanton actions? You're throwing baseless accusations against my companion. From what I understand I just hear some circumstantial evidence, no real proof," Zac said, not backing down as he turned to the last people waiting to go through. "Keep going, this is just a small matter that I'll handle."

The people looked at each other, with two of them shrugging and stepping through. For a few it actually seemed the fact that Zac didn't much care about the government was a testament to their strength, and they quickly followed behind into the array. Soon only ten people were left, who hesitantly looked at the teleportation platform.

"This is your last chance to back out," Zac said as he slowly walked toward the array. "I am stepping through in 10 seconds, anyone who hasn't gone through by then will have to stay behind."

"Our talk isn't done yet," Julia shouted from behind.

"Take it up with the chief of police," Zac tersely retorted, not in the mood to keep up the charades any longer.

A few people grit their teeth and jumped through the array, disappearing into motes of light, while the last 6 people shook their heads and backed away. Zac only nodded and made to step through the portal.

However, before he could walk into the shimmering light he saw a form flash by with a mighty leap. It was Julia who jumped with surprising speed into the teleporter. Since she wasn't planning on attacking Zac his danger sense didn't activate, and he only blankly stared at her form disappearing.

"You should know this already, but Port Atwood is going into seclusion for a month following this. Your colleague's actions will not change this. Ms. Lombard will be returned after that point unless she's committed crimes while in our domain," Zac said to the guards who looked equally surprised, and stepped through the teleporter.

After the travel time he once again arrived at the teleportation area, and immediately heard a shout.

"Emma! Can you hear me?" Julia's voice carried from outside.

Zac sighed and stepped out to the chaotic scene.

All the new citizens hesitantly looked around, some clearly a bit dismayed at the utter lack of civilization. The array was placed some distance away from the temporary town, and they were surrounded by primordial forests.

"We'll head to town in just a bit," Zac said with a loud voice, drawing everyone's attention.

"You just entered without any invitation," Zac said as he turned to a dodgy Julia. "You should know you are stuck here now. I can't let you return to the government at this point."

"Are you truly trying to fight the world government?" Julia spat back, clearly still irate.

"Do you speak for the government now? I already told your colleagues that you will have to stay here for now, and only be returned if you break no rules."

"Everyone, I'll lead you to Port Atwood. Please do not stray away in the woods, as all monsters in this area are around level 40," Zac said.

"You said this area was safe!" a woman shrilly said.

Clearly some had painted quite a different picture of Port Atwood in their mind compared to the wilderness they found themselves in.

"The beasts are left for our trainees to gain experience. We have already killed everything stronger on the island," Zac answered.

"Island?" a few asked simultaneously, and even Julia refocused on Zac.

"Port Atwood is an Island kingdom. Honestly we still haven't found the mainland, so we are not exactly sure where we are in relation to places like New Washington. This

is the main island, while we control a few more. We are constantly traveling through our archipelago to save any stranded citizens and claim more land,” Zac explained.

“The Cosmic Energy! It’s so dense!” a man suddenly exclaimed.

It was one of the experts who actually had a passable level. He was a doctor who was also a cultivator and was already at level 19, which was respectable for someone who hadn’t really fought any monsters since returning from the tutorial.

“This whole island has far higher amounts of energy compared to the mainland. Those who contribute to Port Atwood will be given access to areas that have up to a few times higher density than even this. It is no luck that we became the strongest force on the planet. Anything that is done here, from cultivation to farming, has twice the effect from half the effort,” Zac said, which improved the somewhat despondent faces of some of the people.

He wasn’t planning on talking this much, but the faces of the new citizens clearly showed that some were on the verge of a breakdown, clearly regretting their choice. He needed to throw out some good news or they would never get back to town. Julia looked down on the ground with a thoughtful face, which gave Zac some pause. He still hadn’t figured out what to do with her, as she was a high ranking official.

He already knew that there likely was one or a few spies in the group, but he knew there was not much he could do about it apart from isolating the town until his position was unshakeable. He guessed he would just let Julia wander around for now, unless she actively tried to look into the restricted areas. Perhaps he’d add a guard or two to her.

His musings were interrupted as there suddenly were twenty people who approached. Zac saw it was a few of the people from his female squad, who after just a few days of training looked quite a bit more professional and powerful.

“Welcome back,” Joanna, who lead the squad, said.

Zac only nodded and then pointed at Julia after throwing Joanna the Cosmos Sack containing the bags of the new citizens.

“This one isn’t really a part of the group. You should remember her, she’s a high position official of the New World Government who suddenly jumped through the teleporter. Just let her go with the others, but keep an eye on her. She’s level 29, can you handle it?” Zac asked Joanna.

The recruits balefully glared at Julia when they heard she was a government employee. Their experiences in Greenworth were clearly still fresh in their minds, and they held a deeply rooted hatred for the government due to the mayor.

“Not a problem,” Joanna said, looking like she wanted to eat the government employee whole.

“Don’t kill or torture her,” Zac only said with a sigh. “As for the others, give them the same type of introduction as all the other new townspeople.”

As he gave over the responsibility of the new citizens to Joanna he felt like a large burden was lifted from his shoulders as he started to walk away with his

“Why is he leaving?” a voice was heard from the group.

“Do you think the strongest man in the world has time to babysit you?” one of the Valkyries shot back, causing some murmurs among the group.

Zac shot a glance back toward the group, only to see Julia intently staring at him.

“If Ogras truly did kidnap the movie-star, you don’t need to worry. He is simply a movie fanatic, and don’t have any nefarious purposes. But I will look for him now and investigate,” he said before he disappeared into the woods.

It didn't take long for him to walk back to his mansion, and felt the tranquility sooth his soul. However, that tranquility didn't last long, as a shrill voice interrupted it.

"Are you crazy? A coffin? How can you do this to me?"

Zac recognized the voice, and with a sigh he walked over to the garden he heard the sound come from. As he approached he saw Emily stare with large star-struck eyes at the scene in the garden.

"Wow, it's really her!" Emily whispered with an excitable voice as she saw Zac approach.

Zac could only nod and turn to the couple in the distance.

When he saw the scene he could only wryly smile.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 147 - Roads to Lordship**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

Finally done with midterms! Happy to announce I will be spending 75% of my time on DotF from now on, as compared to 50% (with 50% uni) before. My hope is that it will lead to higher-quality releases, and perhaps other various goodies.

On another note, Defiance of the Fall now has a [wiki-page](#)! Thanks to the patrons to set it up for me! Please beware that the wiki might contain some spoilers from content in the premium chapters.

In the middle of the secluded garden Ogras was grinning as he deftly dodged an enraged Emma MacHale, who was currently trying to clobber him with a champagne bottle.

"A coffin? A COFFIN? What kind of asshole moves someone in something so ominous as a coffin? That wasn't what we agreed upon! I'll shove this bottle up your ass," she screamed as she threw the bottle with full force at a laughing Ogras.

"I didn't want you to feel uncomfortable, and the casket was nicely padded inside. I am a gentleman, after all," Ogras said with a smile as he snatched the bottle out of the air, careful to not let it break.

Zac was quite surprised at Emma's personality. It seemed the person he'd seen in interviews and on the stage of the auction was another role she played, just like in the movies. Her real personality was far more coarse.

He was also quite relieved that it seemed that what Ogras did was not an abduction, though the exact details hadn't been quite agreed upon. Zac didn't want to have a falling out with the demon, but if Ogras truly had started kidnapping women he would have no choice but to do something drastic, as he couldn't accept such behavior. It would be on a completely different scale compared to just messing around at the auction.

Emily giggled as she heard the exchange, which made the movie star look their way, immediately focusing on Zac.

“You! You let this horned mongrel just knock me out and carry me around in that god damn casket? What? Why are you just standing there gaping, you pervert? Are you the kind of guy who just finishes by himself in the corner?”

“Urh,” Zac only managed to get out, not ready to become the target of Emma’s vitriol. “I only found out Ogras had, uh, brought you here, after Julia Lombard told me.”

“Jules told you? Where is she?” the starlet said, quickly calming down.

“Do you two know each other? She was quite angry. Angry enough to jump through the teleporter to come here,” Zac couldn’t help asking.

“She did?” she asked, her mouth slightly curving upward before refocusing at the demon. “You can’t hurt her, or I won’t cooperate anymore. And you never told me you lived in the god damn jungle.”

“Hi! I’m Emily, I’m a huuge fan! You’re in Port Atwood. It’s an island in the middle of nowhere!” Emily chimed in, clearly excited to meet a movie star.

“Hi pretty,” Emma said, clearly more amenable to the excited teenager. “You should stay away from those two, something is wrong with their heads.”

Emily only giggled in response.

“Emily, tell Emma a bit about Port Atwood. Ogras, come with me,” Zac said with a sigh.

He needed to understand what the hell was going on. Soon the two stood some distance away while Emily peppered the movie star about questions about her old life, and Emma had turned back into the gentle personality you saw on TV back in the day.

“So you created a huge mess. You were seen with that casket before you came back here. And now we got a government official on the island,” Zac said with an angry glare. “I don’t even want to imagine the kind of riot you’ve caused in New Washington. You better have a god damn good reason for all this.”

“Well, the casket was sort of a spur-of-the-moment thing,” Ogras shrugged drawing another baleful glare from Zac.

“I was only planning on visiting Ms. MacHale for the dinner I promised, but things turned out this way.”

“She’s not a prisoner. And no forcing her to do anything,” Zac said with an even stare.

“Bah, why would I do something like that? The chase is half the fun,” Ogras spat back. “Besides, that’s not why I brought her here.”

“Explain,” Zac said, still annoyed.

“Didn’t you say you couldn’t understand how those useless bureaucrats are creating a Lord while you, the top spot on your Ladder, is fighting tooth and nail for the same privilege? Well, Emma MacHale solved that puzzle for me yesterday,” Ogras began.

“The first clue came from Ricky, the poor sap you left with me. I asked him about the government’s plans after he spilled everything about their group. We missed one of them by the way, so watch your back. The Red Mercenaries had done some nasty work for the government before it seemed, even killed a Ranker who actively spoke against The New World Government.”

Zac didn’t much care about the last man who was still alive, but he was more concerned about the fact the Red Mercenaries did Government wetwork.

“So the government was behind the attack?” Zac asked with a frown.

“No, it seems they truly only did it to stuff their pockets a bit. Birds die for food, men die for money,” the demon answered with a shrug.

“I was more interested about what he told me about the government’s quests. He swore that there were no quests like defending New Washington from beasts to become a Lord. He did, however, mention that he had heard about a contribution Crystal, and that Emma MacHale was quite high on it.”

Zac was quite intrigued by now, completely having forgotten about the fact that a storm might be brewing in New Washington by now. He only nodded for the demon to continue the narration.

“While I was walking through the Bazaar I was listening for any gossip, and it turned out that MacHale wasn’t the only star the Government employed. There were actually many of them visiting various towns, shaking hands and kissing babies so to speak. All while promoting the Government.

“At first I thought it was just promotion to gain legitimacy before the Auction and get more to sign up for their little alliance. But I was proven wrong. I found out where MacHale was staying later on and went to visit her. Partly to find out more and partly, uh, for personal interests,” Ogras said, drawing an eye-roll from Zac.

“I invited myself into her domicile, and after she had calmed down a bit we had a nice talk. I found out a lot of interesting things. Such as why they held their Auction, and why there were stars travelling town to town with government escorts. The Government needs the *fame*,” Ogras said with a grin.

“What?” Zac couldn’t help but blurt out.

“It’s their Lord quest. They need to generate enough renown, and someone among them will be promoted to a Lord. They are using the stars as mouthpieces to spread the plans of the Government and improve their renown. The Auction was partly held to gather a lot of forces, and gain a lot of renown in one fell swoop. Those who improve the fame of the Government would get contribution points, and Emma was one of those,” Ogras said.

“That still doesn’t explain why you kidnapped her,” Zac said.

“She asked me to,” Ogras said with a shrug. “When I told her who you were she immediately requested sanctuary. In the beginning, she was doing the work willingly, but after she learned some things she wanted out. However, they didn’t allow her to leave. The government was essentially keeping her a captive to generate fame since she was one of their top earners.”

“Does it even matter if you snatched her? They still have the same amount of fame as before, even though she isn’t there anymore?”

“Well, according to Emma the fame was attached to those who contributed somehow. I don’t truly understand it since I’ve never heard of a quest like this before,” Ogras said with some hesitation. “But if those people defected or died, then the Government would lose progress on their quest.”

Zac suddenly remembered the demon’s words outside the teleportation building in New Washington and got a bad feeling.

“You didn’t...?” Zac said with a sinking feeling.

“Well, a few people in New Washington had untimely deaths during the night. But that was also a request from Ms. MacHale. She is quite ruthless. Though we only killed a few degenerates who used their status for disgusting things,” Ogras said with a sinister glint in his eyes.

“You know this might set me at a straight collision course with the government?” Zac said angrily.

Zac wondered if he would ever be able to return to New Washington or their alliance towns without a cover. If the government made Zac an accomplice for what seemed to be a murder-spree and a kidnapping there was no knowing what they might do. Perhaps his good name was being dragged through the mud as they spoke.

“You already were. Someone like you can’t coexist with a group like that. Better prepare yourself mentally and clear this wave quickly. They might be gunning for your sister as we speak,” Ogras retorted.

Zac could only frown in response, knowing that the demon might be right on the nose with that remark. The government wanted to create a unified power, and people like himself might be considered a thorn in their side, even though Zac had no designs on their alliance. Perhaps they would have found some other excuse to create trouble for him even if Ogras didn’t go berserk in the town.

“You still haven’t properly explained why you went through all this trouble?”

“For my, uh our, interests of course,” Ogras said. “The Auction brought far more fame than the government expected, and they were extremely close to finishing their quest. It was to the point that they would probably achieve it before you. We couldn’t allow that to happen. Becoming the first Lord of a world should bring great benefits to that Lord’s town and the Lord himself.”

“So you did that all for me, you say?” Zac asked skeptically.

“Remember, our fates are tied together on this little island,” Ogras said. “Your prosperity is my prosperity.”

Zac went over the information over for some time. He wasn’t really comfortable with the fact that the demon had gone off on a murder-spree in a human town without saying anything. What he said was true; their fates were tied together, and Ogras’ actions would impact Zac.

At the same time he had to admit he felt it was for the best. The government’s actions sounded quite shady, and more importantly he didn’t want to cede the advantage of being the first Lord. He got the Creator’s shipyard from being the first to close an Incursion, so he felt that becoming the first Lord might give a huge advantage as well.

“In the future, consult me first about stuff like this. If we’re going to have a working cooperation you can’t go rogue at every turn. That doesn’t only go for your nightly activities, but also your actions in the Auction,” Zac said with an even stare.

“Yes, mother,” Ogras said while rolling his eyes. “Well, you did show passable ruthlessness with the poison, so I guess I won’t need to take all matters into my own hands in the future. But don’t go squeamish on me. Remember, your actions doesn’t only impact yourself, but all your subjects and your family. A moment of softness can lead to a lifetime of suffering.”

“Ok ok. Also, the government official is your responsibility. She came here because of your actions, so you solve the aftermath. Find out if she is part of this all, but don’t kill her,” Zac said.

Overall he had a pretty decent impression of Julia, but if she jumped through the portal to control the Government’s asset then she would likely become a problem.

“All these rules,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes, though Zac knew he acknowledged the request.

“I told you, you can’t hurt Jules,” Emma suddenly said, having snuck up on them. “If you do I’ll start preaching again here, giving the government a large boost in reputation.”

“I told you, as long as she doesn’t start breaking the rules she’ll be fine,” Zac said.

“Good. Now tell me, where will I stay? The demon promised me a Mansion.”

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 148 - Cogstown**

Zac’s headache was only growing as he walked the movie star to one of the empty courtyards on his compound. He had been forced to let Emma stay here until the promised mansion was built, and he had decided that the construction would be fast-tracked.

Ogras had wanted to accompany them, but Alea arrived which seemed to make him change his mind. The poison mistress didn’t have her usual playfulness, and she simply left after she had thrown a glare at the movie star, which was returned in kind. For now only Emily was accompanying them.

“So you really are the Super Brother-Man? Jules told me she suspected that you were him, and the demon confirmed it. Why do you have that stupid nick-name? Sounds like the alias of someone trying to lure kids into their van,” Emma said, obviously not caring to choose her words more carefully after learning who Zac was.

Zac only sighed and shook his head. It seemed that him being the top ranker couldn’t subdue the mouth of the renowned movie star completely. Still, it was thanks to her that he still could attain the first Lord-title and benefits, so he chose to simply endure it for now.

At least she would be someone else’s problem soon enough, as she’d be barred from his compound the moment she got her mansion built. And if she kept making a racket or cause problems in Port Atwood he wasn’t above throwing her in jail, even if he had to build one just for her. There were limits to his patience.

“You can stay here for now,” Zac said after they arrived at a small but exquisite courtyard that just so happened to be on the opposite side of the compound from where Zac usually meditated. “It might be a week or two before we can construct your permanent home, as our force is a bit occupied with a few things right now.”

“Well, it’s passable I suppose,” Emma said as she walked around.

Zac nodded and turned to leave, but a shout stopped him.

“Wait. What about me?” Emma said with a glare.

“What about you?” Zac asked.

“Will you just leave me here? What am I supposed to do? You’re the worst host ever,” Emma said with a huff.

“Emily can take you to Port Atwood. Julia should be there somewhere also. You’re also free to stay with Ogras in his palace,” Zac said, hoping she would take him up on his offer.

“Why in god’s name would I live with that bastard? Cutie, take me to Julia please,” she said and hooked her arm in Emily’s to her visible excitement.

Finally the two left together, leaving Zac alone with his thoughts. He opened his quest screen and took a look at his quest.

**Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect town from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, town upgraded to City, status upgraded to Lord. (2/3) [02:15:23:14]**

Less than three days remained until the third and final wave. He went over his things and felt as prepared as he could be. He already had two of the Lightning Punishment arrays that he bought for the ant waves, and an ample amount of crystals he got from Rydel's Cosmos Sack and the mining operations.

He also had the high-quality siege machines from the sack, which even low leveled people could utilize. They might not gain energy from the kills, but at least they would contribute to the war efforts. Depending on the nature of the waves he would either have the Valkyries use the siege engines or gain experience from fighting by hand. He honestly did not know what else there was to do before the wave hit, apart from preparing the general population.

After resting a bit he went to the town to meet up with Adran, who usually was up to date with everything happening.

"Greetings, Lord Zac," the demon said as Zac entered his office, which was still the large tent. He still hadn't bothered with having a proper structure built, as it would be moved shortly in any case.

"How did it go with the new town-people?" Zac asked after greeting the administrator.

"Hehe, I do not know what you told them to get them to come here, but some were... Less than pleased with the current state of Port Atwood. Though it got better when we demonstrated building a house in an hour, and explained we would begin construction of the town proper within two weeks," the demon said.

Zac only grimaced while nodding. He wasn't too surprised by their reactions after Mr. Trang's shameless recruitment tactics.

"There are also the two beastkin who have kept pestering us to take them to the island with the town of their kind," he added.

"Where are they now?" Zac asked.

The incident with Ogras had made him completely forget about the two.

"They are waiting in the tavern," the demon answered.

"We have a tavern?" Zac asked surprised.

"Yes, one of the more enterprising humans opened one up while you were gone. Another human also informed us of his island having a pretty huge cache of liquor. We made an extra excursion there to procure it, I hope you don't mind," the demon grinned.

"That's fine, it's good that some civilian businesses are cropping up, please help out cases like that in the future as well," Zac said with a nod. "How are the war preparations?"

"Everything we can think of has been done. We have massively improved on the traps and pitfalls outside the walls, reinforced the walls themselves, and added the siege machines," the administrator said.

"We have also trained some of the more competent civilians to help out with logistical efforts and basic triage. The only thing remaining is whether you wish to buy any more arrays or tools to prepare."

Zac mulled it over. Between his combination Town Protection array and his lightning punishments, he felt secure enough to tackle the third wave. He was sure it would be a nasty one, but still there were limits to how far the system could crank up the difficulty. With his own and the demon's power, and the various advantages he had

accumulated he felt confident in taking on almost anything the System could throw at him.

“We have everything we need saved from the Ant Horde,” Zac said and the demon nodded in agreement.

“Oh, we have also started making some inroads in making the carriages you brought back some time ago run on Nexus Crystals. For now, we can simply create fire from the energy in the combustion chambers of the contraption, but in the future we might be able to even make it run on pure energy instead of wasting so much of it through converting it to heat,” the demon added.

Zac was delighted at the news. That kind of refitting would be quite profitable he believed, but also it would help with mobility for a lot of people. Not every town could own an expensive Teleportation array and would have to actually travel between towns by foot. Being able to drive would massively increase their chance of survival.

“Great, keep me posted. I am planning on visiting the Beastman village before the wave hits. Perhaps we can get some more warriors. From my impression of these Ishiate they might also be skilled craftsmen, which would help in refining all our materials into sellable equipment.”

With that he left the command tent to head over to the tavern. He saw the two Ishiate sitting in a corner looking somewhat troubled, but when Zac told them he was taking them to their hometown they were visibly excited.

But before they could leave he started as he saw who stood behind the counter.

“It’s you?” Zac asked with some surprise.

“Well, a man’s got to do something,” Ryan answered with a grin. “When I said I wanted to open a saloon the demons were more than willing to help with the construction. I’ve never seen a house get erected that fast. Unfortunately, I can’t really charge the demons for liquor since they brought it, but at least I can charge the others.”

“I’m glad you found your calling,” Zac answered with a small smile.

“Yeah, you know I sometimes dreamed of moving to some tropical country and opening a beach bar back when I worked a dead-end job. Who knew that the apocalypse would turn it into reality?” Ryan answered with a widening smile.

Zac wouldn’t have minded staying a bit, but the anxious Ishiate made him remember his tasks.

“I will talk to you later,” Zac said as he left with the two beastmen in tow.

Zac also brought the fisherman and one of the demons who participated in the original scouting mission and immediately set sail. The island was over six hours away, and he didn’t want to waste any time. Soon they were cutting through the waves in breakneck speed as Zac once again sat in the fore contemplating the Dao.

The two Ishiate were extremely intrigued about the vessel they used. They likely had studied human technology quite a bit since the integration, but this vessel was something else entirely. They kept excitedly talking about the construction and tried to hypothesize how it worked as they furiously scribbled notes in notepads. It was as though the vessel had opened up a new world to them.

Zac was happy to see their excitement as he had hopes that he would be able to relocate at least part of the Ishiate back to his town in order to gain some craftsmen. The humans he brought from New Washington was a good start, but Earth had very few proper craftsmen before the fall. Zac suspected that things like blacksmiths, tinkers and even alchemists were more common concepts among the Ishiate who was essentially a medieval society hungering for technological advancements.

Finally as the suns started to set they arrived at their destination, a decently sized island that was slightly larger than the ones he'd visited so far. The climate was the same as on his island, but the forests looked quite different. They were far more colorful, with many trees having red leaves instead of green, and many trunks were blue-ish.

The town they were visiting wasn't originally a seaside town, so it was some ways inland, and they started traveling through the beautiful forests. A weird small critter with three eyes and six legs suddenly skittled in front of them, startling Zac.

"It's a Prikka," one of the Ishiate explained, "I haven't seen one since the fall. This whole forest feels like home, though it has grown quite a bit from what's normal."

After an uneventful trek of five minutes they arrived at the walled city, and Zac looked at it with some interest. It's architecture looked quite different from anything he'd seen so far.

The wall was made of some metal, and on top of it there were huge brass cannons mounted. Both the cannons and the walls looked somewhat new, even though they weren't in great shape. Zac assumed they had been erected or improved in order to combat the monsters of the island. That would also explain the craters on the ground around the wall, and the fire-licked trees at the edge of the forest.

"We're home," the female Ishiate said with ripe emotion in her voice.

As they approached the town Zac kept looking over the area. It was clear that the town hadn't been unscathed over the past months. There were clear signs of battle all around the town, and the metal plating was dented or even missing in various spots. It gave a battle-torn image, though Zac noted that the town still stood, as no parts of the wall were completely ruined, and there were figures patrolling its wall walk.

The group made no effort to hide and openly walked toward the main gate. Their approach was quickly noted, and the guards shouted down at someone below. Soon they arrived at the gate which still was closed.

"Hello? I'm Shea Moon of Cogstown, daughter of Basso Moon. With me are my husband Porro Moon and some human friends who helped us return home," she shouted up at the wall.

There was no response for a minute, and Zac started to frown.

"What now?" Zac asked at the Ishiate, who also looked a bit confused.

"Wait a bit longer. The guards might be getting reporting to those in charge," Shea answered hesitantly.

She was quickly proven right as after another minute a roar could be heard over the wall.

"Open the god damn gate, you idiots!" a deep voice resonated, almost immediately followed by the gates slowly opening with a creak.

Zac and the others didn't have time to enter before a giant Ishiate rushed at them.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### Chapter 149 - Reinforcements

“Little Shea!” the man shouted, tears pouring from his eyes as he scooped up the female Ishiate in a bear hug. “We were so worried when you and the others disappeared. The world turned crazy and we found our town moved to this island. We feared the worst.”

“I missed you father!” Shea answered with a sob.

“What’s going on? What happened?” the huge man asked with concern. “And just what are those hairless ones? The old one looks a bit similar to the ones we have here.”

“You have humans in Cogstown?” Zac couldn’t help asking, which gave the huge man a start.

“You speak our language?”

“He has a skill for that,” Shea explained. “This is Zac Atwood, he is the leader of a town called Port Atwood at a neighboring island. Mr. Atwood, this is Basso Moon. He is the leader of Cogstown and its chief engineer.”

“How did you two end up at a neighboring island? Are the others still there?” Basso asked after nodding at Zac.

“It’s a long story, I’ll explain as we go.”

Basso nodded and led them inside the town. Zac curiously looked around as they walked, content in letting Shea give her father the standard run-down of the System and the Tutorial. It quickly became apparent that Cogstown wasn’t a spot where cultivators were dropped off after the month was over.

When the beastman mentioned humans Zac’s heartbeat had sped up for a moment, hoping that Hannah and the others were dropped off here. But the Ishiate were clueless about most things regarding the System, completely dashing that hope.

The town looked well fortified from the outside, but it was clear that they had met some trouble. A lot of houses were crumbled, and there were gashes and splotches of blood at many places. Even Shea couldn’t help herself from asking what was going on, eliciting a sigh from Basso.

“It’s the god damn birds. There’s a flock of large white birds who turned crazy a month ago. Before that they mainly stayed close to the sea and fed on fish or small critters. But as they grew larger, so did their appetites. They started attacking our town, actually snatching people up in the air,” he said with a tired voice.

“We kept shooting them, both with skills and our weaponry. But they are so large by now that if we kill it in the air their corpses become dangerous projectiles that might kill people when they smash into the ground. And no matter how many we kill it seems they are endless,”

“Can you buy a defensive array?” Zac asked, drawing a pained glance from the town leader.

“That’s the problem. We do have the Crystal Shea mentioned, but we can’t buy much more than a shop and a few basic structures, such as a smithy manned by those weird automatons. We got those options after defending the town from a series of monster attacks.

“I see that the fortifications you mentioned exist, but we can’t purchase them. It seems we need to unlock them with another quest, but we haven’t even received a quest yet.”

Zac nodded, not feeling too surprised. There were very few who actually had the option to buy the arrays at the moment it seemed. Otherwise quite a few more would have been able to get teleporters, far more than the 50 or so towns in the whole world who appeared to possess them at the moment.

Zac was about to ask a follow-up question but was interrupted by some commotion.

“Grandpa!” an Asian man in his early twenties shouted as he rushed toward their group.

“Little Tuan? Is that you?” the old fisherman shouted back with a shaky voice, his eyes immediately reddening.

Mr. Trang already mentioned earlier that the younger generation had already left on a boat to find help for their grandparents. Unfortunately, they hadn’t heard from them since. It looked like at least one of them somehow had ended up on this island, and was one of the “hairless ones” that Basso mentioned.

The man rushed up to the old fisherman, followed by a few more Vietnamese youths who looked to be between 20 and 35. Zac was relieved to see that they seemed fed and unharmed, meaning they probably weren’t prisoners. He really wanted to recruit some Ishiate for his town, but if they had mistreated Sap and the other’s grandchildren it would have become a thorny situation.

“Why are you kids here?” Mr. Nguyen asked as he looked over his villagers.

“Our ship was attacked by some monstrous fish while we looked for the mainland, and we steered toward this island before the ship sunk... Giang and Phuc didn’t make it,” Tuan answered with a shame-filled face. “We were worried sick, but these aliens wouldn’t help build a ship since it was too dangerous.”

“It’s good that you stayed here rather than going back for us old folks. We left ourselves by ship and now live in Lord Zac’s town. We’re doing quite well, and old man Trang is already level 28. And this old man is almost ready to get a Class as well,” he said with a wide smile.

“I’m glad you’re all okay. Why don’t you stay here? I’m sure these aliens won’t mind, they are pretty nice, though it’s a bit hard to make yourself understood,” one of the other youngsters said.

“No, it’s better you kids come back with me and Lord Zac after we’re done here,” Mr. Nguyen answered with a shake of his head. “It seems a bit dangerous here while Port Atwood is completely safe.”

Since Mr. Nguyen was one of the main naval scouts he’d been given a skill crystal for the **[Book of Babel]**, so Basso and the other Ishiate could understand his words as well.

“It’s pretty big words to claim complete safety in this new world of ours,” an Ishiate with a large blunderbuss on his back responded skeptically.

“I think Mr. Nguyen is simply referring to the fact that we have eradicated any threatening beasts on our island, so we do not have to worry about such things anymore. However, with the incursions and other threats humans and Ishiate are facing it can’t be called completely safe,” Zac answered.

The Vietnamese people looked on with surprised expressions, seeing how the Ishiate seemed to understand their words and respond. Clearly, they still didn’t know about the language skill.

“Other threats?” Basso said with a frown.

“Do you have somewhere we can talk in private?” Zac asked.

Soon they found themselves in a large meeting room in what seemed part castle part hangar. From the looks of it they were either trying to build or actually had built a Zeppelin, though he couldn't see one of them floating around.

A few other leaders of Cogstown had joined Basso and his guards, and they listened on as Shea explained her experiences and findings in the tutorial and from there. The Vietnamese people were also in the room, and the old fisherman was quietly translating for them in a corner.

When some clarification was needed by Zac he provided it, but otherwise he was content in letting the Ishiate talk.

"I heard Mr. Zac mention our flag at the meeting, and we immediately chose to follow him. That's how we got home," Shea finished recounting her and the other cultivator's experiences. It appeared she and the other cultivators of Cogstown were dropped off at the other side of the planet, and Shea was at the Auction since she had acquired the language skill during the tutorial.

"It is a relief to hear that so many of our people are still alive and amongst kin. It is a shame we can't connect with them though," Basso said with a sigh as he looked at Zac. "And I am thankful to you, Mr. Zac, for bringing my daughter home."

"It was no problem. I was planning on visiting here sooner or later in any case," Zac said.

"Oh?" Basso said, and the other Ishiate looked curiously or warily at Zac.

"In a sense we're neighbors here on our islands, and I believe it's important to know each other," Zac said. "I'd also like to extend an invitation to the citizens of Cogstown. During the past months we have traveled across the archipelago to rescue any people stranded and beset by monsters."

Finally Zac found an opportunity for recruitment and wouldn't miss it.

"Port Atwood is in need of skilled craftsmen. After talking with Shea I've come to the understanding that your kind are both creative and skilled workers. Many of your group have switched from trying to improve your technology to becoming craftsmen classes to great success. If you're willing to relocate to my Island you would be most welcome," he continued.

"Why would we want to move and become a human's subordinates?" an Ishiate asked, drawing a nervous glance from Shea.

"Security and improvement. Suffice to say, Port Atwood is somewhat unique on the whole planet. We have access to knowledge that you can't find anywhere else. Much of the information about the incursions and Dominators Shea mentioned earlier comes from us. We also possess abundant resources to improve your crafting, and the Cosmic Energy density on our island is unparalleled," Zac answered without missing a beat.

"Most importantly, our citizens are safe, and therefore able to focus on their personal improvement."

"Our people have lived here for generations, and what you propose is a huge change. If you please would excuse us for a bit while we discuss things," Basso said politely.

Zac understood that there likely were things they wanted to ask Shea and her husband without the prying ears of himself and his team, so he nodded at the old fisherman and the demon guards and left with them.

Mr. Nguyen's grandson and the others followed as well, and soon they found themselves in a group of sofas in another room.

“Hey, how did you get the skill to be able to talk in all languages,” Tuan asked Zac. “It seems really convenient.”

“Brat, be polite to Lord Zac,” the old fisherman said with a glare as he smacked his grandson in the back of his head.

“Ow! Grandpa, why do you keep calling him a lord? Is he a European nobility? That shouldn’t matter anymore,” Tuan said looking a bit indignant.

“What European? He’s a ranker on the Ladder,” the old man explained. “Act properly, it’s thanks to Lord Zac we old folk can survive. Work hard and you can gain opportunities that the rest of the world could only dream of. We might not have come from great origins before the world changed, but that doesn’t matter anymore.”

“What? What’s going on?” Tuan asked, while the others looked visibly confused.

Zac could only shake his head. He understood the old man was still following the rules that he put in place earlier, stopping him from saying anything about Port Atwood. Still the old man wanted to convey the importance of having a good rapport with Zac.

But things had changed since he gave that order, and hiding nothing he simply stated the truth.

“I’m the Super Brother-Man.”

It took some convincing, but soon the Vietnamese youth no longer thought it odd that their elder looked up to some foreigner who was so much younger than him, and they no longer spoke about living in the Ishiate town. Clearly staying with the force of the top ranker seemed a far more reasonable idea, especially since the other elders still stayed in Port Atwood.

It took almost an hour before Shea and Basso joined Zac, though the Ishiate were good hosts and brought some food and drink while they waited. Something about his demeanor had clearly changed, as he warily looked at Zac who was calmly sitting in his seat. The large Ishiate looked troubled as he sat down on one of the free sofas on the opposite side of Zac.

“I am sorry about the wait, Lord Zac. There has been much to go over. The news my daughter has brought regarding the change in the world is troubling, to say the least. We knew something extraordinary was happening, but the reality has far exceeded our expectations,” Basso said, looking quite worn out.

“We understand where you’re coming from, and perhaps moving Cogstown to your future residential and commercial districts is the best for our futures. However, I cannot make such a decision on the spot. We have lived our whole lives in this town, and we cannot leave it just like that.

“Our wilder brethren think us uncaring about the past, but that is wrong. We constantly build on our ancestor’s efforts to improve life for future generations. Cogstown is the result of four generations of Ishiate who have pushed themselves to unravel the universe.”

While Zac didn’t share the same types of feeling about his own hometown Greenworth he could understand where he was coming from.

“I will not force anyone to do something they are not willing to do. But you should make a decision sooner rather than later, as your problems with the birds might only get worse. Normally we would help but we will have our hands full ourselves the coming days,” Zac answered.

“We will leave soon, and it will be roughly ten days to two weeks before we can visit again, and that’s the soonest I can imagine,” Zac continued.

“We understand your force will face some sort of trial soon, though Shea didn’t learn the details. If you’re amenable I would like to send a few of our tinkerers with

you back. They are the ones who built the cannons on our walls, and perhaps might prove useful in your war efforts. Truthfully they will also scout your force and island to see whether it would be a good idea for us to move or not,” Basso answered.

“That’s fine,” Zac said, not feeling surprised.

He didn’t expect the isolated Ishiate to uproot themselves on his or Shea’s word, and that he got this much response from Cogstown was better than expected. The tinkerers might even be useful in the coming wave.

Basso and Zac kept talking for a while, and Zac even promised to sell an exploratory vessel like the one he used for a whopping 5 million Nexus coins. The money-printing machine that was the Creator Shipyard was finally starting to give returns.

He’d long ago explained the situation to the Creators, so the ships themselves apparently were modeled after vessels from a huge human force called the Allbright Empire that spanned multiple galaxies. Any foreigner seeing the ships would think they were made by some grandmaster engineer from that empire.

Only an hour later Zac sat down again on the fore of the ship, and with closed eyes ignored the hubbub on the cramped vessel behind him.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 150 - The Third Wave**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

So we’re kicking off the third and final wave :) Hope You’ll enjoy.

Zac had a sense of Deja Vú as he stood waiting on the wall, somberly looking toward the inner regions of the island. Next to him stood Ogras and his three generals. Zac had been extremely surprised to hear that Namys was dead, worried that some monster or powerhouse had arrived at the island.

He was even more shocked to learn that she was killed by Alea on Ogras’ orders. Zac immediately called an emergency meeting between the three of them, and it took an hour to finally get to the bottom of things. Ogras was almost biologically incapable of delivering clear answers, whereas Alea refused to divulge anything Ogras hadn’t.

To hear that the sour-looking demoness had far gone plans to kill him in his sleep without him even having an inkling of it caused Zac a fretful sleepless night. He knew Namys wasn’t one of his biggest fans but had no idea that it went to the level of wanting to eradicate him. Zac understood Ogras’ actions, and Zac also felt it showed that Ogras was in it for the long haul, but it also meant that they had lost one of the best fighters and leaders for the third wave.

Ogras looked unusually pissed off as he was chewing on a piece of dried meat next to him, which was out of character for him. The demon usually adorned that annoying grin no matter the situation, so seeing him trying to take out his anger on a piece of dried boar was a bit funny.

“What’s with you? Your courtship not going according to plans?” Zac asked as he glanced over.

The demon snarled and threw the piece of food down the wall, telling Zac he hit bull's eye.

"Did you know?" Ogras asked as he angrily looked at Zac. "The brat did at least."

"Know what?" Zac asked, genuinely confused.

"Emma MacHale is a god damn lesbian. She's dating that plain looking bore from the government. All that effort wasted," the demon growled.

"Really?" Zac asked, having some difficulty restraining a smile. "I had no idea. How did Emily know? Emma told her?"

"Apparently there were all kinds of rumors before your world got integrated," the demon said, his frown deepening as he took out another piece of meat.

Zac thought it all pretty funny, but he was also a bit confused. Emma moved here to get away from the government, but at the same time dated one of their top officials. Was Julia not aware of the disgusting things Ogras mentioned earlier?

It appeared that the slavery in Greenworth wasn't an isolated incident, rather a well-kept secret, where only a few like the Mayor were out in the open. Important personnel could ignore rules, or even basic human decency, as long as they provided the government with enough benefits. The reason Emma wanted to leave the government was that some of the stars got provided personal slaves, in some cases even children.

Those people were the ones that Ogras went around killing during the night, and after Zac learned of it he felt it was for the best. He wanted nothing to do with a bunch of degenerates like that. The important part was whether those actions were supported by the Government at large, or whether it was a small faction within the splintered organization that acted in such a way.

He was planning on getting to the bottom of things by interrogating Julia, though he didn't want to waste time and effort on that with the wave incoming. It might also prompt Emma to cause trouble, and he would rather wait until he had the Lord-title in his hand.

"I think it's great. At least I won't have to keep poisoning her while she lives in your compound," Alea suddenly interjected, dragging Zac out of his thoughts.

"What?" Zac asked, turning around with wide eyes. "What did you do?"

"What's with that look? I just sprinkled a little something that would give her the runs and feel bloated and a bit feverish. Not in the mood for a roll in the sack," the poison mistress said with a small smile. "She thought she had some had come down with some tropical fever."

Zac couldn't help snorting when he heard Alea's confession. He had avoided the movie star the last two days while mentally preparing for the third wave, hoping to improve as much as he could. He had mainly focused on incorporating his evolved Dao into his fighting style, and trying to gain a second Seed upgrade.

The first part went great, and he felt he possessed a far better command of the Middle Seed of Heaviness by now. The area he could expand his Dao field with the mental attach had also almost doubled after having consolidated his insights. Unfortunately, things hadn't proceeded as smoothly in regards to his meditation, and his other seeds were still at an early stage.

"Don't go poisoning any more of our people," Zac only said before turning back to look out over the wall.

"Yes, dear," Alea answered with a wink.

**Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect town from denizens of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: 5 E-Grade Nexus Crystals, town upgraded to City, status upgraded to Lord. (2/3) [00:00:08:44]**

Zac closed his menu after taking a quick glance at it, taking one last look over his forces. This time it wasn't just him and the demons up on the wall waiting for the wave to arrive.

The Valkyries stood at the ready, having swapped out their spears for bows. Few of them were excellent marksmen, though the improved attributes made most people decent shots by now. Of course one might not need pinpoint accuracy if there was a sea of monsters beneath the wall.

There were also the group of tinkerers from Cogstown, who looked the most excited of the bunch. They stood next to two newly mounted cannons making final adjustments. Zac could only shake his head when he saw that a few of them actually talked with the cannons, drawing weird glances from the demons closeby.

The first time he saw the craftsmen Zac had thought Basso was dumping his town lunatics on Port Atwood in a bid to get rid of them. Most of them had large patches of fur singed off and missing extremities, or even limbs. More than anything they held a burning madness in their eyes, giving off a very unsettling feeling.

But Zac soon realized he was wrong when he watched them mount one of their cannons on his wall. They were extremely skilled at what they did.

The tinkerers hadn't cared the least about the various species walking the island but instead focused on the various technologies available. They had been astounded by human contraptions such as computers and cars, but they clearly focused more on things connected to the system, which Zac felt was for the best. This group, in particular, was mainly concerned about weaponizing Nexus Crystals and turning them into bombs, and it was their experiments that had caused them to look like they did.

Zac felt it was a bit of a shame that he couldn't introduce them to Karunthel, the Creator foreman, as he thought they would hit it off quite well. Zac understood why the beastmen were so excited. They saw the third beast wave as an opportunity to field-test various inventions.

Finally, a contingent of roughly a hundred Zhix warriors orderly stood at the wall as well, ignoring anything around them. With them stood Ibtep, who had changed its large backpack with an equally large bundle of wooden javelins with steel tips. The Zhix had been fetched from the island after Ibtep made the offer, and the Holiness had agreed, though the supersized Zhix itself stayed in the hive.

The civilians stayed in the temporary town within the walls, with some having volunteered for various tasks to help out. Those who volunteered were mainly those from the surrounding islands, who already were used by being constantly accosted by beasts. The experts from New Washington had been shocked to hear the town was about to be attacked, with some even demanding to get sent back.

Zac ignored those voices though, telling them that getting attacked was the norm in the multi-verse and nothing to get worked up over. Julia had wanted to participate in the fight, but on Ogras' advice she was placed under house arrest during the wave. There was no need to give the government official a panoramic view of the powers of Port Atwood.

This was the last wave, and the last opportunity to gain contribution points. Many of the demons had held on to most of their points until now, hoping to gain enough for some more valuable treasures. People would hold nothing back this wave, perhaps even displaying hidden cards just to push themselves further on the contribution ladder.

There was also the competition between Zac and Ogras. Zac had amassed a bit over 80 million contribution points during the waves, whereas Ogras was at a 59. The general consensus was that Zac would keep his lead during the final wave, while a few staunch supporters of the demon lord insisted that Ogras had held back until now, and was ready to explode into action.

Zac personally didn't care about all that. He only hoped that he would be able to finish the wave quickly, so his plans with the teleporter wouldn't get ruined. Of course, he had a backup plan by now.

If the wave wasn't finished and the deadline was nearing, he'd simply step through the teleporter and snatch up John Bernard, and go back. He had wanted to avoid that, as it might result in some retaliation from the government, but as things had progressed up until now Zac felt it didn't really matter. It was just one more act of aggression to add to the tally.

The minutes slowly passed as everyone was waiting for what would come out through the portals this time. When there were less than a minute left Zac suddenly heard a familiar voice in his mind.

**[Special Challenge activated. To become a leader of a world you need to possess the strength to defeat any invaders. Rewards adjusted.]**

Zac groaned as he looked around, and it seemed only he heard the voice. Ogras saw the odd reaction from Zac and raised a brow.

"What's going on?" the demon asked, but Zac had no time to explain when three huge pillars flashed into existence.

Each pillar was far larger compared to the earlier ones, and reminded Zac the incursion pillars. However, the pillars differed from both the sinister red one he'd been living with for a month, and also each other.

One of the pillars was a sickly turquoise color, and it almost looked like ghosts or specters were rotating around it. Zac was immediately reminded of the intelligence report he got from Ogras. The part about the various forces also mentioned the incursions.

The incursions themselves differed in appearance depending on who controlled it, and the turquoise one clearly matched the description of the incursions belonging to the Undead Empire. The second one was pitch black, and it felt like Zac was looking into a black hole as he stared at it.

Zac tried to figure it out, but couldn't remember any force having such an incursion in the information missive. It likely meant that it didn't belong to one of the large forces. That didn't mean it belonged to a weak force, but rather a smaller one that the missive didn't include due to the low likelihood of encountering them. There was no telling from just the light, and it could be either weaklings or a small elite force full of powerhouses.

The final incursion was multicolored in gold and red. Had it only been the lustrous golden color Zac would have thought it belonged to a church, as it radiated holiness. However, the blood-red intermixed gave a more sinister feeling, and it infected any purity of the gold luster.

"What the hell? Incursions?" Ogras muttered, and many of the demons looked confused as well.

"I got a quest update from the System," Zac admitted with a sour face. "It said something about me needing the power to defeat invaders to become a leader. Perhaps it felt the normal challenge wasn't annoying enough?"

As if on cue Zac suddenly heard a shout from behind. It was Janos, who once again stood at the ready at the control crystal for the Array. A large fractal had appeared above it, and any light from the crystal was gone. Zac quickly opened up the town management menu, and as he saw the message inside his sour face turned to a full-blown grimace.

“Shit.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 151 - The Three Forces**

The Town Protection Array was actually blocked by the system. Zac quickly brought out one of his Thunder Punishment Arrays, and to his dismay found them looking like lifeless marbles no matter what he tried.

“The Ruthless Heavens indeed,” Ogras muttered with a sardonic grin. “I guess we’ll have to do this one by hand.”

Zac started to wonder whether the System could actually hold grudges. He had cursed at it quite a bit in the beginning when he was stuck alone on the island. Was it retaliating now by increasing the difficulty to unreasonable levels? Or did it try to suppress him since he wasn’t a cultivator?

In any case, the sight in front of him spelled trouble. He wasn’t contending with one force now, but three. More importantly, he was placed against intelligent forces this time. The wolf horde had been somewhat easy to handle since they were dumb beasts, but the same couldn’t be said about actual invading forces.

They would have organized armies and employ strategy in trying to defeat him. He was sure that the system had provided some pretty good incentives to them so that no diplomatic solution was possible. Not that he thought it was possible in any case.

“I think we should charge in, catch them unaware,” Zac said with some hesitation.

He didn’t want them attacking the wall since it would offer scant protection now that there was no Array to secure it. It might work against dumb beasts, but against an army of high leveled warriors it was only a small diversion.

“There’s no way they would be unaware, rather the opposite. They should have been given plenty of forewarning, perhaps even having the opportunity to accept or decline the quest,” Ogras disagreed.

“We should scout them out and gauge their strength. There are some differences between the pillars and normal Incursions. They are smaller. I think their forces should be limited,” the demon added. “If they were completely confident in defeating us they would already have rushed in. The fact that they are playing it safe is telling us something.”

Zac gave a start and once again looked at the three pillars. They felt huge where they shone in the distance. However, Zac had to agree that they were quite a bit smaller compared to the one with the demons. That red pillar had stretched endlessly into the sky, clearly visible even from the other side of the island. It had felt like it reached the heavens, and apparently, even the closest islands had seen the red light when the demon Incursion was active.

These pillars were large, but not to that point. They were many times higher than the Ayr Hive, but that's was about it. Zac wasn't sure what it meant, but the size of the pillars had indicated the difficulty of the wolf waves. The pillar that sent through the Fiend Wolf was quite a bit larger compared to the ones before it.

"So we just stand here and wait? It's too passive," Zac frowned with impatience. He was in no mood to let the invaders run rampant on his island. Who knew what kind of mess they would create while they stayed on the wall like some turtles.

"It is, but sometimes we need to waste time to save time. We can send out a few scouts to check things out. I'll even go myself. But we shouldn't antagonize them until we know their relationship. Who knows, they might even fight each other. The undead forces are notoriously unwilling to work with almost any other force, and they might just attack the others before turning their attention to us."

Zac nodded after some thought. Though it sounded implausible it might be correct. The goal of those forces should be to kill him and he could only die one time, meaning that only one force would get the reward. Perhaps they would even succumb to infighting for the honor to kill him, provided that they felt he would be easy to handle.

Besides, charging in like a barghest wasn't the best idea. Who knew what cards these people had up their sleeves. He didn't even know what forces two of the incursions belonged to. Gathering intelligence first might be the smartest play.

They had stood at the walls for a few minutes by now, and there still wasn't any activity. Unfortunately the incursions were far enough that they couldn't see their forces due to foliage blocking the view.

"Very well, let's gather some intelligence," Zac said, feeling unsettled by the inaction.

He almost hoped that a wave of invaders would come running through the forest at them, screaming and waving their weapons. A full-frontal assault would be perilous, but it would also be easy to handle. He just needed to take out his axe and go crazy. Now he was unsure what to do or expect.

Ogras nodded and disappeared into the shadows. Not long after Zac saw a few figures blend into the forest as they moved toward the pillars of light. Most of the demons sat down by now with closed eyes, patiently waiting to explode into action. Zac had to stop himself from pacing back and forth like a wreck since he didn't want to show how unsettled he felt by the situation.

He had already defeated one incursion, but that was different. For one he had learned that Clan Azh'Rezak was far weaker than the average when it came to the power of the invading groups. Usually the opportunity would have been snatched away by a more powerful force, but Azh'Rezak managed to hold on to it due to some turbulence in their area.

Secondly, he had deployed guerrilla tactics against the demons, and they didn't even know about his identity until the very end. And finally the war with the monkeys provided a stage where he somehow luckily came out victorious.

It was different now, with him being a defender in the open, and at least the undead were a formidable force.

To take his mind off the situation he opened his quest screen. It was mentioned earlier that his quest and rewards were updated, and he wanted to see what he would get.

**Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect Town from denizens or forces of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: Limited Structure depending on Grade, Town upgraded to Global City, status upgraded to Lord. Road to Hegemony opened. (2/3)**

There were some differences from earlier, with some more apparent than others. The description had gone from saying only denizens to “denizens or forces”, which made sense as Ogras had told him already that denizens were referring to beasts.

The rewards had also changed. The paltry 5 crystals had been swapped to a Limited Structure, and Zac guessed it was something similar to when he got the Creator Shipyard, though the wording was a bit different.

His town would also be upgraded to Global City instead of City. Since the prompt earlier had mentioned world leader he’d almost thought for a second Port Atwood would become a capital. However, it seems that wasn’t the case. He wasn’t clear about the difference between a City and a Global City, apart from guessing the latter was better.

Finally there was the Road to Hegemony. He had no idea what that meant, but he sensed that this addition might be the most important one. He wasn’t sure whether to ask Ogras about it or keep it a secret, so for now he tabled the matter. He needed to actually destroy the three incursions for any of this to matter.

It took almost twenty minutes until Ogras was back, during which time Zac only got more and more impatient.

“There are a *lot* of enemies,” Ogras said with a frown. “There’s a veritable sea of Zombies, tens of thousands. There’s also Aberrations and three to four-meter corpse golems. Unfortunately, it seems the horde has a Lich or Corpse Lord. Otherwise they’d have mindlessly charged at us by now, sensing our life force.”

Aberrations were dead beings that were naturally formed in ominous grounds, often being a mix of various species and bodies. Not two of them looked the same, as they were essentially randomized mistakes of the universe. Their distinguishing feature was extreme endurance, even for the undead beings.

The corpse golems were somewhat similar, though they were constructed rather than formed. Necromancers or liches created them from a bunch of cultivators to suit their purposes. Usually they were quite large, and a fusion of a group of people.

The more skilled the creator, the more beings he or she could add to the monstrosity, making it stronger. Its height was generally the measure of how powerful it was, where golems above five meters were usually E grade or above.

“The other forces aren’t as numerous, though their warriors are generally far stronger compared to the Zombies. The black portal is owned by a force I don’t recognize. They are either a golem species or something rock-related. It was hard to tell. They’re completely pitch black and gave off cold auras. They seemed to have exceptional perception, as they killed the scout we sent before he even came close,” the demon continued.

“The last force is only around a thousand strong, and they might actually be more annoying than the undead. They’re the fools of the Church of Everlasting Dao. I would wager they are on average stronger compared to our own forces,” Ogras concluded with a sigh.

Zac groaned when he learned who the final incursion belonged to. The Church of Everlasting Dao were the lunatics who went to newly integrated planets simply to eradicate all life. They were of the belief that while the System was compelled to keep integrating new worlds, each time it did so it expended important energy and hurt itself. That, in turn, prevented the System from evolving itself and the multi-verse.

In order to reach nirvana or whatever they tried to kill as many people as they could so that more energy would be freed up for the system. The general consensus about this belief was that it either was complete idiocy, or that it was a front for the church elite to stuff their pockets with their victim’s wealth.

No matter which case was the truth it didn't help Zac, as he was suddenly stuck on the island with a bunch of Zealots. Furthermore, if another one of the incursions were the famously annoying Undead Empire and another was run by insane inquisitors, the third mysterious Incursion likely wasn't any good news either.

"So what do we do?" Zac asked.

"They are holding some meeting at the rock people's place. For now we hope they have a falling out and do our job for us."

Zac nodded but didn't feel too hopeful. He could only spread the available intelligence amongst the ranks, and keep everyone on alert. Soon the last hope of an internal fight breaking out was dashed, as an army approached the wall.

Zac understood what Ogras meant when he said rock-people, as he couldn't really tell their appearance either. They were around two meters tall, and Zac couldn't make out any features as they were unnaturally black. Zac wondered for a second if they all possessed some racial skill that obscured them, but threw the question to the back of his head as he brought out his axe.

The ground shook as the army approached, and huge boulders were magically ripped out of the ground by the rock-people and started hovering above their army, creating quite the image. The rudimentary traps across the battlefield were all but useless against the sentient species as they approached.

The very air thrummed with power around the incoming group, and even Ogras' ever-present grin was long gone as he looked out over their enemies.

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Bishop Orsiccas leisurely walked back toward his camp, glancing at the army of Yrd Stonemen leaving for battle.

It had been an annoying discovery to find that they weren't the only ones to get the blessing of The Boundless Heavens, but that they instead shared it with two other groups. That kind of situation clearly muddied what should have been a great opportunity to make some money.

It was quite convenient that at least one of them belonged to some weak backwater group. They would make great sacrifices for the Grand Plan, keeping the Zealots happy, and in the process scout out the powers of this Monarch-candidate.

This was the third world Orsiccas got tasked with purifying and processing with his fellow bishops, which is why he was chosen to head this special assignment while his brothers kept the activities going in their main base. But this was the first time that he'd heard of a Sacrifice to gain such a blessing this early. Monarch-selects usually only emerged after over a year had passed.

It was also quite the headache to find that the undead scum were here. Whenever the Church met those bastards there was always a bloody battle for the high potential corpses. Losses went up and profits went down.

At least he wasn't up against a proper Lich, but instead a Corpse Lord. While neither were easy to deal with, Liches were nigh immortal save from certain types of attacks. They had proper purifier-forces who trained especially to combat the undead on the various fronts, but Orsiccas hadn't brought any here as he expected to be up against the humans or one of the other three species of this new planet.

Worse yet, the Corpse Lord seemed to be a noble. He even doubted whether he himself was its match. Still, he had a full battle-monk contingent with him, which was enough to decimate the undead forces if it came to that.

Orsiccas caressed his mace with a resolute expression. He wouldn't let this one go even if he had to go up against an undead noble, as the bonus he would receive was

substantial. Not only the reward from The Boundless Heavens, but also the one he would receive from the church for procuring such high-grade materials.

Someone who was already a monarch-candidate would have to be a prime specimen in creating a premium vessel. Human bodies were always in high demand as well, as many powerhouses chose vessels of the same species as their original bodies.

Orsiccas never understood that kind of mentality. Those old goats had lived for tens of thousands of years, yet they hadn't had enough. Instead, they chose to scrap their mortal coil for one of the Church's vessels, even if it meant retraining their bodies from the ground up.

Not that Orsiccas complained, as that very business had enabled him to reach heights he could only have dreamed of, with a clear path all the way to becoming a C-Ranked Cardinal. And in the meantime, he would make a pretty penny in the body retrieval business.

Because to live was to fight, so business was always booming.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 152 - Wallbreakers**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Last chapter for October, another month crossed off. Crazy It's almost been six months since I started writing DotF. It feels like yesterday I was writing the first barghest fight, and now we're sitting at over 1k pages. Time flies

"Fire at will," Zac said with a steady voice and nodded to the grinning beastmen.

The tense situation hadn't affected them, and they gleefully made some last adjustments to their three cannons before they fired them. An insanely loud explosion was heard from each of them, and a shockwave even threw away the people closest to the cannons.

Zac knew those cannons would pack quite a punch, but he was shocked at the scene in front of him. He had barely time to register that the projectiles weren't pellets or cannonballs before the three shots landed. One unfortunately veered completely off-course, but the others headed for the incoming army in the distance who quickly erected a group shield.

A blinding light flashed and a terrifying explosion rattled Zac's eardrums a second later. When he looked out at the battlefield again two huge craters of over 50 meters diameter could be seen, with dead or wounded rockmen all over. Their shields clearly were of little to no use against those horrifying bombs the crazy tinkerers had created with Nexus Crystals.

Unfortunately one of the projectiles hadn't gone off, but the power of those who did was amazing.

Zac hoped they could fire off a few more salvos, but a look over at the Ishiate engineers dashed any hope of them being able to shoot the Nexus Crystal infused bombs again. The three cannons were destroyed beyond recognition, with their barrels

completely twisted and deformed. Two of the tinkers were also down on the ground bleeding from cannon shrapnel, though it looked like they would be fine.

“Send scout parties to the sides of the wall in case the other forces tries to flank us,” Zac said to Ilvere, who nodded and sent a few parties away.

“Ibtep, Joanna,” Zac continued. “Your forces will stay on the wall for this one. Be ready to flee if needed. These rockmen are too high-levelled. Save your strength for the undead.”

Both nodded in confirmation.

Zac was about to continue, but the huge boulders that were floating above the Rockmen suddenly shot out like bullets, soaring toward the wall.

“Shit!” Zac screamed seeing the gigantic incoming projectiles.

“Take the middle ones, I’ll destroy as many as I can to the right, and Ilvere the ones to the left. The others will have to dodge,” Ogras said.

“Start shooting,” Zac shouted at the Valkyries who stood ready at the siege machines, as he got ready with his axe.

The siege machines taken from Rydel were mainly in the type of ballistae, each made with high-grade materials and having inscribed projectiles. None of the shots were close in power to the monstrous cannons of the Ishiate, but they were easily reloaded and one shot after another flew at the enemies.

Another huge shield was erected at the attackers after the initial blast from the cannons, and most of the large bolts were stopped in their tracks from the screen. However, Zac knew that every time one of the inscribed bolts slammed into the magic wall the attackers lost some of their cosmic energy, just like it cost Crystals maintaining his array when it was attacked.

The huge rocks finally arrived close to the wall, and Zac charged up as many blades of **[Chop]** as he could, ready on wall walk to intercept them. After some hesitation, he infused his blades with the Dao of Heaviness and launched his blades in quick order. The blades slammed into a huge boulder one by one, not one missing its target.

As his attacks cut into the stones Zac frowned when he realized that they were imbued with some power as well. The fractal blades managed to destroy the boulders, though barely. The stone fractured into smaller pieces, each around half a meter in diameter. Zac immediately threw a worried glance over at Illvere, who launched his huge ball on its chain toward his boulder.

Unfortunately the demon general only managed to create some cracks in the stone and had to scamper out of harm’s way when the projectile slammed into the wall, completely destroying a section of it. Similar scenes could be seen on various spots of the wall, where large cracks or tears were created.

A few of the ballistae were destroyed as well, though most were left unscathed. The loss of life was manageable as most of the armies were gathered at the length that Zac and Ogras protected. Still, a few casualties could be spotted, mainly amongst those on the edges of the army.

The army of stonemen seemed content to stay at the distance, even though their shield no longer could protect them properly from the ballista projectiles. Some ripped through the magic membrane and killed anything within an area of a few meters.

Normally the bolts should have created more mayhem, but the bolts were inscribed with a lightning attack, and the golems seemed quite resistant. Bursts of lightning bolts flashed amongst the golem-people, but the effect was clearly limited, as only those right next to the bolt were noticeably affected.

“We can’t let this go on,” Zac said with a frown as he saw new boulders rise from the earth.

Ogras who usually preferred the safe option actually nodded, and without another word the two jumped down from the wall and rushed toward the attackers. They wordlessly came to the same conclusion. They would have to attack the army the same way they did with the psychic wolves.

If the enemies didn’t want to come to them, then they would rush at the enemies.

Zac once again charged five huge blades with **[Chop]** as they ran, and unhesitatingly shot them at the same part of the shield in front of them. They slammed into the shield one after another, and finally at the fourth blade it broke through, hitting the defenders behind it.

The black golemoids erected personal shields to intercept the two remaining fractal edges, and with concerted effort managed to stop the first one. But the last one created some carnage as Zac had actually imbued it with the Dao of Sharpness.

Zac took advantage of the opening and with **[Loamwalker]** stepped into the breach, and without pause started swinging **[Verun’s Bite]**. Having once poisoned himself with Cosmos Water had one positive side effect. He had become extremely adept at energy control since he fought the whole first wave without being able to properly restore his energy with crystals or gathering arrays.

Zac’s attacks generally consumed almost no energy, and he only activated his skills for the shortest possible duration. Everything was in order to last as long as possible, allowing him to keep fighting for hours.

Ogras wasn’t as careful with his energy, and the familiar pond of shadows spread out amongst the enemies, reaping one life after another.

However, the rockmen were no weaklings and they mounted a furious resistance to himself and Ogras. It quickly became clear that these things mainly followed two types of heritage. Rocks and ice.

The mages manipulated earth, or to a certain extent their own bodies, in order to launch all sorts of attacks at Zac. It even felt like their skill in stone manipulation was a notch above that of the earth mage demons.

Zac also saw that they weren’t some type of stone golems like he and Ogras suspected since they bled when they were cut down. The blood was blue and the splotches that his Zacs face told him it was cold, but it was blood nonetheless.

The other type of attackers mainly manipulated ice. They either used the element to create surprisingly sturdy weapons or shoot small icicles out as hard-to-notice projectiles.

All in all Zac felt that the fighters were quite strong, but not to the point that it would become a problem for him. He surmised their average power was somewhere around level 50 to 60, if they were average warriors without any special advantages such as unique titles.

Compared with himself with his enormous amount of attributes the assailers could only delay Zac, but not stop his onslaught. They would be free Contribution Points unless they threw out some of their elites soon.

Still, he wasn’t able to quickly dispatch them as he’d hoped. Their rocky exterior made them quite resilient, and they had dedicated defenders to keep the others safe. One wall after another, either wrought from earth or ice, stopped his advance, forcing him to redirect his swings.

It also meant that he couldn't send down the average demon soldiers to help out, as they were about as strong on average compared to these assailers. There were only roughly 150 demon warriors, while there were quite a few more rockmen.

Only the true elites dared to venture out every now and then for a blitz attack, before rushing back to safety. But even though they were careful they sustained some wounds as they were pelted by a throng of ice projectiles. Zac's only other backup was the siege machines who focused fire on the areas of the army far from Zac and Ogras.

Even if Zac was far stronger compared to the golemoids it was a chore to fight with only two hands against a sea of fighters. It reminded him of his desperate escape from the monkey horde once upon a time.

A few of them did everything they could to intercept his attacks, while the others pelted him from a range. Even though he was strong he wasn't invulnerable, so most of his time was spent dodging or circumventing the endless walls in the end.

The attacks were quite strong after all, and Zac couldn't just shrug them off like he usually did with the wolves. He was already starting to accumulate some wounds, though between his gear and Endurance they were only superficial.

Worse yet, the weird attackers had no problem in launching more projectiles while Zac and Ogras killed their way around their ranks. The demon warriors could block a few of the boulders using the same sort of group shield they used during the monkey war, but many still slammed into the wall, and gradually destroyed the fortifications.

Suddenly the rockmen started to retreat, actually sacrificing some of their warriors to keep the duo occupied. Soon Zac and Ogras stood panting next to each other, both covered in blue blood and overlooking a battlefield with hundreds of dead aliens.

Zac sighed as he walked through the battlefield to put the ballista bolts into a cosmos sack. It would be easier to repair them than create new ones from scratch, and he knew he would need to use the ballista again soon.

As he traversed the battlefield he grimaced as he surveyed the damages on the wall. Huge cracks and missing sections all along a section of hundreds of meters made the fortification look like part of some ruins rather than a habituated town. There was no way that the demons would be able to fix it in short order.

Zac didn't understand what was going on. It almost felt like the rockmen had a vendetta with the wall, rather than trying to fight Port Atwood's forces. They sacrificed a significant number of their warriors just to make some cracks in it.

It made no sense after having fought them for over an hour. The stonemen were strong enough that a normal wall without the boost of an array would offer little to no hindrance if they wanted to attack head-on.

They could simply have climbed it in seconds and brought the fight to a melee with the demon army, instead of getting bogged down with himself and Ogras. That would have caused significant casualties to his forces, rather than the small losses from errant boulders.

Ogras seemed to be of the same mind as he surveyed the corpses in the area with a frown.

"I think they are sacrifices," Ogras hesitantly said. "There is only one force that would be impacted by the wall. The undead. The Zealots and the rockmen could simply ignore it. But the stupid Zombies would act like the wolves, even when commanded by a leader. They might try to climb the wall, but they would likely fail, becoming prime targets for our warriors to farm some Nexus Coins.

"So these things are working with the Undead?" Zac asked skeptically.

“They’re probably coerced. No one wants to be fodder. It would be the same with Clan Azh’Rezak if we were in their situation. The Undead Empire and the Church of Everlasting Dao are both huge entities in the multi-verse. They could just order around minor forces to do their bidding, and the forces would have to comply due to fear of impacting their home planet otherwise,” Ogras answered with a shake of his head.

“They are being used as a wall breaker while simultaneously testing the waters,” Zac realized with a sigh.

“Yeah. Our only hope now is that they still don’t realize that we don’t possess arrays, and that we simply don’t care about the walls. But those assholes in the undead army are probably laughing it up right now.”

Suddenly Zac felt a slight tingling of danger, and quickly turned toward the forest. As if summoned by Ogras’ words a dour man stood at the crest of the woods, emitting a dense and powerful aura.

It was a humanoid being standing over two meters tall. On his back was a sinister weapon that looked like a hook that was almost as long as the man himself, completely wrought out of bone. It only took one glance to tell what force this thing came from. The man was deathly pale, while his eyes shone a sinister red.

However, the man wasn’t some handsome vampire, rather a walking corpse. There was no rotting flesh, but there was a strong sense of undeath, and the man could by no metrics be called handsome.

“Shit, it’s the big boss himself,” Ogras muttered and readied his spear.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 153 - Gambit**

Zac silently stared at the undead entity and was mentally getting himself ready for a desperate fight. However, the corpse lord suddenly blazed into action, and suddenly his bone weapon was in front of him. Almost at the same moment, Zac heard a loud bang from the wall. It was a sound Zac vividly remembered, as he almost died the last time he heard it.

The Corpse Lord wasn’t as frantic as Zac was back at the auction house, and didn’t even break a sweat as he blocked the bullet with his weapon, giving Zac a clear indication of his power. Zac even had thoughts of fleeing, as he wasn’t sure he’d be able to kill this entity.

The Corpse Lord made the choice for Zac as plans and stratagems were flashing through his head. The undead sneered and receded back into the woods, followed by a few hulking corpse golems who stood behind their lord like bodyguards. It appeared the Undead leader was biding his time, or perhaps the sniper scared him off.

“Shit, it’s a noble I think,” Ogras muttered with a frown as he watched the undead disappear amongst the foliage. “Those things are extremely hard to deal with.”

Zac could only nod in acknowledgment. The man, if they could be called that, only silently stood in the distance, yet Zac’s senses detected danger. The two quickly finished gathering anything of value before they rushed back to the wall to rest.

“Who has your gun?” Zac suddenly asked, looking over at Ogras who grinned a bit.

“The old bastard. It appears he was in a human army long ago and has some knowledge of guns,” the demon responded.

Zac knew the demon was talking about Sap Trang, and was quite impressed with both the timing and aim of the old fisherman. It was a shame that the attack wasn't successful, but it was worth a try.

The fight had taken quite a large portion of Zac's energy, but it was likely the same for the rockmen. They had blocked most of the bolts, and the Valkyries and the demons had kept shooting for the better part of the hour until they finally ran out of ammunition.

“Good job,” Zac told his squadron as he returned to the wall with Ogras in tow.

This time they simply left the corpses on the battlefield, as it felt too dangerous to venture out and collect them at the moment.

“I'm sorry we couldn't be of more help,” Joanna only answered with a somber expression.

“You did plenty,” Zac said, seeing the Zhix leader walk up to him.

“The Zhix are willing to join you in the next wave,” Ibtep said as he approached.

“Thank you. However, it is better you conserve your strength until the undead arrive. They have an almost endless number of warriors, and at that moment it will be all hands on deck,” Zac answered.

Zac gave a few more orders before he sat down and closed his eyes, each hand holding a Nexus Crystal. Only an hour elapsed before they once again were accosted by the rock-men. There was still no sign of the other two forces, and it felt more and more true that they were actually using these rockmen as pawns.

Even though he wasn't completely restored Zac got up on his feet with a groan and got ready to intercept as many of the boulders as possible. This time a few more of the elite demons with ranged capability also descended the wall in order to get close enough to attack as well.

However, even with increased numbers, their efficiency was quite limited. Individual warriors or mages didn't have the capability to breach the strong barriers the rockmen erected, so they were forced to use the breaches created by the ballista bolts.

Zac knew that it would be mainly up to him and Ogras to fight these things. There also was Alea and Janos, but both Ogras and Zac felt it better if those two stayed hidden for now.

The two generals had the type of skills that could turn a battle around, and they weren't pushed to the point they needed to use them yet. Both Zac and Ogras could slowly kill their way through the rockman army without exposing their hidden aces, though it was quite tiring.

The only upside was that he was getting huge benefits from the fighting. The reward for each kill was substantial, with every rockman giving thousands of nexus coins. Even though it took some time to kill each of them the speed with which he gathered Cosmos Energy was unparalleled. If this continued he'd likely gain a level within the day.

At the same time Zac knew this couldn't go on. There were only two of them, and they were starting to tire after only two waves. If they allowed the rock men to keep harassing their front lines like this he and Ogras would wear themselves out in no time. And these golem-like beings were the weakest of the bunch. Some drastic measures needed to be taken.

“If that Corpse Lord dies, what will the other undead do?” Zac suddenly asked the demon who was meditating next to him.

The demon opened his eyes and shot a suspicious glance at Zac.

“They would be like rabid dogs who got out of their leash,” Ogras said. “Why? What are you planning?”

“We can’t let this go on. There’s no way the two of us can fight off the whole rockman incursion, and after that face the two elite forces,” Zac sighed.

“You’re just going to jump into the thick of it? Are you insane? You will be in a sea of undead. Even if you find him it’s not for certain he will even fight you,” Ogras said.

“I have to believe they are after my head for their quests. I think he will fight me, rather than risking some subordinate getting the kill credit;” Zac retorted with a shrug as he took out his one and only remaining E-Grade Crystal.

“You know, risking your life like that isn’t the only option,” Ogras said and threw a pointed glance at the distance, toward the teleportation array. “If you’re dead you can’t save your sister.”

“You know how desperate the situation is for our planet. Only a fifth of humanity remains, and the incursions haven’t even begun their attacks in earnest. This might be my best chance to gain power and secure a foothold for myself and my family. If we keep fleeing we will sooner or later be hunted down, as our enemies will only grow stronger,” Zac said and closed his eyes.

“You’re thinking in some all-or-nothing scenario. There’s nothing stopping you from becoming a powerhouse even if you lose your lordship and town,” Ogras wheezed out.

“I know, but I must still try. But prepare our contingency. If I fuck this up we might need to flee in a hurry. And create some diversion if possible.”

“Sigh... Fine, you god damn lunatic. We’ll see if we can shake up the Zealots while you go to the undead. If the big priest joins the battle against you, then you can just lie down and wait for death and reanimation,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes.

“You have a plan?” Zac asked curious.

“Well, it’s time for my brave generals to earn their pay,” Ogras only answered with a small grin.

Restoring his energy reserves went quite quick with the E-Grade crystal, and only after 30 minutes he was mostly restored. That meant he was essentially in full fighting condition, as he’d conserved his usage of his Dao during the two waves, opting to mainly use simpler attacks.

“I’m ready,” Zac said as he stood up.

“Wait, take this,” Ogras said as he threw over a necklace. “It’s a minor trinket that will mask your life aura. It will allow you to get closer to the zombies without them sensing you. Might help you get a move on the big boss before they can react.”

“Thanks,” Zac only said and immediately put it around his neck.

“Remember, Corpse Lord Nobles are crazy durable, they are like walking tanks. Don’t waste your time using weaker attacks, and go for their brains. They can keep going without limbs or even a heart, but they still need their brains. And wait with attacking for another 15 minutes. We need to get ready on our side.”

“I understand, I will do my best. Good luck to you,” Zac said as he looked at his watch and then jumped down the wall toward the inner area of Port Atwood.

Just as he landed he heard a mumbled ‘good luck’ from above, and he immediately kept running toward the south. Zac planned on taking a slight detour,

coming at the undead incursion from the opposite side. It would waste a few minutes, but it would hopefully help even further with his ambush.

When he'd traveled enough he quickly climbed over the wall and like a hare skittled into the woods. He immediately started running full speed, still not making a sound. This was his home turf, and together with his Dao of Trees he almost merged with the area, instinctually knowing where to put his feet and which areas to avoid.

He unerringly moved toward the undead incursion in a parabolic trajectory, but some sounds interrupted his charge. He quickly stopped and deviated a bit toward the sound. He suddenly saw a person moving through the woods, carrying a struggling body.

At first Zac thought it was a demon, as it had reddish and scaled skin, but he quickly realized it was some sort of lizard man, though it didn't have a tail. Since it was neither undead or a golem Zac knew it must be a cultist.

Zac also recognized the man he was carrying. It was Adran, who should have been safely back at the camp. His feet and legs were bound, and he had a large black eye. Clearly the administrator hadn't given up as he kept struggling, making the lizardman stumble and swear.

Zac had no time to figure out how the hell the cult member had managed to infiltrate the town and kidnap one of their leaders from right under his nose, but he quickly went to action. He activated **[Loamwalker]** and appeared right next to the lizardman who didn't even have time to exclaim before his decapitated head fell to the side.

"Are you ok?" Zac asked as he untied the knots on the rope holding the demon.

"Thank the heavens you found me. That bastard appeared from nowhere. He clocked me right in my eye and bound me, then I was suddenly in the forest," Adran wheezed. "I think it was some random teleportation since the guy seemed a bit disoriented at first."

Zac frowned and looked at the fallen cultists.

"Honestly I found you by chance, we didn't even know you were kidnapped. The town is over that way," Zac said as he pointed toward the wall. "There is no enemies between here and there, hurry back and warn everyone we might have intruders in the town proper. Try to gather everyone so they can't sneak off with someone."

"I will. Thank you again, Lord Zac," the administrator said with a bow and hurried back toward Port Atwood.

Zac only continued onward, his unease with the situation only increasing. He needed to be quick. Zack believed a large reason why the forces were so hesitant to attack was that his cards were still largely hidden. But if the church captured one of his citizens they would soon learn that they only had a scant 150 proper fighters and two powerhouses.

That knowledge might give the legion of cultists enough courage to simply charge his town. He needed to create chaos within the undead ranks before something like that happened.

He kept pushing forward for a few minutes until an unbelievable stench entered his nostrils. Zac frowned and slowed down, but unhesitantly kept moving forward.

As he advanced Zac noted that the forest was ending, the trees seemingly simply gone from where they once stood. Port Atwood still hadn't gotten around clearing out the forest this far out, so the System must have done it for the incursions.

He silently crept to the edge of the woods, praying that the necklace ogras gave him would be efficient enough, and peered out over the incursion.

As soon as he looked over the field he understood where the stench came from. The area around the incursion was completely filled with rotting undead. Patches of skin were slouching off from their faces, and some missed limbs.

Zac frowned when he noted that almost all of them were actually Asians wearing normal, though ripped, clothes like suits or t-shirts. He had a suspicion before, but this seemed to confirm it. These invaders were likely actually from incursions on his own world, not from some other random force in the multi-verse.

He didn't know if it had any implication or could lead to trouble down the line, but that was an issue that he would have to save for the future. He already had way too much on his plate at the moment to worry about such things.

Zac silently scouted the army, trying to find the figure he saw earlier. There was a sea of zombies in front of him, but the large Corpse Lord should be easily identifiable from his grisly weapon, and the fact that he wasn't rotting away.

But before he could locate the leaders his eyes were drawn toward a few huge monoliths that were arduously carried by a few titanic corpse golems.

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#### **Chapter 154 - Diversion**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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"Where are we going?" Sap Trang asked with some trepidation while looking at his traveling companions.

The world had truly turned crazy. It was just absurd that he was currently walking through a forest with a group of demons. He still wasn't used to these horned beings, even after a month of living together.

"Zac is attacking the Undead Leaders in a bit, we need to cause a distraction," Ogras answered tersely as the small group pushed forward.

"With only the four of us?" Sap asked skeptically.

It was just him and three demons. Of course, these particular ones were amongst the strongest of the bunch. The poison user could likely kill the whole human squads on their island alone, and he had personally felt the might of Janos' illusions when the demon trapped him and the other refugees for days in the infirmary.

He hadn't even realized that days passed in the illusion, or that he was trapped in an illusion at all. He had thought they were back in his little village before the world got integrated. He had sat in on his small boat with a handmade rod, watching the sunset.

When he got home from his trip his grandson was there, visiting during a break in his university studies. Duc was truly his pride and joy, the first one in the family who was getting a proper education. Yet he hadn't forgotten his roots and visited home every chance he could.

Sap had almost been reluctant to be released out of the illusion, as what more could an old man wish for than what he received in there. However, reality waited for no man.

“All these questions,” Ogras retorted with a frown. “Yes, just the four of us. We’re heading to the cultists to create some chaos. If possible gain some contribution points.”

“I just don’t understand how this old man fits into the picture,” Sap hesitantly said. “If the three of you can’t handle it then a poor fisherman won’t make a difference.”

“Do you think I had you train with my toy just for fun? It’s time to provide some assistance,” Ogras said with a small grin.

“The sniper rifle? I’ve only trained a few days,” Sap said, his long brows rising in alarm.

“You were a soldier before, you’ve held a gun. That’s more than what can be said about those little chicks Lord Zac brought back the other day. Besides, Lord Zac likes you, so I’ll keep you safe,” Alea said with a charming smile, which only served to make the old man more nervous.

Sap didn’t know if his new Lord and this woman were in a relationship, but she gave him the creeps. It wasn’t right how she could kill someone with just a light touch, her whole body being poison. Then again, that was none of his business.

His goal was to become indispensable to the island, which would eke out a path to the future for his village, which was especially important now that the youngsters were back.

He had a strong feeling that even if Lord Zac went head to head against that so-called World Government, Zac would walk out the victor. Between Zac’s monstrous power and the wily demon whispering in his ear, Port Atwood was nigh unstoppable. They needed to get through the current situation though.

“Fine. But if I start shooting their soldiers I will be spotted after a few shots, it won’t cause much trouble,” Sap finally acquiesced.

“Let us worry about that,” Ogras only said with a small smile as the small group pushed into the woods.

They kept moving through the woods in blazing speeds, and Sap was barely able to keep up with the others. He had worked his old body to the bone since he arrived here, but sometimes it felt like there was an unbreachable abyss between himself and these monsters.

Of course, slow and steady wins the race. Sap was aware of that, but unfortunately his time was limited. If possible he would strive to reach E-Rank Race and gain new longevity. He was content with the life he had lived, but if he could watch over his descendants in this turbulent new world for hundreds of years, he would.

Duc was a bright young man, but he was a bit soft. Sap wasn’t sure if he would be able to survive on his own in this world that was far more ruthless compared to the old one. They currently enjoyed the protection of Lord Zac, but who knew what the future might hold. One must always be responsible for his own fate.

Sap saw the huge sinister pillar in the distance, blazing in red and gold. The colors were normally quite auspicious, but the feeling the pillar gave out was horrifying.

The old fisherman started as his shadow suddenly grew and wrapped around him, and quickly looked around to see the same thing happening with the others as well.

Soon they were covered in shadows, at which point Janos waved his hand and another shimmering layer superimposed on them.

“Only speak if necessary from now, and always a low volume. Our spheres will mask us, but the sound dampening is limited,” Ogras whispered. “The three of us will

be responsible for the main attack. Old man, your job is to pick off anyone who looks like a leader or is trying to organize a response. We want utter chaos.”

“What if they find me?” Sap asked with a frown.

“Then start running. Hopefully our actions will keep them occupied,” Ogras answered.

The group finally arrived at some thick bushes that were just a few hundred meters away from the clearing with the zealots. They had already snuck past one group of sentries with the help of the combination of Janos’ and Ogras’ skills.

“Stay inside these bushes. Make no movement or sound, but get ready. The second Janos comes back to your side, start picking off targets. Remember, leaders and people organizing a resistance,” Ogras said to Sap.

Sap really didn’t like hiding alone in some bushes surrounded by crazed enemies who were far stronger than himself, but he also knew he didn’t have much of a choice at the moment.

“What will you do?” he asked hesitantly.

“Oh, you’ll see,” Ogras said with a malicious grin.

Soon the three scuttled away, leaving Sap alone with his thoughts.

*Leaving an old man like this, these youth have no manners,* Sap grumbled in his head, but still gingerly readied the huge sniper rifle, careful to not make any sound.

They didn’t have things like this back in the day when they were fighting in the jungles, but only old soviet-era guns, if even that. Sometimes the shipments had “gone missing”, likely fattening the pockets of some general.

Still, guns weren’t complicated. It was point and click. Sniper rifles were a bit harder to handle since one had to take into account things such as wind and elevation. But since he had started to gain his class he felt himself getting reinvigorated. The arthritis in his hands and knees was long gone, and his mind was sharper than it had ever been.

While he waited for the demons to finish up whatever madness they were planning Sap opened up his attribute page to take his mind off things.

**Name**

**Sap Trang**

**Level**

**28**

**Class**

**Wave Whisperer**

**Race**

**Human (F)**

**Alignment**

**Human (Earth)**

**Titles**

**Adventurer, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Full of Class**

**Dao**

**Seed of Waves - Early**

**Strength**

**31**

**Dexterity**

**16**

**Endurance**  
26  
**Vitality**  
27  
**Intelligence**  
28  
**Wisdom**  
26  
**Luck**  
8  
**Free Points**  
0  
**Nexus Coins**  
18 653

Every time Sap opened his menu he felt like a man reborn. He still remembered the scant 4 points in strength he possessed when he first found out about this screen. He was seventy-two years old, and before the fall he felt death looming close. But by now, between the medicine bath he took and the improved attributes, he felt as strong as a bull.

It made him think of his young lord. Zachary was only twice his levels, but his powers were out of this world. Sap even suspected that the young man long passed 100 points in multiple attributes. He didn't know how that was possible though, as Sap only got 5 points per level since he got his class. There were many things he didn't understand about the man he chose to follow.

How did he defeat an incursion singlehandedly? It was such a monstrous accomplishment that it was mindboggling. Unfortunately, he would never get the answer, as neither the Lord or the demons spoke a single word about anything that happened before he and the spoiled brats arrived at the island.

Second was the mysterious shipyard. He had asked to work there multiple times, as that was where he felt he could provide the most help. But every time Zachary rebuffed him without hesitation. Those who worked there also never left their area, and Sap hadn't seen them since they kept him and the other refugees at the docks.

Finally the attributes of the Lord himself. He had seen the other elites of the world at the auction and instinctively knew that Zachary was almost a different species when he compared and contrasted them. That was why none of the other two mysteries mattered. He was betting on the terrifying power that the lord of Port Atwood kept showing.

Sap didn't feel it mattered if he himself died, if his sacrifice could create a debt that Lord Zac would pay forward to his grandson and fellow villagers.

With that in mind he put his eye next to the scope, and slowly scouted the camp for promising targets. He was careful to not let the scope rest on any of the warriors though, as he knew some had extraordinary senses and could sense threats.

The camp consisted of reddish aliens who looked mostly human with a bit of reptile thrown into the mix, and there seemed to be two groups where neither seemed superior to the other. Sap thought it mainly meant they were different squadrons. He also spotted three suspicious tents where leaders might reside. Those tents would be his targets as soon as the mute demon returned.

Sap kept wondering what the trio would do, and his gut told him it would be something sinister. Ogras, in particular, was a bad influence on Lord Zachary, though it were always the evil ones who stayed alive.

Suddenly he saw something odd. The camp itself looked normal, where the people were minding their business, mainly preparing their weapons and gear. However, above the fortified camp a scary purple gas rose out of nowhere. Sap frowned, not being able to understand what was going on, but his instincts told him it was related to the plan of Ogras.

He was soon proven right as a terrifying roar echoed through the camp.

“POISON!” followed by an equally loud roar. “PURIFY!”

The next moment it was as though reality cracked, as the view of the camp and incursion distorted and was replaced with a similar, but slightly different reality. The soldiers and monks were still there, confusedly looking around.

However, there was also a gas that spread through the camp, and Sap realized that crazy woman must have let something out. He knew it was his time to contribute in a bit, and he was proven right as the reticent demon appeared next to him also carrying a sniper rifle.

“Get ready,” Janos said as he plopped down while panting.

The illusionist looked extremely pale, like he was completely wrung out. Still, he waved his hand a bit and a shimmer covered the two of them.

“Shoot leaders,” the demon said next and after that ignored Sap, who hurriedly looked back into the scope.

At first glance through the scope, he thought the battle already over, as almost all of the church-members were covered in a blazing golden flame. However, soon he realized that was some sort of defensive skill that was likely protection against the poison covering the area.

A bang next to him made him refocus, and Sap quickly localized a monk with a slightly more elaborate gown, and without hesitation pulled the trigger. The man seemed to realize something was up, but it was too late as his chest and heart blasted open into a huge hole from the high caliber rifle.

Sap had no time to lament he wasn't getting any Cosmic Energy from the kill and quickly moved his scope to his next target. In this manner, he picked off various warriors one by one. It was an odd feeling, as he knew that each and every one of those he killed were even stronger than the average demon on his island, and normally would consider him an ant.

Still, he knew that it wouldn't have been possible without the chaos the trio had created. The invaders seemed to realize they were attacked from somewhere as well, but something that Janos had done made it so they couldn't pinpoint the origin of the bullets.

The fire seemed to be an effective barrier against the poisonous winds, as it covered the priests in a cocoon. However, was already too late for many. Quite a few were stumbling around, a few even passed out.

The demon lord and the poison mistress weren't just sitting around either, as more waves of poison kept appearing across the camp, and Sap saw quite a few soldiers get killed by shadow spears suddenly rising up from nowhere. Sap couldn't localize Ogras himself but knew he was hiding somewhere to pick off the targets.

He finally had cleared everyone around one of the suspicious tents and moved his scope toward the next one. There he found a clear target for assassination. It was

a richly decked priest in a unique gown. He was angrily glaring around, with a shimmering mace in his hand.

Sap slowly exhaled his breath, and when he was completely steady he quickly moved the scope to hover over the man's chest and instantly pressed the trigger.

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#### **Chapter 155 - Full Frontal Assault**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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His odd method of aiming was a special technique Sap Trang was using to give the powerhouses as little warning as possible. He remembered how Lord Zac had seemed to know the bullets were coming before the bang even arrived, and he wanted to avoid that situation. Sap didn't know if his tactic worked, but it should be better than doing nothing.

However, the bullet didn't work on this man, as the high priest roared and a wave of golden flame exploded out from him, covering almost half the camp in an instant. The bullet was scorched into nothingness, and all the poison in the area was incinerated.

A few hundred dead or dying lay on the ground, but a large group were still battle-ready, though none looked completely unscathed.

"Conviction!" the man roared while pointing to the west, letting Sap know the high priest was the one who gave the initial warning.

Multiple priests and monks immediately turned toward that direction, and suddenly it was as though the heavens itself punished the whole area to the west of the camp. Blazing golden beams slammed into the ground from the skies, creating seas of fire that covered hundreds of meters.

Sap guessed the two remaining demons were located in that area, and immediately reloaded his gun and in quick succession fired off two bullets toward the high priest.

The demon shot at the same target, as Janos likely also realized the mace-wielding high priest was the largest threat to their operation and Port Atwood.

Unfortunately the bullets didn't work any better for the illusionist either, as every shot disintegrated before they hit the man. Waves of billowing heat kept wafting out from the priest, making Sap wonder just how much Cosmos Energy the man contained. Interestingly enough the fire didn't seem to ham the priests, but rather strengthen them.

Sap didn't have time to mull it over as the high priest's head suddenly snapped right toward his direction, and it felt as though the priest looked back at him through the scope. Great fear flooded Sap's heart, and it felt as though reality went into slow motion.

"Illusion broken, he knows," Janos said and coughed up a mouthful of blood.

Sap desperately shot another bullet at the man, but it was to no avail as the high priest lifted his mace toward his direction, seemingly giving out a death sentence.

A great light shone down on Sap from the heavens above, and he looked up to see boundless fire descending upon him. It felt like the fire didn't only want to burn his body, but even his soul. Sap completely froze, unsure what to do apart from pray to Buddha.

However, shadows suddenly gathered above him, and the fire was blocked right above him, while the forest around their bushes turned to cinders.

Out of the darkness Ogras and a three meter tall hideous monster stepped out. The monster was full of thorns and vines, and multicolored gases wafted out from it, making it look like something out of a horror story.

Before Sap had time to react the monster slowly transformed into the female demon. She was burned and bruised at various places, just like Ogras, but it was undoubtedly her. Sap even forgot the battle as he stared at the woman who frowned as she saw his gaze.

Before Sap could do anything else shadows started rushing toward Ogras, and it looked like they were becoming a second layer of skin on him.

"Split up and flee," Ogras said with a voice that sounded as though it came from the depths of hell as his body turned completely black.

Sap unhesitantly followed the order, as this battle was not something someone like him could intrude upon. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Janos do the same, and further in the distance he saw a squad of furious-looking priests start moving toward them. A primal fear pushed Sap's legs forward, but a morbid curiosity made him throw one last look at the battle.

Ogras looked like a god of darkness with two huge black wings on his back as he hovered facing the high priest who radiated a blazing glory. A gigantic sun burned behind the priest's back, and the mace in his hand seemed to feed upon the celestial fire.

Sap almost thought he was back in an illusion, but knew he wasn't so lucky. The world had truly turned crazy.

The ten-meter monoliths that the Corpse Golems carried around emitted an intensely uncomfortable feeling, as though they emitted the chill of death itself. Zac got goosebumps from their aura even from his hiding spot amongst the foliage. The undead seemed to love it though and even fought amongst themselves to get as close as possible to them.

Zac actually knew what those things were since he had looked up as much general knowledge as he could about the undead forces in preparation for finding his sister. He would likely need to traverse the domain of the undead to reach her, and any knowledge would help.

The large pillars were called unholy beacons, and they were tools that transformed Cosmic Energy into miasma.

There were many unclear points as to how the undead legions could actually exist, but it was clearly linked to miasma. The undead did not cultivate using Cosmic Energy, and to a certain degree it was almost harmful to them. While normal Cosmic Energy was without attunement, it could be considered to be basic building block of life. However, putting that into the body of a living corpse could be quite harmful.

They instead absorbed miasma, or Death Attuned Cosmic Energy as it was also called. Some places where extreme bloodshed had taken place naturally created

miasma, other times the undead forces manufactured it with beacons and arrays. The beacons essentially terraformed an area into an environment that suited the undead.

The need for miasma was also one of the reasons why the undead forces created such a number of zombies. Zombies were generally quite weak unless they managed to awaken their intelligence, but they acted as miniature unholy beacons.

Low tiered Zombies could still absorb Cosmic Energy, but most of it was actually released again as miasma. The process was far less efficient compared to the real beacons, but Zombies were self-propagating, creating a natural spread of the undead domain.

Miasma was not too toxic to humans, and one could actually absorb it just like Cosmic Energy. However, doing so for too long would have negative effects, affecting both the mind and the body. That only went for people like Zac who had a sturdy constitution though.

A normal mortal at level 1 would fall sick and die within a few days if he or she stayed within miasma, while Zac would be able to traverse the whole incursion without much problem.

Zac hadn't expected the undead invaders to actually bring beacons with them to the island. It meant they weren't just planning a quick assault, but a long term occupation of the area after his town was dealt with.

A frown emerged on Zac's face as he surveyed the shining pillars, as he couldn't have those things keep spewing out miasma. It had only been a few hours since the invaders arrived, but the vicinity was already largely converted, giving it a ghastly feeling.

A large part of the island might become uninhabitable if the monoliths were left unchecked for too long. Their presence only reaffirmed his opinion that the third wave needed to be dealt with in a lightning-quick manner. If everything went well here he might actually strike a second leader within the hour, as soon as the Zombies started rampaging.

There were a few more minutes before the agreed-upon time, and Zac kept looking over the area to get a grasp of the forces the Corpse Lord brought. He counted at least fifty Corpse golems, most of which surrounded the monoliths. He could only find five aberrations though. Perhaps those freaks of nature were quite rare, Zac didn't really have much knowledge about them.

Finally he spotted a large tent that looked surprisingly normal, apart from its dour colors. The walking corpses didn't care about a roof over their heads, so it should belong to the Corpse lord. There were a few corpse golems standing guard around it as well, making it quite hard to sneak up on.

However, he was already prepared to fight through a sea of Zombies to reach the Corpse Lord, as sneaking around wasn't his strong suit. Hopefully having the necklace while speeding through the masses with **[Loamwalker]** would be enough to give him a leg up on the enemy.

It was almost time, so Zac steadied his breath for a few seconds, some fear lingering in his heart. However, that fear was eclipsed by a steely determination. Months on this island had reforged him and given him an unflinching mentality. Just seeing the horrid sight in front of him would have made him run away screaming a year ago, but now he only looked at it from a tactical viewpoint.

He took out his axe again, carefully looking it over. Hopefully the upgrade would prove useful in the fight, as the stone cost 6 million. He felt the excitement of the axe when he fed it the stone, but he still hadn't figured out what had changed by using it.

It looked pretty much the same as before, and he hadn't really felt anything different when he killed the rockmen earlier.

Next he put on a nondescript cloak that would mask himself a bit, and without stalling any further rushed toward the command tent when there were five seconds left to the deadline. Each step with **[Loamwalker]** pushed him almost ten meters, barely leaving a shadow in his wake.

Most of the zombies didn't even register Zac's passing by and mindlessly kept milling about. A few gave a start and started growling while looking around with confused faces, perhaps trying to understand what was going on.

Zac didn't bother with them as he infused a huge amount of Cosmic Energy into his arms and axe, wanting to end it all with one swift strike.

Finally he arrived right outside the tent, and Zac was already mid-swing when he appeared. A five-meter fractal blade ripped through the air horizontally, infused with the Dao of Heaviness. A corpse golem stood in the way of the swing, but **[Verun's Bite]** had the force of a train as it ripped right through its dense muscles, completely bisecting the hulking golem.

The blade continued unimpeded right into the tent, but as it was almost completely through Zac felt a painful shockwave in his arm as his swing lost all its momentum instantaneously. A huge shockwave spread out, pushing away any Zombies in the vicinity, and two of the huge corpse golems even fell on their backs from the force.

The tent was rendered into ribbons by the wild energies, showing Zac the interior of the tent. The Corpse Lord stood stable like a mountain, his bone hook holding Zac's fractal blade in place. Zac's eyes met with the sinister eyes glowing like red orbs of the undead leader, and the Corpse Lord's mouth opened into a ghastly grin showing sharp teeth.

"I suspected you might try this, human," the undead warrior said with a sneer. "You think my true death will solve your problems, and you might be right. But just this amount of power won't be enough."

Zac didn't know why he could understand the undead general's words, but it didn't matter. He didn't answer the taunt, instead quickly materializing a new fractal blade. He actually noted that the hand of the Corpse Lord was very subtly shaking, probably meaning that the defense wasn't quite as relaxed as the undead humanoid wanted to make it look.

He remembered Ogras advice and mustered all he had in each of his swings. He needed to end this quickly before he was overrun by a sea of undead monstrosities. Each of Zac's swings was imbued by either his Dao of Heaviness or Dao of Sharpness, and he tried everything in his book in order to create an opening.

The Undead was an even match, the huge bone hook tearing through the air to meet each and every swing. Zac noted with some relief he was actually pushing the man back a bit, and kept his pace up. However, he didn't dare relax as it seemed the undead wasn't using any Dao, and Zac wouldn't believe a leader of an incursion didn't possess a few of them at least.

Zac was also getting a constant stream of Cosmic Energy, as the Zombies in the area unhesitatingly joined the fight between the two powerhouses, and kept streaming toward Zac in an effort to disrupt his rhythm. However, the Zombies were too weak to do much of anything, and most were destroyed simply by the errant energies or shockwaves from the battle.

Suddenly the Corpse Lord jumped back and released a bestial roar. The unholy beacons around them blazed to life and shone with a ghastly turquoise that covered

the whole area. The world turned almost monochrome with all warm colors in the spectrum gone.

It appeared the Corpse Lord was going all out.

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**Chapter 156 - Life versus Death**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Whatever the undead leader unleashed didn't just affect the unholy beacons, but the whole area was affected. The zombies in the vicinity of the fight suddenly shrieked as they fell on the ground, melting with visible speed.

The former humans turned into a putrid goop, and from the puddles a stream of deathly energy rose, joining the energy the monoliths released. Zac hesitantly looked around, and his visibility was quickly getting blocked from the immense amount of miasma rising in the air.

In seconds the whole sky was covered with billowing waves of miasma and Zac felt like a small boat on turbulent seas. The density of deathly energy was skyrocketing where they were fighting, and Zac was starting to feel a bit nauseated. It quickly got to the point it forced him to start circulating his Dao of Trees to combat the nausea.

A torrent of energy was gathering above the Corpse Lord, who started emitting an even mightier aura compared to before. Zac wasn't sure what was going on, but he knew he had to do something about the situation. If the Corpse Lord swallowed up all the energy in the skies he would turn into a true monster.

Zac pushed off the ground and created an overextended edge that he swung in an effort to disrupt the gathering miasma above the corpse lord. He knew he couldn't rip apart the whole miasmatic clouds in skies, but he could at least do something about the part the Corpse lord tried to absorb. Unfortunately, it was like cutting air, and the edge harmlessly passed through it.

Zac knew from the start that his swing might fail, but he kept the swing going and released the edge right toward the closest monolith. The fractal blade flew away, and with a thundering explosion destroyed the undead beacon.

An enormous shockwave of wild energies erupted from the monolith, instantly killing a few corpse golems and hundreds of zombies. It seemed all the cosmic energy and miasma gathered in the pillar was released like a bomb when the beacon broke. Zac suddenly felt a huge surge of Cosmic Energy in his body, proving that the System credited him all the kills.

Zac noted with some relief that the clouds quickly thinned out a bit, and set his sights at a second pillar. However, the Corpse Lord wouldn't have it and quickly intercepted Zac's second strike. The leader seemed taken by surprise by the fact that the fractal edge could detach from the axe, but he wouldn't make the same mistake again.

The undead leader suddenly pushed one of his hands toward the sky with a ripping motion causing two swirling torrents of miasma to emerge from the clouds, quickly transforming into actual fractal beasts. They looked like some sort of worms with huge maws and emitted an intense aura of death.

The two miasma monsters descended and Zac quickly summoned multiple fractal edges and launched them at the beasts. To Zac's disappointment the edges only passed through just like with the clouds, as the monsters were largely incorporeal.

At least the beasts temporarily lost their forms from the swings, and two clouds landed on him instead, completely drowning the area in highly concentrated miasma.

Zac hoped that was it, but to his dismay he saw the clouds starting to reform, and from just standing in the clouds he was quickly growing numb and deathly cold. Desperate for a solution Zac released Cosmic Energy imbued with the Dao of Trees into the area where the beasts were reforming, and it actually worked.

The pure life energy created some sort of reaction in the reforming beasts, leaving two convulsing clouds failing to properly reform. It would likely have been better to just cut them with edges imbued with the Dao, but he still wasn't able to imbue his edges with the Dao of Trees.

Just as Zac breathed out in relief he felt an intense danger and immediately jumped to the side while activating a defensive charge on his gear. At the same time, he started gathering his remaining energy into the fractal on his arm, preparing for a final desperate gambit. If it failed he would have to flee and take as many as he could with him through the teleporter.

The Corpse Lord emerged out of one of the clouds, the air around him distorting from the teeming energy in his body. His whole body was swollen, likely from absorbing an unordinary amount of miasma. The bone hook in his hands shone with extremely concentrated energy, and it made a beeline straight for Zac's torso.

Zac hoped that the erected shield would buy him some time, but to his horror he saw that the shimmering barrier actually cracked soon after the undead leader's weapon slammed into it. It was the first time his gear wasn't able to block a strike, proving the power of the Corpse Lord.

With the barrier destroyed the sinister bone-weapon continued into his gut, and the pain made Zac almost immediately pass out.

It was far worse than a normal stab wound, and it actually felt like Zac was dying. However, he grabbed hold of the hook with his hand, refusing to let go as he finished pushing energy into the fractal on his other arm. The fractal was finally satiated, and Zac pushed forward his arm with a roar.

Reality cracked, and the familiar hand from [Nature's Punishment] extended down toward the Corpse Lord from above. The spatial hole also released a torrent of a multitude of colors that offset the deathly lights of the monoliths.

The Corpse Lord looked alarmed for the first time since the fight started, and without hesitation he pushed backward with immense speed, even giving up on the weapon that Zac was holding on to.

However, he couldn't outrun the gigantic hand that wanted to crush him. As he fled the undead leader stabbed his sharp nails into his own chest while gritting his teeth.

For a second Zac thought the Corpse Lord had made a mistake, but he quickly realized he was wrong. A disgusting black ichor rushed out like a waterfall from the wound the undead created, to the point that the hand from [Nature's Punishment] was getting completely drenched.

“WORLD ROT!” the undead roared, and Zac felt a pain in his arm that even eclipsed the wound in his gut. It felt like his hand was quickly rotting away, and even though he had imbued the hand with the Dao of Trees the protection was limited.

At least Zac’s Dao stopped the hand from immediately disintegrating, and Zac used all his determination to do some damage before it was too late. The rotting hand swooped down to crush the corpse lord, who desperately dodged.

However, the hand was huge, and it at least managed to grab one of the arms of the undead leader, and with a sickening crunch broke it beyond recognition before Zac was forced to release the skill.

It was either that or lose his life, as he was afraid the rot would spread if he let the black liquid keep corroding the huge hand. Zac felt feverish and nauseated, but he wouldn’t let the opportunity go as he mustered some of his last reserves to move next to the Corpse Lord. Zac didn’t use any fractal or skills, only the Dao of Heaviness with the true edge of **[Verun’s Bite]**.

The Corpse Lord was momentarily distracted from the pain of getting his arm crushed, but he still used his arm to block the axe strike instead of getting decapitated. The Axe slammed into the Corpse Lord, whose inhuman sturdiness stopped the edge after only pushing in a small bit.

The Endurance of the Corpse Lord was clearly far higher than Zac’s, and his body was as good as any defensive gear. Zac noticed the undead used some sort of defensive skill though, as the arm was shimmering with miasma.

Zac suddenly felt a primal rage erupt from the axe, and the teeth on it started to rattle. Without warning a spirit of some prehistoric beast with a huge maw emerged from the axe and bit into the shoulder of the Corpse Lord with a growl.

The undead screamed in rage and tried to hit wave it away, but it was an incorporeal being. With a quick motion, the beast ripped out a large section of the Corpse Lord’s shoulder before dissipating into nothingness again.

Zac didn’t understand what just happened, but he felt this was his last chance to kill the undead leader. Both his arms were currently ruined; one from **[Nature’s Punishment]**, while other was almost completely severed from the axe ghost. The axe was also freed from the arm from the bite so Zac swung it down again at the Corpse Lord.

The undead was in a miserable state and kept trying to move away from Zac. His desperate assault was starting to produce real results, even though Zac himself also was in a miserable state.

Zac looked down at his freely bleeding wound, and saw that there was a sickly black tinge to it. It was painful beyond compare, and he quickly swallowed one of his best healing pills to combat the wound. He felt a warmth spread through his body, but it seemed it had small effect in working against this particular wound.

Still, there was no time to worry about this. Zac rushed toward the mangled corpse lord, and with a growl swung his axe. He also ignored his pounding head and infused it with the Dao of Heaviness one time after another. Each swing was like a falling meteor, and the Corpse Lord was struggling more and more in avoiding a killing strike.

Unfortunately the corpse lord possessed some sort of odd skill that made him swap position with a Zombie, foiling Zac time and time again. However, it’s range was quite limited and seemed to cost quite a bit of miasma, so Zac didn’t relent and kept following like a blood hound.

Finally Zac managed to strike out before the Lord once again performed the body swap, and the axe hit down next to the neck of the Corpse Lord, cutting straight down toward his lung, drawing a huge torrent of the black ichor.

The Corpse Lord looked like he was barely hanging on, but before Zac could finish him off a humongous fist closed in on him. He didn't even have time to dodge, and the fist clocked him right in his face. With Zac's monstrous Endurance he was largely okay, but while he wasn't hurt the power of the swing threw him away.

Zac had been too focused on the undead leader, completely ignoring the surroundings, allowing corpse golem to sneak up on him. Zac quickly tried to return to the undead leader deliver the final strike, but the aberrations and corpse golems went berserk as they disregarded their safety and swarmed him.

Zac was feeling woozy from his festering wound and energy consumption, but he grit his teeth and killed them one by one, each kill giving a huge infusion of cosmic energy.

It only took thirty seconds to push past the resistance since he was going all out, unheeding of energy expenditure, but Zac couldn't locate the Corpse Lord as the last aberration fell. He looked all over, and finally found his target right next to the incursion crystal, his bone hook somehow back on his back.

"We will meet again, human. Death won't be a reprieve for you," the Corpse Lord said with seething rage as jumped straight into the shining crystal.

A light flashed, and before Zac even had time to react the undead leader was gone, and soon after the crystal lost its luster.

As if something snapped in the heads of the Zombies they almost instantly started roaring, gaining a bloodthirsty aura. Relief flooded Zac's mind, and he almost sat down to rest. He didn't manage to kill the undead leader, but at least he completed his mission.

But he barely had time to take a breath when a stone spear erupted from the ground, going straight for his heart. It thrummed with abundant ice-cold power, and Zac didn't hesitate in using his second defensive charge.

As the stone spear approached darkness congealed into a stone-man dressed in exquisite gear, and Zac's eyes locked with two black holes filled malice.

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#### **Chapter 157 - Wounded**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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he stone spear slammed into Zac's hastily erected shield, and while it held true this time many cracks spread over the barrier, which was a testament to the power contained in the attack.

It seemed that Zac couldn't rely too heavily on his gear in the future, as its efficacy was limited. He himself had broken through Rydel's protective talisman with

his final attack, and this was the second time he was almost killed from his own shield failing him

“We were treated as fodder, yet in the end it’s the Yrd who will reap the benefits,” the new attacker said with a deep and gravelly voice.

Zac was somberly looking at his new assailer, guessing it was the leader of the rock-men. Its appearance spelled very bad news. Zac was in no condition to fight another intense battle like the last one, even if the rockman wasn’t as strong as the Corpse Lord. Zac had overtaxed both his mind and his Cosmic Energy in his previous fight, and he was barely able to contain the festering wound in his side.

Still, there was nothing to do. He was unsure whether he would even be able to flee if he tried, as the rockman leader seemed to have some type of movement skill as well. But he wouldn’t give up until his last breath, and Zac wordlessly brought up his axe once again.

But before Zac had time to figure out a battle plan a beam of darkness went straight for the rockman, and Ogras appeared right next to him almost simultaneously. The demon touched his shoulder, and the last thing Zac saw before the shadows swallowed the two was the rockman slashing Ogras’ shadow spears to smithereens.

The two reappeared somewhere in the forest and Zac quickly scanned the vicinity for any enemy forces, and only relaxed when he noted they were alone. He was about to ask why they didn’t stay and fight, but before Zac could open his mouth the demon keeled over.

Zac finally took a good look at his companion and was shocked at what he saw. The demon was in even worse state than he was. Grisly wounds and burns covered multiple parts of his body, and everything from down from his left elbow was simply missing, leaving just a bloody stump.

Horrified Zac hurried toward Ogras and tried to help him up.

“Are you ok?” Zac asked with concern. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Stop staring, carry me back to the wall,” Ogras wheezed back, and Zac could comply as he picked him up and started running, the pain in his side almost making him pass out.

The wound in Zac’s gut burned like someone was groping around in there with a hot poker, but he could only bear with it for now. He already tried eating one of his best healing pills, but it virtually did nothing for him.

He would need to consult the physician when he was back. He couldn’t ask the demon about it either as it looked like Ogras was barely conscious at the moment.

Zac was having trouble staying awake as well, but he stubbornly pushed forward one step at the time. His vision was closing in on him, but he refused to topple over. Finally the forest gave way to the prepared battlefield, and the sight of the ruined wall entered his eyes.

Zac summoned strength from god knows where and resumed his run toward safety. Each step was a challenge, and he almost fell into a few of the crude pits, but eventually he reached the wall, only to see the demon soldiers nervously waiting.

Fearful and despondent eyes looked at the pathetic figures of Zac and Ogras made, clearly feeling that all hope was lost. The two didn’t look like heroes making a triumphant return, but rather like the vanquished returning in defeat.

“What’s with those faces? Lord Zac prevailed over the Corpse Lord Noble, and the undead are going feral as we speak, attacking friend and foe alike,” Ogras roused and shouted with a powerful voice, and took out a lizardman head out of his pouch.

“The leader of those fucking cultists didn’t prove a match against a true demonic warrior either,” the demon continued and threw away the head, its arc drawing mesmerized looks.

“Their leaders are dead, their lines are in disarray. We won! It’s time to reap some contribution points.”

“Take your positions!” Zac followed up with a roar, and the demons and other squads others formed proper lines along the broken wall with newfound vigor.

Joanna and two other Valkyries came rushing toward Zac, who slumped down on the ground behind the newly formed lines.

“Are you really ok?” she worriedly asked, but was soon pushed out of the way by Alea who went down on her knees next to him and checked his wound.

“Your wound is filled with highly concentrated miasma, you need to get rid of it or it will spread,” she said with a low voice, careful not to let anyone else hear.

“I tried eating a healing pill, didn’t work,” Zac tiredly muttered as he took out a few normal Nexus Crystals.

“I know you have some sort of nature Dao, use that as well for now,” she said with a sigh.

Zac opened his eyes and properly looked at the poison mistress. She was in bad shape as well, with many bloodied spots on her dress. He looked around and saw Mr. Trang stand close-by with one of the huge sniper rifles on his back. He had a somber expression Zac had never seen before, and he warily gazed at Alea next to him.

Alea followed Zac’s gaze and sighed.

“We attacked the cultists, things got out of hand. Ogras saved us and stayed behind to fight. It seems he won. We’ll explain it later, recover for now,” Alea quickly recapped.

Zac knew there were things that were missing from that explanation, judging from how Alea and Sap looked, not mentioning Ogras himself. But for now he could only focus on recovery.

Actually he hadn’t dared ask Ogras what happened with the Church while they fled back toward the wall, afraid of the answer. But it seemed Ogras had actually fought to the point he lost a limb in order to not only distract, but destroy, the cultists.

Zac described the appearance of the leader of the rockmen detail in case he would try something again, then closed his eyes and resumed absorbing the Nexus Crystals. He wished he could follow the advice of Alea and also use the Dao of Trees, but his head felt like he had a concussion, and he was afraid he’d pass out if he actually tried to use a Dao at the moment.

Zac instead fully focused on recovering his Cosmic Energy, but only after ten minutes a multitude of roars interrupted him. He quickly glanced over and saw it was a sea of undead who were rushing toward their army.

“I killed most of the strong ones, but wake me up if you start getting problems handling it,” Zac said to Alea who was still standing by his side.

“Don’t look down on us demons. While we might not be monsters like you, we’re no weaklings. Just rest up and let us and the little spear-kittens you are training solve this. Oh, and the insect people seem particularly motivated,” Alea said with a slight smile.

Zac couldn’t help looking over at the small Zhix contingent, and saw they were visibly irate.

“Unholy things. Abominations,” Ibtep said and angry clacking spread amongst his kind.

Zac shook his head and kept focusing on his recovery. His headache had subsided somewhat by now, but he still didn't dare use his Dao, and his wound kept hurting like hell.

Soon the army clashed with the Zombie horde, and Zac kept surveying the battle from a part of the wall that was still halfway standing. It seemed that neither the cultists or the rock people were present, and Zac could only pray it was due to them having their hands full with their own undead hordes.

For now his army was doing fine, and the unrelenting waves of undead served mostly as fodder. There were some Aberrations and Corpse Golems left but they either were dealt with by groups of Demon Soldiers who whittled them down, or sometimes a lightning bolt from the ballistae ended them.

Even the contingents of Valkyries and Zhix could fight in hand to hand combat, though their combat tactics were quite different. The former slaves used large shields as roadblocks as they methodically stabbed the zombies with their spears, felling them one after another.

The Zhix were far more aggressive, bisecting the Zombies one by one, and simply shrugging off the occasional swipe from them. Still, there was some sort of unspoken coordination between the insectoid warriors, as any time one of them risked to be seriously injured a spear or a knife suddenly arrived from someone else to neutralize the threat. There was some sort of order to the apparent chaos, but Zac couldn't figure it out.

Almost an hour passed, and there was still no sign of the stronger forces, and Zac was starting to get worried that they were up to something. A sudden movement to his left made him look over, and he saw a pale-faced Ogras get to his feet, a thick clump of shadows covering the stump on his left arm.

"What are you doing? Sit down and rest," Zac said with raised brows. "They are doing fine."

"I just lost an arm, no big deal. I'll regrow it later. I am mostly restored apart from that, and I don't need the hand to use my skills," the demon answered with a shrug.

Zac knew the demon was lying, but Zac wouldn't stop him. He knew the personality of the demon. Ogras was selfish, careful and calculating, but he'd actually fought to the point he lost an appendage and almost died for Port Atwood. Zac knew it wasn't as easy to regrow the limbs as the demon let on. It was certainly possible, but the pills were quite rare and expensive.

Besides, even after having regrown the limb it took time and effort to redraw the pathways and retrain the limb. Losing an arm was no small matter for a warrior, and it would take years to get back on track.

"Don't overextend yourself. The last leader is out there somewhere, he's unharmed and there's no way these Zombies can kill him," Zac said with a tired voice.

Ogras only nodded before shadows gathered around him, and he disappeared.

The battle raged on and it was as though the undead were unending. The Valkyries had been forced to back away, as they were starting to make mistakes due to being completely wrung out. However, Zac knew that each one of them had gained a significant amount of Cosmic Energy from the intense bout. He had killed a couple of zombies before, and he knew they gave a few hundred Nexus Coins each.

The Zhix warriors lasted a while longer, though they eventually had to reluctantly back away as well, leaving only the battle-hardened demons to defend the long stretch of ruined wall. They couldn't clump together, as that would allow the

zombie horde to pass them by and go after the numerous civilians who still were in the town.

A lot of demon craftsmen and other non-combat classes were also helping out, constantly building temporary fortifications along the destroyed wall in order to shorten the distance the defenders had to cover. They used everything from chopped down trees to random boulders.

It didn't look pretty, but it worked well enough as long as it was tall and sturdy. They were up against braindead zombies, and almost anything sufficed.

Zac looked over his army, seeing that almost no one was unharmed after the unrelenting battle. Zac was quite happy that the Zombies in the multi-verse weren't quite like those in the movies. A bite from a zombie didn't turn you into one.

The wound would likely get infected, as the zombies were crawling with all kinds of bacteria, but that was about it. One had to actually die first to turn into a zombie, where miasma entering the corpse caused the transformation. That's why there also was no cure, since even if one cured the zombification, the cured patient would still only be a corpse.

There was some scuffling next to him and Zac looked over to see a bandaged Janos stand there, silent as usual.

"I heard a bit about your feats with the Zealots, great job," Zac said.

"Hm," Janos only answered with a slight nod.

Zac didn't mind, as he was too tired to keep up a conversation in any case. He kept rotating between silently meditating with his eyes closed, and occasionally overseeing the battlefield. However, as he once again was about to close his eyes a terrifying sense of danger erupted in his mind, and his eyes opened up wide.

He looked around but only saw the taciturn illusionist still standing next to him. However, in his hand was a slender sword Zac had never seen before, and it was moving straight at him.

Zac could only helplessly watch the as the blade plunged into his chest.

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**Chapter 158 - Betrayal**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Searing pain exploded in Zac's chest as a blade ruthlessly pushed toward his heart. He was out of defensive charges from his gear, and instead had to settle for desperately moving his torso slightly to avoid getting his heart skewered. The blade still slid in between two of his ribs, and he was seriously wounded though he avoided any lethal damage.

Cosmic energy started gathering as various thoughts were flashing through his head. Were the demons finally making a move on him? Did Ogras' injuries make him impatient to seize control? Or was Janos just going rogue, just like Namys?

Zac coughed up a mouthful of blood as he scrambled to his feet, but the piercing sound of a sniper rifle made him quickly throw himself on the ground again, the wounds in his body only worsening. His vision was swimming but he desperately looked around to see what was going on.

Janos stood in front of him with a confused look on his face as he looked down at a large hole in his chest that was gushing torrential amounts of blood. Soon after the demon collapsed right next to him. Zac quickly looked to the origin of the sound and found Sap Trang rushing toward him with a determined expression, a smoking sniper rifle in his hand.

Each breath was torture, but Zac forced himself up again, and quickly took out one of his healing pills. It might not work against the miasma in his old wound, but at least it should help against his new one. He quickly swallowed it with a shaking hand as he brought out his axe with an enraged expression.

The commotion caused both demons and humans to look over, and scene with a dead Janos and heavily bleeding Zac caused widespread confusion. The Valkyries scrambled to create some distance from the demonic warriors, while the demons confusedly looked at each other, hesitating what to do.

It didn't take long before Alea rushed up toward Zac, but she was stopped by a huge fractal edge being directed at her.

"Stay back," Zac coughed with a grim face, blood still flowing down his mouth and from his wounded lungs.

Sap didn't hesitate either, but pointed his reloaded gun at the poison mistress, all the while warily scouting the vicinity. Alea looked startled but immediately moved back a bit with some sadness in her eyes. Ogras himself was still suspiciously absent, and Zac couldn't spot him at either the battlefield or amongst the defending army.

A warm glow gathered in Zac's chest and he took a few more ragged breaths as the pill worked its magic. However, he didn't have time to really rest up as Janos' body bloated up and with an explosion of golden flames erupted into an inferno right next to him. Zac quickly grabbed Sap and flashed away with the help of **[Loamwalker]**.

However, just as he reappeared some distance away another sense of impending doom rattled his mind, and he quickly threw himself and Sap to the ground. A freezing chill erupted in his legs, and he quickly looked down to find it skewered by a black icicle. His whole leg was turning completely numb from the frigid spike, and he wasn't even able to extract it as it had completely frozen the area of his thigh.

With a groan he got back to his feet, ignoring the pain in his leg, and with mad swings intercepted a storm of small icicles following the large one. Zac looked around and finally found the source of the attacks. It was the rockman leader who Ogras helped him escape from earlier.

It looked like he was trying to fish in muddy waters and take advantage of the fact that the other two leaders were dead or gone from the island. However, while Zac was caught unaware by Janos' betrayal he was in far better condition right now compared to when they met last time.

He had absorbed quite a bit of energy from the Crystals by now and could manage a short battle even with his wounded chest.

Zac unhesitatingly pushed forward with **[Loamwalker]** and appeared right in front of the surprised golem leader with his axe mid-swing. However, the leader was a veteran fighter, and a thick wall of black ice materialized out of nowhere to intercept Zac's strike.

A powerful shockwave erupted from the impact, and Zac had to grit his teeth together to not let out a whimper from the pain. His swings carried a tremendous amount of force, and the shockwaves only made his wounds worse.

A great boom resounded in the air, and a chunk of the rockman's side was blasted away, causing blue blood to paint the ground. It was Sap Trang who had timed his shot perfectly with when Zac's swing destroyed the ice wall. The leader managed to react fast enough to avoid his chest getting blasted open, but at least it wounded him. Thankfully this boss wasn't able to completely stop the bullets like the Corpse Lord was.

The rockman roared and suddenly the area started trembling. Zac felt a new sense of danger as he saw the area rapidly freeze.

"Run!" he shouted as he activated his movement skill, deftly dodging an ice spear that followed by a veritable torrent of attacks that flew in all directions.

Zac's shout had warned quite a few, but a few Zhix, Valkyries and demons were caught in the large ice storm the rockman created. Even the demon warriors caught inside soon succumbed after desperately having defended against the onslaught of ice spears from above and earthen stalactites from below. In just a few seconds the whole area was transformed into a confusing mess of icicles, ice walls, and jagged rocks.

Zac was forced to keep moving about using his movement skill, while wildly waving his axe to destroy the projectiles that kept whirling toward him. But the projectiles were in the hundreds, and he couldn't destroy them all.

Luckily the power of each individual projectile was limited, and with his Endurance they only created shallow flesh wounds. However, whenever an icicle hit the new wound on his chest or the festering one on his side he almost keeled over from the pain.

And it was at exactly one such time that the rockman suddenly re-emerged right behind Zac, giving him an acute sense of danger. He lifted his axe to try to parry whatever the rockman had planned, but suddenly a few spikes materialized around the two, and unerringly slammed into various spots of the Rockman.

The leader wailed in pain, and Zac took the opportunity to swiftly decapitate the man with a horizontal swing. A huge surge of Cosmic Energy entered his body, but Zac didn't care about any of that. He quickly looked around and saw a grisly scene.

Alea stood some distance away, covered in blood from head to toe. She was impaled in three spots by frozen stalactites, and her whole body was heavily wounded from the uncountable small icicles that were rotating in the air. She had a strong constitution in order to handle her poisons, but not to the point she could shrug off attacks as Zac did.

Their eyes met and Alea gave a small smile before her eyes rolled up and she collapsed on the floor. Zac didn't hesitate, but instantly moved to her side with **[Loamwalker]** and scooped her up in his arms.

Since the Rockman was dead the ice storm ended, but the huge ice walls and rocky formations that trapped him were still there, forcing him to run through the maze.

If he was alone he might have just punched his way through or jumped over the obstacles, but with the Alea's wounds he didn't dare to do anything so drastic.

As he ran he suddenly heard the familiar unfeeling voice.

**[Mission Complete. Calculating Grade. Grade: B. Adding 4 hours of Contribution gathering. Incursions close in 30 minutes. Contribution store remaining time: 24 hours.]**

It was the first time Zac actually heard the System's voice when he completed a quest. Usually there were just prompts that showed his progress. He briefly wondered if there was some special reason for this, but he didn't have time to mull it over as he was out of the icefield.

Zac found himself close to the back of the battlefield. Most of the demons were still focusing on keeping the Zombies at bay, but a small defensive perimeter had also been created with a dozen demons standing prepared at the edge of the frozen field. Sap was standing next to them looking fidgety.

"Young man, are you alright?" Sap shouted as he ran up to Zac as soon as he emerged from behind a protruding rock.

The old fisherman was still carrying the sniper rifle around, warily looking down at Alea in Zac's arms.

"Did you..?" he hesitantly said, seemingly afraid to continue.

A few demons were warily looking at him as well, their eyes darting between Zac's face and the unconscious and bloodied demon general in his arms.

"Don't look at me, look at the Zombies. Alea risked her life to save me, and thanks to her the last of the enemy leaders is dead," Zac said with a hoarse voice as he carefully put her down and fed her a healing pill.

The demons relaxed somewhat then they saw the pill Zac fed her. It came from Rydel's Cosmos Sack and was a well known top tier pill in the demonic factions.

"The quest is completed, the final leader is dead. You have four more hours to rack up as much Contribution Points as you can, but after that you won't gain any anymore. You have another 20 hours to buy from the Contribution Store before it disappears as well," Zac said. "The Incursions will close in 30 minutes. That means that the rockmen and the remaining Zealots will likely flee."

He wasn't sure about the last statement, but he hadn't seen either since he returned from the wall. The rockmen had taken significant losses earlier, and they were also the force closest to the Undead incursion. Zac doubted they would be a problem, since they should have their hands full.

He was more worried about the zealots, as they didn't seem the type to just give up in the face of death from what he'd read about them. Crazy fanatics rarely took the most logical actions. But they were also missing, which was fine with Zac for now, as he needed to rest and Ogras was missing.

The demons looked ecstatic at the news and started to fight the endless undead with newfound vigor. With all three of the powerhouses gone the war was essentially over. There were some weird things going on, such as the betrayal of Janos and the absence of Ogras, but that could wait for at least four hours. Now it was time to reap some benefits.

Zac let two of the non-combat demons carry the unconscious Alea away, and sat down again with a sigh.

"Thank you for your help today. You have made huge contributions to Port Atwood in this quest. You don't need to stand guard, go kill some zombies. They will give you a great boost in experience," Zac said as he looked up to the old fisherman with his rifle.

"Young man, everything might not be as they seem. Those flames that the mute demon exploded into? They were the very same ones all the lizardman Zealots used. I lost sight of Janos as we fled back toward the wall, and he might have been replaced somehow," Mr. Trang said after some hesitation.

Zac looked over surprised at the old fisherman who only shrugged his shoulders indicating he didn't know. Zac could only pray that what the old man said was true, but for now there was no way to confirm it.

Soon Mr. Trang sped off without another word, putting the rifle into a Cosmos Sack. Left alone Zac once again started to focus on recovery, though this time he didn't dare close his eyes. Instead, he kept vigil over his surroundings as he circulated the Dao of Trees.

He was still mentally wrung out from the battle with the Undead Lord, but he needed to do something to stabilize the wound in his side, even if his head was pounding. At least it seemed the Dao of Trees didn't take much mental strength to passively circulate through the body, and the effects were noticeable.

As Zac sat down he opened his quest panel, and a wave of relief hit him as he looked over his quest.

**Incursion Master (Unique) [COMPLETE]: Close or conquer incursion and protect Town from denizens or forces of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: Limited Structure depending on Grade, Town upgraded to Global City, status upgraded to Lord. Road to Hegemony opened. (3/3) [00:23:58:03] [00:03:58:03].**

The quest was really complete. It was a quest he'd had in his quest menu for almost five months, and it was finally done with. Zac took a deep breath and looked up at the skies.

There wasn't any great joy in him from the huge accomplishment. Of course he was relieved that he wouldn't have to keep fighting the waves anymore. But rather being excited about the rewards, he was excited about something else.

He could finally, and without worries, go about finding his sister.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

### **Chapter 159 - Infiltrators**

The pain in Zac's side kept burning as he sat down and meditated. No pill he owned worked on the wound, as the miasma in his body was stubbornly refusing to dissipate. The demon physician had examined the wound after the battle calmed down, and he was sure that it wasn't the miasma itself that was the problem, but rather that the miasma contained some Dao.

It reminded Zac of the fight earlier, where the hand from **[Nature's Punishment]** rotted into nothingness in less than a second from the so-called World Rot the Corpse Lord summoned. Zac believed there was a good chance that the undead leader possessed a high tier, or even peak tier Dao in something related to death or rot, which was why his wound refused to get better and instead kept trying to spread through his body.

His only solace was that the vibrant energy generated from the Dao of Trees somewhat alleviated his problems. It wasn't to the point that he actually healed, but it managed to stop the spread of miasma and contained it in his wound. However, that meant he was forced to use the Dao almost constantly, and that he still needed to walk around with an open wound.

He currently sat in one of the secluded courtyards in his mansion, slowly going through the events. He was in no mood to look over the restoration of the wall or calm

down irate citizens. After he killed the last leader yesterday, there was not much of a battle. He realized after a while that the arrays were once again active, and he activated the town protection array without hesitation.

It ensured the safety of the town, and also allowed the tired out Valkyries to gain some Cosmic Energy by killing zombies with bow and arrows from the safety within the shield. It might also have been him erecting the defensive array that ensured that a final attack never arrived from the proper forces.

Still, before it got to that point the losses weren't insignificant. They'd lost Janos, 7 demon warriors, and 9 Valkyries. A few Zhix had died as well, but Zac didn't worry as much about them since they weren't formally his people yet. Most of the losses occurred from the Rockman leader's area attack, though some of the Valkyries died from making mistakes.

Alyn had said the losses were acceptable, as most untested squads had large losses in their first battle. Their deaths would be the foundations for the survivors to keep each other safe. Still, Zac felt bad about so many of them already having died since he took them under his wing just a little while ago. He had already told them as much when they signed on, but talking about it and seeing it actually happen were two different things.

Instead of helping with the restoration work Zac instead focused on his wound. He kept trying to utilize his Dao in various ways in order to heal himself. He was also waiting on news from Calrin, but he didn't hold much hope. Other than that he was simply waiting for the timer for the quest to reach zero. He still hadn't received his rewards yet, and he assumed he would get them as soon as the timer ended.

His wound could be considered to be afflicted with poison, though it was a combination of Dao and transformed miasma. He would need a specialized type of potion to heal his particular wound, very much the same way a specific poison required a specific antidote. There were also higher grade panaceas that would heal most types of wounds like this, but those were extremely expensive and hard to get.

Another alternative was to find a proper healer who specialized in purifying Misma. There was no such person on the island at the moment, but perhaps people like that could be found on the border towns close to the undead incursion. But there was still a few days before the appointed time where Mr. Bernard would open the teleporter, so that option was still not available. And it wasn't like he'd pin his hopes here being some healers waiting where he was going.

That left the Dao of Trees. He kept circulating the warm energy the Tree Fractal in his chest generated while thinking back to the vision he had. He was actually having decent gains, but his meditations were interrupted as he sensed the shadows congeal in the building, which caused Zac to furrow his eyebrows.

"So, do you want to talk about it?" the familiar voice said.

"Talk about what?" Zac asked without opening his eyes.

"The fact that you immediately assumed that I ordered Janos to attack you," Ogras answered.

"I didn't know what was going on, so I wouldn't take any chances. It was you who taught me to be careful with friends and foe alike," Zac said with an even voice. "I still don't know what you're planning in that scheming head of yours."

"Don't worry, I am quite happy with our current arrangement. I can move freely in the shadows while you stand in the light, drawing all the attention away from me," Ogras said with a light voice. "And I even lost an arm for this town, you should know where my allegiances are by now."

"I know, and thank you," Zac answered as he opened his eyes and stared down at his own hands.

None of the two said anything for a while as the silence stretched on in the small courtyard, and Zac once again slowly closed his eyes.

"We found him, you know. Janos. Well, the real Janos," Ogras said after a while.

That actually made Zac open his eyes and look over at the demon. Ogras looked a lot better compared to before, but his left sleeve was still conspicuously empty. There was also a burn on his throat that still hadn't fully healed.

"Really, he's alive? That wasn't a corpse puppet earlier? How could a Zealot replace him?" Zac asked with a frown.

"He was followed by a group of priests after he fled back toward the camp. They caught up with Janos and tried to burn him to death with their nasty fire. Janos used his last cosmic energy to create an illusion where he was burned alive while he used an escape skill where he burrowed underground," Ogras said.

"However, he was already over-drafted when he used his ultimate illusion to cover the whole church-camp for a few breaths. He passed out as soon as he went underground," the demon continued with a snort.

"So they thought he was dead, and one of them took his shape, confident Janos wouldn't return himself," Zac finished, and the demon nodded in response.

He was relieved to hear that there really wasn't actually a second betrayer among the generals. Mr. Trang had already told him yesterday that there might be something weird going on, but he wasn't able to tell for sure.

"What about the monoliths?" Zac asked. "Have they been destroyed?"

"Destroyed? No, I had Calrin sell them for two million Nexus Coins each. They are not bad weapons if you want to ruin someone's domain. Too bad we're not able to properly store them," Ogras said.

"Great," Zac said, always happy to earn some extra money. "And the Zombies?"

"Most are dead. Some wandered off somewhere, but the barghest should take care of them," Ogras said. "The only remaining trouble is that we don't know if there are any more Zealots hiding in the town. I had no idea those lunatics were so crafty. I always imagined them being meatheads who just went around burning everything to the ground, leaving nothing behind.

"The fact that they were able to both infiltrate our town to capture Adran and pose as Janos proves that they are far more crafty than that. It's a real headache, as we don't really know whether there are any more of them remaining on the island. I have conducted interrogations with the main personnel though, and the Adran you saved is the real one.

"How do you know that? Do we have a method to expose the spies? That monk didn't even revert back to his real form when he died," Zac asked.

"We don't have any method yet, but I asked the Sky Gnome to get a quote from the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes on a dossier regarding this matter. It will probably be pretty damn expensive, but we might not have a choice," Ogras answered with a grimace. "For now I asked things only the real ones should know."

"What was the first thing you said to me?" Zac suddenly asked.

"... I said 'You natives truly are barbarians, so aggressive'," Ogras answered.

"Who's the shipyard's foreman?" Zac followed up without missing a beat.

"Karunthel, and he's a spider golem from what you told me. And no, I haven't met him myself," Ogras answered with a roll of his eyes.

Zac only nodded in satisfaction.

“What do you mean not have a choice?” Zac asked.

“Our town is pretty small so far, so I’m quite sure we can individually interrogate every single one in hopes of catching any more people in hiding,” Ogras said. “But this capability poses another problem. Who knows what they have done over the past months in the world? Were the ones we met in New Washington even humans?”

A cold feeling gripped Zac’s heart. As he realized the wider implications of what Ogras said. However, he soon calmed down a bit.

“They should have been. The officials used teleporters to get there, they can’t be invaders,” Zac hesitantly said.

“Perhaps, or perhaps the transformation enables them to use teleporters, who knows? Besides, not everyone teleported. What about that Thomas guy, the big boss? What about the clan members of the Marshall clan who stayed behind wherever they live, instead of going to an exciting auction? They can be everywhere,” Ogras retorted.

When Ogras talked about it, it truly sounded like a pain in the ass. Even worse, there might be Zealots hidden in the human ranks who subtly pushed the government toward a path of no return so that The Church of Everlasting Dao later could gobble them up without any organized response.

“So what do you propose?” Zac asked.

“We wait for the quote from the blue bastard. We need to know more, both for Port Atwood and how we relate to the rest of the world. If the infiltration skills the Zealots showed on our island are common, then we can’t trust anyone,” Ogras said with a sigh, but soon perked up. “Besides, it’s time to drag some dividends out of Calrin.”

Zac could only agree and got to his feet with a grunt. The pain erupted in his side, but he could only bear with it, though a sheen of perspiration covered his forehead. At least he had learned to use the Dao of Trees while walking, so he was able to keep the wound in check as he traveled.

Ogras was quite correct about the dividends. He had owned a stake in the consortia for a while now, but the gnome hadn’t coughed up a single Nexus Coin so far. The only thing he’d gotten transferred was 6 million right before the wave hit. That wasn’t profit though, but part of the money the gnome owed him.

As the two slowly walked through the town a lot of people threw surreptitious glances at them.

“Why are people staring?” Zac asked in a low voice to ogras who walked by his side.

“Things are a bit tense. You weren’t the only one who thought a coup was taking place during the wave. It’s a bit tense between the races at the moment,” Ogras said with a shrug. “Hopefully seeing us together will alleviate the rumors.”

The visit at Calrin’s took over an hour, but at least they left satisfied. Zac’s private reserves had swelled with an astounding 48 million Nexus Coins, and that was after paying 15 million for an information missive. It could have been way more, but Zac chose to keep all Aetherbloom in order to train himself and his forces.

The bundles of the magical stalks that Calrin and Ogras procured in New Washington were worth roughly 30 million nexus coins. However, Zac didn’t have much to spend his coins on at the moment and felt it was better to use the herbs to create body refining paste for his people.

The missive from the Pagoda of Myriad Eyes was a personalized query, where Calrin had asked two specific questions. One was how common it was for the priests of

The Church of Everlasting Dao to have the shape-shifting capabilities. The other asked for an identifying method.

The first answer cost 5 million nexus coins, and the second 10 million. Zac wondered just how much money the information network made, if two simple answers cost that much. The Church was a huge organization, and the information they asked for shouldn't be some big secret in the multi-verse, yet they made money so easily.

It turned out that while it wasn't a main heritage of the church, there were quite a few infiltrators in their ranks. One could expect there to be well over a thousand of them in a standard incursion. They were mainly used when the natives were strong and organized, and some planning was required to purify the planet.

The second answer was quite simple. It told them to feed everyone a certain root. It was harmless to most people, but to the lizardmen it was like cyanide, even if they were E-ranked powerhouses. Zac didn't possess any of the root at the moment, but it was quite common so Calrin was already working on procuring a bunch of it.

The only downside was that Zac didn't know whether there were only lizardmen in the ranks of the church. There had only been that species on the island apparently, though he hadn't really seen the Zealots. They never made an actual attack on the town after Ogras' successful attack killed a good portion of them, including their high priest, and they instead returned in defeat through the incursion.

Actually, the reason Ogras had been absent after resting up for a bit was that he once again set out to the incursions as soon as he could. Instead of killing a throng of Zombies for little Contribution he opted to go for the stronger warriors that each gave a great amount of points.

The warriors of the church and the rockmen were just like the demon soldiers, giving huge amounts of energy and coins since they were actually level 75. That bonus apparently transferred over to the Contribution points as well.

The only reason Ogras didn't pass him in total contribution was that the third wave actually only took around 4 hours in total. It took a few hours more apart from that to clear out the unrelenting Zombies, but when the third leader was dead the quest was considered finished.

The third wave was a test of raw power in a sense. The system sent over three powerhouses with their personal armies, while it blocked any defensive or offensive arrays. There was no way to turn it into a defensive siege since a wall couldn't block the attackers, and if Zac ran he would fail the mission.

The only real way to finish it was to possess superior raw power. And the result was clear. Two of the leaders were killed, and the third one was forced to flee while barely alive.

The wound in Zac's side however reminded him that the victory wasn't as clear as it might have seemed.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 160 - Long Time No See**

Since Zac was already up and about he decided to head over to the contribution shop. There was still 7 hours before it closed, but he thought he might as well spend

the points he'd accumulated. He had still not received any rewards from the quest and guessed they would appear when the timer went to Zero.

Ogras had left earlier with some glee, likely happy about his windfall from the shop. The demon had received quite a haul as well, especially as he bought most of the materials in the bazaar with his own money, giving him a large chunk of profit.

Soon he arrived at the Contribution crystal, and the area was filled with people. There were even a few Zhix warriors there, though they kept their distance from others. There were also a few demon soldiers keeping an eye on them.

The Zhix generally respected the strong, but they also hated Cosmic Energy, which made for a confusing situation for the insectoid warriors. They had been quite impressed with the demon's performance against the zombie wave, but at the same time disgusted by the amount of corruption in them.

At least they weren't attacking anyone, which was a step in the right direction in Zac's book. He still held some hope that the Kundevi hive would be the bridge to ally himself with the Zhix population, which had become even more important now as his relations with the new world government had soured a bit.

As he approached the crystal the contribution shop automatically opened in front of him.

**[Contribution points: 59 348 334]**

It wasn't too bad, he'd generated around 18 million points during the third wave. It was less than half the amount he gained during the other two waves, but on the other hand, the wave only lasted for a few hours. He expected a large part came from the Rockman leader, but Zac wasn't sure whether he gained something from the Corpse Lord as well.

He didn't gain any cosmic energy from defeating him, as he didn't actually manage to kill the undead leader, but he might have been rewarded contribution points since forcing the Corpse Lord to flee might have been the largest contribution in defeating the wave.

There was no point in trying to figure out the System's contribution formula, and Zac instead focused on the available items in the store. He still wasn't quite sure what to buy. One thing he'd realized as he fought these powerhouses was that they seemed to have more skills than him.

He'd asked Ogras about it before, and after some prodding, he learned that Ogras got new skills at 60 and 75. In fact, Ogras got more than one skill when reaching the max level of F-Grade. If the undead leader was actually an E-ranked being who was limited to F-Grade when arriving on earth it would explain an even greater amount of skills.

Zac still had some trouble deciding whether to buy some skills to broaden his repertoire, or to get something else. He was afraid that it was a waste to get skills right now when he might get a more suitable one from his class in just a few levels. The short but intense battle had actually given him two levels putting him at level 56 now.

There were no Dao-related items in the store, so he had to focus on something else. He already knew there was no pill or item that could fix his wound either, as that was the first thing he looked up. Finally, his eyes landed on an item called "Fruit of Vitality". It was a stat-boosting treasure that gave a permanent small boost to an attribute.

Stat-boosting treasures were always in high demand, and quite expensive. The most expensive ones by far were those that gave boosts to all stats or luck, and unfortunately, neither one of those types were in the store.

The Fruit of Vitality was a high-quality F-Grade treasure, and according to description could boost his vitality by 3-5 points. It might not seem like a huge amount, but with his title boosts it would be even more. The problem was that it was quite expensive, costing 20 million Contribution points.

Persistent boosts to power were always expensive though, and after some hesitation he bought it. If it was before he might have bought something else, but with the wound in his side he felt any boost to vitality to be necessary.

Next, he bought a Cultivation Manual for 10 million Nexus coins. It wasn't the best in the store, but also not the worst. It was without any attribute and meant for the cultivators at the academy. In an ideal world he would buy a few more so that people could find more suitable ones, but he couldn't spend all his resources on it.

Finally, he actually bought a quest from the store. It was simply called **[Inquisitive Eye]**, and it was one of the possible upgrade routes for his skill **[Eye of Discernment]**. Zac was quite tired of the extremely limited information he got from the skill. It couldn't be used on any treasures or tools, and it only showed a name and level of people he used the skill on.

**[Inquisitive Eye]** didn't provide much for the second problem, but it did give some help with identifying treasures. Apparently, it was possible to trigger a quest to upgrade **[Eye of Discernment]** without having to buy it, but Zac hadn't seen anything of the sort since he got the skill all that time ago.

Paying 7.5 million Contribution Points to start the upgrade process felt like a worthwhile investment. That left Zac with roughly 21 million points. As there wasn't anything else he really needed anymore he chose to spring for another attribute treasure, this one boosting his endurance.

For each purchase a small box appeared in front of him, drawing a few curious glances. Zac did the same as last time and simply put them all into his pouch and left. Next he went over to the Creator shipyard.

"Greetings, Lord Zac," Rahm said as soon Zac stepped into the lobby.

Zac felt almost as though as the dignified Creator liaison was a video game NPC, just waiting in this building for him to come by. He hadn't really seen the creators do much of anything apart from greeting him when he arrived.

"Good day, Rahm," Zac said with a nod. "I need to make a few purchases."

"I take it the monster waves are dealt with?" Rahm said as he handed over a crystal containing all available designs.

"Yes, we finished the third wave yesterday, and the quest ends in a few hours," Zac said with a nod.

"Then congratulations are in order," Rahm said, still with the same expressionless face.

"Haha there you are, brat," a booming voice sounded from the back of the building, as Karunthel moved to the lobby. "I watched your fight with the zombie guy, not bad. You've got grit. You should get some bombs though, you just left all those zombies milling about after you left."

"You watched the fight?" Zac asked surprised, as neither he nor the Corpse Lord seemed to have noticed any bystander.

"I hit a wall in my research so I went out to take a look at your battles. I really like how you blew up the beacon. But you should know you can turn those things into fun weapons that shoot beams of extremely concentrated miasma. It's a waste to just blow them up," the Creator hummed, as always obsessed with creating weaponry.

“I had a few thunder punishment arrays, but the System blocked me from using them just when the enemies arrived,”

“Ah yes, the System is a bit boring in that way. A powerful Technomancer once visited our planet. He had some amazing toys, like a laser that could incinerate this whole planet with a shot. Yet he had to fight with a bow and arrow to gain levels,” the spider-golem said with a laugh. “So what brings you here, more scouting vessels?”

“No, I am looking for something bigger. It needs to be able to transport more people, and also have some fighting capabilities,” Zac said.

The small vessels were starting to become insufficient for his growing town. He needed something sturdier to explore a larger area around his island, and if needed carry far larger groups of people. If they found people on the brink of death on some faraway island they couldn't keep shuttling them back and forth, as that could lock up a vessel for a month.

“I would suggest a frigate or Carrack-classed vessel. The Carrack is slightly larger, with heavier weaponry. It takes a crew of 10 to fully man, 8 if you have someone adept in arrays or battle-systems,” Rahm calmly explained.

“The frigate is a bit smaller, with less durable hull and less weaponry. However, it's far faster compared to the Carrack. The Carrack holds roughly the same speed as the small scout vessels, whereas the frigate can move over twice that speed,” the Creator continued.

“What do they cost?” Zac asked, knowing that Creator vessels didn't come cheap.

“The carrack cost 32 million nexus coins, whereas the frigate cost 26 million,” Rahm answered without giving the foreman time to make up a quote. “Another million if you want them to have spatial arrays.”

“Spatial arrays?” Zac asked confused.

“Making it possible to shrink them, so they fit in any cosmos sack. I don't think natives have access to large enough Cosmos Sacks?” Karunthel said with a teasing grin.

“I'll take a carrack with the spatial arrays,” Zac said with a grimace.

“Always a pleasure to see you, brat,” Karunthel said with a wide smile. “I like you, so I'll make the weaponry myself. It will give them a little extra punch. Who knows, we'll maybe blow up some islands together after all?”

“I'm heading out for a while soon, so we'll have to postpone bombing the archipelago,” Zac with a small smile.

“That's good, you youngsters should venture out and create some ruckus. Otherwise, you'll become real bores,” the foreman said with a sagely nod. “Come back in 3 days to get the ship, or send the demonling if you've left by then.”

Zac said his goodbyes and ventured back to his camp. All this walking around was starting to aggravate his wound, and Zac was finding it harder and harder to keep it under control with the Dao of Trees. He needed to rest up a bit. It felt a bit pathetic, he had the attributes to win in a fight against a t-rex, but he felt ready to keel over after doing some errands.

Zac sat down in his courtyard again, keeping the rotation of his Dao of Trees going to calm down the pulsating wound. He felt he was onto something earlier before Ogras interrupted him, and after some hesitation he took out one of the boxes. It was the one containing the fruit of vitality.

He didn't purchase it simply to get a small boost in stats, he also had another purpose. His frantic usage of his Dao against the torrents of miasma had opened a door

in his mind. It was the unrelenting characteristic of life in the face of death, the struggling light that refused to wink out of existence.

He took out the Fruit of Vitality from the box, carefully sensing the aroma and aura it gave out. It smelled delicious and gave off a fresh and fragrant smell. It was nowhere the level of the Fruit of Ascension, but still really appetizing. Without waiting any further he took a large bite and in seconds he had swallowed the whole fruit.

A warm stream spread through his body, infusing each of his cells with vibrant energy. Even the miasma in his body retreated into a ball around his wound, seemingly terrified of the energy. The warmth kept pulsing in wave after wave, and all the while Zac sat and pondered on the Dao.

The hours passed as Zac sat mesmerized by the feeling, savoring being filled with pure vitality and life. It wasn't the same as the epiphany he had back when he improved his Dao of Heaviness, but it was more like he was able to focus on something that was blurry before.

He understood what Ilvere had meant before, that breakthroughs sometimes come after the actual fight. Zac was finally understanding what he sensed, but was too occupied to completely grasp, during the fight with the Corpse Lord. For some reason, his mind imagined a windswept tundra where storms and harsh weather were a constant nuisance.

Yet a small seed managed to take root, growing and surviving in that horrid climate, through rain and snow, unrelentingly reaching upward. It was the same as he'd felt when he circulated his Dao of Trees in the storm of miasma.

Something changed in him, and the fractal looking like the Tree of Life blazed into verdant colors. He wanted to keep enjoying the moment of clarity, but Zac suddenly felt a presence in the courtyard. Reminiscence mixed with some annoyance in Zac's mind as he spoke up without opening his eyes.

"Long time no see, Abby."

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 161 - Rewards**

The stargazer floated a few meters away from Zac, warily looking at him. She seemed to barely be able to reconcile the unkempt hobo from a few months before with the man in front of her.

"It's only been a few months, but you've changed quite a bit," she said, her beautiful eye shimmering with stardust.

Zac turned over and looked straight into the huge eye that looked like a cosmic cloud surrounding a black hole.

"Yes, well, *someone* told me that the system would kill me unless I defeated the demon incursion. Five months of constant battle will change you," Zac said, not being able to really hide his irritation.

"Ah well, about that..." Abby said, her eye uncomfortably looking away.

Zac only snorted and opened up his menu. Abby could stew in uncomfortable silence a bit.

**Name**

Zachary Atwood

Level

56

Class

Hatchetman (F)

Race

Human (E)

Alignment

Port Atwood - Lord (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - Middle, Seed of Sharpness - Early

Strength

311

Dexterity

158

Endurance

212

Vitality

165

Intelligence

83

Wisdom

78

Luck

93

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

30 694 153

He'd had quite a boost in attributes in the past day. The largest improvement was in vitality, which had increased by over 50 points. While it wasn't enough to start healing up the wound in his side, it still was a great help. The higher Vitality he had, the less mental energy he would have to expend on the Dao of Trees to keep the miasma in check.

The largest source of his improved attributes clearly came from his new Title.

**[Progenitor Hegemon: First to become a Lord in world. Reward: All stats +10.]**

Unfortunately, it didn't give out any new percentage bonus, but it gave the largest flat bonus of any title he possessed so far. Judging from how highly the System regarded lordship, he guessed that becoming the world leader would give quite a boost.

Besides, there was the possibility that he only got the Quest update because he was about to become the first lord, and that update vastly increased his rewards.

Next, he opened up his Dao Menu, and the changed line clearly showed where most of the added vitality came from.

**Heaviness (Middle): Strength +15, Endurance +10, Wisdom +5**

**Sharpness (Early): Dexterity +10, Intelligence +5**

**Trees (Middle): Endurance +5, Vitality +25**

Just as he suspected his Dao of Trees had evolved, this particular improvement giving only Vitality. His insight into the Dao was in regards to the unrelenting life in a tree, and he felt it was a great complement to his other attributes. His Vitality had started to lag behind his other stats, as he'd been forced to focus on Dexterity lately to complement his absurd Strength.

Zac actually also put his 6 free points from last his two levels into vitality as well in order to combat the wound, since he didn't know he would have a sudden breakthrough in his Dao.

Finally, he opened up his Quest Screen to take a look.

#### **Active Quests**

**First step of Hegemony (Unique, Limited): Enter the first trial within a month. Defeat the challenge. Reward: [Tower of Eternity] token, [F-Grade Dao Treasure] (0/1)**

#### **Dynamic Quests**

**Incursion Master (Unique): Close or conquer incursion and protect Town from denizens or forces of other alignments for 3 months. Reward: Limited Structure depending on Grade, Town upgraded to Global City, status upgraded to Lord. Road to Hegemony opened. (3/3) [Complete]**

#### **Class Quests**

Incursion Master was still there even though the timers were gone, so Zac guessed he once again would have to go to the Nexus Node in order to cash out his new building. The other two rewards he already had received.

He was more interested in the other quest though. It was clearly related to the Road to Hegemony. He also knew about both of the rewards. A Dao Treasure was something he had been trying to get since the start, as he felt that improving the Dao to a high enough tier would be the largest trouble for him when trying to upgrade to an Epic-graded class.

As for the Tower of Eternity, he had heard of it as well. Alyn mentioned it long ago, though he would have to look it up at a later point. He wasn't able to do it right now, but he would probably try it after having found his sister. Zac got to his feet with a grunt and turned toward the Stargazer floating close-by.

"You know, violence against System-employees is strictly illegal," Abby said with a nervous shake in her voice.

"Come with me," Zac only said as he walked out of the courtyard.

"I see your home looks much better," Abby said, seemingly desperate to change the subject.

"So why are you back here?" Zac asked, even though he knew the answer. "Another tutorial?"

"No, this time I am here for good. You've become a proper lord, and I've been sent to manage your estate. Powerhouses seldom have the time nor the interest for the

management of their domains, as they are busy exploring mystic realms or cultivating. They therefore need a functioning support system to take care of the minutia of running anything from a City to an Empire,” Abby quickly explained as she hovered next to Zac who was walking through the mansion.

“So you want to run my town? Why should I let you? Someone already told me that you spewed those lies earlier to get yourself a promotion. I am not sure that I want to hand over Port Atwood to someone like that,” Zac said as he stepped into the hall that contained the Nexus Node.

“Who told you something like that?” Abby angrily said. “I might have bent the truth a bit, but it was for your sake. I even got punished for helping as much as I did, I almost lost my job!”

“So this is the lying Stargazer that caused so much trouble?” a clearly annoyed voice echoed through the hall as the shadows congealed into Ogras.

“A demon? Why are you still here? Lord Zac should have defeated you,” Abby said with a frown.

“Zac and I came to an agreement, we’re staying behind,” Ogras said. “Someone has to make sure a power-hungry star-humper doesn’t go out of line.”

“Hey! It was ONE Stargazer who tried to impregnate a star. Out of an endless number of our kind,” Abby angrily screamed at the demon.

“Wait, what?” Zac said, who largely had been ignoring the two bickering. “One of your kind tried to have sex with a *star*?”

“One of the greatest powerhouses of the Stargazers fell in love with a god damn star. Made it his wife, there was a ceremony and everything. The whole multi-verse has been laughing about it for millennia,” Ogras said, barely containing his laughs, and Zac couldn’t stop his mouth from tugging upward as he threw a glance at the irate Stargazer.

“It’s not that simple. And for your information, the two are still happily married 800 thousand years later,” she defensively said.

Unfortunately her explanation didn’t have the desired effect as Ogras started to laugh loudly, and Zac couldn’t stop a snort as he turned back and touched the crystal.

**[Calculating. Grade Awarded: B. Contribution rank: 1. Grade Awarded increased to A]**

Zac frowned as he saw the prompt showing up in front of him.

“Did you get some treasure from being second place on the contribution ladder?” he asked, causing a pause in the squabbling behind him.

“No, no one got anything. Pisses me off, but then again we got quite the haul from the shop itself,” Ogras said with a grimace as he looked down to the stump on his arm. “Might not have gone as hard at it if I knew there was no bonus at the end. Why, what did you get?”

“Nothing either, that’s why I asked,” Zac answered, feeling a bit bad about the situation.

He was quite excited about the A-ranking on the quest, though he would honestly have preferred something that would provide him with a direct power-up. A Dao-Treasure or some fruit that improved all his attributes, for example.

A high graded structure would likely be extremely beneficial in the long run, but right now he was facing enemies from all directions. There were the Incursions, the Undead, the Dominators, and even Humans. He needed short term boosts at the moment.

“Oh WOW!” Abby suddenly exclaimed as she floated over to Zac. “Just what have you done to get these rewards?”

Zac looked over at the Stargazer confused, not understanding what Abby talked about. He had only just touched the crystal, but he hadn't seen the structure yet.

“What are you talking about?” Zac asked.

“Well I'm your assistant, so I have access to the administrative functions of your town. With the help of my class I can see even more than you,” she said looking proud.

“Also known as spying,” Ogras sneered from the side, drawing an angry glare from the Stargazer.

“It's not spying, you know we Stargazers do not play politics, we work for the System itself, or the Lords we get assigned to.”

“Yet the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes, that happens to be run by Stargazers, seems to know everything. How about that?”

“That's because Lords voluntarily sell information, not because we're spying,” she retorted with an angry huff.

“Lords sell their own information? Why would they do that?” Zac asked skeptically.

It was a big problem if the Stargazer started sending back information to an information network, especially if she had an insight into his limited structures. A frown started to emerge on Zac's face as he considered his options. He wouldn't allow the fact that he had a Creator Shipyard be sent to the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes, even if he had to take drastic measures.

Abby saw the look on Zac's face and slowly floated away.

“I swear we don't, and we can't, divulge anything of our administrative districts. Most lords sell the public information of their town since the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes pays well. But those packages don't include any sensitive information, just the standard things that anyone visiting could find out in a few minutes. Lords consider it free money,” Abby said defensively.

“She's probably telling the truth. This time. Almost all Lords in the multi-verse have assistants like this thing, they wouldn't keep them around if there were some loopholes,” Ogras shrugged.

“Thing? We're stargazers, born of the Cosmos,” Abby huffed, a cloud looking like a nebula forming in the hall.

“Fine, fine,” Zac sighed. “What about the reward? How can you know what it is? It hasn't even been built yet.”

“I put a hold on the construction so that you can decide where you want it.”

“So, what is it?” Zac asked curiously, and even the demon shut his mouth and looked over in anticipation.

“Shouldn't we do this without... Any security risks?” Abby asked, making no effort to hide what she was referring to as she looked straight at Ogras.

The demon only snorted and ignored her comment.

“Ogras is the second in command of the town, and he already knows about the Creator Shipyard. We're already stuck together for good or bad. Now, what is it?”

“It's an Ancient Dao Repository. Probably someone sold it to the system after finding it in some mystic realm,” Abby said, no longer able to contain her excitement.

“A what?” Zac asked confused, but the demon looked clearly agitated.

“You and your System-blasted luck. I'm surprised it doesn't rain Nexus Crystals where you walk,” Ogras spat out, looking disgusted.

“A Dao Repository is usually one of the most important areas to any force. It contains the accumulation of skills and techniques they’ve gathered over the eons. A proper repository has an autonomous defense system,” Abby explained. “How they work are extremely varied, it depends on what goal the force who built it had. I don’t have that information available.”

“So it’s a building that contains skills that I can get for free?” Zac asked, getting excited.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Ogras said. “Even the permanent skill crystals can’t be just used willy-nilly. There are limitations such as a maximum amount of usages per month or year. The more complicated the skill, the less the crystal can be used.”

“So, you have to pay to use the crystals?” Zac asked.

“Usually you have to prove yourself somehow. Imagine if some rich wastrel used the crystal for a top tier skill in a force, and suddenly none of the real warriors could learn the skill for a thousand years. Things like that could ruin a force. So there are often checks put in place. Who knows, maybe not even you will be able to gain access to the best skills even though you own the building,” Ogras said, looking a bit amused.

“It doesn’t sound like Dao Repositories are kept a secret,” Zac said as he took out a blueprint for the future Port Atwood. “Place the structure within the inner wall, but closer to the wall than my compound. Also, I need an array to protect the whole inner area, from the Repository to the Shipyard. I don’t want prying eyes, and I don’t want people sneaking in.”

Since apparently Abby was already hotwired into his Town System Zac thought he might as well let her work a bit. It wasn’t like he was too angry with her in any case. Her lies back then might have been partly to give herself a shot at a cushy job, but it was also thanks to those lies he was even alive today. Otherwise, he would have focused on getting off this demon-infested island, trying to get home. He would have died out on the sea.

Abby looked quite excited that Zac seemed to have accepted her, and quickly nodded her huge eye. Only seconds later a large rumbling could be heard, reminiscent of when the shipyard was created. The three looked at each other and without another word headed toward the source of the sounds, all looking very curious.

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#### **Chapter 162 - The Great Sage Brazla**

“What’s a Global City?” Zac suddenly asked, having forgotten about the matter from the excitement of the various upgrades.

“At this stage of a world it is not too different from a normal City. Only global cities can have off-world teleporters, but you can’t build this while the planet still is in its emerging stages,” Abby answered without missing a beat “But the System works with a very strict hierarchy. A Global City is a step above a normal City. The next, and final, step for a D-graded world is a World Capital.

“It means if you manage to upgrade Port Atwood again the System will essentially consider you the owner of this planet. Right now you can kind of be seen as a king of a country. How did you even manage to get an upgrade this early?” Abby curiously asked.

“I guess the system must like me,” Zac said with a sardonic smile. “It changed the rewards when it decided to throw three incursions at me.”

Ogras only snorted but didn't deign to comment.

“Well, it means you are one of the main contenders for becoming a Monarch. A Lord first has to upgrade their City to a Global city before trying to turn it into a capital. Generally, there can be no more than ten World Cities on a planet,” Abby said.

“All that doesn't matter in the face of power though,” Ogras added in. “If you're strong enough you can just walk up to the Capital and kill the leader, and you're the new owner of the planet.”

At the moment it didn't seem very useful to have a Global City, as it was once again related to long-term benefits. However, most things related to building a kingdom was related to long-term planning and benefits.

“I've seen administrative centers in the town shop who handles taxes and contribution systems. Can you do that instead?” Zac asked with a glance over at the hovering eye.

“Well... No,” Abby said, looking a bit embarrassed.

Zac only shook his head and kept walking. Soon they found themselves where Zac placed the Dao Repository. There were already a few people standing around the construction, as the placement wasn't too far-off from the temporary town.

Zac understood why the onlooking demons and humans looked surprised, as they gazed at the extremely conspicuous building. The best adjective Zac could find to describe his new repository was... Gaudy.

It wasn't overly large, with a circular area perhaps fifty meters across. However, within those fifty meters, tens of spires and towers were crammed, reaching for the sky in various directions.

Besides the spires there were golden pillars and crystals of various sizes, seemingly fighting tooth and nail for the limited space. Multicolored lights were shining out of the various structures, and it looked like most of the radiant rays were decorative rather than functional.

“Uh... Do the repositories usually look like this?” Zac could only ask his two companions.

“Well, maybe if the patriarch of the force is overly wealthy hand has no taste. I've never seen such a shitty design,” Ogras muttered, but his eyes suddenly widened as the lights from one of the towers congealed into an actual lightning bolt that flew straight toward him.

The demon barely had time to teleport out of the way before the bolt slammed into the ground where he stood earlier, and Zac's brows rose when he sensed the power contained in the strike. He looked over at the structure, hesitant over what to do. It seemed there was someone inside, someone who could actually hear them.

“I'll go inside and take a look,” Zac said with a shrug, passing by the onlookers who hurriedly backed away.

He was the owner of the structure, so it shouldn't attack him. At least Zac hoped so. While the Repository consisted of dozens of buildings mashed together there was only one entrance as far as Zac could see, an ostentatious gate radiating divine light.

It actually reminded Zac a bit of his first Dao-vision. The celestial army that fought the axe-man summoned a mysterious gate radiating the power of the heavens. The design of the entrance to his new building looked a bit similar, but it felt like a stage production or a cheap mimicry of the real thing he had seen.

While the lights shimmered it didn't contain any sense of power or awe, which was why not only the gate, but the whole structure, gave off the feeling of something not being quite right. It all felt like empty bluster, and Zac was starting to wonder whether there actually would be anything valuable inside.

The gates opened themselves as he got close and something sounding like harp music started playing as he stepped through them. Zac couldn't stop himself from rolling his eyes, but he made sure not to mutter anything derogatory. While the whole thing felt pretty stupid it couldn't be denied that the lightning bolt packed some real punch.

The ostentatious style of the structure was very much the same inside as on the exteriors. However, Zac noticed there was some spatial manipulation at play. It was the same as with the Ayr Hive, as the insides were far larger compared to the outside.

Zac found himself in a gigantic hall, lined with eight enormous statues of various beings. He saw one human holding a scepter, and the other statues depicted other types of humanoids. The floor was made of gold and platinum, and still felt quite over-the-top, but at least the atmosphere was more solemn inside compared to the outside.

"Welcome, human, to the Hall of Endless Skills," a booming voice echoed through the large hall, and Zac looked around for the source of the voice.

The air shimmered in front of him, and a translucent humanoid decked in an obscene amount of jewelry appeared. He looked mostly human, apart from the fact that he was a bit thinner, and there were golden scales inlaid in his face.

"Uh, hello, I am Zachary Atwood, leader of Port Atwood," Zac said hesitantly. "I'm told this is a Dao Repository, are you its castellan?"

"The Towers of Myriad Dao is a Spiritual Treasure, and I am its Spirit. You can call me Great Sage Brazla. I manage and oversee every function of the repository."

"Nice to meet you, great sage," Zac said, deciding to play along for now. "Can you tell me what you contain?"

"The Hall of Endless Skills has four levels. The bottom floor contains 81 F-Graded skills, the second 14 E-Graded skills, the third floor 3 D-Graded skills," the man said while puffing out his chest.

*Endless Skills my ass*, Zac thought but had to admit that there even being E and D-graded skills was quite impressive.

"Do you mind if I peruse the skills for a bit?" Zac asked.

A large screen appeared in front of Zac, listing all of the skills. Zac was pleasantly surprised when he read the descriptions. Not one of the 81 F-Graded skills were something that he had seen before, and all of them seemed pretty strong.

"How do I control who gets to use the skills?" Zac asked.

"The first floor is free to use. After that you need to defeat the floor challenge to gain access to the skills. If you unlock a floor, you can use whatever means you want, The Great Brazla won't interfere. But any aptitude tests will be conducted by me."

"Since the Great Sage Brazla is a benevolent spirit he will give you the standardized test for the E-Graded floor. You only need to defeat a few D-Graded Golems to open it up. But if you don't improve the pitiful surroundings of his body by the time you want to undergo the challenge he might just do something... Unexpected with the tests," Brazla said, his hands moving about erratically.

"Uh.. what? Shouldn't your creator have set certain rules when he created you?" Zac asked, a bit uncomfortable that his new neighbor seemed to have access to D graded golems, and perhaps even more dangerous things.

“Well yes, but that was millions and millions of years ago. The Great Brazla has grown beyond the scope of his creator’s imagination,” the projection said with his nose in the air.

A bad feeling was starting to overcome Zac, as he heard the Tool Spirit had gone from speaking in first to third person in just a few sentences. Abby said that someone likely found this thing in a mystical realm. Had the spirit gone crazy from eons of being alone?

“I’ll arrange for your surroundings to be improved. But it might take some time to find materials that can match with your... splendor,” Zac said. “Is there something else apart from the skills? Like cultivation manuals?”

“We have two side halls, the hall of Celestial Artisan, and the Hall of Blade Emperor. Both were friends of my creator, and they each set up a branching heritage in the great Brazla’s body,” Brazla said.

“Branching Heritage?” Zac said confused.

“One F Graded class leading to multiple E-Ranked, leading to a few D-ranked classes. Various paths for various needs. Ways to get into the heritage path from various common classes,” the Tool Spirit said with some disinterest.

Zac was quite excited, as it sounded like he got a combat and a non-combat heritage at once. Two heritages were enough to base a sturdy force on, just like Clan Azh’Rezak. Furthermore, his heritages were branching to boot, giving more options.

The only problem was who would get access, and who wouldn’t. But that was a problem for later, there was more to explore in here.

“You said there are four floors in the main hall, but you only mentioned the first three. What’s on the fourth floor?” Zac continued, changing the subject.

“The fourth floor holds the Eight Grand Inheritances. Eight powerhouses left their skills, treasures, and their insights here, waiting for the right successor. The Celestial Artisan and the Blade Emperor are two of them. You can see the others around you,” the spirit said as it waved at the huge statues.

“Each inheritance can only be taken by one at a time, and they contain their own trials. If the inheritor fails a trial, he is barred forever from continuing, and the trial will be locked until his death,” Brazla explained.

Zac’s heartbeat finally started to speed up. The skills were good, and the heritages were even better. But this felt like the crown jewel of the Repository. Full inheritances with not only skills, but Dao insights and treasures as well? It sounded extremely valuable.

Brazla seemed to notice Zac’s change in demeanor and it bent itself back so much that its nose was literally pointing straight up in the air.

“You like that human? Let me tell you. Two of the inheritances are even C-Ranked, left by lofty C-ranked Hegemons. Their means and insights are beyond your scope of understanding. But not beyond the great mind of The Great Brazla, of course,” the spirit tool boasted.

“How do I get access to those inheritances?” Zac asked, not even bothering with refuting the golem.

“Each person can only inherit one inheritance, and only has one try. You are the unworthy owner of the Great Brazla, so, for now, you will decide who gets to try which trial. The only requirement is that the trial taker needs to be F-graded when they start their inheritance. But remember, if the one you pick fails, then that inheritance is locked forever for that person,” the specter responded.

Zac asked a few clarifying questions from the Tool Spirit to make sure he understood everything, and after thinking it over decided to leave the Inheritances alone until he was right at the edge of pushing through his bottleneck.

Messing up a C-graded inheritance since he was too impatient and try it out right away would be a huge loss. As for the other spots, he would save them for close friends or promising people. Perhaps even to his children. If he let any random try it out the inheritance would be locked out for hundreds of years unless he killed the trial taker.

In the end he refocused on the F-Graded skills. It was something that could benefit him right now. He noticed that the skills were split up into 3 categories; High, Middle and Low. It was a way to distinguish between the top tier and the average skills Zac guessed, as there were only 9 High-Graded skills out of the 81 in total.

There were another 27 Middle Ranked skills, while the rest were low-ranked. However, it looked like even the ones Brazla considered low-tiered were much better than the things he could buy at the Nexus Node.

In the end Zac chose to add two skills to his repertoire, things he suspected he might not get in any case judging from the characteristics of his class. He noted that most of the skills on the F-Graded floor could be taught around three to five times a year, after which the crystals needed to restore themselves.

The procedure for learning the skills was as easy as when getting them from his class. He only needed to touch the crystals containing them, after which he received a stream of knowledge right into his mind, and the fractals appeared in their slots.

“I will take my leave, Great Sage Brazla, I will meet you again soon. Do not let anyone approach anything for now,” Zac said as he left.

“Of course. And remember, a piece of art such as myself need to be surrounded by beauty,” the Tool Spirit answered as he dissipated into thin air.

Zac left the repository, eager to get back to his mansion and get used to his new skills, but as soon as he exited the doors of the so-called Hall of Endless Skills he was met with a wall of people looking at him like starving ghosts.

“Is it true what it says?” Ogras said, his eyes glittering with greed.

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### **Chapter 163 - The Eight Inheritances**

“Is what true?” Zac asked, not understanding the commotion in front of him.

Ogras only pointed up at a huge signboard that hovered above the entrance. It was over ten meters across, with rays of golden light cascading around it. There was even a painting of Brazla himself, who invitingly beckoned for people to enter.

**Welcome to the Towers of Myriad Dao,  
Home of the Halls of Endless Skills**

**Holder of the Eight Ancient Inheritances:**

**The Invoker**

**The Umbra**

**The Titan**

**The Blade Emperor**  
**The Celestial Artisan**  
**The Undying Fiend**  
**Lord of Cycles**  
**Crown of Despair**

“What the fuck?!” Zac couldn’t help screaming and quickly ran back into the repository.

“Back already human? Have you found the materials to beautify my surroundings so quickly?” Brazla asked as Zac stormed back into the hall with murder in his eyes.

“Why the hell have you put up the sign outside?” Zac asked, not bothering with pleasantries.

“To showcase the greatness of The Great Sage Brazla, of course?” the spiritual tool said, looking confused.

Zac lamented the fact that he didn’t have the capability to strangle ghosts, and instead took a few calming breaths to not explode in anger.

“You need to take it down, right now. If people find out I have a bunch of valuable inheritances here the whole town will be put in danger,” Zac said with as calm a voice he could muster.

“I refuse. If you can’t even protect my body it’s for the best you get defeated so The Great Brazla can find better owner,” Brazla retorted without hesitation, completely unconcerned with the situation. “And don’t you try to cover my great form. I can make the sign as large as your whole town if I need to.”

Zac only blankly stared at the smiling spirit decked in an endless amount of holographic wealth, and without another word left the hall again. Was the system messing with him, after all? First that change in the quest, and then it sends him an insane Tool Spirit? Was it truly retaliating for swearing at it?

The mob was still standing outside, and it even seemed that it had grown in the short while Zac was back inside. Zac could only inwardly groan as he looked over the people in front of him.

“As you can see Port Atwood has gained another boon, a proper repository. It contains 81 different Skill Crystals, a few of which are high graded,” Zac said with a loud voice, silencing the mob in front of him. “You all know how these types of crystals work. Their uses are limited. However, I will open the repository up to those who have fought and contributed to Port Atwood during the beast waves. I will need to formalize the rules, but the order of entering will be based on your Contribution ranking.”

Most of the demons looked extremely excited. Even though they were from an established force these kinds of opportunities were generally left to the elites or direct descendants. Normal soldiers would have to make do with the skills their classes gave them. But having an additional powerful skill could turn a battle around, or help them survive in a situation they’d otherwise perish in.

“What about the Inheritances?” a voice shouted.

“The inheritances are guarded by nigh-impossible challenges with almost no chance of survival. Not even I have taken one for myself. For now, no one will get one,” Zac said.

“Each Inheritance can only be awarded to one person at a time. It consists of multiple stages, and each stage has one-time rewards. If an inheritor perishes, the trial will open again. So to have the inheritance is also to have a target on your back, it is both a blessing and a curse,” Zac shouted.

That cooled the atmosphere quite a bit, and many even looked at each other suspiciously. Zac decided to at least try to control the message since Brazla refused to take down the sign. He didn't mention the heritages or the higher Ranked skills, and instead focused on the less explosive parts of the repository.

The Inheritances was what he really wanted to be kept quiet, but there was no chance of that happening with the sign. At least painting the inheritances as a huge risk might cool down the scheming a bit. The whole situation felt like a real pain in the ass to Zac, and he was happy he now had someone he could dump this kind of annoyance on.

"I guess it's time to call a meeting. Gather the usual people," Zac said to Ogras, who was uncharacteristically helpful as he simply nodded and disappeared into shadows after throwing a last glance at the gaudy towers of the repository.

That left Zac and Abby, who slowly moved toward the temporary town. Zac was happy to see the bustling activity with hundreds of people working together. He believed that it wouldn't take long before the real town was in place.

"Hey, can a Tool Spirit go crazy?" Zac asked when he felt they'd moved far enough from the repository.

"Of course, they almost always do in the end," Abby answered as matter of course.

"What do you mean?" Zac asked confused.

"Well, Tool Spirits are almost immortal, they can live as long as the weapon stays whole. It doesn't matter for unevolved spirits without a sense of self, but when they evolve into sentient beings the clock starts ticking," Abby explained.

"Imagine living an endless amount of time, stuck inside a weapon? Your creator is long gone, perhaps you're forgotten under hundreds of meters of soil or in some hidden chamber, slowly counting the eons? Anyone would go crazy."

"They can hibernate, but the endless passage of time affects everyone. Spirits generally don't go crazy while in someone's employ though."

Zac could only shake his head. He honestly couldn't tell if Brazla had gone insane, or he just had an extremely annoying personality. For now, he would treat him as a lunatic just in case.

Soon Zac found himself in Adran's tent, the meeting room filled with the usual members. Most of the spots were filled with the demons that had drafted the plan for Port Atwood, a new addition was Joanna, but she and Mr. Trang were still the only humans. There were some promising people who joined from New Washington, but it was to soon to have them present at this kind of meeting.

Zac recapped the situation with the repository since not everyone was present at the new building earlier. This time he also mentioned the heritages, though he still didn't mention the higher tiered skills.

The mention of the Celestial Artisan's heritage caused quite a commotion, far more than the other one.

"Why are you so excited?" Zac asked the head of agriculture, who was almost jumping in his seat.

"Clan Azh'Rezak spent very little resources on non-combat ventures. The clan mainly gained its resources through hunting beasts and working as mercenaries. A real Heritage will be a huge boon to even us old people with craftsman classes," he hastily said.

"I am sorry to put some breaks on the excitement, but before we can even discuss perusing heritages and skills we need to properly work out how things will work

going forward. We have been scrapping along for now, but it is time to get structured,” Zac said, quickly cooling down the excited atmosphere.

“Most of us stayed behind on this baby world because things weren’t too good back home at the Clan,” Ogras suddenly spoke up, drawing attention. “But I don’t think everyone here has planned what to do for the long term. What will we do? Where will we go? I can tell you right now that I have decided to stay here as part of Port Atwood.

“You know that Lord Zac is the strongest man on this planet, he is the first Lord to emerge, and is a clear candidate to become a World Ruler. We’re sitting right on top on a Nexus Vein, and as this baby world matures the density of energy on this island will far eclipse anything we ever knew back home.

Rather than venturing out into the multiverse like a homeless vagabond I will stay here and build my foundation. With the repository and other benefits we will seize in the future I believe we will be more powerful than Clan Azh’Rezak in less than a hundred years,” the demon continued.

A few of the demons thoughtfully nodded, whereas others took it as a matter of course that they would stay here.

“I am setting up a proper Structure now that I am a sanctioned Lord, and its organization will be largely based on the heterogeneous forces amongst the demonkind. I will use a Contribution system, from what I understand you had something similar in your clan,” Zac followed up after nodding at Ogras.

“Port Atwood has accumulated great amounts of resources through the monster waves and our struggles, and we can’t just give it away. Only those who contribute in pushing Port Atwood forward will get a share. Since Adran can’t do all that work by himself I am buying a management office who will be in charge of the Contribution system”, Zac explained.

“I have my own pursuits, much like the other warriors, and will not have a hands-on approach in managing Port Atwood. Abby here is my assistant who will be in charge of making sure the town runs smoothly,” Zac continued.

From there the meeting turned into fine details of how the town would be managed. Initially, five ministries would be created, with Zac as the sole leader. There would be no democracy and no councils. Ogras himself wouldn’t have any official role, except as an advisor to Zac himself.

The Ministry of War would not only be responsible of the defense of Port Atwood, but also the war effort against the incursions in the future. Ilvere was placed as the leader of that ministry, with Joanna as a second in command. Their first task would be to create a team that would head to Billyville in two weeks.

Zac himself couldn’t go, but it was no reason he couldn’t send some warriors to gain some money and experience. An Incursion was always a good source of money for those who survived, and the Ratmen were weak but numerous from the sound of it, somewhat like the Zombie horde.

The Ministry of Revenue would be spearheaded by Zakarith, who was tasked to find some humans to help her. Their job would be to keep track of income and spending, and they would also handle Zac’s personal business ventures such as his income from the Consortia and the mine.

It was also decided that Port Atwood would, for the time being at least, own all the land of the town, and as soon as the town was up and running start charging rent. Since he essentially owned the mountain he would also own the residences he planned to build over there, designed to be residences for the elite.

The Ministry of Justice was in charge of keeping the law. For now there hadn’t really been any problems that couldn’t be handled internally, but as Port Atwood grew

many issues would crop up. Ogras recommended Alea, and Zac thought it sounded like a good idea.

Perhaps people would stay on the straight and narrow, knowing the poison mistress would be in charge of punishments. Alea herself wasn't present at the meeting, so she was promoted in her absence. The poison mistress had avoided Zac since their misunderstanding during the third wave, even though he'd tried to find her to apologize.

The Ministry of Works would manage any government projects, the foremost being the construction of the town. A future project would be to do a proper inspection of the nearby islands in order to set up supporting facilities on them, such as farms, husbandries, and mines.

Finally, a Ministry of State Affairs would be in charge of coordinating the various ministries and departments and communicate progression with Zac.

There currently weren't clear candidates for all positions that needed to be filled, but Zac believed things like that would work itself out sooner or later. Real talents wouldn't stay hidden forever.

It was also decided that those who worked for Port Atwood would not be given a Salary in form of crystals but rather contribution points. Zac also decided that there also wouldn't be a way to convert the points to Nexus Coins or Crystals for the time being, though that might change in the future.

Finally when it came to the repository it was decided that the first 81 people, apart from Ogras and Zac, would get to use the repository once. After that it would cost Contribution points to use, and since the Crystal Charges were limited some sort of tests would also be tests performed, so that no precious slots would be used on wastrels.

Zac felt quite happy with the progress from the meeting, but just as he was about to call it a day Abby dropped a bomb on him.

"As Lord Zac has founded a Global City, and from the fact that we have been placed on an island, the sphere of influence that was given is quite large. There are currently 298 Islands inside your Kingdom, many of which are populated.

"I suggest we start building a network of F-Graded Teleportation arrays between your islands to integrate all your citizens."

Zac was shocked by the size of his influence. They had scouted less than twenty islands so far, and already they'd found thousands of people. Just how many would be gathered over 300 of them? Besides, with such a huge area there was no way that there wasn't any drop-off point for cultivators. Perhaps he would be able to get some more promising people who could benefit from his new Blade Emperor heritage.

The meeting took hours, but eventually everything was dealt with. This time Zac left alone, sending Abby away. After pressing Illvere for a bit he was told of a gazebo some distance from the temporary town.

As he got closer to the small pavilion he stopped for a second as he saw the familiar form of Alea.

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## Chapter 164 - Waiting

Zac felt paralyzed for a second, unsure of what to do now that he found her. But after a shake of his head he walked up and sat down next to her.

“Are you here to thank me again?” Alea said with some annoyance when he sat down in the gazebo.

“I’m sorry I doubted you back there. I wasn’t thinking straight in the heat of the moment,” Zac said as he looked over at her. “You have been great support from the start, and I won’t forget that again.”

She looked mesmerizing in the sunset. Her long silver hair danced in the wind, and her two horns looked like aetheric fire. She looked back at him, and only gave a roll of her eyes in response.

“I know. You keep getting hurt because of me, is there anything I can do to return the favor?” Zac asked, his eyes staying on her this time.

Suddenly she moved straight at him, and this time Zac repressed his instincts to block her. If she wanted to punch him to vent some anger, so be it. But his eyes widened as her mouth closed in on his as her hands wrapped around his head. His arms wrapped around her slender frame as if by instinct, and the two shared a passionate kiss in the sunset.

Long repressed emotions were surfacing in his mind, making Zac a bit dizzy. The dizziness intensified, and a loud gurgling in his stomach quickly told him that what he felt might not have an emotional root. A sense of unease quickly doused any passion as Alea slipped out of his hands.

“That’s for pointing your big thing at me,” she said with a giggle and winked at him, before she left Zac to his own devices. “A night on the toilet might help you remember to think straight in the future.”

That night Zac truly understood what it meant to anger a poison master. He’d never felt so empty as he did after his tenth trip to the outhouse, as he’d been exploding out of every orifice with each visit. There were even times where he wondered if he would have even survived if it wasn’t for his high vitality. However, he almost felt it was worth it as he thought back to the passionate moment in the gazebo.

The next day a pale-faced Zac walked over to the Academy, making some small talk with the girls there. The mood was quite heavy, as a noticeable part of their small army died during the Zombie horde.

“We heard from Joanna that a group of warriors will go to another Incursion in a few weeks,” one of the Valkyries suddenly said. “We want to go.”

“You want to go? War is no joke. The Ratmen won’t be as strong as the demons, but they’ll likely be stronger than the Zombies. And they’ll also be more cunning,” Zac said skeptically. “It’s good to strive for power, but don’t bite off more than you can chew. There is no rush.”

“We know that. But we finally understand just how far we are from people like you, or even the demon soldiers. We could only stand on the sidelines for most of the battle, completely useless. We came here because we want to get stronger. Some more of us might die if we go, but death is inevitable. Those who survive will be more powerful on our return,” the girl continued.

“Besides, pretty much all of us gained enough experience to get our class. When we go to the next incursion we will have finished our skill quests, and we will be far stronger than now,” another girl added.

“Oh? What class are you getting?” Zac asked curiously.

“We’re all getting the Warrior class. Alyn says it’s best for us to all have the same starting point, as that will help with War Arrays in the future. From there we will start to specialize.”

“That’s good,” Zac said with a nod.

Honestly he was happy that he’d listened to Alyn to have them all get a common class. With the new heritage their future might look far better compared to if they got some odd class that became available due to their specific circumstances.

“Work hard, you have improved, but there is a long way to go. You can go to the Incursion if Ilvere and Alyn judge you’re ready when the time for the operation starts. They have a better grasp on both the power of your squad and of the Ratmen,” Zac said as he walked into a walled-off area of the gravity array and sat down.

It was a small secluded spot that he kept for himself when he came here to utilize the array. The first thing Zac did was use the rest of the rewards he bought with his contribution points. The Fruit of Endurance unfortunately only gave a 3-point boost, but it was better than nothing.

The quest for the upgrade to **[Eye of Discernment]** was quite simple. He only needed to inspect a thousand people with the skill, and it would get upgraded. Of course, it was only simple since Zac could essentially inspect anyone without fear of repercussions. If it was some weaker person the quest might be impossible to finish, as the wrong inspection might result in a beatdown or even death.

Next he sat down and started meditating again. He had already made a huge stride with his improved Dao of Trees, but he wasn’t content with just that. He was already in the last stretch of his F-Grade class, but he was far from reaching his target for progression in the Dao. In fact, even with his recent break-throughs he was still only third place on the Dao Ladder, with Abbot Everlasting Peace and Guru Anaad Phakiwar firmly ensconced in front of him.

The days passed and Zac was getting less and less communicative, mainly holding up to practice his skills or meditating. However, progress was limited. Impatience was gnawing at him as he waited for the deadline to arrive. He hadn’t expected the final horde to end so quickly and now was stuck waiting for a week until Bernard would open the portal.

The only real change to him was when he got word that the Gnome finally got his hands on a pill of purification. It was a pill that was designed to combat miasma. As soon as Zac got his hands on it he eagerly ate it, and it truly helped a lot.

Unfortunately the effect of one such pill was limited. Whatever the Corpse Lord injected him with wasn’t messing around, and it stubbornly kept causing him trouble. Calrin promised to keep looking, but he didn’t look hopeful. Zac could only put his hopes to there being more solutions close to where he was going.

Every evening he would sit down at the array at the appointed time in hopes that the town leader would open his array in advance. Each time both Ogras had Alea silently stood with him, and wordlessly left when he stood up with a shake of his head.

Meanwhile, Port Atwood was springing up with tremendous speed, the earth and wood mages working overtime in creating one structure after another. The humans weren’t just lounging around either, and their speed in erecting buildings would give Amish barn raisers a run for their money.

Even the Academy was quickly changing, and another contingent was getting created. Quite a few young men had signed up to become soldiers. According to Alyn she believed that after she rooted out those without aptitude or without the drive necessary perhaps less than 10% would remain, but at least it was a start.

Even the empty slots in the Valkyrie squad had gotten refilled with former refugees from the islands. Zac was even more surprised to find out that the new recruits insisted on giving the same pledge as the old members. Zac could only shake his head in confusion, but eventually he relented and accepted, bringing their numbers back up to 80.

Finally the agreed-upon day arrived and Zac sat down on the teleporter array, even though there was hours before the array would open. Outwardly he was unperturbed, but his heart was hammering, waiting to see whether his gambit worked. The minutes passed, and finally they reached the agreed-upon time. Still, nothing appeared in his teleportation menu. Only The Cradle of God was public. One minute passed, then another.

Zac was starting to wonder whether the man had succumbed to the poison Zac force-fed him. Perhaps he even found a cure somehow. However, a new town flashed into being, and Zac immediately stood up and looked over at Alea and Ogras, who accompanied him.

“I will be back within the month,” Zac said, and with unwavering determination on his face disappeared through the teleporter.

He soon found himself in a small room, and from the first look around it seemed it was a garage.

“The antidote. Hurry, give me the antidote!” a wheezing voice came from a corner.

Zac looked over, and saw John Bernard stand there huddled over. When Zac saw the man his eyebrows rose in appall, and shame filled his heart. The man had been quite portly just a week ago, but now he looked like a pale shadow of a man. He had lost almost all his body fat, and had thick black lines under his eyes. If Zac didn’t know any better he would have guessed the man in front of him had undergone months of chemotherapy treatment.

Without hesitating he threw over the small white bottle, and John swallowed the contents without giving it a second glance. Zac also transferred over 2 500 000 Nexus Coins to the man. He had planned to give him a million coins, but after seeing his wretched appearance he changed his mind.

“I am sorry about putting you through this suffering, desperate times,” Zac said with a shake of his head, and then took out one of the small roots that had weeded out the infiltrating monks.

“I will give you a piece of information that might save your life. One of the invading incursions is The Church of Everlasting Dao. They possess infiltrators who essentially have shape shifting capabilities, they can turn into any person. No scouting techniques can spot the disguise.

“This root is harmless to humans but deadly to the infiltrators. It’s what we used to root out all the spies in our own City. We expect your New World Government is already infiltrated,” Zac said as he threw over the root to John.

The man was absorbed in feeling the effects of the antidote, but Zac’s words woke him up and he caught the root hesitantly.

“You know, you’re a wanted man now. That demon’s actions in New Washington has made you the enemies of the whole government,” John said just as Zac was about to leave.

“Oh? Is there people outside planning to catch me?” Zac asked.

“Do you think I’m suicidal? I want nothing to do with your conflict. The sooner you’re out of my life, the better,” John said with grumpily.

Zac only shook his head and stepped out. It was night-time here as well, so Zac had no problem to slip into the darkness unencumbered.

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“It’s me,” John said into the radio as he looked himself over in the Radio.

He was already starting to look better, the dark circles under his eyes already gone. It also felt like he finally would be able to eat again, without it feeling like his teeth were shattering and his throat catching fire.

He was already so engrossed in planning out the feast that he would prepare for himself to celebrate, that he almost forgot he was on a call with a superior.

“Did he come?” a rough voice answered after a few seconds.

“Yes Sir, he stepped though as soon as I opened it. He immediately left town afterward it seems,” John answered as he went over the list in his head.

He’d definitely open up the bottle of 21-year-old scotch he’d been saving for months now. And a mountain of ribs. They killed that huge boar the other day, and it barely contained a trace of miasma.

“Good, you’ve done well. We’ll take it from here,” the man on the other end said.

“What are you going to do? He’s the Super-Brother Man, after all. He’s not some nobody,” John asked skeptically as he put down the mirror. “He also said something about shape-shifters infiltrating the government, and-“

“You don’t need to worry about that. You are hereby relieved.”

A window shattered and John only felt a blazing pain in his head, before all turned to darkness.

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#### **Chapter 165 - A Thousand Faces**

Zac rushed toward southeast along a derelict road. The town Bernard managed, Aubrey Hills, was north of the Dead Zone, and he needed to get to the eastern part. Zac knew there were border towns closer to the incursion from his conversation with Bernard during the Auction.

They were right at the edge of what was considered the undead influence. Those kinds of towns weren’t under government control but were rather chaotic places under the control of the one with the largest fists.

Its population generally consisted of anyone who wanted to use the incursion as a spot for gaining levels and wealth. Zombies were quite stupid and not overly strong, which made for perfect target practice. Besides, due to the huge populations of China and India, there was almost an endless source of Zombies to hunt.

However, Zac knew that the good times of these border towns were limited. The concentration of miasma at the edge of the incursion should be limited, so it was normal that there weren’t too strong zombies there.

But as the zombie hunters depopulated any closeby towns from zombies they would need to venture further and further into the incursion, where the miasma was denser. The risk of meeting evolved Zombies and other strong beasts was going to get higher and higher.

Zombies weren't the only thing to worry about in the huge Zone the Undead Empire controlled. The wildlife that had lived inside for almost half a year would have evolved like over the rest of the world. With the additional effect of the miasma the beasts should be completely insane due to the corruption.

But for now, the towns were havens for those who lived in the area and didn't mind the risk. It was like a macabre gold rush where every walking corpse was a small gold nugget. Zac didn't bother to learn the town's names since they were peppered along the incursion, and most of them were essentially the same.

There were also rumors of there being settlements even further inside the incursion, though Zac didn't have the coordinates for any place like that. But Zac had no desire to go there in any case, as his goal was clear.

He'd find a border town and get himself oriented. The fact that the government seemed to have made him a target wasn't a surprise, but he needed to find out the extent the enmity reached.

Besides, his information about the undead was from the information crystals back at Port Atwood, rather than more detailed information from the locals. They might have figured out various things that could be beneficial to know.

As he moved forward his wound unceasingly kept pounding, but by now it barely registered in Zac's mind. His increased Vitality and evolved seed were a great improvement compared to before, as he didn't need to keep his Dao active at all times to keep the spread of corruption at bay.

However, the wound was barely healing even when he kept using his Dao, and at this speed it would likely take years before he was completely cured. That was another reason he wanted to stop in the frontier town. Perhaps some people there had attained classes that gave skills targeted at combating miasma.

Zac kept going until the suns were starting to show, and quickly stopped at a what once seemed to have been a rest stop along the highway. The area was completely overgrown by now, and Zac didn't expect to find anything useful. He walked up to a parked trailer and took out a large mirror, placing it against the vehicle.

Next, he placed a thick cloak rimmed with wolf pelt over his shoulders, and his arm got thick leather vambraces. He even put on two pairs of sturdy shoes. He actually also had a pair of shoes that only had a few straps instead of soles, allowing him to freely use his [Loamwalker] skill while wearing shoes, but he didn't dare to use those after remembering the state of Fort Roger.

Zac gave a quick spin, happy with the transformation he'd undergone. He felt he almost looked like a barbarian, with wolf pelts covering much of his back. He also put a large high-quality two-handed battleaxe on his back. It was a nasty piece of equipment, and something he'd found up on the monkey mountain amongst the corpses.

He needed a weapon to use that wasn't the same as the one-handed axe he'd shown off at a few occasions. But even if he was going undercover he didn't want to use a sword or something else, afraid it would hamper his future skill choices.

Next, he focused his Cosmic Energy in his scalp and was amazed to see his hair grow out with speed visible to his eyes. Soon it was long enough that he put it in a bun with a leather string.

Not only that, but he also grew out a beard, covering the somewhat distinct scar on his mouth that still wasn't gone.

He looked like an almost completely different person, and that was the point. Still, he wasn't done there as he activated a fractal that was placed on his throat. His body suddenly was wracked in pain, but he grit his teeth and pushed through. In just a

few seconds he'd completely changed. He was now a few inches shorter, while his face had undergone a large transformation.

It was the skill [**Thousand Faces**], one of the 81 skills in the repository. It was a shapeshifting skill, and something he decided to pick up after having seen how effective the priest infiltrators were. He was a high profile person and his appearance might cause unwanted trouble, and this was his solution.

It was only one of the mid-grade skills, and it didn't really fit his pathways very well. That's why it hurt like his bones were ground to dust and then reshaped when he used it. But it still felt like one of the most useful skills in the repository for his current needs.

Looking back from the mirror now was a middle-aged man with a more angular facial structure and a hooked nose. Not even Kenzie should recognize him as he currently looked. As the skill actually changed the bone structure of someone it didn't take any energy to maintain, but a weakness was that it couldn't change his aura.

An aura was almost like a fingerprint these days, and some scouts could use the fluctuations a person gave out to identify people in disguises. However, for that to work the scout would have to have met him earlier, so the risk for that was not too big unless the people of new Washington were actively hunting him.

Satisfied with the transformation he packed away his mirror and got ready to leave. He still wore his E-graded robes underneath the furs, not wanting to give up the defensive charges they contained.

Back on his island this many layers would have been decidedly hot, but here on the mainland it was starting to get quite chilly. It was already November, though Zac didn't know if the months or seasons had changed somehow.

He kept going through the desolate wasteland, but this time he had taken out one of his cars. It wasn't one of the modified ones that were running on Nexus Crystals, but rather one of the normal ones. However, there were a few inscriptions placed in a few unseen spots that would make it sturdier.

He'd missed driving, and enjoyed feeling even though the scenery was a bit dour. But soon he actually saw some activity. Much like in the area around New Washington there was almost never traffic, but he actually saw a jeep speed across a field in the distance. It looked quite rickety, the car jumping and looked about to keel over at any moment.

Zac understood why whoever was inside was driving that recklessly though. Right behind the car a huge tiger was in hot pursuit. It was even larger than the car, but that wasn't the odd thing about it. Even from the distance, Zac could see that it was greyish, not having the usual yellow and black stripes. Its eyes were also shining in a similar turquoise as the undead beacons did.

It clearly was in the process of mutating from living inside miasma for a long time, though Zac didn't understand what it was doing here. There was no discernable miasma in the atmosphere where they were, so it must have wandered out from the dead zone. Perhaps it had an appetite for humans and was out on a hunt.

A bump in the terrain suddenly sent the vehicle out of control, but as it was about to overturn three people nimbly jumped out of the car and landed on the ground as the Jeep kept going. From how practiced their movements were Zac almost thought that wasn't the first time they had been forced to jump out of a runaway vehicle.

Zac finally got a good look at the party and saw it was one Caucasian male and two Asians, one woman and one man. All of them looked to be around their thirties and judging from their gear they weren't people who had stayed put within the safety of a wall since the integration.

The Zombified Tiger gave off a ghastly roar that Zac could clearly hear even from the distance and pounced at the trio. The commotion actually made Zac stop his car and get out. For a second he wondered if he should rush over there to save them, but the three put up a valiant defense against the beast.

While they weren't some supreme powerhouses they were stronger than the Valkyries back in Port Atwood, and they had complementary skills. Still, the tiger seemed extremely durable, and it was unclear whether they would be able to whittle it down before they ran out of cosmic energy.

"You there! Please assist us, and half the value of the beast core is yours!" the Asian man in the back shouted over at Zac in passable English.

Zac's brows rose when he heard the offer, and he ran over to the battle. Beast cores were crystals that contained a good chunk of the total Cosmic Energy of a beast. Zac didn't expect to hear it mentioned here, as generally that wasn't something that should exist in an animal until they reached D-rank.

At that point, both humans and beasts would develop a Core in their body that could compress and contain vast amounts of Cosmic Energy. This was a sharp difference from how it was now, where cosmic energy was generally stored in every cell of the body. A core was far more efficient, and successfully forming one was akin to getting a high powered battery in your body.

Zac used **[Inquisitive Eyes]** on the beast.

**[Miasmic Bengal Tiger - Undead. Level 43 - Endurance]**

Zac getting the skill had caused his reputation to take somewhat of a hit, and rumors of him being a peeping tom started to spread. But he had finished his quest in just a few days by using **[Eye of Discernment]** on almost everyone in the town, much to the citizen's annoyance.

The new and improved version was still F-ranked, but much more useful. It now also displayed what was the highest attribute of the one he spied on, which would give a hint of their battle style. It also could discern the grades of many resources, which was a good way to learn if something he found was useful or not.

With a fluid motion Zac took the large two-handed axe from his back and joined the fray. Naturally, he would have been able to kill the beast in a simple swing, but he only used a bit of his power in order to not stand out.

The intense battle kept going for a few minutes, and Zac was a large contributor to the victory, as every swing of his contained quite a punch that maimed the animal. He purposely made himself seem slightly stronger than the trio, so that they wouldn't get any ideas after the fight finished.

Finally, they felled the beast, and with a groan, it thumped down on the ground.

"Thank you, friend. That's some swing you have there. I don't recognize you, are you new to the area?" the blonde man said between pants.

"I came here to get stronger. I'm heading to a frontier town now," Zac said with a hoarse voice. "What's that beast core you mentioned?"

"Oh so you're not from around here," the man nodded. "The animals that live deep in the dead zone have started to get these crystals in their heads. We call them Beast Cores. They are filled with tons of miasma. They are useful for various things. You can even use them for cultivation, but I wouldn't recommend that. Fries your brain after a while."

The other two, who seemed to be siblings at closer scrutiny, nodded at that.

"General Stores buys them for a pretty penny, so they are like gold here. Some Zombies have them as well, especially the stronger ones. The stores pay by the gram,

and finding these have become more profitable than just grinding low level Zombies,” the Asian man who spotted him earlier added.

It seemed they weren't real beast cores after all, but rather something created by the miasma. Still, Zac curiously looked on as the Asian girl took out a large knife and started cutting into the head of the tiger.

“I'm John, by the way. I was an expat in Hong Kong before all this,” John said with an expansive gesture “This is Ling and Hung.”

“I'm David,” Zac said, using the first name that came to his mind. “How did this thing get all the way out here? From what I gathered before coming these types of beasts stay further in the Dead Zone?”

“Ah, well, that's sort of our mistake. We accidentally enraged it and it followed us for more than a day. We got off-track while trying to shake it off,” John said.

“Got it,” Ling said with a melodious voice as she took out a greyish crystal from the head of the tiger. She quickly wiped it off with a rag and displayed it in front of them.

“Wow, it's a big one. Should be worth over thirty thousand,” John said with a whistle.

“So, uh... Do you think we can catch a ride? Our poor Betty seems to have given her last breath,” John said as he looked at the overturned jeep that had smoke coming out of it.

“... It's fine, you just need to eat this root first,” Zac said as he took out the minty root from a backpack.

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#### **Chapter 166 - The Frontier**

“Excuse me?” John said, looking down at the small root in Zac's hand.

“It seems the rumors haven't reached the border towns yet. One of the incursions contains shapeshifters. They have probably infiltrated both the government and many strong factions. However, this root is deadly to them while it is harmless to us humans,” Zac said and ate a large chunk of it to prove he was speaking the truth.

“It's called Springroot, and is available for purchase in the General Store. Nowadays people take a bite of it to prove they're not a shapeshifter where I come from,” Zac continued.

The three looked confused at each other, until Ling took the piece of root and looked it over. Her eyes shone with some mysterious luster for a second, telling Zac she was using some sort of ocular skill. Perhaps her main role in the group was scouting.

“No poison,” she said and the other two nodded with some relief.

With a shrug of his shoulders, John broke off a piece and ate it.

“Not bad, minty. It might double as a mouthwash,” John said. “These shapeshifters, what do they look like?”

“I heard they're lizard-people,” Zac said with a shake of his head, knowing how it sounded. “Apparently they are part of some multi-verse cult.”

“Lizard-people cultists, just what we need,” John spat on the ground, while the other two seemed to agree with the sentiment as they ate the root.

Zac wasn't really worried about the three being infiltrators. While there likely was over a thousand of them out there, they had quite a bit of ground to cover. They might have some unknown means for reaching various settlements but they shouldn't be able to use the teleporters, meaning it should take some time to spread over the planet.

Besides, Zac hadn't even heard anything about the Church's Incursion, meaning they might be extremely far away. Ogras believed that it was out there, only that the government was keeping it secret.

It would be easy to motivate within the government ranks. Just call it a secret government resource to train their elite, and even the actual government officials would keep it secret. Meanwhile, the infiltrators could slowly ensconce themselves within the government.

The reason Zac made the three eat the root was rather to get an excuse to tell the story. He hoped that doing this would create rumors to spread like ripples on the water. Zac alone doing it wouldn't cut it, but he was determined to have his whole force spread the knowledge as soon as he was back with Kenzie.

Soon the four were sitting in Zacs modified car, pushing through the wilderness. It might be a bit weird for some loner to allow 3 strangers into his car in these uncertain times, but Zac didn't really care about that. It would give him an opportunity to gather intelligence as he drove, which would save some time.

"Who's in charge of the frontier town?" Zac asked as he drove, occasionally avoiding the huge potholes that had formed over the past months.

"Eastern Hills is run by a man calling himself Ling Tian. It sort of means 'Rise above the Heavens'. Kind of stupid, but quite a few around these parts have taken these Dao monikers, thinking they are the main characters of some story," John said with a snort.

"It's kind of weird that the System uses Dao while it was a concept in Asia even before the integration," Zac noted.

It was something he still didn't quite understand. Was it a coincidence, or was it something to it? That wasn't the only thing as there was also the issue of the demons. It made Zac wonder just what happened on earth thousands of years ago. Perhaps the old stories of mages and dragons were more than just stories?

"Yeah, I've wondered about that myself," John said. "The general belief is that the old masters of Daoism managed to peek through the veil, so-to-speak, and learn some aspects of the Dao. Who knows, perhaps there was Cosmic Energy on earth back in the day, but it ran out?"

"The old masters have lit the way for our people. I believe that's why the System gave us the hardest challenge," Hung said from the back seat.

"So, Ling Tian?" Zac prodded, not commenting on the harshness of challenges. While the undead horde was a pain, he didn't feel it beat having to close a whole incursion on your own.

"He's a bit annoying, but one of the better leaders. That's why we stay there. He doesn't do anything untoward, and he is usually out fighting Zombies," John said.

"Annoying how?" Zac asked with some interest.

"Well, he's imagining himself to be the savior of mankind or something. He keeps trying to gather together the townspeople to launch crusades at the core of the incursion. But you know, few people are that crazy. Charging the core of the Dead Zone is a suicide mission," John said with a shake of his head.

"Chuunibyou," Ling muttered from the back.

Zac didn't comment, but he felt a bit hopeless inside. He didn't know whether this leader of the frontier town was delusional or not, but the whole situation in these border towns was problematic. There seemed to be quite a few strong warriors here, but people mainly fought to empower and enrich themselves.

Perhaps this situation would have been okay if the undead were weak. If that was the case then sooner or later the zombies would be hunted into extinction. However, Zac knew reality wasn't so convenient. As soon as the leaders like the Corpse Lord started their crusades these border towns would get deserted in the blink of an eye.

There was no organization and no order. There would be no real resistance against the invaders when they started their conquest in earnest. People like these three would just move somewhere else, if they even survived.

Zac had been thinking of what to do about these Incursions since he finally became a Lord. He felt that his quest had given him the greatest clue what to do from here. He needed to kill the leaders of the incursions, and the rest would sort itself out. A force without powerhouses to protect and lead the ranks was just prey in the end.

The only problem was that he didn't even manage to kill the Corpse Lord, and Ogras believed that those who arrived at his island weren't the highest-ranking members of respective Incursion. Perhaps the rockman was the exception, though they weren't sure. Still, it was a plan, and he still had some time before the limiters on the invaders were completely removed.

After another two hours of driving, they finally reached their target, Eastern Hills. Zac was surprised by its size as he slowly drove through a huge gate. When he imagined the frontier towns he had thought that they would look like Fort Roger, but with stronger people.

However, reality differed quite a bit. The wall was a thick and sturdy combination of cement and stones, with armed soldiers walking along the wall walk. The town inside was somewhat clean and orderly, though Zac saw the people looked quite rough.

To his surprise he saw that at least 80 percent of those on the streets were of Asian heritage, with the rest being a random mix. He hadn't really thought along those lines before, but he realized that even if China had taken a huge hit by the incursion there should still be a great number of survivors in the area.

And it was clear that these people weren't like the survivors in Fort Roger. Almost everyone was armed with some sort of weapon, mostly clubs or spears. Most looked to be in good condition, but there were also a few who looked pale and emitted a cold aura, making Zac frown.

"Miasma poisoning. You get like this if you absorb too many beast cores or stay in the Dead Zone too long," John explained after noticing Zac's frown.

A bestial roar suddenly erupted from nearby the main road they were driving along, and Zac stopped the car.

"A transformation, this is a good lesson for you David," John said as he jumped out of the car.

Zac curiously followed after taking out the keys. Just a hundred meters away a crowd was gathering some distance from a man who spasmed and growled erratically.

"This is the end for those who get too greedy," John explained as he looked at the odd man without pity. "He's absorbed too much miasma, and he's lost control of it. He's turning."

"Turning? Is there nothing to do in a case like this?" Zac asked with some pity.

He sympathized a bit with the man, but honestly Zac was mainly thinking about himself. He had a wound filled with highly concentrated miasma, and this would have been his end if he didn't possess the Dao of Trees.

"Perhaps with the help of a strong purifier, but I doubt they would risk getting close to someone who's lost all reason," John said with a shake of his head.

"Purifier? What's that?" Zac asked curiously.

"It's what we call people who have skills and classes that can purify the miasma. Remember, don't piss off a Purifier while you're staying on the frontier. Getting their help can be the difference between life and death if you get wounded in the Dead Zone. Besides, many are desperate to curry their favor.

"So if you piss off a Purifier, don't be surprised if you get mobbed by a bunch of Zombie Hunters who just want to form a relationship with them," John said with a low voice.

Zac's heartbeat started to increase when hearing John's explanation. It sounded like a purifier was exactly what he needed to take care of his wound.

"Who is the best purifier in this town?" Zac asked, trying to not sound too eager.

"You're talking like they're a dime a dozen. They're extremely rare, and generally only reside in the larger towns on the edge of the Dead Zone," John said with a shake of his head. "There is a purifier a few towns over, it would take almost a day to drive there."

Zac frowned at that, unsure at what to do. Either he'd follow his original plan and push through the incursion to get to the eastern side, or he'd detour and try his luck with a purifier.

"Why are you asking?" John asked with some confusion. "Are you hurt somewhere? You don't look to be suffering from miasma poisoning."

"Just orienting myself. Who knows what'll happen in the future, seems like a good idea to know where the healers are," Zac said with a nonchalant shrug.

"Aint that the truth. However, you shouldn't think of the Purifiers as a backup plan. Their energy is limited, and they rarely see people off the streets. Look around, quite a few here have more miasma in their bodies than they'd like. If they could get that fixed most would. Oh, it seems time's up."

The sounds of bones cracking and grinding against each other made Zac refocus on the unfortunate man Zombiefying.

"This one belongs to the Frost Wolves," a man with a badge resembling a howling wolf suddenly said as he stepped forward accompanied by three underlings.

"Fuck you, it belongs to whoever is the fastest," another man with two short swords retorted.

"What's going on?" Zac asked with a subdued voice.

"These things are quite valuable after they turn, they're like evolved Zombies. The kill gives a large amount of Cosmic Energy, and it is pretty much guaranteed to have a large Core. Poor bastard's essentially become a walking treasure trove."

"So why are they waiting?" Zac asked.

"The core is currently forming. When the transformation is complete, then the core is formed," John explained, as he hesitantly looked over the spectators.

"We should back away, too many strong people are present," he said as he distanced himself from the hubbub.

Zac didn't really care about some miasma core, and he backed away as well, and together they saw the spectators rip the poor man into pieces like hungry hyenas.

The man with the two swords triumphantly held up the decapitated head of the zombie after a few seconds, causing the others to swear and walk away, leaving the mangled corpse where it was.

“They’re just giving up?” Zac asked.

“Rules of the town. When the core’s claimed the battle is over. However, that guy might need to watch his back, the Frost Wolf Mercenaries are a bit shady,” John said with a shrug as he jumped into Zac’s car again.

“You don’t have a place to stay, right? Why don’t you join us for the night? You can learn about how things work here in the wild east.”

“Sounds good,” Zac answered with a last glance at the corpse of the pitiful man, before jumping back into the driver’s seat.

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#### **Chapter 167 - Purifier Wang**

Zac was currently speeding along the deserted road, heading east. He was still driving the car, as it was pretty much as fast as him jogging. He’d also found that it was easier for him to use the Dao of Trees while driving compared to jogging, so it was also better for his wound.

Ever since he arrived at the edge of the Dead Zone he had sensed that the atmosphere contained some miasma. It was only a smidgeon, but Zac noticed to his annoyance that his wound seemed to passively absorb it. He was therefore forced to use his Dao of Trees a bit more than he did back on the island.

That’s why he’d decided to look up one of the purifiers, even if it would waste at least one day. He could only assume his condition would get worse when he went into the Dead Zone, so if he could get the wound fixed ahead of that he would likely save more time in the end.

The image of the mutilated corpse on the street of Eastern Hills was a poignant image of what would happen if he didn’t properly take care of his wound. It would be a cosmic joke if he survived the Incursion and the three waves, only to turn into a zombie because he didn’t properly tend to his festering gut.

He’d stayed the night at John’s place. He lived together with the siblings in a pretty large house. It turned out that they were a small mercenary group, and the reason that John was so friendly from the start was that he hoped to recruit Zac. They were originally 7 people, forming a pretty strong squad that mainly focused on finding herbs and other valuables deeper in the core zone.

However, months of risking their lives had resulted in only three being left of the group, and they finally had to admit they needed to bolster their squad after being unable to finish the tiger on their own.

If Zac actually was who he pretended, then he might actually have taken them up on their offer. Going into the Dead Zone alone was perilous, having a squad to watch your back was preferable. They had been disappointed at his refusal, but they made no big deal about it.

Zac had only stayed the night and left early in the morning. The former expat helped out quite a bit in explaining how things worked, even though Zac refused John’s

invitation. More troubling was what he heard about himself, or rather the Super Brother-Man.

Rumors about him had already reached the frontier. There were all kinds of rumors, but the core of them was generally that he consorted with the invaders, which was why he had gotten so strong. John had also heard about Ogras deeds in New Washington, though the details had gotten extremely twisted.

However, there was no official proclamation from the government, which only made Zac more uneasy. It only meant that whatever they planned would be done under the table, rather than in the open.

He also didn't think that rumors were spreading organically, as only a week had passed since the auction. Zac believed that the government was trying to speed things along. Perhaps they tried to boost their own reputation by dragging the Super Brother-Man through the mud.

Zac wanted to get his name cleared, but for now he could only ignore the rumor mill. He didn't care what the world thought of him as long as he could reach his sister. Since John had been so helpful Zac left a few hundred Nexus Crystals in his room when leaving.

He had no idea if he'd meet the three again, as they had their goals and he had his. He was currently driving toward one of the main border towns in the area, which was somewhat ostentatiously named Perseverance. Apparently, it was originally a part of Chengdu, and over 50 000 people lived there at the moment.

Zac kept driving for most of the day, passing a few towns on the way. He actually encountered a few parties on the road, though people kept to their own, likely afraid of getting attacked. There were no witnesses and no laws out in the wild, and Zac guessed few people would take a risk like John and the other two did.

The suns were already setting when he arrived at his destination, and it appeared he just made it before the large town gates were closing.

"1000 Nexus Coins to enter with a vehicle," a guard said as he hailed Zac.

Zac's brows rose at the price, but he still paid up and drove through. The price was a bit surprising, as it was equivalent to killing at least twenty decently strong Zombies. If everyone had to pay that amount when returning from an excursion then the town would have to make quite some profit.

Zac drove some ways into the town, before turning into a few back alleys. When he found a secluded spot with no pedestrians he quickly exited the vehicle and put it in a cosmos sack before quickly walking away.

He knew that cars were generally safe if he parked it somewhere, but he didn't want to take any risks as there were inscriptions on his vehicle making it special.

Most cars on the frontier were actually booby-trapped nowadays with various explosives, as good terrain vehicles were hard to come by and fiercely protected. There were car mechanics who mainly dealt in installing bombs in hard-to-find places with hidden triggers. Stealing one was akin to sitting on a barrel of gunpowder that could go off at any time.

Zac walked around the town, getting a sense of the area. The whole place felt rougher compared to Eastern Hills, and there were more people who seemed to be barely scraping by. There was one thing that confused him a bit. He noted that many of the weaker pedestrians seemed to have accumulated more miasma in their bodies compared to the stronger ones.

However, after seeing a street vendor selling food he understood why. Even if the vendor slathered the skewers in some sauce Zac could see that the meat was grey

and sickly-looking, and he could even sense some corrupt energy in the meat. It seemed that food was getting scarce and they were forced to eat animals tainted with miasma.

Zac could only shake his head and keep walking, happy that he had stocked up with food that would last months in his pouches. He didn't have time to worry about the people slowly turning themselves into zombies, but instead he was trying to listen in on conversations to find out more about the Purifier. It didn't take long to learn where the purifier, who was apparently called Wang Guo, resided.

The Purifier ran what was called a miasma clinic out of the bottom floor of his building. Zac quickly walked over there and found that there already was a long line of pale people, most clearly suffering from miasma poisoning. Zac shrugged and just went to the back of the line.

"Excuse me, how long does it usually take to get to see the doctor? Is he still working at this hour?" Zac asked the man in front of him.

"Don't you know how this works?" the man turned over with a dour face, though he quickly moderated his demeanor after seeing the huge axe on Zac's back. "We're lining up for getting a chance at getting treated tomorrow. Mr. Wang only has open office once a week, and he treats people as long as his Cosmic Energy allows."

Zac wasn't too enthused about waiting the whole night in line when there was no guarantee he'd even get to meet the Purifier. As he was mulling over what to do he suddenly spotted a man walking straight up to the closed doors and entered.

"Who was that?" Zac asked the man in front of him.

"One of Lord Perseverance's lieutenants," the man answered in a hushed voice. "They always get purified after returning to town."

Zac understood the implications. The rules clearly weren't the same for everyone. Since this Mr. Wang seemed to change his tune depending on who visited, then Zac wouldn't need to wait in this endless line. Zac was worried about the Purifier being limited somehow to only helping out once a week, but it seemed it was rather that he didn't want to waste too much of his time.

"So you think one can get purified without waiting if one pays enough?" Zac asked the man in front of him again.

The man nervously looked around and ignored the question. But a few coughs from Zac and walking up uncomfortably close forced the man to answer in a whisper.

"Hey, I don't want trouble. Mr. Wang is petty, and if he finds out I've talked about him behind his back who knows what trouble I'd get into. But yeah, he is also greedy, so he'd definitely heal you if you paid enough. Honestly, he is only doing these open houses since the Lord Perseverance is paying him to," the man wheezed, then pointedly started ignoring Zac.

Finally understanding the way things worked and unhesitantly walked up to the door to the clinic. A few mutters and curses were thrown his direction from those in the line, but no one wanted to cause trouble or lose their spot, so Zac entered unaccosted.

"Hey! Didn't you see the line? Purifier Wang's open hour starts tomorrow," an annoyed, but sweet, voice entered his ears as soon as he walked through and closed the door.

It was a woman that was sitting by a clear glass table in a small empty lobby. She was quite good-looking in a sultry way, but her appearance only lowered Zac's opinion of this so-called healer.

The woman was clearly wearing a “Sexy Nurse” Halloween-outfit rather than actual scrubs, showing off a great amount of skin. Furthermore, she wasn’t alone as a strong-looking bodyguard lounged in a chair nearby.

From what Zac had heard so far Wang Guo was far from some benevolent hero, but rather some shady person who had lucked into a great class. He could only internally sigh and walk up to the counter.

“I have traveled far to meet Purifier Wang, as I hear he is one of the most skilled people around,” Zac said.

Actually that wasn’t true, but Wang Guo was the closest one to the east of Eastern Hills, and Zac didn’t want to waste more time than he had to.

“It doesn’t matter. Purifier Wang only sees patients once a week, as he needs the rest of the week to recuperate. The great healing arts take a lot of strength,” the nurse answered with a huff as the bodyguard started to move toward him.

Zac didn’t respond, and instead only took out one of his cosmos sacks and poured a small hill of Nexus Crystals on her desk and leaned over it toward the startled girl.

“Unfortunately my time is limited. This is a small gift to you. I would be happy to give a much larger donation to Purifier Wang as well. Could you tell me what I’d need to do to get the same treatment as the guy who just entered?”

The girl expertly took the crystals and swept them into a Chanel bag with extreme swiftness, cleaning out the table in only a second. After that, she looked at the guard who shrugged.

“Since you wish to donate to help keep his little clinic running I’m sure Purifier Wang would be able to squeeze you in,” she said with a smile, as she leaned forward a bit showcasing her impressive cleavage.

It was at this moment the man from earlier exited the door leading further into the clinic. He was surprised to see the gruff-looking Zac stand in the lobby leaning over the counter, and he appeared extremely incensed at seeing the receptionist’s suggestive pose and smile.

“Who the fuck are you? Yao Yao, get away from that barbarian,” the man growled and quickly walked over.

“I mean no trouble, I am just here to see Purifier Wang,” Zac said as he quickly backed away.

“Then why the fuck are you hitting on my woman?” the lieutenant growled.

“He’s here to give a big donation to the clinic,” the nurse quickly said, trying to defuse the situation.

However, the comment only seemed to enrage the man further.

“So you’re trying to flash your little wealth in front of my girl? You might as well leave all of it behind then,” he said, and with lightning-quick movement took out a dagger, unhesitantly stabbing toward Zac’s throat.

Zac was about to kill the man in front of him by instinct, but in the last second restrained himself. Things also got more convoluted after the guard joined the fight after some hesitation, trying to help the angry man out.

Zac tripped one of the men and brought the other one with him down on the ground, causing a chaotic grapple-fight. He quickly knocked out the lieutenant on the way down, and after grappling around with the bodyguard for a few seconds Zac awarded him with a measured punch knocking him out.

Zac could only hope it would look genuine to the shocked spectator, as he was in no mood to pretend any longer than that. One of the men actually managed to land

a punch in his gut, which made his wound hurt like a hot tong, souring his mood considerably.

“I’ll go ahead and visit the Purifier now. I would prefer not to be disturbed,” Zac said to the gaping nurse before heading into the inner parts of the clinic.

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#### **Chapter 168 - Healing**

Zac felt annoyed as he stepped through the door to the back of the clinic. He just wanted to go through the town unannounced and disappear before anyone could remember him. Yet he’d been forced to knock out one of the higher-ups of the town just because of some silly jealousy. Who knew what type of trouble would come knocking if he stayed too long.

With a few quick steps he walked through an unadorned corridor and found himself in an austere clinic looking like some ancient herbalist’s treatment room.

Various herbs were hanging from the roof, creating a thick scent in the room, and the walls were covered with old drawings that seemed to show the chakras of the body. However, the room was completely empty, with the Purifier nowhere in sight.

Zac frowned and looked around a bit. Suddenly he spotted that something was odd with a large medicine cabinet, and with a simple push moved it to the side. It led him to another room, and Zac could only gape when he entered it.

The interiors looked like the basement of a real anime fanatic, if this particular fanatic was also a corrupt warlord. Stands displaying figurines were placed next to machine guns and actual gold bars. The room was completely cluttered, and in the back a man in his late thirties was lounging in a recliner, watching some old series on the television.

A cough from Zac made the man jump up like his ass was on fire. He quickly swiveled toward the exit, and seemed shocked to see a man decked in furs and a war axe standing in his sanctuary.

“Who are you? How dare you enter this place?” the man said with a flustered face as he tried to shoo Zac back. “Out, OUT!”

“I didn’t mean to intrude on your… Private area,” Zac said with another cough as he backed out into the clinic. “Your nurse sent me through to get some help in exchange for a donation. After that, I’m leaving this town.”

Finally after having stepped outside and closed the hidden door did the man seem to calm down.

“Wait here a second,” he said as he rushed over to the door and shouted for the nurse, who quickly came running.

The two exchanged a few whispers as the surrepticiously glanced over in Zac’s direction, until the nurse left again.

“No way, if I help you then Perseverance will get angry with me. You beat up one of his lieutenants, who knows what he’ll do,” the Purifier said, looking scared.

“That’s why I would like you to hurry up,” Zac said, simply pouring some crystals on the floor in front of him. “I pay well.”

Greed shone in Mr. Wang's eyes as he saw the crystals falling like rain from Zac's bag.

"Fine, tw-.. no, five thousand crystals, and not one less," the Purifier said, not being able to stop himself from licking his mouth. "And leave right after, I will deny having helped you."

"Fine, go ahead," Zac said as he started to undress.

"Don't you know anything?" the man hurriedly said with a look of disgust. "Who wants to see your naked body? Just point where your miasma wound is."

Zac stopped, feeling a bit surprised, but pointed toward his side where the festering wound was located.

The Purifier took a step forward and a golden light started to emit from his hands. Zac carefully gazed at the light, and was relieved to see that the Purifier didn't seem to play any tricks on him. The light felt like concentrated Cosmic Energy, but it was somehow changed to contain far more of the vibrant life that always existed in it. It was like the opposite of miasma in a sense.

The man held his hands close to the wound and closed his eyes in concentration. Zac soon found a warmth reminiscent of what it felt like then eating healing pills around the blackish tendrils spreading from the core of his injury. But as soon as the warmth entered him it disappeared, as the Purifier backed away with wide eyes.

"Just how are you alive? What is this wound? There's no way I can treat that," he stammered, looking shocked at what he'd found.

"Never mind how I'm alive. I know it's a bad wound, but I felt the effect of your skills. Do as much as you can," Zac said with a sigh. "Besides, healing wound this severe should give a huge boost in experience to your class, right?"

Zac guessed that his class was considered a non-combat class, and that healing people would be considered progressing the class. If it worked the same as with a blacksmith and the like, healing a nasty wound should give a large boost of experience. The man still looked troubled, but the reminder seemed to have reawakened the greed in the man.

The Purifier once again extended his hands, though much more carefully this time, and the golden light emerged once more. It started on the outer edges of the wound, and Zac was ecstatic to find that the corruption was melting away at a speed that far eclipsed what he was able to do by himself with his Dao of Trees.

However, Zac started to frown as the minutes passed and the purifier was starting to turn pale. A sheen of perspiration was already covering his face, but he still had only managed to work on the outer rim of the wound. The core was still the same, throbbing with miasma and rot.

Suddenly the man opened his eyes wide and fell back, spewing a mouthful of black blood on the ground. Zac was alarmed and made to move toward him, but an intense pain that was as bad as when he got stabbed by the Corpse Lord's weapon exploded in his side. Huge waves of miasma started to spread out of it, trying to completely convert Zac.

He fought back the rampaging wound with everything that he got, putting his Dao of Trees on overdrive. Pale with anger and pain Zac stepped forward and grabbed the shell-shocked Purifier by the throat.

"What the fuck did you do?" Zac growled. "Fix it or I'll break your neck."

"I swear it wasn't me," the man squealed with pain. "It was your wound. It's *alive*."

"I don't care, heal it right now," Zac said.

“Don’t you understand? There’s no way I can heal it. Perhaps not even the strongest purifiers can. And look at me, you’ve poisoned me!” he said with tears in his eyes as he held up his hands.

The hands were greyish, almost looking like the hands of a Zombie. They also gave off the cold aura of death, indicating they were flooded with miasma. The sight quickly stopped Zac in his tracks, and he let go of the man who plopped down on the ground with a groan.

What the man said finally registered in Zac’s mind. The wound truly felt alive, as it time and time again tried to break through the Dao Field Zac had created around the wound. When it didn’t work it tried to break out from another direction, just like a caged animal.

The situation was under control for now, but Zac knew it would be very strenuous to keep his Dao Field going indefinitely.

“What do I do to calm the wound down?” Zac said with a frown, not wanting to just leave it like this.

“I have no idea. I only got this class since my family were exorcists. Or con-men, you know. I helped out until I was old enough to get the hell out from there and get a real job. I don’t really know anything about miasma or fighting the undead. I just push the light into the wounds and they heal,” he panted as he covered his zombified hands in the golden light.

“Man it will take weeks to rid my hands of this much miasma. And this is only the backlash. I don’t understand how you’re alive, but you should go and say your final goodbyes,” he said with a bleak expression, though Zac felt he could discern some *schadenfreude* in the end. “I can’t imagine anyone surviving that *thing*.”

Zac looked down on the wounded Purifier with a frown, unsure what to do from here on out. He’d thought that visiting a Purifier would either heal him, or not work. The fact that it seemed to have made things worse wasn’t something he expected.

He could keep going along the edge of the incursion, finding other Purifiers to help out as well, but there was no telling how much time he would waste that way. Weeks, perhaps. And there was no guarantee that the other healers had any solutions.

The other option was to just hope for the best and push through the Dead Zone. That meant that he would have to go through areas with dense miasma while his wound was out of control though.

Finally he settled on staying the night in the town. He would wait to see if the restless attacks would subside. If things got worse he might have no choice but to seek out a better Purifier, but if the wound got back to normal again he would push through the Dead Zone.

“Sorry about your hands,” Zac said as he placed the agreed upon crystals on the ground.

“You should start working in earnest on your class. My wound came from an evolved Zombie, so this kind of injury will become more and more common. If you can’t heal these kinds of wounds, then sooner or later some wounded powerhouse might lash out at you in anger. That little bodyguard downstairs won’t be able to protect you.”

Mr. Wang didn’t answer Zac, but the Purifier’s frown deepened as he thoughtfully looked at his hands. With that Zac left the small room and walked through the clinic. Zac didn’t actually know if what he said was the truth, but humanity needed as many competent Purifiers as possible.

Wang Guo got such a gift thanks to his family's odd occupation, but if he continued like now that precious gift would get squandered, and it might lead to the death of many warriors who might otherwise have survived.

The two men were still lying unconscious on the ground when Zac returned to the lobby, though they had been repositioned so that their airways were unobstructed. The nurse called Yao Yao looked up when he appeared, but his facial expression must have been quite bad since she flinched away.

"Is there an ambush waiting for me outside?" Zac only asked with a hoarse voice as he gave the girl an even look.

"I don't know, no one has come in or out since you arrived. Is... Purifier Wang okay?" she answered looking a bit scared.

"He's fine, but a bit drained. He will likely not be able to work tomorrow," Zac said with a shrug as he exited clinic.

A quick look around showed nothing out of the usual, except the fact that the whole queue was looking at him with curious or envious eyes. There were no guards lined up, and Zac felt no danger through his sense, so he simply walked away.

A few quick twists and turns later he found himself in a secluded area where he changed his large fur cloak for a more nondescript one. He thought about changing his full face, but he was afraid of doing that at the moment.

The pain of the transformation might cause him to lose focus, which he couldn't risk while his wound rampaged around in his gut. He did however remove the bun, causing his long hair to cover his face somewhat.

Next, he hurried over to a tavern far from the clinic. He had already seen a few as he walked through the town earlier, as apparently many Zombie hunters didn't bother owning property. They left for long stretches of time, and their homes might be ransacked when they returned.

Instead many chose to stay in hotels and taverns while they were in town. Zac chose one that was neither particularly flashy nor run-down, and quickly paid for a room.

He was starting to get a bit dizzy as he was walking up the stairs, as the constant movement had put a strain on him. He opened the door with shaky hands and with a muffled groan he sat down on the floor, finally able to focus on the Dao of Trees.

Time slowly passed and Zac was extremely relieved to sense that his wound was slowly calming down, allowing him to relax somewhat. However, he didn't dare to relent, so he kept his Dao going, even if it was starting to cause some strain. He felt that as long as he could keep this up for a couple of more hours he'd be back in decent shape, to the point he would dare enter the Dead Zone.

But unfortunately the night wasn't fated to be a quiet one, as the subdued sounds of steps stopped right outside his door.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

#### **Chapter 169 - Nature's Barrier**

Zac frowned as his danger sense flared to life. He quickly rotated his cosmic energy as a few large emerald leaves started to flutter around him as though he was

sitting in the middle of a hurricane. The next second the door exploded into wood chippings as some unknown assailers were firing automatic rifles from the other side.

Zac didn't get flustered and instead only slowly got to his feet. Not a single bullet actually hit him as each and every one was miraculously intercepted by the leaves that were seemingly haphazardly fluttering around him.

It was Zac's second new skill, **[Nature's barrier]**. It was a High F-Graded skill that created a barrier of leaves that automatically intercepted incoming projectiles. Their movements weren't haphazard at all, but rather followed some intricate pattern that Zac still couldn't make heads or tails of.

The leaves were extremely durable, but a few tears started to appear from on them the incessant firing. Almost all bullets hit true, making Zac believe that the attackers had some sort of class that aided in with aim. However, the leaves quickly restored themselves, only at the cost of some Cosmic Energy.

Nature's Barrier wasn't one of the 9 high graded skills in the repository for nothing. It provided an extremely durable extra layer of protection. It also had a few other strong points that suited Zac quite well. The durability on the leaves was based on his Endurance, which was quite unique for barrier spells.

This alone made it worthy of the High-grade rank. The stopping-power of most spell shields was based on Intelligence, meaning the shields a physical warrior would summon could barely provide any safety.

The leaves could also be empowered with his Dao of Trees, making it was a perfect fit. However, there was no need to do that for some random rifles. However, after testing the skill out on the island he found that the rounds that the sniper rifles fired would easily penetrate the leaves. So he would need to imbue the skill with his Dao to protect himself from that type of attack.

It was the very same sniper rifles that had prompted Zac to get this skill even though he believed he might get something similar from his class in the future. Zac felt that apart from his high stats he had no proper way to protect himself from attacks. Even some weaklings managed to burn through all his defensive charges and almost kill him with the help of three rifles.

The high priest could create a field of fire that incinerated any attack, whereas the Corpse Lord had turned his very body into a treasure, providing far higher protection than average skills. Even Ogras would have no problem surviving an attack from sniper rifles, as he only needed to meld with the shadows.

Zac waited a second for the shooting to die down before he blasted out from the broken door like a raging bull. Outside stood two men, who seemed extremely shocked to see an unscathed Zac emerge. The interruption caused the pain in Zac's side to flare up again, causing a constant annoyance.

A swift slash from a small tomahawk ripped open the throat of one of the attackers, who helplessly slumped down on the floor with a wet gurgling sound. At the same time, Zac grabbed the throat of the other man and dragged him back into the room.

"Who sent you?" Zac asked.

"P-please don't kill me. I was ordered," the man said with horror in his eyes.

"Who?" Zac only repeated while he tightened his grip.

"Lord Perseverance," the man quickly said, obviously having no problem betraying the town leader. "You flashed a lot of wealth at the clinic, and you hurt both the Purifier and a lieutenant."

Zac shook his head, not too surprised with how things had turned out. He had only hoped that someone who could stay alive this far and even lead a town would have better sense. Zac tightened his grip once more, and this time the crunch of broken bones could be heard in the room. Zac dropped down the corpse on the ground and started to prepare for his next move.

He swapped out his normal boots to the pair that had no sole, which would allow him to use his movement skill. He had a feeling he would need it since the tavern was completely silent. The two had emptied a clip each, yet there was no commotion, clearly indicating something was up.

Finally he was ready to break out, but before Zac left he looked down at the two bodies on the floor, some loss in his eyes. It wasn't really sadness over what he did, but rather at what he was becoming. Perhaps he didn't need to kill those two, but he wouldn't leave any hidden risks. It was based on what Ogras said during the third wave.

He truly didn't just represent himself anymore. Leaving his enemies alive would be like releasing the wolves back into the mountains. Zac couldn't always be around to protect those close to him, and if he kept being merciful his friends and family would be in constant danger.

He still didn't take out **[Verun's Bite]** when he exited the room, feeling there was no one in this town that could force him to get serious. A quick glance around showed a completely empty hallway, confirming his doubt that people had been silently evacuated while he meditated.

With a few quick jumps, he quickly descended the stairs, but a sense of danger made him immediately move away with **[Loamwalker]**. This allowed him to narrowly escape the explosion of a claymore that destroyed the whole stairs where he stood just now.

Zac frowned as he saw the destruction caused. These Zombie hunters were extraordinarily well-equipped it seemed. Zac could only guess they had raided some army base in the vicinity since those types of explosives shouldn't just be lying around.

Zac had no doubt that when he exited the little tavern there would be a firing squad waiting for him. He wasn't really worried about the outcome, but rather about the rumors that would spread if he went out like a tank and decimated the attackers.

There still weren't too many people who were able to do things like that, and he didn't want to alert either the government or any invaders monitoring his activities.

To get around the problem Zac simply decided to create his own exit, and with a few slashes and a kick, he walked out of the building from the side and quickly ran away. He heard a shout from behind, but now that he was out in the open he wasn't worried they'd catch him.

Zac activated **[Loamwalker]** and sped through a side passage heading for the edge of town. However, he was interrupted after only ten seconds by acute pain in his side, forcing him to slow down to normal speed again.

Zac groaned and touched his side, feeling the deathly chill of miasma pulsating. He already sensed it a bit when he used **[Nature's Barrier]**, but it truly looked like his wound reacted to him using cosmic energy at the moment.

The wound wasn't like this before back on the island, making the preparations and research he'd done with the help of Ogras and Alea essentially useless. It was as though a beast had woken up in his wound and started causing all kinds of problems, which no one could have expected. Still, Zac knew it wasn't time to think about it now and instead kept running toward the outer wall of the town.

Zac was ripping through the streets with breakneck speed even without using his movement skill or cosmic energy, empowered only by his overpowered attributes.

However, the hunt was on, and two warriors were closing in on motorcycles. Zac wasn't sure how they could find him so easy, and could only guess they either had a drone or some skill that could track him within a certain area.

Zac was in no mood to get entangled with whatever the riders had planned, and took out two pieces of rocks he still kept in his bags. He quickly turned around and threw them in quick succession, and the two stones shot like cannonballs into the tires of the motorcycles.

The two pursuers couldn't keep their vehicles under control even with their improved attributes, and they quickly jumped off the motorcycles who went out of control crashing into a storefront. A quick glance back showed that they were scuffed but largely unscathed, and one even readied a gun while rolling. However, Zac rounded a corner and the shots fired harmlessly hit a wall.

Luckily the town wasn't too large, and Zac soon found himself at the outer wall. A soldier on guard up on the wall wall heard the commotion of the pursuit, and quickly levied his rifle at Zac and fired. Zac quickly dodged the first shots as he took out a Tomahawk. With a quick throw, it embedded itself deep into the chest of the guard, who fell over the side with a groan.

Not wanting to stay one more second in this town, Zac climbed up the wall quick like a monkey, turning back to remember the faces of those who tried to kill him. But a sense of danger made him heedlessly throw himself over the edge before he could make out anyone's appearance.

An enormous fireball blasted into the section that Zac stood on a second earlier, completely erasing the section of the wall. Zac frowned as he looked back up on the wall he just fell down from. It appeared there were some competent people in the town, after all.

With a grunt, he quickly ripped out the tomahawk from the chest of the fallen guard, and from there ran straight toward the Dead Zone. He ignored the pain in his wound, and once again activated [Loamwalker] for a whole minute this time in order to create some distance.

As soon as he found a road leading south-east he took out his car and quickly sped off. As he drove he once again was able to mainly focus on the Dao of Trees, and he was relieved to feel that the wound was quickly calming down again. It appeared that while using Cosmic Energy triggered the wound somewhat, it wasn't anywhere close to what happened did when it was attacked by the healing energy of the Purifier.

It was completely quiet as Zac sped along through the dead of night, with neither humans nor zombies in sight. Zac knew that this would be the case, as the zombie hunters had essentially cleaned everything out along the rim of the dead zone. To find targets they needed to head further and further in.

It felt a bit shameful to escape in a mad dash instead of just walking out tall and proud. It wasn't like he'd done anything wrong. But it felt too stupid to eradicate a main opposition to the zombies just because one of the lieutenants being an asshole, creating an unfortunate chain reaction.

Besides, one man fleeing this so-called Lord Perseverance was a far less attention-grabbing gossip than one man killing the lord and his whole army.

Zac kept driving for almost an hour without any lights out, guided only by his keen reflexes and eyesight. However, his mouth curved downward in annoyance as he suddenly saw an array of lights blocking the road ahead.

With a somber expression, he stopped the car and walked out, almost blinded by the light. It felt like there was no point to try and sneak around, as they clearly knew

his location. He needed to clear this situation up unless he wanted to be hounded for days.

Between the floodlights Zac saw roughly thirty men lined up, armed with both military weapons and things like swords and spears. The vehicles themselves were clearly of army-make, reinforcing Zac's belief that this town had ransacked an army base, or perhaps even was founded by deserted soldiers.

"A lot of trouble for just one person," Zac said with a steady voice as he looked at the captors.

"Oh, Lord Perseverance doesn't get his name without reason," a teasing voice answered.

"So what do you want?" Zac asked, trying his hardest to keep his increasingly short fuse in check.

"What do all men want? Beauty, youth, wealth. You, unfortunately, don't have the first two, but I do believe you have the last one," the voice responded, eliciting guffaws from the other bandits.

"We know you have a Cosmos Sack large enough to fit a car. Throw it over, along with everything you wear, and I'll let you leave," the man said, prompting another round of laughs.

Something snapped in Zac, and he wordlessly took out his weapon. This time it wasn't a tomahawk or the twohanded axe he wore on his back, but **[Verun's Bite]**. He didn't expect any of the men in front of him to tell any tales of his distinctive weapon and fighting style.

Because enough was enough.

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### **Chapter 170 - Conquest**

"Alright, what's next?" Ogras said with a sigh as he cracked his neck.

It was just like that god damn man to go gallivanting just when he became a Lord, leaving all the boring work for others. Now Ogras found himself stuck with Adran, who was starting to look more and more disagreeable by the day. A quick look at his new watch told him he'd been stuck in this room for over three hours.

At least the new government building was far better than the stuffy old tent that Adran used before. It was a large four-story structure with quite a few rooms, all nicely ventilated. It was one of the first things they finished outside the wall, as Ogras believed that the growing population needed feel the power of the government.

"There have been a few complaints by the so-called experts, citing bad working conditions. A few have requested to be sent back to New Washington," the stocky administrator said after looking at his docket.

Ogras only snorted in derision, showing clearly what he thought about that.

"Everyone is making do with what we have. Cease work on those people's homes and focus on those who are properly integrating. No point in wasting effort on those kinds of people," the young demon lord said with a shrug.

There had been some general dissatisfaction amongst the humans after the third wave. The fact that they were almost overrun by three incursions had frayed their

nerves, causing some unrest. The fact that they won in just a few hours didn't seem to be much of a comfort for them either.

Ogras had to admit that his actions right after Zac left hadn't helped much. As soon as Zac went on his journey Ogras gathered every single demon, having each of them swallow a piece of the Springroot. There actually were two who refused, and they were summarily killed without trial.

Next, they walked over and rounded up every single human, who counted over a thousand by now. They were herded to the large square of the Academy, mainly to keep people from running away with the help of the gravity array. The same procedure happened there, though Ogras used a bit gentler methods. He only slightly tortured the first ones who refused to eat, instead of outright killing them.

It had turned out that a total of 8 people were infiltrators, and Ogras still couldn't be sure if that was all of them. However, having some spies in one's midst was noting uncommon, so he decided to not waste any more effort on it. Just take those two incessant women who kept pestering him. However, some of the humans had been crying about "human rights violations" or the like, making him want to show them some real violations.

Still, he knew he had to keep himself in check for when Zac came back. The man was still a bit too soft for Ogras' taste, and the demon knew Zac would cause a ruckus if he handled the little humans too roughly. And Ogras really needed to stay on his good side for now.

"Finally there is the issue of the town who calls itself Refugee Harbor. Since they are located on one of the closest islands and quite populous we aimed to integrate them into the array network first, getting access to their manpower. However, two parties have been rebuffed already, refused access to the town. The second time they were even attacked and forced to flee," Adran continued with a small frown.

"Oh? There was such a thing?" Ogras asked with some interest. "How strong are their forces?"

"From what we can tell not overly powerful, their strongest elites are perhaps slightly stronger than the Valkyries. We still have no information about the leader either, as he hasn't shown himself," the administrator answered.

Ogras mulled it over as he tapped his fingers against the metallic mold that he had stretching out from his missing forearm. He looked forward to see the results of his little experiment.

"Ready the large ship Zac, uh Lord Atwood, bought and 50 soldiers. Ah, bring 2 squads of the girls as well, might as well give them some experience," Ogras said as he roused himself with a small smile. "My ass is getting splinters from sitting here day after day. Conquering a town sounds like fun."

"We did receive reports of something odd going on there," Adran hesitantly said. "It's the place with the missing children and adults acting weird."

"Oh, I'll bring Janos and Alea as well. They'll be able to counter any mind-altering things, if that's what's going on there," Ogras said with a shrug as he stood up and left.

As Ogras walked out of the government building he couldn't stop himself from throwing a glance at the gaudy tower on the other side of the wall, still spewing out its nauseating rays of light. Just looking at the place made Ogras pissed off. He'd never met as annoying a construct in his life.

Clearly, being stuck in some forgotten pocket of the multi-verse had turned the tool spirit insane. However, he really needed to ingratiate himself with it, as he felt that the ticket to his current problems might be through the repository.

Ogras still remembered the soul-wrenching feeling of standing in front of the Nexus Crystal, realizing the system deemed him unworthy. He'd walked the path of the elite, struggling in the shadows all these years, yet it wasn't enough.

Not a single upgrade path was available to him at the moment, locking him to the F-Grade. He always knew this might happen as he followed an incomplete heritage, yet having it confirmed was a real blow.

At first, he'd lived in denial, hoping that it was the System holding him back with its restrictions, but he knew now that wasn't the case. He knew that perhaps all 3 of the leaders who invaded the island already had evolved, and were only waiting for the system to release the shackles. In fact it was quite normal to send people right at the precipice of evolving.

It would allow passage through the Incursion, and the second they got through to the baby world they could take the last step into E-Ranks. From there they could properly spend their time to solidify their foundations until they could burst out with unprecedented power as soon as the last restrictions were removed. That was one of the reasons that these humans hadn't been erased so far.

Yet he was stuck where he was, unable to take that step. Who knew how long it would take for him to gain whatever was needed to improve. The Fruit of Ascension wasn't enough. He even sacrificed a hand in order to rack up some god damn achievements, hoping that would allow him to evolve. But not even that was enough for The Ruthless Heavens.

At least he was lucky enough to be able to hide behind a human netherbeast. He needed Zac to keep growing into a true monster until he could solve his current conundrum. Ogras knew that more promising men than him had been stuck on this very step for their whole life until they died, consumed with regret.

Yet Ogras refused to succumb to that fate. His eyes once again moved to the towers in the distance.

### *The Umbra.*

He had been despondent, desperate even, until he saw that inheritance. A new path opened up to him as he read those two words. Those two words might not mean much to others, but to Ogras it represented the difference between dying a nobody and defying the heavens.

A full inheritance of someone who walked a very similar path as himself. Such a gift was something that essentially everyone in the multi-verse thirsted for. It was far superior to some Dao fruit or heritages. It could save hundreds, perhaps thousands of years of effort, depending on the grade.

Perhaps it could even give him a large enough boost for him to dare go through with his quest. He had thought that he wouldn't get any quests for a long while due to his actions in forfeiting the invasion, yet it was there, staring at him.

**[Doubling down (Unique): Slay an Incursion leader. Reward: [Tower of Eternity Token], restrictions removed. (0/1)]**

Ogras saw it as sort of a test by The Ruthless Heavens, a chance for him to prove it wasn't cowardice or weakness that made him give up on the invasion. However, until he saw the inheritance he simply ignored it. He barely survived a fight with one Church's generals, how the hell would he survive the big boss?

And don't even mention the Tower. He barely survived the desperate push that got him to the entrance of the third floor. He still had one chance left, but as he was now he knew that going back was suicide.

But armed with an inheritance? That was completely another matter. Even more, if he managed to drag a certain human with him to walk in front of him to take the brunt of the trial...

Ogras couldn't help feeling the universe was paving a true path of supremacy for him, and couldn't help whistle a tune as he walked toward the house of the old goat. He was thinking of bringing him along. Not because he really needed an experienced sailor, but rather that he enjoyed Sap Trang's company.

"... So anyway, don't mention that... appearance... to lord Atwood, or you will be spending the rest of your short life on the toilet," a familiar voice could be heard from inside the small hut the fisherman had built for himself.

Intrigued, Ogras melded into the shadows as he slipped into the house.

"Little lass, no need for threats. But you know, you shouldn't keep secrets from your significant other. If he truly likes you he won't mind you are a swamp monster," Mr. Sap said, looking troubled.

Alea looked extremely annoyed at the fisherman's comment.

"He's not... Well anyway, I am no swamp monster, it's just some complications from my class I am working out. Lord Zac doesn't need to know about it until I've fixed it, ok? And you, why are you hiding in the shadows?" Alea said as she swirled around to the shadows in the corner.

Ogras was a bit embarrassed but didn't let it show as he walked out of the shadows.

"Let's go. We have a town to conquer. And the old goat's right. Why not just stay in your real body for now, instead of wasting all that Cosmic Energy? He's not even here."

"It's NOT my real body!" Alea raged. "And I can't have people talking. Whatever, let's go."

With that, she simply grabbed the collar of the old fisherman, who helplessly followed the two.

Next, the three walked over to the Academy, intent on bringing a few of the little spear girls. They had just gotten their classes, and some real battle might remind them they weren't immortals just yet.

"We only take orders from lord Zac," one of the leaders simply said after Ogras told them about the mission.

Ogras didn't know her name since he hadn't bothered learning any of them, but he couldn't help cursing Zac as he looked at the small army. He had all these girls willingly entering contracts with him, yet he only stayed by himself in his large empty castle. Perhaps he really was a monk.

"Well, that might be true, but Illvere and Alyn take orders from me," Ogras said with a small smile. "I hear you want to go to the Ratman incursion in a week? It would be a shame if those two said you weren't ready."

The Valkyries angrily glared at him for a bit, before they reluctantly started to get their gear.

"Don't be so glum, we're going to liberate a town that refuses to acknowledge your great Lord," Ogras said with a laugh after seeing their faces, which actually seemed to improve their mood.

In just two hours the awe-inspiring Carrack set out, slicing through the waters. It was manned by a group of eager demons and two squads of Valkyries who not only balefully glared at Ogras but at Alea as well.

The girls were in a generally competitive mood against the poison mistress, as she went over to the Academy every now and then to “improve their natural poison resistance”, as she called it. Ogras knew it was more about marking territories, but he didn’t really care.

It took a few hours but soon they found themselves outside the gates of Refugee’s Harbor. Ogras considered just blasting a hole in the whole thing with the ship’s weapons, but reluctantly decided against it. He was sure it would end with some dragged out lecture from Zac when he got back.

Instead, he anchored some distance away from the town and only left a skeleton crew to man its cannons in case would be needed after all. The rest followed him toward the gates. Ogras threw a disdainful glance at the scared-looking guards standing on top of the wall, and with a shake of his head took a step forward.

He guessed he’d have to at least give them a chance to surrender.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 171 - Shamelessness**

“You know who we are. Open the gates or we’ll open it for you,” Ogras said with a loud voice, looking up at the hapless guards.

There was no response for a few seconds, and the silence stretched on as the humans up on the wall looked at each other with despondent faces. Ogras was almost thankful for their inaction, as it would save a lot of time in their end.

“Very well, thank you for making this easy,” Ogras said with a shrug as the gate was drowned in darkness.

Constant sounds of wood breaking and splintering could be heard as the thick gate was impaled by numerous shadow spears. Shouts erupted from the wall, and a few attempted to stop Ogras’ attack. A few arrows and ineffectual spells sailed toward him, but Ogras effortlessly ignored them without breaking a sweat.

The demons didn’t stay passive when they saw their general being attacked, and a multitude of far more powerful attacks blasted into the wall, completely decimating the top sections of it. Screams and wails could be heard, but Ogras didn’t care as he stepped forward. It felt nice to not be the defender for once, but the conqueror.

Step by step he walked through the remains of the gate, his shadows suffocating the small fires that had started from the spells. The demons followed behind him, and finally the Valkyries walked in the rear with troubled countenances on their faces.

One by one they stepped through the wall of smoke into the town proper, and found themselves face to face with around two hundred warriors. They looked scared but they stood their ground, surprising Ogras somewhat.

“Please, we just want to live our lives in peace, why do you need to keep coming here?” a woman in the front shouted with red-rimmed eyes.

“Well if it doesn’t suit you, then you’re welcome to swim out of our sphere of influence,” Ogras answered with a smile. “But as long as you stay in Lord Atwood’s kingdom you will need to follow his laws.”

“Since when is this area under the influence of demons? We never agree to follow one of your kind,” another man with a large sword shouted back.

“Then you’ll be happy to learn that Lord Atwood is a bona fide human. Now let me ask you something. Where are all the children?” Ogras retorted.

The defenders looked at each other with troubled faces, apparently readying themselves for a fight.

“Why do you want to know that? There’s no need for you to bother our children,” the woman aggressively shot back, fear covering her face.

“Well, depending on what you did with them we will either kill you all, or we’ll-” Ogras didn’t get further as Janos walked up and coughed next to him.

“Something... Off. Catch me one?” a voice suddenly said next to him, making Ogras turn to the taciturn Illusionist.

“You’re saying they are under an illusion?” Ogras asked with a low voice.

“Maybe. Saw glimmer in eyes. Mind control,” Janos answered with a small shrug.

Ogras thought it over for a second until he turned his gaze to a building that was placed just behind the defending army. With a slight exertion, he managed to extend his shadows all the way over there, and with a few well-placed stabs he destroyed the supporting beams of the structure.

The house soon collapsed with a large crash, making many of the defenders worriedly turn around, afraid of getting ambushed. Ogras took advantage of the brief lapse of focus to flash over and grab the woman in the front. Shadows swirled all around her in a fraction of a second, and she was completely immobilized as Ogras teleported back to his own side.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING? RELEASE ME!” she shouted and tried to frenetically rip free from her binding.

The shout made the humans finally realize what just happened, and a few shouted some weak demands to release her. Ogras only snorted and nodded at Janos who walked over and touched her forehead. She quickly calmed down and her face gained a wooden expression, devoid of any life.

“Ask now,” Janos said and backed away.

“What’s your name?” Ogras asked the woman placed in a trance.

It was one of Janos’ more convenient skills. The only downside was that there had to be quite a difference in attributes between the illusionist and the target for it to work. Besides, even weaklings with extremely strong convictions or wills could break out of it, though this woman seemed to possess neither.

“Katherine,” she mumbled without changing her expression.

“What happened with the children of this town? Are they dead?” Ogras asked.

Ogras knew that if these people had killed all the kids, then Zac would have personally eradicated everyone here, so it would make his life quite easy. They could simply mow every combatant down, construct a teleporter and be back before supper. But if not, perhaps the situation was more complicated.

“He’s holding them captive. We need to follow his order or he’ll hurt them. He ordered us to make you leave,” she said, some fear once again emerging on her face.

“Who’s he?” Ogras asked intrigued.

It took a special level of scum to go through with that kind of plan, and Ogras was almost impressed.

“The lord, Lord of Eyes. He’ll hurt them unless we do what he says,” she repeated.

“Why don’t you just kill him, and you’ll all be free?” Alea asked as she stepped forward.

“We can’t, it would harm the children,” she said with a frantic shake of her head.

“Why?”

“It...” the woman began, but started frowning in confusion.

“Hypnotic suggestion,” Janos said.

“What?” Ogras asked, slightly annoyed that the man still hadn’t worked out his speech impairment after all these years.

“Protective measure. Implant suggestion. Can’t attack, fail,” the Illusionist said with a pained face.

“He’s saying that his lord has implanted the townspeople with a hypnotic suggestion. An attempt to kill him or rescue the children will end in failure, and even kill the children,” Alea translated, being used to Janos’ stilted speech.

“Then why bother with kidnapping the children? Can’t he just hypnotize them to follow his orders?” Ogras asked skeptically, feeling that the whole thing sounded like a pain in the ass.

“Weak hypnotist, too many, too big suggestion,” Janos said.

Ogras finally understood what was going on. Hypnosis generally wasn’t some supreme skill that could make people, especially strong cultivators, believe or do anything. Hypnosis was essentially tricking the brain, not forcing it to believe something. No hypnotist could make a man kill himself, for example, as that would go against the primal instinct of them.

However, this Lord of Eyes had found a pretty smart solution. He didn’t implant a suggestion that tried to force the into unconditional surrender, but a suggestion that an attack on him would end with the hostages dying. For all people knew, it might actually be true, so implanting it would be far easier than saying that the lord was simply invincible.

It was an extra layer of protection the hypnotist created for himself on top of having actual hostages. Ogras brows rose at the realization, as this level of cowardice was something else. Still, the man couldn’t be a complete weakling if he not only managed to capture all the kids but even managed to implant the whole town with suggestions.

He only hesitated for a second before he put on his **[Circlet of Tranquility]**. It was the same item he’d used before to protect himself against mental attacks, and it also worked against mind control. It might be an over-the-top measure against some random hypnotist, but he wouldn’t gamble with his little life. It would be a true embarrassment if he was hypnotized by some hack at an isolated town on a baby world. He might just as well kill himself from embarrassment.

“Where is this Lord of Eyes now?” Ogras asked next.

“He’s hiding in the library,” the woman answered, her face once again having turned expressionless.

“I’ll be right back,” Ogras said, as he looked at the building the captive indicated.

“Do you need help?” Alea asked, but only received a small laugh as an answer as the shadows swallowed Ogras.

In no time he walked amongst the book-cases, the claws on his feet creating a clacking sound in the otherwise silent library. Rows and rows of dusty books lined the building, actually making Ogras a bit excited.

This baby planet was far more interesting than he ever could have imagined. The poor saps lived their whole lives without a speck of Cosmic Energy, yet they had created

so many fun things. The almost endless amounts of movies and shows were a testament to this, but that only scratched the surface.

Lately he'd asked around a bit about the history of the world from various humans, mainly the congenial one currently running the tavern, and what he learned truly astounded him. The humans of planet Earth had a shorter history than his own clan, yet they had gone from cavemen to taking the first steps of discovering the multiverse.

Who knew, if they were left alone for another few thousand years they might actually have become a new lineage of the technocrats. He wondered just how they could be so industrious. A few thousand years was just a blink in the history of his own homeworld, and nothing really changed.

Perhaps a few wars would take place, and a few new clans emerge. Perhaps there was something in the air of this world making the humans so restless, forcing them to keep reinventing themselves.

He truly looked forward perusing this library, but that would have to be saved for another day. He kept scanning the building with **[Omniscient Eyes]** until they fell upon a certain bookcase against a wall. His mouth tugged upwards and walked over. He gripped the wooden bookcase with a hand and simply flung it away, not bothering with finding the hidden mechanic.

Behind the bookcase was a drape, hiding the entrance to a small room. When Ogras pushed the garment to the side he saw a grimy-looking man wearing rags sit pathetically in a corner.

"Wha- Please, spare me! I'm just a nobody, tending the books," the man cried with a wretched appearance.

"Spare the waterworks. The Lord of Eyes, I presume?" Ogras said as he stepped into the small hideout.

"Wha? No, I'm Gregor, the librarian," he answered with a confused face, but before he could continue a spear of shadows penetrated his leg, making him shriek in pain.

"Don't waste my time, I want to be home before dinner. Where are you keeping the kids?" Ogras said as he looked down on the prompt showing above the man.

**Gregor Johnsson.**

**Level: 34**

**Class: Hypnotist (Uncommon).**

**Most used skill: Seed of Suggestion**

**Highest Attribute: Wisdom**

"Wait, ok, it's me. But know that if I'm harmed any further the children will all die. We are linked through my Mental Hive-skill," the man said between grit teeth.

Ogras snorted as he felt the gem on his circlet heat up, and from how hot it got he realized that it was actually a quite strong attack. The man must have leveled up his **[Seed of Suggestion]** skill to at least high level from using it on the whole town.

"Don't bother using your Seed of Suggestion skill like on the villagers. And even if your little suggestion was true, what would I care about some human brats dying?" Ogras said as another leg of the hypnotist was gored.

The man was now wailing and crying on the floor, sounding like he'd been put through the thousand tortures.

"Please, no more, I'll do whatever, I'll work for you! The kids are hidden in the town hall. There's a hidden bomb shelter in the basement, they're there," Gregor cried, tears and snot freely running down his face.

“It’s a shame, someone like you would make a decent asset. This level of shamelessness is in a way a strength. But I don’t want to rock the boat with the little lord at the moment, I have an inheritance to receive, after all. So my apologies,” Ogras said with a somewhat regretful face.

The Lord of Eyes confusedly opened his mouth, but before he could speak a large shadow spear impaled his torso, completely skewering him. A small burst of cosmic energy entered Ogras’ body, but it soon dissipated out of his body once again, reminding him of his predicament of being stuck on the bottleneck.

Ogras placed the corpse in his bag and returned to the armies who were still in a standstill.

“It’s done, the kids are in the basement of the town hall over there. Hidden bomb shelter,” Ogras said as he appeared.

From there it didn’t take long to sort everything out. When Ogras showed the corpse of the Lord of Eyes, chaos took hold of the defending army, with everyone crying that the children were doomed. Only when the Valkyries and a few demons were leading out roughly three hundred haggard, but living, children would they calm down.

The Hypnotist was dead, but the suggestions still lingered in their minds, though they would dispel by themselves over time according to Janos. The Illusionist also walked around and helped to speed along the process, and soon a few people, including the formerly captured woman stood in front of Ogras and the others.

“Thank you for releasing us from this mental prison, and sorry about the way we acted earlier,” the woman said with some embarrassment.

“It’s no problem. Lord Atwood would surely have come to your aid sooner if we knew what was going on here. Since your town appeared fine on the surface we mainly focused on saving those facing death on the other islands,” Ogras said with a straight face. “I’m surprised you are so calm facing us demons. Most humans are a bit more... shocked.”

“Well, we only met the Beastkin in the Tutorial, but I guess you’re another of the new races sharing the fused world?” the woman asked.

“Uh, right. You actually have cultivators here?” Ogras asked intrigued.

“Yes, roughly two thousand of us are cultivators,” she answered as a matter of course, but Ogras could barely contain his surprise.

This could only mean that Refugee’s Harbor was a drop-off site for a human tutorial group. It explained why the town was largely fine when most of the humans they scooped up on the various islands were on their last legs. But before he could ask any follow-up questions a beautiful, but dirty, woman somewhere in her twenties pushed herself to the forefront of the cultivators of Refugee’s Harbor.

“Please, excuse me! You said that the Lord’s name is Atwood? Is it Zachary Atwood?” she asked with a hesitant face.

“Why do you know that name? Who are you?” Ogras asked with a frown.

“I’m Hannah, Zac’s girlfriend.”

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**Chapter 172 - Balance**

A horrifying pressure spread out from Zac as he stepped forward with **[Verun's Bite]** in his hands. The previously rowdy squad from Perseverance didn't have time to react before he was upon them. A horizontal swing of **[Chop]** ripped through most of the group, crushing hastily erected defenses like dry twigs.

"Attack!" the voice from earlier frantically cried, no longer having any joviality in it.

However, it was to no avail as a dozen glittering leaves whirled around Zac as he methodically cut down everything. Spells and bullets flew through the night, but the defensive skill of Zac proved its worth as the attacks were continuously blocked. The few that snuck by couldn't really hurt Zac either, as between his monstrous Endurance and E-Grade robes he was nigh-invulnerable to ordinary attacks.

A car door slammed and an engine started, clearly indicating someone had quickly grown tired of the fight. Zac only shook his head with some regret, and detached his fractal edge, letting it cut the military vehicle and its driver in half. He would actually already have finished the fight if it wasn't for the fact that he didn't want to damage the vehicles.

They would be a great asset to his town, as he didn't have many good vehicles at the moment. With some inscriptions and the engine modifications, they would be great tools for his force to explore and traverse the main continent in the future. After all it seemed the Creators wouldn't sell any land vehicles. The next step after the ships would be the flying spiritual tools, but that was extremely far off.

There were roughly thirty people who were part of the ambush, but the fight only lasted for less than a minute before the night once again was blanketed in deathly silence. Corpses were strewn all over, some as far as a few hundred meters away from the blockade. After the initial rampage a few tried to flee, but between **[Loamwalker]** and the fractal edge projectiles Zac shot out none survived.

However, the battle wasn't completely without consequence, as Zac was panting with a pallid face. He tried to end it as quickly as possible in order to not let his wound go out of control again, but it was no stopping it as a horrible pain spread through his side.

Worse yet, it started to absorb miasma as well. It seemed like something in the wound almost had turned into a small whirlpool, slowly rotating while drawing in the deathly energy in the atmosphere. Luckily the Dao of Trees blocked out a good chunk of it, forming a natural barrier.

After a brief hesitation he chose not to head out of the Dead Zone. Between the Cleansing Pill he ate back on the island, the Purifier's efforts, and his Dao, it would take weeks before the concentration of miasma reached the levels of concentration it had right at the beginning. Besides, the wound calmed down after a while the last time, so hopefully the same would happen again.

Still, he didn't wish to remain at the scene of the battle. It looked like only the leader who spoke in the beginning had a semblance of power, whereas the others were normal foot soldiers. Most used machine guns rather than skills, showing that their power was limited. The huge fireball that almost blasted him up on the wall of Perseverance was still fresh in his mind. He wasn't in the mood to take one of those blasts at the moment, as the leaves wouldn't do much against such an attack.

Zac therefore quickly collected all the vehicles as in greatest cosmos sack, gaining 10 military jeeps. After a brief hesitation, he also threw in the bodies of all the men as well, not wanting to leave them to give clues of what happened here. He wanted to leave the so-called Lord Perseverance with some doubt, and if he was smart he'd cut his losses.

Besides, even if they were enemies they were all humans. To leave them here would mean they'd turn to zombies eventually. He'd make sure that they would rest in peace instead. He didn't bother cleaning up the scene any more than that though, leaving the scars and cracks left from his and the other's attacks. Finally he put his own car into a sack, and brought out a new one.

It was one of the few vehicles that already was modified to run on crystals instead of gas. Earlier he used a normal one since he expected to enter a town, but now he had no such compunctions. Gas was scarce and he didn't want to waste it, while he had an almost endless number of crystals. Besides, the car running on Cosmos Energy had another advantage. It made almost no sound, even more-so than an electric car.

Zac swooshed along the road, a silent spectre in the night. However, a frown started to emerge on his face, as the wound wasn't calming down, and instead kept rotating and absorbing miasma. He thought about stopping, but he still was quite close to the border town. Instead he kept driving for another two hours, until the first rays of daylight started to push through the thick grey clouds that seemed to cover the Dead Zone.

At that moment he stopped the car and put it into a Cosmos Sack, as he walked into the forest next to the road. Even with some sunlight it felt like the Dead Zone was blanketed in an endless gloom, the combination of miasma and the thick clouds creating a sort of a natural barrier against the suns.

As he walked along the forest he also noted that widespread terraforming was taking place inside. He still was quite far out in the edge of the domain of the undead forces, but the trees had already started to transform. They had long lost their leaves it seemed, though Zac couldn't tell whether it was due to the miasma or winter's approach.

Since Zac Dao of Trees he could somewhat sense how the trees was faring, and he wasn't surprised when he felt that most of the trees were dead or on the verge of dying. However, there were some that defiantly struggled on in the face of death, actually somehow gaining strength from the struggle. Others had simply mutated, and seemed to be quietly absorbing miasma as nourishment. As he saw it he was reminded of the adage that life finds a way.

After having walked for thirty minutes he felt confident that he was both far from any civilization, meaning he shouldn't run into any zombies, or far enough into no-man's-land that no zombie hunters should find him. Therefore he started to look around for a place to camp.

He still hadn't slept during the night, as he was busy trying to calm down his wound earlier. Even with his stats he was starting to get tired, and he didn't want to risk losing focus inside an incursion. He looked around a bit and finally he found a tree that stood tall and proud, actually still having its leaves on its branches.

It was one of the trees that had found a way to combat the miasma. Zac didn't really understand how, but after holding his hands to it for a while it almost felt like it slowly transformed the deathly energy back into normal Cosmic Energy. It was essentially the reverse of what zombies and unholy beacons did.

Zac was also happy to sense that the miasma actually was quite a bit sparser around the tree, prompting him to sit down and rest his back against the thick trunk. Still, even with better environment his wound wouldn't stop absorbing miasma.

Until now he'd held back on trying to cut out whatever was in the wound, as the Demon physician had noted it might come with unexpected side-effects. It was a bit like cooking a fugu fish, one wrong cut and the whole fish would turn poisonous. There was a risk with the same happening to Zac, so he decided on slowly healing.

However, things had changed since the purifier tried fixing him. It wasn't slowly getting better like before, but rather getting worse. Zac had seen the effect of miasma poisoning first-hand, and had no desire to become the walking dead.

He was tired, but before sleeping he'd give it a chance. He took out a knife he'd prepared for just this occasion, along with some bandages and a flashlight. Next he took off all his clothes on his torso, displaying the wound out in the cold air.

It truly looked ghastly, a black hole with tendrils spreading out from it. After a brief touch it didn't feel hot like an infection, but rather a numbing cold. This much was the same as before, but one startling change had taken place. The wound was now slowly pulsing, as though it had a heartbeat of its own.

The disgusting sight only reaffirmed Zac's decision, and with a somber expression he disinfected the knife before he gingerly cut into his flesh right outside the core of the wound. His plan was to quickly cut out the center, and then slowly heal the tendrils after the main part of the wound was gone.

However, he only managed to cut a centimeter into his body before a wave of pain unlike anything he'd felt before flooded his mind, overloading his system. Zac had no way to produce any semblance of a response as his eyes rolled up into his head and he collapsed back against the tree unconscious.

The suns were already quite high in the sky when Zac woke up again with a start, and he was surprised to see that he'd actually slept for 5 hours. It was far longer compared to the two to three hours he usually slept, and guessed it was since he wasn't in great condition.

After making sure nothing in his surroundings was amiss he quickly looked down at his wound, and breathed in relief that his little experiment didn't seem to have made anything worse. The black core was still slowly pulsating, but it hadn't spread out while he was knocked out.

A quick internal check also showed that his body didn't contain any more miasma compared to earlier. In fact, it almost seemed there were less of it than before in his body. However, Zac was worried to see that small amounts of miasma were still entering him. As he dressed again he pondered on his next step.

He was truly walking along blind, not knowing what the hell the thing in his body was. It was quite unfortunate that neither Calrin nor Ogras could figure anything out. The undead faction was extremely vast with tens of thousands of classes and means, and there was no way they could find out exactly what he'd been struck by.

It also was quite hard for the gnome to buy anything used for purifying the miasma. The undead empire saw those types of pills as a direct affront to their faction, and that selling those types of things an attack on them. The pills themselves weren't hard to make, but few were willing to draw the undead's ire for the limited revenue that came with the purifying pills.

Zac sighed and rested his head back against the large tree again, closing his eyes. It truly was a marvelous specimen, surviving in this harsh climate. The suns were obscured, and the energy in the atmosphere was corrupted, yet the tree pushed forward, not giving up. Zac thought of trying to glean any hints from it, and entered a meditative state as he tried to understand what the tree actually was doing.

The hours passed and soon the small Dao field he had erected around his wound started to change. Before it was like a cloud that blocked miasma from entering the wound, but since the cloud was porous some snuck through. However, the cloud started to transform, turning into a small whirlpool as well, moving the opposite direction from the whirl in his wound.

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### **Chapter 173 - Disrupt the Call**

Zac felt he'd stumbled upon something important as he slowly controlled the Dao of Trees to rotate over the wound. It was a way of manipulation of the Dao that he'd never done before. Usually, he just pushed the Dao into his attack or his body, but now he realized that type of usage probably could be likened to back when he was alone on the island.

The way he used Cosmic Energy in the start was to simply push it into his arms and legs to run faster and punch harder. There was no refinement or finesse to it, and most of the energy was wasted. However, using it in a controlled manner, such as through skills, showed far higher effectiveness.

It seemed that it was the same with the Dao. Even though he was anxious to get going he felt it was critical to test this further, so he slowly manipulated the little whirlpool containing his Dao of Trees. Eventually he managed to manipulate it slightly, such as growing or making it smaller.

More importantly, as he kept the small Dao field spinning over his wound Zac noticed that keeping it going was almost effortless. He still hadn't really understood exactly what the power from Dao was. Ogras called it the Power of Laws, whereas Calrin mentioned Spirit. Zac himself thought of it as mental energy.

In any case, the consumption of mental energy seemed far lower when he'd turned the Dao field into a small whirlwind, as though the spinning was keeping the field from dissipating on its own. Zac only needed to supply it with a bit of energy every now and then to keep the rotation going. It was far more efficient than wasting a lot of energy to keep a blob of Dao to cover the wound for a while, and then rest a bit as the wound grew worse again.

Having finally found a way to combat the corruption he got up to his feet and started to walk away. However, he quickly walked back and cut off a few saplings from the tree, as the mutation was worth further study. It had even opened up a new avenue for him in a sense, showing a possible direction of how to take his Dao one step further.

Without death, there can be no life. The tree had taken that even further, as it created life out of death, converting miasma to cosmic energy. It was like the seasons, the death of winter turning into the warm life of summer. He felt it was very possible to use this concept into improving his Dao of Trees, though he wasn't quite there yet.

Zac kept going southeast through the forest, not bothering going back to the road. It didn't make much difference in speed whether he drove over broken-down roads or sped through the forest on foot, at least not now when his wound was under control.

Had this been a year or so ago he'd be extremely freaked out by the gloomy atmosphere, but now it barely registered as most of his mind was preoccupied with the Dao of Trees. If he wasn't on a clock he would have secluded himself right at this moment, trying to formalize the wisp of insight he'd gained as he sat under the resisting tree.

However, time waits for no man. There were myriad things he needed to get done. The first and foremost was finding Kenzie, but that was just the start. Next thing on his list was the hegemony quest. There was a one-month time limit on it, so needed

to finish it quickly. It was only called the first step, which made it sound like a classic quest chain.

But even though it was only the first step it gave extravagant rewards, making Zac extremely curious as to what other things were waiting down the road. It was also quite welcome considering that there soon was the global treasure hunt.

He had been hemming and hawing whether he should go or not, especially now that it looked like he'd become a persona non grata with the government. But it was starting to feel like he didn't have much of a choice. The weight of responsibility was starting to push down on him. He simply wasn't strong enough at the moment.

He might be strong compared to some rabble, or even on earth in general. Yet he barely managed to fight off the Corpse Lord, who wasn't even the leader of the incursion. That was only one of the Incursions, and beyond that were the Dominators who were suspiciously silent.

The treasure hunt was supposed to give unique opportunities to gain power, and he couldn't afford not to go anymore, no matter what he personally wanted to do. He would just have to keep his head down and fight for opportunities, and hopefully not get dragged into any large-scale conflict.

Four days quickly passed, and Zac felt he was making good time through the Dead Zone. He'd been afraid that he would be bogged down by endless waves of Zombies, but he barely saw a single one. Then again, it made sense since the incursion had grown way out of proportion, being almost as large as the old United States in landmass.

Still, with his superhuman attributes, he'd crossed around half of the Dead Zone, as he guessed he was somewhat near the Core by now. Just two or three days of travel to the southwest and he should be right at the Nexus Hub that was the core of the Undead Incursion. Of course, he was heading east, almost in the opposite direction. For the moment he had no interest in meeting the real core forces of the Undead Empire.

Most of the area he walked through was pure wilderness, and he skirted around the towns and hovels he passed while he traveled. He assumed that the Zombies would be gathered in the towns, as those who wandered out into the wild would likely be picked off by the wandering beasts.

Zac did, however, get accosted by mutated beasts every now and then, frenziedly trying to ravage him. Zac quickly dispatched the monsters, not bothering with collecting their bodies. They were teeming with miasma, making the meat inedible unless you were desperate. Especially since yesterday, the monsters had grown particularly wretched, as the concentration of miasma had grown far higher. As for their hides, Zac already had a mountain of those from the wolf hordes.

Since there were almost no impediments to his travels he decided to take a few extra hours a day to work on his Dao. Being forced to ceaselessly combat the surrounding miasma had one strong point. It was continuously sharpening his control over his Dao. The deathly energy of the corrupted Cosmic Energy was also a great contrast to his Dao of Trees, which was a subcategory of the Dao of Nature or the Dao of life.

They were almost opposites, and seeing the two forces combat each other through the whirling vortices kept giving Zac new insights. It was on the third day he realized that while the two forces were restricting each other, they also were empowering each other in a sense.

Some of the miasma was still entering him even with his Dao whirl keeping vigil, but Zac initially didn't care as the Dao of Trees purified a bit of the energy in the wound as well. However, Zac started to note that energy kept going in, but never left.

As he pushed through the wilderness he pondered on the implications. The wound was acting up less and less as his control of his Dao increased, but the energy had to go somewhere. He was starting to get worried that something was accumulating inside him, but a loud explosion dragged him out of his thoughts.

The explosion clearly didn't come from a natural source, and though Zac generally wanted to avoid problems he couldn't help but curiously move toward the source of the sound. In just a few seconds a large plume of smoke rose in the air in the distance, giving him a clear direction.

As he moved forward through the gloomy forest he started to hear the sound of machine guns incessantly firing. Zac was surprised, as he didn't expect human activity this far into the Dead Zone. He'd moved quite quickly, sleeping only a few hours each day for four days by now, bringing him far into undead territory.

There should be good targets quite a bit further out with many towns being overrun by zombies, so there weren't many reasons for Zombie Hunters venturing this far inside. It exponentially increased the risk of running into something dangerous, like the core invaders themselves. Besides, Zac had already run into two beasts that were quite a bit stronger than the tiger that caused John so much trouble, so the invaders weren't the only thing to worry about.

The gunfighting sounded more and more intense as Zac increased his pace through the forest, until he finally reached the edge of the woods, the decaying trees giving way to what once might have been vast paddies, perhaps for growing rice. The vast irrigated field had turned into sickly puddles with thick fog wafting above it.

However, the fields weren't what garnered Zac's attention. Rather it was the huge swarm of zombies walking together, and the people desperately trying to impede their march. However, even with zombies dropping every second the number was just unimaginable. The number of Zombies couldn't even be put in the same category as those that invaded his island. If Zac had to guess there had to be at least half a million of them stumbling along.

It was an ocean of the undead, and the only solace was that there seemingly weren't any Aberrations or corpse golems amongst the ranks. There were however a few zombies who stood out from the mindless masses, and every now and again one would leap out from the ranks and try to snag one of the humans running along with the horde.

The resistance consisted of roughly 300 people, mostly of Asian descent, who kept moving along the flanks of the huge swarm of the undead, using various means of downing one zombie after another. Zac was a bit confused why they fought so hard though, as it seemed the endless hordes of undead were stumbling toward the core of the Dead Zone, rather than out towards the settlements.

Perhaps they simply tried to impede whatever was going on. Nothing good could come from hundreds of thousands of zombies gathering together, after all. If so, Zac could only salute their brave efforts. Normally he would have helped, but between his wound and his mission he decided that this was a battle he would simply have to bow out from.

He was about to recede into the forest and walk around the army, but a prompt in front of him suddenly appearing stopped him in his tracks.

**[Distrupt the Call (Unique, Limited): The Undead are gathering. As a Lord of the living, spearhead the efforts to impede their progress. Slay 10 000 undead within ten minutes. Reward: 10 Purification pills (0/10 000) NOTE: Failure to complete quest results in your location and status be shared with the Lords of Undeath for 7 days.]**

“SHIT!” Zac roared with frustration as he took out his axe while balefully glaring at the zombie horde.

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 174 - Sui**

Sui sighed as she reloaded her rifle once again. Bullets were running low as they'd harried the endless hordes for days now. Unfortunately she had no alternative, as her skills were used for healing rather than killing, meaning she didn't even gain any experience from her attacks.

She didn't really care about that, but what she was doing left a sour taste in her mouth. She originally ventured out into the Dead Zone in order to find a cure for her people, not to hunt them like animals. But still she kept going, slowly firing one bullet after another, taking great care to hit the brains of the undead in order to save on ammunition. Because like it or not, they had to do something.

Yet it felt like they barely made a dent in their ranks with their tireless efforts. In fact, she suspected there were actually more of them now than when they began, simply since the undead numbers were bolstered as groups kept merging.

She was traveling with the scouts that were the first amongst those realizing what was happening. The dead were organizing. They'd heard rumors of zombies being gathered up by elite undead who were passing through an area, but nothing like what they were experiencing now. It was as though all the dead were receiving some call, and mindlessly headed toward some destination in the central zone.

Even the elite zombies weren't immune to whatever was beckoning them, as they too walked inside the ranks, hiding amongst their mindless brethren.

Though the small resistance army that gathered from four frontier village knew they were shooting at their countrymen, there was nothing to be done. They couldn't let the situation progress unimpeded.

Not that a many of them minded, Sui noted with a sigh, looking over at the tired but gleeful faces of a few of the Zombie Hunters. They couldn't care less about why the towns took action. They only cared about the fact that there suddenly were free targets just mindlessly wandering forward, largely ignoring the fact that they were getting attacked.

They likely saw it as free money. They only needed to survive the occasional attacks from the evolved zombies as they kept cutting down the lower zombies, not caring that they were once someone's family members.

“Shit!” a roar suddenly could be heard from behind, startling the hunters close-by.

Sui quickly swiveled her gun around, only to see a Caucasian man with long hair and madness in his eyes rush toward the zombie-horde with an axe in his hand.

“Stop, it's too dangerous! There are elite zombies inside!” she shouted in English, trying to stop the lunatic's charge.

However, it was to no avail as he kept running, a growl echoing in his wake. However, the expected scene of a man being swallowed by a sea of zombies after

desperately swinging his axe for a few seconds didn't happen. Her eyes widened in shock as she bore witness to a level of carnage she'd never dreamed of before.

-----  
Zac grit his teeth as he pushed into the zombie horde, enraging the closest undead with his aura of life. With the time limit the System gave him there was no time to worry about exposing himself in front of the humans, so he rotated his cosmic energy to immediately create five huge fractal blades.

He let the five blades rip through the air with a speed that made his arms look like a blur as they each carved a path of bisected bodies and pools of putrid blood. However, even with over a hundred of them dying he barely made a dent in the army. A large surge of Cosmic Energy entered his body, as even the gain from killing weak zombies was noticeable when he instantly killed dozens of them.

However, Zac almost paused his charge when he noted that Cosmic Energy wasn't the only thing that entered him when he killed the undead. Along with the energy there were also large amounts of miasma piggybacking into his body.

He never noticed something like that when he killed the beasts during the past days, but perhaps it worked differently when fighting with true undead, rather than corrupted beasts. Zacs mind frantically tried to figure out what to do, but he could only push more mental energy into fortifying the Dao-Swirl as he kept going. He couldn't stop now, as failure wasn't an option.

In order to quickly reach new targets he also used [**Loamwalker**] to shorten the distance between himself and the next clump of undead. Explosions of blood and viscera kept erupting around him as he madly kept pushing forward getting completely drenched in the blackish blood.

Only after five minutes did he stumble, coughing out a mouthful of ice-cold blood as his bloodshot eyes looked around with a wild glare. His wound was going haywire from the exertion and the insane amount of miasma that had entered him by this point.

The system didn't really give him much of an option with this quest, making him once again wonder whether it was giving him extra attention or if it was just an asshole to everyone. The moment he decided to back away and not get involved he immediately received a quest that forced him into the fray.

The ten purification pills would be a blessing, especially now that he was getting drowned in miasma. However, that's not why he decided to fight. The price for failure wasn't something he could afford. Giving he Undead Lords his location and status was likely a death sentence. Not only would the Corpse Lord he fought earlier be warned of his proximity, but his boss would be as well.

Between his festering wound and the disadvantageous terrain, he was in no mood for a second round with the undead nobleman. Zac wasn't even sure he'd survive the encounter, his improved Dao notwithstanding.

Thousands of zombies were quickly whittled down, and Zac could actually sense glee from the spirit in his axe. The growls created by the swings in the air slowly were changing into howls of exultation. An evolved zombie suddenly tried to get the jump on him, trying to flank him as he once again stepped forward to the next pack of the zombies, but a spectral beast suddenly appeared and ripped it into pieces.

This time the spirit didn't dissipate immediately though, instead opting to go on a rampage on its own. It was like a bulldozer crushing everything in its path. Zac didn't really understand how it worked, but he didn't mind as he was on the clock. He could only hope that the kills from the Tool Spirit counted toward his own kills at least.

The timer kept decreasing, and soon less than two minutes remained on the quest. Zac only needed a final push now, but he knew he was running out of time. Not the timer, but the amount of deathly energy that had entered him by now.

If he didn't do something quick he would turn to a zombie himself, even if he kept utilizing his Dao. In a final burst of violence he once again summoned more blades, this time completely overloading them and turning them into gargantuan blades of death.

With a roar he unleashed them into five directions, and a prompt told him he'd finished his quest. However, there was no time to take a breather in relief, as his body was wracked with an insane amount of pain, absorbing miasma at an unprecedented rate. Even stopping the killing didn't stop the miasma from entering his body, as it looked the huge surge had created its own momentum.

The small whirlpool in his wound from before had created a large physical manifestation as dense clouds miasma whirled around him, even following him when he ran away.

An unimaginable amount of corrupted energy kept pushing into Zac, spreading through his whole body before he even had a chance to nullify it. His Dao was already overtaxed and it felt like he was an ant trying to stop an elephant with the Dao of Trees. A numbing cold entered his extremities as his mind was flooded with corruption. The deathly energy was quickly clouded his mind, and a blank rage was starting to take control.

Using his remaining sanity Zac quickly finished the quest, and suddenly held an inscribed bottle with ten golden pills. Zac shakily uncorked the bottle and hurriedly downed a pill, and immediately felt as though a radiant sun flicked to life in his stomach. He quickly integrated the energy into his Dao-spiral in order to directly combat the miasma trying to seize control.

Unfortunately, it wasn't enough as there was just too much corruption inside him. The pill did what it was supposed to, but one of them wouldn't cut it against this extraordinary situation. Zac hesitantly looked at the bottle, but could only take a deep breath and swallow another two of the golden beads. His hesitation wasn't without reason, as he remembered what the Sky Gnome had told him.

Swallowing Purification Pills was like swallowing fire that burned away the corruption. One pill was already taxing on the body. Taking two was putting your life on the line. Three was tantamount to suicide. Yet Zac felt he had no option, and could only hope that the two rampaging powers would cancel each other out somewhat.

The gambit seemed somewhat effective, allowing Zac to take a quick breather. But the torrential amount of miasma entering him was almost endless. Zac's eyes suddenly widened in horror as he saw that even the zombies still standing in the horde around him started to lifelessly fall to the ground as the miasma was ripped out of their bodies to join the ever-growing whirlpool.

The effect was quickly rippling outward through the horde, and in just seconds even more zombies had died from loss of miasma than Zac's assault, with hundreds falling down with every breath.

Whatever the Corpse Lord planted inside him was completely unleashed, and was creating a growing storm in the area. Not even the evolved zombies were safe as the whirlpool greedily sucked out their corruption, instantly killing them.

A small solace was that the tens of thousands of zombies that were getting killed was counted as his kills, also awarding him with Cosmic Energy. However, Zac wasn't happy with the huge sudden increase of experience, as his defenses were quickly crumbling against the increased power of deathly energy.

Completely ignoring the consequences of over-imbibing medicine Zac quickly downed another handful of pills, leaving only one in the bottle for emergencies. The miasma whirlwind around him kept expanding, and without any alternatives he could only flee for an area with sparser amounts of miasma.

Even with 9 pills in his body creating a Dao-empowered blazing inferno of purification it was barely keeping enough to keep his sanity in check, and Zac's mind was a blur as he started running towards the woods. Worse yet, it no longer only was a problem of being flooded with miasma, but his body was also burning from the inside from the radiant energy of the pills.

The two powers almost seemed to be in contention of who could destroy his body first, as they rampaged through every part of his body, causing unimaginable pain.

However, Zac knew that if he relented the miasma would win, as the supply was almost endless in the Dead Zone. With no alternative he swallowed his final pill as he kept running, finally emerging from the core of the vast zombie horde.

By now a huge chunk of the horde was simply lying lifelessly on the ground while Zac's figure was completely shrouded in miasma almost dense enough to liquefy. The whirlpool above him even started to look like a hurricane with him as the eye. It made Zac look like a specter that was fleeing for the woods, surrounded by uncountable azure will-o-wisps.

"Wait! Let us help!" a voice from the distance entered Zac's ears through the chaos, but he was barely coherent at this point and ignored the call.

Through the haze of the miasma around him he finally spotted a line of trees, and he mindlessly ran toward it, his only goal to get away from this god-forsaken paddy and its zombies. His desperation lent strength to his legs, and with great strides he disappeared amongst the trees, leaving a shell-shocked resistance army.

The zombie hunters and resistance fighters mutely overlooked the scene of carnage and desolation, unable to move for a few seconds. The scene of destruction they'd just witnessed was something they'd never forget.

Only one pair of eyes hesitantly looked at the direction of the ocean of miasma receding between the trees, and the man inside it.

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#### **Chapter 175 - Changes**

The clashes kept going for god knows how long between the two whirlpools in Zac's body, and the energy contained in the center between them was growing more and more horrifying. Zac knew if something destabilized whatever was going on within the blazing waves of energy he'd explode like a nuclear bomb.

The tenth pill had thankfully been enough for him to regain some sort of equilibrium between the two opposing forces, and he wholeheartedly focused his energy on keeping the energy fluctuations as stable as he could.

He was fresh out of ideas and options, but he refused to give in. Giving up control at this moment was tantamount to dying, and so he kept overtaxing his mind and kept pushing his Dao past its limits. He had no idea where he was going or how long he ran, but finally his legs went out, and he didn't have the energy to get up again.

Still, he kept fighting against the inevitable, hoping that something would change. His will had transformed over the past months, and even though the pain he was feeling far eclipsed what he went through in the pool of Cosmic Water, he never thought to end it.

Instead, he stoutly endured the raging battle between life and death in his body, his mind focusing on his goals and ambitions. For cycle after cycle the two whirlpools clashed, and Zac forgot everything except those two forces' ebb and flow.

A prompt flashed in his periphery as he kept struggling, but his mind was too over-taxed to notice it. He only kept focusing on stabilizing the two opposing forces and stabilizing his wound. Finally, the frantic bursts from the miasmatic wound gave in, just as Zac's Dao-swirl was on the verge of completely dissipating.

Zac thought he could sense a wave of reluctance and hatred before it disappeared and stillness settled in his body.

The clashes abruptly stopped, and relief flooded Zac's mind. But it also was the last straw as his mind quickly started to descend into darkness. He had kept himself conscious through sheer willpower, resisting long past his limits. But just before his mind submerged into a deep slumber he sensed something new in his wound.

A small seed barely as large as a fingernail, but containing enough energy to blow up a city was quietly nestled in his gut.

-----  
Sharp pain in his leg woke Zac up from his slumber with a groan. He looked around with bleary eyes, who widened at the sight of a desiccated zombie dumbly gnawing at his ankle. Luckily his gear and attributes kept him safe, as the bites only left some surface wounds.

Zac quickly slapped the head of the undead, instantly destroying its brain. However, the rapid motion caused a bout of vertigo, and Zac emptied his stomach without warning. Finally, after a few dry heaves he managed to sit up and look around with a squint, his head still aching from overusing his mental energy.

He was in some random forest, with nothing around as far as he could see apart from dead or dying trees. In his muddled state it took some time for him to realize something was odd; he wasn't hurting. That, of course, wasn't completely correct, as every part of him hurt. It was odd in the sense that the wound in his side that had plagued him for what felt like forever was completely inert, not even a twang remaining.

The only pain he felt at the moment was a general ache all over his body accompanied by a splitting headache from over-drafting his Dao. The great change prompted him to quickly close his eyes again and focus on his side.

He was amazed to sense that there barely was any miasma in his wound, and it was almost completely inert. It still absorbed a small amount of miasma, but it could barely be called a trickle. And that was with his Dao not currently rotating. It likely wasn't much worse than what anyone traversing the Dead Zone experienced.

Suddenly he remembered the small ball he saw right before passing out, but after checking around he couldn't find it in his wound. He even took off his shirt again to visually inspect the wound, but couldn't find anything either. However, he was able to note that the blackness of the wound and tendrils were quite faded. The skin they covered also wasn't cold like a corpse's like before, but had regained their warmth.

It was a relief, but Zac frowned as he remembered the sense of extreme power in that little ball that was created from the clashes between his pill-empowered Dao-whirl and the miasma in his wound. It took almost half an hour, but finally he found it.

It was nestled right below his navel and had somehow integrated itself with his pathways.

The little beads seemed completely inert, as though the monstrous amounts of power it contained were locked away. Still, it was only after long hesitation Zac dared to channel some cosmic energy through the paths. It was with a huge sigh of relief he felt that the energy passed the bead by without it even reacting.

If it started making a ruckus from energy going through he would essentially be crippled, as the bead was nestled in a core position of the pathways. What made him confused though was that its position reminded him of what he'd learned about the Cores of D-Grade powerhouses.

They were often located in the very same position he found the bead, making it almost seem that he'd formed a Cosmic Core. However, there were some differences from what he'd heard about the topic. A real core was supposedly larger, and while the power contained in his bead was high, it was nothing compared to a real Core.

A real Cosmic Core was the source of energy for a D-Grade powerhouse. He still didn't really understand what that entailed, but from Ogras it wasn't only a matter of quantity, but also of quality. The energy a genuine core was of a higher grade than anything he could come in contact with, whereas his core was something else entirely.

There was also the issue of how it was formed. His core was created from miasma and his Dao, making it's composition completely different from what it should contain. He didn't even understand how the core could form, as the two energies that it was made from should be each other's bane.

Zac guessed he would have to slowly try to understand what was going on, as he simply had far too little information to make any educated guesses at the moment. He would have to ask someone whether it was possible to form a Core embryo before reaching D-Grade or something of the sort. For now he had to focus on what he could do and instead opened his status screen.

Name Zachary Atwood Level 58 Class Hatchetman (F) Race Human (E) Alignment Port Atwood - Lord (Earth) Titles Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Core Dao Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Early Strength 320 Dexterity 158 Endurance 227 Vitality 188 Intelligence 90 Wisdom 85 Luck 93 Free Points 6 Nexus Coins 49 903 653

Zac's brows rose when he saw the number of Nexus Coins he somehow possessed. He'd gained around twenty million nexus coins since he checked last. He knew he gained around 70 to 100 Nexus Coins from the Zombies, so killing 10 000 of them for his quest should account for less than a tenth of the total number. His memory contained some blanks from his desperate instinctual flight earlier, just what had happened?

That wasn't the only thing, his level had increased by two. He was somewhat close to leveling to 57 before running into the zombie horde, but still he'd gained a whole level on top of that, which was quite a lot seeing as how arduous it was becoming to reach new levels.

He also sensed that it wouldn't take much effort to gain another level, bringing him just one step away from level 60. A quick glance at a watch reassured him at least that only one day had passed, making his current leveling speed the highest he'd ever managed. He wondered what humanity thought when they saw him push past two levels in no time.

His stats had improved once again almost across the board, and he quickly noted a large reason for this. His Seed of Trees had finally reached High level, bringing it just one step from the peak. His speed of improvement was almost unfathomable, and it made Zac realize why most people ventured out adventuring rather than sitting at home meditating when they were stuck in a bottleneck.

He never would have improved his Dao of Trees to the middle grade if it wasn't for the battle with the Corpse Lord, and his current breakthrough could be directly attributed to experiences while moving through the Dead Zone. He quickly opened up his Dao Screen and took a look at his evolved seed.

**[Trees (High): Endurance +10, Vitality +40, Intelligence +5, Wisdom +5]**

The seed now gave a whopping 60 attribute points, doubling up from before. Zac couldn't help but get a bit excited even though he knew it would happen. Comparing from how it was before his new insight gave him +15 Vitality, and 5 points in Endurance, Intelligence and Wisdom each.

His insight was based on the dynamic nature of the life of a Tree, how it went from almost a death-like state during winter back to teeming with life during summer. It was everchanging, and it was only through death that life could come. Even if a forest burned down, the ashes became nourishment for the seeds germinating in the ground.

Zac felt that this concept was applicable to many things, but for the moment he had no time to properly sit down and ponder on it. He had too many things to do, and he didn't even know where he was, or what to do about the miniature bomb lodged in his body uncomfortably close to his family jewels.

There was however one more change in his screen that might give him a hint of what was going on. He saw that there was a new Title in his growing list of accomplishments. With anticipation he focused on the new Title called Core, but what he saw only made him more confused.

**[Core: Successfully form a Core. Reward: ??????]**

Zac blankly stared at the odd line for a while until he hesitantly closed it with a frown. After mentally going through it in his mind there simply was no reward from the Title, differing from all other ones. If he didn't know any better he would have guessed there was a bug in a computer system.

But the menus and prompts weren't part of some random program, it was part of THE system, an Entity powerful enough to conquer multiple dimensions.

He was completely confused as to what the weird line meant, and he wasn't even sure whether it was something he should ask around about. The thing with bugs was that they tended to get corrected, and he wasn't sure how the system dealt with people that did things they weren't supposed to.

Zac had a feeling the weird prompt was the result of a series of coincidental circumstances. The combination of his specific Dao and whatever the Corpse Lord injected him with had transformed and created something odd through the circumstances of being triggered by the purifier.

Next was the insane amount of miasma that entered him in a very short span of time. Normally he shouldn't have survived something like that. It was the same with the pills. Taking two was risky, three was suicide. But he gobbled down ten at the same time and still lived to tell the tale.

The only reason he could think of as to why he was still alive was his experience in the pond of Cosmic Water. The experience had been a bit similar, though it wasn't exactly the same. His body had absorbed extreme amounts of energy from the Fruit of Ascension along with the Cosmic Water and was ripped apart and reformed untold time.

Perhaps that very experience had changed something with him on a fundamental level, and allowed him to survive when he by all accounts should have exploded or become an undead. However, he didn't have time to figure anything out or even get dressed because an eerie laugh dragged him out of his thoughts.

"Well, what's this?" a hollow voice drifted out from behind him, prompting Zac to whirl around and whip out his axe.

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#### **Chapter 176 - Ghosts**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Happy thanksgiving my dudes!

Zac's eyes widened as he saw what faced him. The best way to describe it was that he was looking at a ghost. It was clearly an undead denizen teeming with miasma, but it was mostly translucent. It didn't really have any facial features, apart from its eyes shining in white and azure.

It looked upon Zac like it was gazing at an oddity, apparently not even considering the possibility of having found itself in danger.

"You've strayed quite some ways from safety, human," the specter said. "I will let you live if you can provide any hints of what caused the miasmatic disturbance in this area."

Zac blankly stared at the apparition for a second, not sure what to do. While the thing talked the talk, his intuition told him that the undead in front of him was not of the same power as the Corpse Lord he fought earlier. For a second he thought it might be one of the liches Ogras had mentioned, but he quickly discounted that possibility. The air around it wasn't even slightly distorted from power, and his danger sense didn't flare up.

Unhappy with the lack of response the undead looked ready to follow up with something else, but a glance at the wound on Zac's side stopped the wraith in its tracks.

"What *is* that on your body?"

Zac's mind worked a mile a minute as he quickly put on his robe again. It looked like his experience had caused a huge disturbance in the area, causing even the sentient undead to scout it out. Perhaps it wasn't even alone, with some of the real leaders close-by.

He was still not yet ready to start an all-out brawl with the undead forces. His wound was finally better, but he still hadn't explored the changes to his body. He didn't want to overload the odd Core in him and go off like fireworks from destabilizing it. The core contained enough miasma to create over a hundred thousand zombies, who knew what could happen if it was unleashed.

"Oh, you are one of Lord Mhal's experiments..." the wraith said, but it shuddered as it looked at Zac's body, seemingly seeing straight through him. "But what is that core.... Wait, that axe... You're-".

The undead didn't get further than that though, as Zac flashed right next to it with [Loamwalker] with his axe already mid-swing. With a growl the edge went straight through the head of the wraith with a swoosh, but Zac didn't feel any elation.

His brows furrowed when he saw that the undead was completely fine, and Zac understood why the undead was so laid back. The thing was completely incorporeal, and a normal attack wouldn't cut it. Without missing a beat he imbued the edge with the Dao of Heaviness and swung once again before the ghost even had time to react to the first swing.

He hoped that the effect would be like when he fought the ghost wolves during the first wave. His normal hits didn't work, but when he empowered the strike with the Dao he had no problem killing them. However, the empowered swing didn't fare any better, harmlessly passing through the undead.

Zac already knew that some undead were notoriously hard to kill, often requiring specific classes or skills to get the job done. Unfortunately he had no skill of that kind. Initially he'd hoped that his repository would contain one, but there were only so many skills in there.

"To think you left your island to come here. Great Lord Voshri was very intrigued when you defeated Mhal," the wraith laughed as it started to flutter away through the woods. "I am guessing you're the cause for the disturbance as well. The benefits you will bring me."

Zac knew he couldn't let this thing get away, as it would cause untold trouble. Not only did it immediately figure out who he was, but it also seemed to possess some sort of ocular skill. It clearly managed to see the core inside his body. Even worse, Zac's brows rose in alarm as the ghost started to shine with a stronger and stronger azure light, starting to look like an unholy beacon.

Out of options Zac only had one idea. He'd used the Dao of Trees to combat the miasma for a week now, and perhaps it would be effective in combat as well. The problem was that he never had been able to push the Dao of Trees into his axe, forcing him to only use it for defense.

Zac once again used his movement skill to get next to the fleeing specter, and ignoring his tired mind unleashed a large Dao-field around him. This time he didn't create a whirl, but just expanded a sphere of influence that focused on the ghost.

The Dao field quickly drifted out, covering a diameter of over twenty meters around him, a huge difference compared to the Dao field he could create with his Dao of Heaviness. Clearly the field was effective as the wraith faltered as it tried to fly away, and even its light dimmed noticeably.

Zac was immediately upon the undead again, once again swinging his axe. He was ready to try to force the Dao of Trees inside the weapon, but it was surprisingly effortless to integrate the Dao into his axe as it once again ripped toward the head of the wraith.

This time the specter tried dodging, but it was to no avail as it was bogged down by the High-grade Dao-field. Desperate its eyes lit up light two ghostly lanterns, and a shield from miasma was erected in front of it. However, it was clear that it was just some sort of scout, its defense largely relying on being incorporeal. Its actual prowess was nowhere close to Zac's.

The shield couldn't even muster a defense against [Verun's Bite] that was teeming with green energy. The ghost didn't get decapitated but rather destroyed as the axe blasted through shining with its green glimmer.

The green light was the Dao of Trees, and it almost looked like it was extremely potent acid as it started to eat the specter, who started to shriek as it tried to get it off. However, in just seconds most of the undead was gone, leaving only a husk.

“From death comes life...” Zac muttered as he looked at the ghost melting away in no time.

It looked like he had gotten himself an amazing weapon against the undead. It was extremely effective on the ghost, and Zac guessed that it would work wonders against the other undead as well. A great worry was that the incursion would be led by a Lich, but with his new type of attack he wasn't as worried anymore.

However, he couldn't relax just yet, as the miasma around the perishing ghost suddenly shuddered. Zac quickly backed away, just in time to avoid a huge azure fire shooting up at the sky, quickly consuming the last of the undead. It appeared that the thing ignited its last energy to either take him with it into true death, or give out its location.

Zac was far more worried about the second option, as it would mean the ghost wasn't alone. He had a strong feeling that the ruckus he'd caused yesterday wasn't small, and this thing was likely only one of many. Not wasting any time he immediately set out to the east, planning to get back on track.

However, he only ran for a few minutes before he was dismayed to find himself essentially surrounded by undead. No matter which direction he looked he could spot a ghost scout. Since it was just a matter of time before he was found out he simply decided to make a break for it and pushed his speed to the limit as he ran through the woods.

As he suspected a few bright beams exploded in the sky not long after, likely markers released by scouts. Zac's location was completely exposed and he could only pray that he didn't run into the main army. Zac ignored the ghosts and kept pushing forward, aiming to get as far away as possible from the core zone.

Before he blacked out yesterday he'd already been quite close to the center of the undead incursion, and judging from the density of miasma in the area he'd gone further inside during his mad dash. He couldn't be held up here, since stronger and stronger reinforcements would come if he was bogged down.

He felt like a trapped animal as he ran through the gloomy forest with his eyes darting left and right, waiting for anything to pop out between the trees. He was proven right in almost no time, as he suddenly found himself in a clearing with over a thousand undead in waiting.

He wanted slap himself when he realized he'd been tricked. Finding himself facing a waiting army was no accident. The ghosts around him shining their lights were herding him. He'd subconsciously tied to run in the direction where there were fewer lights in the way, steering clear of the directions thick with ghosts, afraid the enemy would be there.

Worse yet, this undead army was something else entirely compared to the native zombies, as they all looked sentient and well equipped. And in the front of the army stood a familiar figure, and seeing him Zac couldn't help a groan escaping.

“It's you, after all! No wonder my wounds were aching!” the Corpse Lord roared with fury as miasma in the area started to gather around him.

The undead general was clearly back on his feet looking intact, though Zac was surprised to see that the arm he'd crushed with **[Nature's Punishment]** looked completely different from before. It was to the point that Zac suspected that it was actually replaced with another arm somehow, as it not only was larger compared to this other arm, it even looked to belong to some other type of humanoid.

However, the Corpse Lord didn't feel weaker compared to before. On the contrary, it felt like he'd even gained a power-up, and the new arm pulsated with power. Perhaps the arm once had belonged to a E-Grade individual, as the power emanations reminded him of those of the fiend wolf and hive-queen.

The Corpse Lord was backed up by quite a few other undead, but Zac felt that there was no other undead at the same level as the leader itself, which was the only good news so far. Hopefully he was the only general that had come to the area to check things out, or at least the others were some distance away.

Time was of the essence, so Zac wordlessly sent out five large fractal edges toward the army, imbuing them with the Dao of Heaviness. However, the Corpse Lord only snorted as a vast aura of power emanated from him.

"Shields!" the general roared, prompting huge azure barriers to be erected along the army.

As for himself, the Lord simply jumped forward and punched the fractal heading in his direction. The collision created a huge impact creating a small crater in the ground, but it was clear which force was stronger. The new larger arm of the Corpse Lord didn't even get a scratch as the fractal dissipated into a few wild swirls of Cosmic Energy.

"Your tricks will not work again human. I do not know how you survived my Seed of Desolation, but I will slowly figure it out as I pick you apart," the Corpse Lord said with a growl, its eyes still blazing with fury.

Zac was starting to suspect that the reaction of the general, who apparently was named Mhal, was due to more than just having lost the battle two weeks ago. The undead looked like he wanted to eat him whole. Perhaps the punishment for failing the mission was quite extreme.

Since the incursions had long stabilized they should have an open channel of communications with the main forces back on their own worlds. Who knew, perhaps the Corpse Lord's whole faction got implicated due to the failure. From how Ogras explained how it worked it seemed like a distinct possibility.

Zac knew that even if some other powerhouses were close, they would be attracted by a large battle. He would need to finish this up quickly and then flee at top speed, so he decided on a gambit. The undead army wasn't just waiting on him though, and a flurry of attacks flew his way as their leader simply was content to observe for the moment.

Cosmic energy gathered at the fractal on Zacs arm with extreme speed as he ran to keep a constant distance from the opposing side. Soon the fractal was filled, and he pushed forward with his arm once again, making reality crack.

The huge arm from the other dimension started reaching for the Corpse Lord, who didn't seem surprised at its appearance. In fact, he seemed gleeful, fully expecting the attack.

"Did you think the same attack would work twice?" the undead sneered as torrential amounts of corruption rose from three huge kettles carried by gigantic corpse golems.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

## Chapter 177 - Ravenous

“I’m not limited by the Ruthless Heavens here. This time I have my legion with me!” the Corpse Lord roared as three huge streams of corruption rose out from the kettles and flew to intercept the emerging hand above Zac.

Zac wasn’t surprised the undead leader had something up his sleeve, but he didn’t change his mind. He pushed the gigantic hand forward, making it slam straight into the torrents of corruption as it moved to snatch the Corpse Lord.

A sizzling could be heard from his arm as smoke started to rise, making Zac grunt in pain. But he kept going, and soon the whole arm was submerged in the putrid liquid from the kettles. It was a far stronger version of the corruption that spewed out of the Corpse Lord’s own body during the last fight, and Zac felt as though he was submerged in a vat of acid.

“True Rot!” the undead leader roared as he pushed the miasma in the air to join the liquid from the kettles, pushing the decaying powers to another level.

The hand was completely submerged in a blob of turbid liquid as it stopped some distance from the undead lord, who looked at a panting Zac with a sneer. The effect of the ball of corruption was extended to Zac as well, and the effect was strong enough to singe him all over. The hair and beard he’d grown out fell out in thick clumps, and the cloak he used above his real gear was rotting away at a speed visible to the naked eye.

However, the Corpse Lord’s eyes suddenly opened wide in alarm as an emerald shockwave of energy scattered the blob of corruption. The putrid liquid flew in all directions, actually killing dozens of the undead soldiers, as a hand blazing in green luster emerged out of it.

The arm wrought out of nature didn’t look decayed at all. On the contrary, it seemed even more vibrant compared to before, as small saplings and leaves grew from its rugged exterior.

“You!” Mhal roared, as he tried to perform a body swap, but it was to no avail.

The hand had somehow locked down space around it, turning the area into its domain. Zac sensed it was something like a Dao Field in a sense, but at the same time it was far sturdier. Aghast, the Corpse Lord tried to flee, but he didn’t get far as the hand quickly closed around him.

“I’ll take you with me! **[Seed Detonation]!**” was the last thing the undead screamed in fury as the hand clenched, causing a sickening crunch.

Zac froze for a second, bracing for whatever his foe had planned in revenge. But nothing happened, making Zac look around in confusion. The Corpse Lord had said seed detonation, likely trying to explode whatever he embedded in Zac’s gut. But perhaps the odd changes it had undergone had broken the connection Mhal possessed.

Zac sighed in relief as he saw his gambit was successful. He was betting that the two upgrades to his Dao of Trees would supersede whatever the Corpse Lord had planned. A Dao Seed gaining two upgrades was a huge boost, and even with the support of the Dead Zone Mhal shouldn’t be ready for the power-up.

He was correct. Though the three large kettles made the power of rot far stronger, it was no match for the concept of growth through decay. The hand even emerged stronger from the attack. A huge surge of Cosmic Energy entered him, effortlessly pushing him to level 59.

While there was utter chaos in the undead ranks from the sudden fall of their leader Zac quickly ran forward and stored the mangled remains and weapon of the

Corpse Lord in his sack. The undead himself possessed a sack, which Zac quickly bound to himself and put inside his robe.

Zac had achieved his goal and was pondering what to do next. He even contemplating going on a rampage to push himself toward level 60. However, a sudden blaze of pain erupted in his body as the core beneath his navel sprung to life as it started to absorb miasma once again.

The last words of the Corpse Lord once again echoed in Zac's, making him wonder whether Mhal had some sort of contingency after all.

At least Zac noted with some relief that the miasma it absorbed wasn't too bad, not at all at the same level as before. Of course, continuously absorbing corrupted energy wasn't great, so Zac quickly started up a Dao-swirl above the bead to stem the influx, even though his mental energy was quite tapped out.

However, his eyes widened in horror when he felt the mental energy forming the Dao swirl getting sucked into the bead alongside the miasma. Zac quickly stopped the Dao-field, afraid he would damage his mind if it kept going. He was already almost wrung dry from yesterday, and along with this fight he was already close to his limits.

Right now was not the time to ponder on a response to the new issue because the undead army was quickly turning berserk after seeing their leader get killed. Huge lumbering corpse golems were rushing toward him as a dizzying array of attacks soared through the air.

Zac judged the army to be even stronger than his demon force, with real foreign invaders making up the bulk. Even at top condition this wasn't a fight he'd take on heedlessly. He quickly oriented himself as he dodged as many of the attacks as he could before he started to run around the army. It was time to flee.

A few of the golems moved to intercept, and Zac once again hefted his axe as he carved a path of carnage to make an escape. However, the undead here were not like the mindless zombies from before and they mounted a terrifying retaliation. He was constantly struck by fists almost as large as himself, and each one hit with the force of a truck.

He was also continuously pelted by ranged attacks, both mental and physical. His skill **[Mental Fortress]** was running on overdrive, and he was forced to unsummon the glistening leaves from **[Nature's defense]** as he was unable to keep up the consumption of Cosmic Energy from reforming them.

In just a few minutes he was completely bloodied with innumerable wounds. However, the undead army wasn't unscathed either. With each step of Zac's an elite of the undead army was destroyed as he pushed forward like a meat grinder on legs.

It didn't matter whether it was Corpse Golems, aberrations or elite zombies. Everything fell in front of Zac's relentless swings. The experience he was gaining was enormous, but he knew he couldn't keep it up for long. With every kill he gained Cosmic Energy, but more miasma also entered him.

If that was it, then it wouldn't be such a problem, but the core clearly was looking for some sort of equilibrium as it kept absorbing opposing energy as well. Since Zac couldn't keep the Dao Field going anymore it actually absorbed something else from him. His lifeforce.

It felt like he was slowly being sucked dry, and every time he killed an undead a little bit of his life was ripped away to keep the balance going. However, it wasn't like he could just stop, so the carnage continued until he finally broke away from the army, fleeing into the woods.

This time he wouldn't get controlled by any ghosts as he pushed straight east. A quick look around showed that the army at least wasn't following him. He'd caused

massive losses to the army, and perhaps they didn't want to throw their lives away, instead opting to wait for orders from superiors.

A few of the scouts tried to keep track of him, but Zac finally managed to shake them off with the help of **[Loamwalker]** and his superior physique. However, he was completely spent by this point. The fight had cost him almost all his Cosmic Energy, and his mind was overtaxed after the last two days' efforts.

Even his body felt completely drained from the bead sucking the life out of him. At least it had calmed down by a bit since he'd stopped his killing spree, but things still looked dire. Even though he just wanted to lay down and sleep for a few days he kept running.

He just killed one of the generals of the undead army, and he didn't for one second think that there wouldn't be some reaction from this. He needed to create much more distance before he was satisfied. He really wanted to find a road by this point, but the forests and uneven plains felt endless as he ran for hours.

Zac's mind was starting to become a blur, all his effort focused on taking one step after another. He'd long lost any pursuers trying to keep up with him, but the problem of him getting continuously drained was persisting. No matter what he tried, from using his Dao to trying to feed the bead the energy from Nexus Crystals, it didn't work.

The only thing he found to somewhat help out was to eat meat from strong creatures, so he kept continuously eating dried meat as he ran. In just a few hours he'd consumed a couple of week's worth of food, but he kept ravenously putting one piece after another into his mouth as he ran.

The only permanent solution Zac could come up with at the moment was to keep running further away from the core of the Dead Zone. The drain on his body was based on how much miasma his body absorbed from the atmosphere. Zac figured that if he got to the edge of Dead Zone the sparse miasma in the air would result in his body wouldn't get drained to such a degree.

Still, even with his speed he knew it might take days to get far enough out as he felt he was getting closer and closer to his limits, meat or no meat. Those were the thoughts churning in Zac's muddled head as a bright light suddenly flashed from the left of him and he looked over with confused eyes. What entered his eyes was a large truck speeding right toward him, and in the next moment everything went black.

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Zac was swimming in a sea of darkness, not knowing what was going on. He couldn't remember how he got here, or even who he was. Time and space had no meaning as he quietly floated in the endless black until a glowing warmth spread through the universe, rekindling his memories.

Zac stirred with a groan, and immediately heard a conversation above him.

"Why are you wasting our resources on that man? He is teeming with miasma, he's probably lived inside the Dead Zone for months. I don't know how he has survived, he doesn't seem to have an ounce of Cosmic Energy in his body, and he seems like he's on the verge of death anyway," a disgruntled voice said as Zac felt something pushing him in his side. "Just let him quietly pass."

"It was us who hit him with our truck, it's only right that we help him out. And how I use my healing powers is none of your business," an irritated female voice from somewhere right next to Zac responded. "Besides, do you want to answer to the Battle Monks when they find out we left one of their kind in the wilderness?"

"Shit, we've already lost most of our army, but you pick up strays. Well, whatever," the man muttered, followed by steps walking away.

The warmth kept flooding into his body, reinvigorating his drained cells. At the same time he felt that some miasma kept entering his body, though now the golden warmth was what got absorbed into his Core to balance it out. It gave his body a much-needed respite, as he was just too exhausted from the past two days.

He wanted to get up and see what was going on, but he was surprised that his body wasn't listening to him, not even allowing him to open his eyes. Instead, he was forced to lie there mulling over what the two said. The way the man described him was troubling, so he tried to properly sense the state of his body.

He was shocked by what he found out. He had no problem using his inner vision, but he almost thought he'd was looking at someone else when he saw what was going on.

There was not a smidgeon of energy in his body, to the point that it almost felt like he'd gone back to be a normal mortal. At the same time his frame had undergone a transformation, and not a good one. Most of his muscles were gone, and he looked sickly or starving. Zac could only guess that his bulk was swallowed along with his energy into the gluttonous bead.

Finally there was the mention of battle monks. Zac didn't understand what they had to do with him, until he went over the battle from before. The fight had once again singed his hair clean he realized with an inward groan.

*I guess I'm back to being Monk*, was the last helpless thought in Zac's mind as he once again drifted into unconsciousness.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Truck-kun strikes again!

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

#### **Chapter 178 - Monks**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Some small updates, tl;dr at bottom.

##### **1. Going full time.**

As many of you know, I am a university student. I mentioned in my last update that I'm reducing my time to 50% to focus more on DotF. Actually, due to my not really looking up the schedule properly I ended up studying full time in November as well. But that's beside the point.

**As of December 6th I will be a full-time author**, solely focusing on DotF. I'm still enrolled (gotta get those student discounts) but I've removed all courses for the coming 5 months in order to be able to give it my all with my story. After that, I'll reevaluate what to do going forward.

This won't change the release schedule, at least not in the short run. A problem I've felt the past months is that I lack the time (or energy after a long day) to properly edit my chapters, and make sure they're all up to standard.

I need to build up a proper (20ch+) private stock, which will be my goal for Dec and Jan. That's to both allow me to change things around without it impacting readers, and to allow me to give myself vacation days since I've been writing the story 7 days a week since May.

##### **2. Holiday Schedule.**

Since I'm going full time there will be **no break in releases for the holidays**, and everything will follow the schedule. But since I will be away I'll likely release some chapters ahead of schedule/at irregular times.

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tl;dr: **I'm going full time. Full chapter count for December.**

Zac once again woke up from his deep slumber. This time he was relieved to sense that he was once again able to move, though the feeling of feebleness was still there. He arduously got up to a sitting position and quickly looked around.

He was in the cargo of a small military truck that was obviously still driving as it was bumping and waving around. Inside were another six people resting, four men and two women. All of them were east Asian apart from one of the men who seemed to be Indian.

Two were having a conversation with subdued voices, while the others were reading or maintaining their weapons. When Zac got up to a sitting position a few glanced at him, but soon lost interest and got back to what they were doing.

Zac still wasn't sure of what was going on so he first checked his situation. He wasn't bound or anything of the sort, and he still had all his cosmos sacks within his robes. It appeared he wasn't a prisoner, not that he really thought that after overhearing the earlier conversation.

Still, it was a relief since he wasn't sure he'd be able to mount a prison break in his current condition. A deep rumbling in his stomach reminded him of his wretched and starved state, and it also roused one of the girls who sat close to him.

"You're awake? How are you feeling?" she asked after she noticed Zac's sitting posture, and Zac could tell that she was the one who spoke earlier before he passed out again.

She was quite short, barely reaching 150 cm. Along with her petite frame, Zac almost thought for a second that she was a child. However, she appeared to be somewhere in her early twenties from her facial features. She didn't give off a strong impression from her appearance, but there was still something about her.

At first he couldn't put his finger on it, but after a while, Zac realized it was a slight aura of power. However, it was different from those he was used to, like his own or the Demon warriors. Their auras were drenched in bloodlust and something wrought from countless battles.

Hers was a subdued warm glow that gave off a rather comforting feeling. Another rumble came from Zacs belly, and with a slight flush the girl quickly handed over a can of sausages from her backpack

"Yes, thank you for saving me," Zac answered with a hoarse voice and quickly devoured the small Vienna sausages with relish.

He considered bringing out something more from his pouch but decided against it with some regret. He wasn't in a condition to defend himself for the moment, and showing he possessed multiple Cosmos Sacks wasn't a good idea.

"We're sorry about hitting you with our truck. I'm Sui. We're heading out of the Dead Zone now, and you're free to join us,"

"Oh?" Zac said. "In which direction?"

"We're-" Sui said, but didn't get further before a gruff voice interrupted her.

"Oh? You're awake? Which monastery do you belong to?"

Zac frowned and looked over at a man who sat opposite him. The voice was the same one that wanted to leave him for dead earlier.

"I am not part of any monastery," Zac answered, deciding to tell the truth.

He felt it was no point in lying about the situation, as he had no idea what the so-called battle monks were. He'd be exposed in just a follow-up question or two, and he didn't want to get caught lying while he was in this condition.

Though he could sit up his body was far from restored, and he wasn't sure he would even be able to walk around at the moment.

"You've got some balls impersonating a monk," the man snorted. "I say we throw him off before we arrive, we can't afford to anger the Everlasting Monastery. Our villages depend on their protection."

"Don't be stupid, the monks are benevolent people. They wouldn't jeopardize the population over something like that," Sui said with a glare.

"What's the Everlasting Monastery?" Zac asked.

"It's a large monastery led by one of the most powerful people in the world, Abbot Everlasting Peace. The monastery is actually two days inside the Dead Zone, but the monks still reside there. More impressively, they are actually able to purify the miasma," Sui said with some reverence on her face. "They have turned a large area into a safe zone."

Zac's brows rose at the explanation. Abbot Everlasting Peace was actually the one he was most curious about since the Ladder System was launched, even more so than Salvation and Thea Marshall. Abbot Everlasting Peace was the person who held the first spot on the Dao-ladder at the time.

Surprisingly there had been no information about him, or the Indian Guru holding the second spot on the Dao Ladder, in New Washington. So it turned out the monk was staying in the middle of the undead incursion, somehow eking out a living.

Zac felt it was no wonder that the Abbot had such a high level. He was living in the middle of an incursion, so he was bound to either perish or get strong, just like himself. A thought struck Zac and he opened up the ladders for the first time in a while.

Ladder - Level Rank Name Level 1 Super Brother-Man 59 2 Salvation 48 3 Thea Marshall 47 4 Enigma 43 5 Thwonkin' Billy 42 6 Joker 42 7 Abbot Everlasting Peace 41 8 Daoist Chosui 41 9 Silverfox 41 10 Guru Anaad Phakiwar 40 ... 100 Ling Tian 40

Ladder - Wealth Rank Name 1 Super Brother-Man 2 Smaug 3 Salvation 4 Joker 5 Enigma 6 Greed 7 Little Treasure 8 Thwonkin' Billy 9 The Eternal Eye 10 Henry Marshall

Ladder - Dao Rank Name 1 Abbot Everlasting Peace 2 Guru Anaad Phakiwar 3 Super Brother-Man 4 Thea Marshall 5 Abbot Boundless Truth 6 The Eternal Eye 7 Silverfox 8 Father Thomas 9 Daoist Chosui 10 Little Treasure

Zac was shocked. Not even attaining a high tiered Seed was enough to push him to the top of the Dao ladder. It made him truly wonder just what kind of insights the monk had. He was actually a bit excited about going to the monastery now. Perhaps he would be able to glean some insight as to why the monk was gaining so much enlightenment.

Otherwise not much was changing on the ladders. The only large change since he checked last was that the individual named Dahlia had disappeared from the ladder. Before she was at the 9th spot, so Zac guessed she'd died. It happened every now and then, and it seemed that less than 30 of the original rankers were left on the ladder after roughly 11 weeks.

Some had simply gotten passed by others, while others died. To keep up with the top 100 of the world one needed to be constantly throwing oneself in danger after all. Another trend Zac was noticing was that the ladders were starting to get more harmonized.

In the start Zac was one of the few that existed on all ladders, while Thea was another example. But by now quite a few of those who were on the Dao Ladder also found themselves on the Level ladder. This was nothing odd, as gaining a Dao Seed not only improved attributes, but also empowered skills. It gave a huge boost and would increase leveling speed and survivability by a tier.

Zac himself would be long dead if he didn't have his Dao Seeds for example. Curiously enough Salvation still wasn't on the Dao Ladder though, defying expectations. There was a rumor in New Washington that Salvation was doing the same as the Dominators, gaining levels by killing humans, which was why he gained so many levels without gaining any Dao.

"Why are you heading to the monastery?" Zac suddenly asked.

"There was an... incident," Sui hesitantly answered, throwing a quick glance at Zac.

"Incident? You call most of our people getting slaughtered an incident?" another man in the truck retorted with a glare.

"A god damn lunatic came from nowhere, causing a huge amount of trouble. He was extremely strong, but I think he had gone crazy from miasma like he was on the verge of turning. He killed god knows how many zombies, but then the miasma in the area started to go haywire," the man continued.

"Then everything turned crazy. Elite undead started to gather in droves, seemingly looking for the madman. We think he might have turned into a zombie lord or something, judging by the amount of miasma that entered him," the man opposite spat with a frown. "We got caught in the middle of it. We got butchered. If I find that asshole..."

"You'll what?" a scarred man sitting in a corner of the truck snorted. "Piss your pants? That guy was crazy strong, and now he's a Zombie to boot."

Zac had to force his face to stay neutral as he heard the explanation. He had no idea that he turned out to be a calamity not only for the zombies but the humans as well. He couldn't let them know he was the one responsible for the chaos. Otherwise, they'd likely rip him apart for revenge.

Suddenly he was quite happy that his whole appearance had undergone a transformation during his flight. Not only was his hair gone, but his face had changed back to its original since he wasn't able to keep his disguise going. Even his frame had drastically changed in only two days, making it nigh impossible to know he was the responsible party.

He felt extremely bad about the situation and made a mental promise to try to help out the villages affected by his actions in the future. But for now he had to stay silent on the matter, even if it was unethical.

"So you're heading there to rest up?" Zac asked.

"We need to warn the monastery about the developments in the Dead Zone, and hopefully some of our party are heading there as well. We got split up when we fled," Sui answered as he looked down, fiddling with her fingers.

Zac simply nodded and reclined back against the wall.

"What about you?" the gruff man asked. "If you ask me, you're extremely suspicious. What were you doing so far into the Dead Zone?"

“I originally am from Perseverance on the west side of the incursion. I heard a rumor about a town having a lot of Caucasian cultivators on the east side. I was trying to get there to find a good team, but I got turned around,” Zac answered, mixing some truth with lies.

“You crossed the whole Dead Zone... to find a party?” the gruff man asked suspiciously.

“I accidentally got in an argument with the purifier in Perseverance, so my situation got a bit... complicated,” Zac shrugged. “None of the teams would take me in.”

A few of the people in the truck snickered at that, throwing a glance at Sui who frowned.

“It’s disgusting how some of us use our gifts for personal gain when we should strive to help mankind,” she said with a sour face.

“Not everyone is as idealistic as you, girl,” an old man sitting on the other side of Sui spoke up for the first time. “Most are just trying to survive.”

They kept talking for a while, and Zac was happy to find out that the monastery was to the east, roughly halfway between the core and the edge of the Dead Zone, which meant that they drove in the right direction.

They didn’t really know about any town like the one Zac described, though some of the monks might know, as quite a few of the elite Zombie Hunters had passed through there and left some intelligence behind.

After a while Zac was starting to feel drained once again by the bead, but Sui seemed to sense it somehow. She quickly started to heal him again, while the man on the opposite side snorted after throwing Zac a glare.

After driving a few hours the truck stopped, but apparently it was only for a quick bathroom break and switch drivers. The others seemed eager to get out of the cramped truck, and quickly jumped out one by one. In just seconds only Sui and Zac were left behind, as she was in the middle of once again healing him, or rather feeding the greedy Core in his body.

“Don’t mind what the others said earlier...” Sui suddenly said with a low voice as she imbued him with her healing skill.

“About pretending to be a monk? I don’t mind, I kinda look like one,” Zac answered about a shrug.

“No, not that... About you causing the deaths of our teammates. I know you didn’t mean for that to happen. I guess it has to do with the weird thing in your body?”

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

#### **Chapter 179 - Divine Mountain**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New month new Drive! Join now and read ahead for the rest of the year!

Various thoughts ran through Zac’s head as he leveled an even stare at Sui, to the point that she quickly started to get flustered.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to surprise you. Your face and body are different, but your energy feels the same. I only know it because my class has given me some unique

skills. The others don't know. I promise I won't tell, so please don't do anything drastic," she quickly explained in a hurried flurry of words.

"I understand. Thank you for your discretion. You can call me David," Zac said after a while and closed his eyes, once again using the nickname he chose on the other side of the Dead Zone.

The silence might have been a bit oppressive to the Purifier because she quickly got out of the van as well as soon as she was done imbuing him with another round of energy. That left Zac alone in the van, going over what she said. In the end he felt it wasn't a big deal that she knew. If she didn't even tell those in her team she wouldn't tell anyone else.

Since he was alone for the moment he quickly took out a bunch of dried meat and stuffed himself, almost inhaling the strips made from high leveled beasts. Sui's efforts was very effective in keeping the bead happy, but that alone wasn't enough. His body felt as though he'd been starving for months, lacking not only energy but nourishment.

With his attributes he had an extreme metabolism, if he didn't eat a lot he'd only get worse. In just seconds Zac actually managed to stuff his face with over a kilo of high-grade meat and a couple of liters of water from a canteen. After a brief hesitation he took out another flask and took a small sip from it.

It was actually extremely diluted Cosmic Water, containing roughly one percent of the high energy liquid. As it entered his body he felt the familiar burn through his pathways, but with the low amount of water it was just a small flash of warmth before it turned into Cosmic Energy.

It was the highest concentration he dared to drink at the moment, but even this mixture was harmful if imbibed to much. It did, however, give a small boost to his completely depleted reserves of Cosmic Energy, which improved his bodily functions in general.

Drinking it was partly to invigorate his body, but mainly in order to stay prepared. While Sui seemed nice enough, he didn't really trust the others. If it came to it he needed to be able to protect himself. Besides, they were still in the Dead Zone, anything could happen.

Zac would have liked to continue eating, but approaching voices told him his feast was over, so he quickly put away his Cosmos Pouch again. The trip was largely uneventful after that, as they only traveled on roads far away from civilization. They entered a sort of routine where nothing really happened apart from Sui infusing some energy into Zac every hour or so.

They never stopped driving and kept going non-stop. The only times they stopped was when they found abandoned vehicles, where they tried to salvage some leftover gas with practiced ease. It was the middle of the night when they made another such stop, and the Old man jumped out of the back of the truck with a hose and a can.

However, it didn't take long before the calm of the night was interrupted by multiple roars from zombies.

"Attack!" a shout from outside came, and within seconds the rest of the people in the truck were up on their feet and outside.

Zac had to admit that these people seemed to have more combat experience than even his Valkyries. Perhaps trying some recruiting in the area would be a good idea. For a second he thought about going out to help, but a quick check told him his body was in no condition yet. The energy he got from the Cosmic Water was just to keep him going at full power for a couple of seconds, and he didn't want to waste it on some mindless zombies.

Instead, he took the chance to once again replenish his body. He stuffed his face with dried meat, and once again downed it with a mouthful of diluted Cosmic Water. It was simply too hard to restore energy naturally in the Dead Zone, as most of the Cosmic Energy was converted into miasma. Taking out a bunch of crystals would be suspicious as well, leaving him with only this option.

“Aren’t you relaxed, having a drink while we’re out here risking our lives,” a grunt suddenly came from outside.

Surprised Zac quickly looked over, and to his annoyance it was the man who sat opposite him, Wang Fang. It appeared that the man had actually snuck back toward the truck while the fight was still going. Zac could only say that the man’s name was completely apt, as he had been a complete wang since Zac woke up.

“Unfortunately I’m not in shape to help at the moment,” Zac could only respond, as what the man said was in a sense true.

“Even worse, you’ve also been hiding rations while enjoying ours,” the man pressed on as he jumped into the van. “Makes me wonder what else you have been hiding. I knew we should have frisked you when Sui picked you up.”

Zac’s brows scrunched up, and he started to wonder if he would have to waste the little energy he’d restored in order to break some bones. He couldn’t have the man search him, even if it meant that he’d have a falling out with the people in the truck. The wealth on his person was beyond anything they could imagine, and it would create chaos.

Zac slowly started to rotate his cosmic energy through his parched pathways, getting ready for a quick surprise strike. However, he was relieved to hear that the fighting had died down outside, and footsteps were approaching the truck.

Wang Fang tsked in annoyance, but quickly snatched the flask out of Zac’s hand and backed away with a triumphant sneer. However, face quickly changed as the sweet aroma from the Cosmic Water drew his attention, and he unhesitantly took a swig from the canteen.

“You really shouldn’t drink that. It is poison, and it will be the end of you,” Zac said with a frown.

However, Wang ignored him and greedily swallowed one mouthful after another with a blissful expression on his face.

At this moment the others entered the truck, frowning at the scene.

“What’s going on?” the old man, who appeared to be some sort of leader, asked.

“Our little guest has been hoarding treasures all along,” the Wang Fang said and showed them the flask triumphantly. “I found him drinking from this when I looked inside. It’s some magical water that restored instantly restored all my cosmic energy from just a few mouthfuls.”

Some murmurs erupted from the others as they greedily looked at the flask, apart from Sui who looked aghast at the situation. Wang seemed emboldened by the attention and Zac’s silence so he kept going.

“Not only that, the flask itself is a treasure, as it contains an endless amount of the Treasure Water,” he said, looking at Zac with a sneer. “I bet this thing is why you had to flee into the Dead Zone. You probably stole it and got chased.”

“I’ll give you a final warning,” Zac said with a shrug. “That bottle contains diluted Cosmic Water. It will restore your cosmic energy, but it will also ruin your pathways. I only took a small sip to restore my depleted energy, but that was because I had no alternative. Drinking it like you did will only end in tragedy.”

“You stole it from David? Fang-ge, what kind of man have you become?” Sui said with disappointment. “Return it immediately.”

“It’s okay, it’s nothing valuable,” Zac said with a wave, before he looked at the others in the truck. “You were benevolent and helped me in my time of need, so I wish you no harm. Stay away from that liquid.”

“Not wanting us to waste your treasure?” Wang snorted. “I bet you’re planning to steal it back. Sorry, but it will stay with me from now on. This will be what push our squad to greatness.”

Zac shook his head, not wanting to bother with the fool any longer. If he wanted to kill himself he was welcome to. Besides, the flask was nothing expensive, just a little Cosmic Water diluted in normal water. It was nothing compared to the small lake of the stuff he possessed.

Instead he closed his eyes and rested. In the end a few others tasted the water, and all marveled at its magical effects. However, the Old Man, Sui, and another man declined instead opting to slowly restore themselves with Nexus Crystals. Since they didn’t take it any further or trying to frisk him for any more treasures Zac let the matter end there.

Between Sui’s help and his slow recuperation he was over 15% restored by now by his own account. It wasn’t optimal, but it was enough to rebuff some zombie hunters if it came to that. But Zac felt that what they would go through in the future was punishment enough. He remembered how addictive the water was, it felt like one could keep going and fight forever with the stuff. But reality would catch up with them soon enough.

After the confrontation the atmosphere in the truck got quite oppressive, with no one really in the mood to speak up. Zac knew that if it wasn’t for Sui he would have been attacked, or at least thrown out by now. It was lucky for him that no one wanted to anger the purifier, as it might result in their death tomorrow from lack of treatment.

Zac considered whether he should just start to bring out his meat and some crystals, and beat them up if they got greedy for his things. But in the end he gave up on the idea, as he didn’t want to rock the boat. He needed to get infused by the energy from Sui, so he decided to stay put until they arrived at the monastery.

Instead they sat in silence, the hours feeling like days. Zac wasn’t sure how long they’d driven, but suddenly his eyes opened due to a change in the atmosphere. The concentration of miasma was rapidly declining, to the point that it was almost gone after 20 seconds of driving.

The others in the truck sensed it as well and stretched their legs as they cracked their necks. The truck stopped only a minute later, and everyone quickly got out. This time Zac didn’t stay behind, and for the first time in over a day he got up on his feet and walked out of the stuffy truck.

By now Sui had infused him over 30 times, and his body finally didn’t feel like it was teetering on the brink of collapse. Even better, the air was completely free from miasma, and Zac felt his body slowly start to absorb energy to deplete his wrung out body.

With a grunt he jumped out of the truck, but he immediately froze when he looked at the area, and he couldn’t help but gape in awe. As he looked around it almost felt like he was in a dream, standing on the foot of Mount Meru.

The sky was an intense blue, the gloomy clouds of the Dead Zone just a distant memory. The surroundings were draped lush greenery, with rice paddies covering most of the base of a towering mountain that rose to the skies. The fields were tended by at

least a hundred monks, dressed in simple kasayas, and it was easy to forget that they were surrounded by zombies from the pastoral scenery.

The greenery actually stopped some ways up the mountain, being replaced by sheer walls and cliffs. More amazingly the mountain itself was almost completely covered text, huge letters leaving barely any surfaces unaltered.

It was not the fractals of the system or any foreign species Zac knew from a glance. He was by no means an expert in the area, but he was pretty sure it was some sort of Indian text, likely Sanskrit as it was a Buddhistic mountain.

However, Zac had never heard of something like this magical mountain before the integration. Engraving a whole mountain was an unfathomable undertaking, and the carvings would have made it world renown. So Zac could only guess that the engravings were added after the world got integrated, which made sense since something like this should be a lot easier when one's attributes had improved.

More surprisingly he felt that the Sanskrit wasn't just decoration, as there were hints of power in the letters. They held a subdued but intractable strength, making Zac even doubt he could cause a crack in the stones. Together they formed something unfathomable giving the whole mountain almost a divine aura.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 180 - Invitation**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New month new Drive! Join now and read ahead for the rest of the year!

Since he heard about it Zac had wondered how a monastery could stand strong in the middle of the Dead Zone, wantonly purifying the area. He would have thought that the undead leaders would have purged the area and flattened the mountain, not wanting to leave such a cancer in their backyard. But he had a feeling that the tens of thousands of letters were part of the answer somehow.

Some distance from them a set of stone stairs led up the mountain, simple and unadorned compared to the rest of the area. At its end far up the mountain Zac could vaguely spot a few roofs of the monastery, though much of it was shrouded in a white mist.

"Are we really still in the Dead Zone?" Zac couldn't help ask with a subdued voice to Sui who stood next to him.

"Buddha guards this place, and the mountain grow stronger every day. It is the beacon of hope for many of us," Sui answered with reverence in her eyes as she looked up at the shrouded monastery in the distance.

A deep gong suddenly spread out from the top of the mountain, somehow clearing Zac's mind in an instant. For months worries had plagued his mind, and new issues kept cropping up. However, it was all blown away from the sound, and it appeared it was the same for Sui as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. The two simply stood and took in the tranquility for another few seconds until a jarring voice broke the serenity.

"That's him! He pretended to be a monk, I think he works for the undead trying to spy on you!"

Zac couldn't help roll his eyes as he looked over at the direction the sound came from. Wang Fang stood some distance away, clearly trying to suck up to two monks.

Both monks appeared to be some sort of guards, as they each held a staff with some iron hoops at the end. Just looking at them Zac sensed they had to be at least level 30 from their presence. The two guards looked back at him, though they looked confused rather than anything else.

The others of the party stood some distance away, looking at the ongoings with troubled faces. Clearly they didn't want to get involved in what was going on, neither speaking up for Zac nor helping Wang Fang.

Zac took the accusation in stride, as he didn't feel it would be very hard to prove his innocence. He was especially sure of that as he just received a prompt he had never seen before. After mulling it over a few seconds he made his choice, making the prompt disappear again.

However, Sui wasn't as calm as she scurried over toward the two monks who both seemed to recognize her. As soon as she approached they both put their hands together and bowed in greeting.

"Don't listen to Fang, he's talking crazy. We accidentally hit David with our truck on the way here," she said, and followed up with a quick recounting of the situation.

The two monks looked a bit troubled at the situation, but soon one of the two hurried toward the long stairs leading toward the monastery while the other one walked over toward Zac, much to the joy of Wang Fang.

"Patron, please accommodate this penniless monk and stay for a moment. While Patron Sui is a respected guest of the monastery, it is still a fact you contain an unordinary amount of yin energy. Please stand by while we confer with our senior brothers," the monk said with a courteous bow.

"That's fine, I'll look at your mountain for a bit. It is very interesting," Zac said as he sat down.

Zac truly didn't mind the wait, as he found the inscriptions extremely interesting. Every type of inscription he'd encountered so far came from the system or integrated societies, and they all had one thing in common.

They were based on the fractals that made up the skills and pathways for Cosmic Energy. The fractals from the system felt the purest and unadulterated, whereas the ones from the Creators and Demons differed in various ways. However, they shared the same root.

From how Zac understood it, the fractals were the language of the Dao and they contained hints of various truths. That's why it was possible to study skill fractals to slowly gain insight into the Dao. It was all based on a cohesive system drawn up by the Apostate of Order billions of years ago.

It was different with the Sanskrit writings on the mountain walls, as they had nothing to do with the fractals. Zac couldn't understand how it was possible to draw power from something that seemed to be its own system, rather than the system of the multiverse.

It felt like a true miracle that the monastery somehow had managed to create something with Earth Scripture. As for exactly what the mountain did, Zac still wasn't completely sure. It emitted a pressure as heavy as the world, yet at the same time it was light as a feather.

The only thing he could figure out after watching it for twenty minutes was that the mountain itself was the thing responsible for converting the miasma in the area. But that was likely only part of the capabilities of the mountain.

For the monastery to still stand strong, it likely possessed some sort of defensive or offensive abilities as well. Otherwise Mhal or one of his colleagues would have just destroyed the whole thing. Abbot Everlasting Peace should be quite powerful, but in the end he was only level 41. He shouldn't be able to fend off the whole Undead Hordes with his own power.

One possibility he thought of was that this monastery was chosen as an outpost and the monks were given a crystal just like his. Maybe they possessed some extremely strong arrays that kept the area safe in case of attack. However, Zac didn't gain access to those kinds of arrays until he finished the first Incursion quest.

He didn't really make any headway with the scriptures, so didn't mind seeing a couple of monks slowly descend the stairs and walk toward him.

"Amitabha, patron. Abbot Everlasting Peace has asked for your company if convenient," the monk said with a bow.

The old monk himself seemed quite confused about the invitation, and the same could be seen on the others. However, Zac himself wasn't too surprised. When he arrived at the monastery he got the option by the system to make his presence known, which he accepted.

"Sounds good," Zac only said and got to his feet. "Let me just talk with my travel companions."

With a few steps he walked over to the group who now sat around a table having dinner some distance away, with the group of warrior monks following close behind. Sui looked over with a troubled face, but Zac spoke up before she could say anything.

"Thank you for your help over the past days. I am not sure I would have survived without your gift of life. If possible I will return the favor in the future."

"You need to survive impersonating a venerable first," Wang Fang retorted with a gleeful face, clearly misunderstanding the presence of the monks behind Zac.

The others looked troubled, especially the Old Man who looked back and forth between Zac and the monks respectfully standing behind him with a slight frown on his face. Zac only ignored Wang, much to his annoyance.

"You are welcome. I believe helping you will be the largest karmic contribution of my life," Sui answered with sincerity, drawing surprised glances from the others.

Wang Fang seemed completely infuriated by the comment, and looked ready to go another round. However, he wasn't given the opportunity as Zac simply left toward the stairs with the monks in tow.

As he reached the stairs he saw that they weren't actually unadorned like it seemed from the distance. They were covered with scripts as well, with Sanskrit covering both the left and right sides, leaving only a small part of the middle clear to step on.

"There are 2 700 stairs leading up to the Monastery of Everlasting Peace. Each step is inscribed with a line from the Diamond Sutra. The Sutra is then repeated nine times. To walk the stairs is to search for enlightenment through repetition," the elderly monk commented as he saw Zac gaze upon the text.

Zac only nodded in response as he took the first step on the stairs. As he did a small pressure landed on his shoulders, but it wasn't to the point of really bothering him. Mostly unencumbered he kept walking up the stairs as he looked at the inscriptions on the sides.

The monks behind Zac looked at each others with some surprise, but quickly followed Zac up the stairs. No one spoke as they kept walking up one step at a time. Zac couldn't help but look at each line as he walked, being drawn to the words. He

couldn't actually read the Sanskrit, but through his language skill he still got a sense what it said.

Of course, that was just the surface. The sutras of Buddhism and Hinduism were notoriously cryptic, and one could spend their whole life pondering its layers. However, he was surprised to sense that he got a different inspiration from the 301<sup>st</sup> step compared to the 1<sup>st</sup>. The inscriptions were the same, yet their meaning was somehow different.

Curious, Zac kept climbing, trying to absorb whatever the Diamond Sutra was trying to tell him. The formless pressure was gaining slightly in strength with each of his step, and by the time he reached the seventh iteration of the Diamond Sutra it started to become quite strenuous, to the point that Zac was unsure whether he'd make it all the way.

Zac was contemplating whether he should start rotating his Cosmic Energy or ask the monks walking behind him what was going on. But in the end he felt that would somehow be losing, or failing some test. The monks behind him walked without any effort, telling Zac it wasn't an issue of strength. Even the old man looking to be at least 70 wasn't even panting, only kindly smiling at him when Zac looked back.

Since the old man wasn't using Cosmic Energy, Zac instead summoned his Dao of Trees as he kept walking. He felt he was on to something as the pressure drastically lessened, and released a Dao Field around his body. More surprisingly it felt as though the meaning of the inscriptions on the ground changed as he walked, instead starting to talk about his Dao.

As he ascended the last sets of steps his Dao Field kept subtly changing, turning more solid and robust. When he finally stood at the end of the stairs the pressure suddenly completely disappeared, and his Dao Field spread out over fifty meters, twice what he managed earlier.

His mind was crystal clear as he stood still for a few breaths, only pondering on his recent insights into the Dao. The stairs and its inscriptions had somehow stabilized his evolved seed, something that might normally have taken him weeks of meditation.

"Amithaba, patron. All is none. Heart is all," the old monk said behind Zac as he bowed toward him.

"I feel like I have been given a huge gift here," Zac said as he looked down at the stairs leading back toward the base of the mountain.

"If you light a lamp for somebody, it will also brighten your own path. Remember, the Dao comes from the heart. The heart can manifest the myriad Dao, but also endless worries," the old monk said with a kindly smile. "This way patron, the Abbot is waiting."

The other monks in the party monks seemed much friendlier to Zac after he ascended the steps, and with a bow, they left him and the old man. The monastery wasn't too big Zac noted as they walked, and perhaps it could house a thousand monks. Then again, they were on a mountain, and perhaps there were a bunch of monks living as hermits in caves.

The temple was simple and austere but in spotless condition. There was a solemn silence in the air, and the area exuded an ancient aura. Zac felt it would taint the tranquility if he spoke here, so he let the old man lead him in complete silence through the compound.

After a few minutes they had walked to the back of the temple, and Zac noted with some surprise they passed the larger halls. Instead it appeared they headed toward a small courtyard hidden in the back. It was small and unassuming, and absolutely not the place Zac thought the abbot would stay.

A few monks sat and meditated on a square in front of the gates to the small courtyard, and they all opened their eyes when they heard the footsteps of Zac and the old monk. Even Zac felt some pressure when faced with the calm stares of the monks in front of him.

Zac realized that while these monks might not be on the ladder, they likely weren't too far off. Besides, judging by the mysterious things going on at the monastery they might actually be stronger than some rankers in reality.

The old man simply placed his hands together in greeting, and led Zac into the small courtyard. There Actually were two layers of doors, and before opening the second door, the old man first closed the outer one. When the old man opened the inner door next, Zac was blanketed with an extremely dense amount of cosmic energy, to the point that it could rival the small cave beneath the lake of Cosmic Water.

As they entered Zac was surprised to see that most of the inner courtyard was covered by a pond, though it seemed to be normal water. Zac saw a few koi swing about, but that wasn't what drew his attention. In the middle of the pond was a huge lotus-flower, reaching at least 3 meters across, and on top of it sat a monk staring out at the sunset.

The imagery was quite striking, but that wasn't enough to shock Zac. He was still left gaping however from the torrents of pure healing powers that swirled around the flower. It was as though the old monk sat in the middle of a hurricane wrought from pure life.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 181 - Abbot Everlasting Peace**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New month new Drive! Join now and read ahead for the rest of the year!

Initially when they entered Zac could only see the side of the old monk sitting on the lotus. However, as Zac was lead around the pond to a seat facing the Abbot his brows rose in shock.

His first impression of Abbot Everlasting Peace was that he was teeming with life, but his appearance truly didn't match. The old man sat in a classic meditating pose, but there was a huge hole in his chest right where his lungs and heart should be.

The loose robes the old monk wore covered some of the wound, but Zac could actually see the sky through the hole in the old man's chest. The Abbot's face was equally grisly, with huge jagged scars lining his face that made Zac's scars seem like small beauty marks.

Furthermore, having been on the receiving end of the Corpse Lord Zac recognized the aura coming from the wounds. It was clear it was done by some undead powerhouse. The miasma was mostly cleansed in the old man, but some hints remained, and the scars were still slightly blackened.

His eyes were closed, and Zac sensed he was in the middle of cultivation as energy swirled around him like a whirlwind in slow motion. Zac's eyes couldn't help but turn to the flower underneath the monk, as the energies it emitted were extremely pure.

Zac even guessed the flower might be a treasure of the grade of the Fruit of Ascension, though its function likely was separate. Judging by the state of the old man he might not even be able to leave the flower, as it was continuously pouring healing energies into his body.

The old monk who led Zac to the courtyard wordlessly bowed to the Abbot and Zac before he left again, closing the doors to the courtyard behind him.

Zac was happy to wait for the old monk to wake up, as some of the spill-off from the flower actually entered himself, nourishing even better than Sui's healing skills did. It felt as though his parched body was slowly being submerged into a pure river, with him slowly absorbing the water.

It made Zac wonder just how potent it was to sit in the center of the flower. After roughly 30 minutes the old man finally roused himself

"Ambithaba, benefactor," the old man said as he slowly opened his eyes. "I apologize for making you see this embarrassing sight."

"That's okay. Uh, no offense, but how are you alive?" Zac couldn't help asking as his eyes once again were drawn to the hole in the old man's chest.

"Do not worry, I am not one of the yin creatures you've met outside," the old man said with a kindly smile, though it was somewhat marred from the scars.

"This penniless monk was wounded in battle. I am ashamed to admit it, but I am not ready to enter the Samsara. My home has turned into a hell on earth. If I don't stay and fight, who will? Perhaps I performed meritorious deeds in a past life, as the universe bestowed me with this treasure in my moment of need," he said as he pointed down at the Lotus flower.

"It is prolonging this one's life and slowly provides healing," the Abbot said. "Unfortunately it means I am not able to leave it, and won't be for a long while."

"It seems quite special, sitting here is helping me out as well. I'm Zac, by the way, thank you for receiving me," Zac simply said.

"Benefactor showed great merit when you laid one of the leaders of this Incursion to rest. Receiving you is the least this poor temple could do," this old man said with a small smile.

"Oh? How did you know that?" Zac asked curiously.

The abbot only kept smiling as a screen opened up in front of Zac.

Life versus Death (Unique): Triumph over the six lords of undeath and the Lich King of the Undead Incursion. Reward: Infallible Sutra, unique building depending on performance. (3/7).

Zac was shocked when he saw the quest. It was very similar to his own old quest, Off With Their Heads, as it was based on killing the leaders of an incursion. That wasn't what surprised him though, it was the fact that the progress was already at (3/7).

Zac was quite sure that Mhal was one of the three, but that still meant that two of the generals were already killed before his battle. While it might not seem like much compared to Zac killing all four of the heralds before two months were over, he knew the two couldn't be compared.

Clan Azh'Rezak was a fledgling demonic clan that only got the opportunity to invade a new planet through dumb luck, and the resources they could put into the invasion were severely limited. Meanwhile, the Undead Empire was one of the largest forces in the multi-verse, with resources and means that Zac couldn't even imagine.

Of course, the undead force that invaded Earth was just some insignificant branch of the empire, but still, the foundations would have to be on another level compared to Ogras' clan. That was easily displayed by the fact that Ogras was barely

as strong as just one of the lords, but likely no match against the actual Lich King. Mhal and his colleagues would likely have no trouble slaughter the beasts that were the Heralds of the demonic incursion.

“I barely survived the fight against the undead lord, I can’t believe you have managed to kill two of them,” Zac said, not hiding his awe.

“They came two months ago to destroy this mountain. An army of undead lead by two generals. With some special means and luck, we managed to prevail. However, the fight resulted in this embarrassing appearance,” the monk explained. “This mountain warded off evil and protected us in our time of need. However, my brothers tell me the undead are growing stronger. I am not sure how long it will take until they try again.”

“Perhaps the death of one more of their own might give us more time to prepare,” Abbot Everlasting Peace continued.

“Hopefully our force can be of assistance soon. Currently, they are closing up another Incursion,” Zac said, referring to the Ratmen Incursion at Billyville.

The operation should have started by now, and Zac hoped they would be successful in closing it down. It would free up another powerhouse to join the battle against the other Incursions.

“But I believe this undead Incursion must be closed as soon as possible. They can’t be allowed to keep growing for much longer,” Zac continued.

“The undead disrupt the harmony between life and death and deny poor souls Samsara. This penniless monk would be most indebted by any assistance benefactor can bring,” the Abbot said. “But I believe that is not why benefactor visited this old man?”

Zac pondered a bit on how to frame his next questions. It was generally quite rude to ask about secrets to cultivation from outsiders, as it was akin to asking them for their weaknesses. However, the situation on Earth was desperate, and Zac felt it wasn’t time to be bashful.

“I gained my strength by singlehandedly closing an incursion,” Zac said, explaining his situation to an outsider for the first time. “It has awarded me with various benefits that snowballed into a huge advantage in power over perhaps anyone on this planet. Yet I fear it’s not enough. I have no confidence in defeating the Lich King as I am, and there are many more invaders out there.”

“I am looking for any methods to get stronger, and seeing the mountain and your monks tells me I have much to learn from you. Can you tell me how your insight into the Dao is so high?”

“Did you know? This penniless monk had never left this mountain before the integration,” the old man responded with a smile. “I also never contributed much to the monastery. I believed that to understand Karma you first needed to sever Karma.”

“This monk only sat and pondered on the Sutras and what the Buddhist Dharma meant, but I realize now that was just selfishness. Only when I stepped out from my courtyard did I come to understand things that had been hazy mysteries for decades.”

“What is the point of understanding Karma if you do not create spread goodness through Karma?” the Old man asked, seemingly rhetorical.

“Dao, Faith, Insight, Truth, Enlightenment. All are names for the same thing as this one sees it. Understanding of the self and the universe. This mountain has been consecrated in the Dao for thousands of years, and it gained spirituality. The sutras are the basis for its being, therefore they have power. Our hearts give them power, therefore they are powerful,” Abbot Everlasting Peace said as he looked up at the sky, before once again focusing on Zac.

Zac wasn't sure what to make of the old man's explanation. He wasn't a spiritual person before the fall and didn't really understand some of the things these monks said.

He was sure that there was a lesson to be learned from how the old monk gained power, but at the same time, it might not apply to himself. They walked different paths, his wrought with blood and carnage. The old monk seemed to understand Zac's confusion and only shook his head.

"Benefactor doesn't need to become a monk and read scriptures to improve the Dao. This old man believes that finding the answers is not about following a certain procedure. It is about being true to your nature and your heart. If you try to force enlightenment it will always be out of reach, you will become an old man looking up at the clouds in despair," he said.

"But if you follow your nature and your heart, the myriad Dao will open themselves to you."

Zac slowly nodded, somewhat understanding what the old man was driving at. However, suddenly he had an epiphany.

"Nature..." Zac murmured with his eyes widening.

What he gained wasn't some realization in regards to the Dao, but rather about inscriptions, though it all tied together. He realized he'd been naïve when he thought of the fractals by the Creators and the Demons as simple or flawed.

The creators were among the greatest craftsmen in the multi-verse, there was no reason they shouldn't be able to create fractals that looked the same as the ones the System used. However, they still inscribed the squarish ones that had reminded Zac of old-school computer text.

It was the same with the Demons. Their fractals looked a bit crude in comparison to the one that adorned his robes, but after living with them for months Zac knew they weren't some barbarians.

Why couldn't they simply alter their scripts a bit to look like the ones from the system? The design of those fractals wasn't anything uncommon, as they could simply buy basic gear from the General Store. Add to that the thousands of years of research they had.

Only now did Zac understand that it was a deliberate choice. The scripts the two factions used were more closely aligned with their nature. The strength of an inscription wasn't dictated how close it looked to a "real" fractal, but by the insight and skill of the inscriber.

Zac now realized that the power of the inscriptions likely got stronger, not weaker, when the inscriptions were more suited to the nature of the Creator. For the same reason, the Sanskrit covering the mountain was close to the nature of these monks, which is why they gained power.

This was what the Abbot was trying to tell him. Zac was looking at the Dao like there was an answer sheet, and Zac hoped the Abbot had a few of the answers he didn't possess yet. But Dao was an individual journey.

He should be looking inward to find his own nature and what Dao suited him and his path, instead of trying to find tricks or Dao fruits that would give him shortcuts or answers to questions he wasn't even asking.

"Benefactor is still hurt from earlier. Why not keep this penniless monk company for a few days?" The Abbot suddenly said, dragging Zac out of his thoughts.

"Actually, I am in the region on a mission," Zac said with some hesitation. "I can't stay overly long."

It would be nice to stay in this courtyard for a bit since he was getting better by the second. The lotus was flooding the area with vitality after all, and he was still sorely lacking in that department.

“This old man can see benefactor has strong Karmic ties to someone in the east. But it is not yet time,” the Abbot said.

“Nature does not hurry, yet all is accomplished.”

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 182 - Black and Gold**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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“What do you mean?” Zac asked confused.

“This penniless monk gained some minor insight into the Dao of Karma from his many decades of meditation. It has given me some unique skills in this new reality of ours. Karma ties you to a location to the east. However, if you leave now you will likely fail in your goal,” the monk said with a calm voice.

Zac thought it over and couldn’t find any reason the old man would lie. Still, it felt like too strong a power to be able to predict the future like that, at least for someone at level 40. That felt like something that was in the realm of gods.

“Why would I fail?” Zac asked with some skepticism.

“Because your yin and yang are currently out of balance,” the old man said as he pointed at Zac’s stomach.

“Benefactor’s wound might not look as bad as this one,” the Abbot continued as he pointed at his chest. “But it is just as dangerous. I sense a storm inside you. Unless benefactor finds harmony, the yin outside the mountain will kill you.”

Zac grimaced, very aware of the problem. The wound in his side was calm at the moment, but that was only because there was bountiful vitality in this courtyard, almost to the point that it was like being constantly healed by a purifier.

The moment he stepped out from the mountain the process of his vitality being sapped would likely restart again. As he sat and pondered in the back of the truck he made some educated guesses about his situation. The suction of his life force likely wasn’t only because he was inside the Dead Zone, but because of the composition of the bead.

The Core was mainly created from the miasma of over a hundred thousand zombies along with a lot of ambient deathly energy. The opposing force was the ten purification pills along with his Dao of Vitality and Sui’s ministrations. However, the pills and other life-attuned energies he absorbed were far less than the total amount of miasma, to the point that at most 10% of the energy in the bead was life-based.

That meant that the absorption would likely continue even after he left the Dead Zone. His current idea was just to tough it out somehow until he found Kenzie, then hurry back to Port Atwood and hope Ogras or someone else had some idea. But perhaps the monk in front of him could provide some alternative solution.

“Do you have a way to cleanse away the miasma in me?” Zac asked with some hope.

“Why would benefactor want to remove half of his self?”

“Half my what?” Zac asked confused, afraid the monk had misunderstood him.

“If this poor monk may be blunt, I believe benefactor has not looked at the situation from all angles,” Abbot Everlasting Peace said.

“Benefactor likely looks at the yin energy on the outside as something negative, akin to poison. However, this poor monk sees it as the other half of life. This poor monk sensed benefactor walk a path of life when he ascended the stairs. One might look at death as the opposite of life, but one can also see it as its shadow,” the monk said.

Zac nodded in agreement, as that was basically what he based his latest insight of his Dao Seed around.

“One might say that the two restrain each other, but this penniless monk believes they can also nurture each other. Perhaps benefactor doesn’t need to remove the yin, but rather bolster the yang,” the monk concluded.

This was honestly something Zac had thought about before. He felt that he shouldn’t even be alive, but a series of coincidences had left him with this odd core, and perhaps it was a ticket for him to go further than the conventional cultivator. He knew that reaching the higher tiers of power was beyond hard, and unless one encountered a continuous stream of lucky encounters the road would likely end at E-Grade or even lower.

However, there were a lot of question marks about choosing this path. First of all, he wasn’t too sure if it fit his current Daos or his class. He was, in essence, an axe warrior with some nature-element skills on the side. The life-death path was something else.

He was afraid that he’d find himself at an impasse when he reached level 75. Alyn and Ogras had multiple time told him how extremely hard it was to walk the path of the elite, and that almost everyone got stuck at the bottleneck due to lacking the qualifications to go further.

Getting an epic-graded class was nigh-impossible unless you came from a high tier background who had resources that a newly integrated world could only dream of. Perhaps if he spread himself too thin he would lose everything. The situation on Earth was dire, and perhaps it was a mistake to take such a big gamble.

Like it or not, he was the main force against the Incursions and Dominators. The incursions were possible to close without evolving due to the restrictions still in place, but that didn’t hold true for the Dominators. They were already at level 100, far past the F-grade barrier.

He’d discussed the issue at length with Ogras and understood that the increase in strength from each level at E-Grade was the same as a handful of levels for an F-Grader. It wasn’t impossible to skip ranks and fight people who were at the beginning of a new rank, but the Dominators were too far past the delimiter. Even if they were trash who just had a lot of extra time there was no way for Zac to defeat them at level 75.

So if Zac got himself stuck at the bottleneck for too long the Dominators might just kill him and everyone else even if he managed to close the Incursions. The odd cultists of the Zhix were still shrouded in mystery. If they wanted they should have been able to destroy the Incursions without too much effort. Yet they were still biding their time, hiding in their burrows.

That fact only made Zac more nervous, rather than the opposite. It felt like the Dominators were a ticking time bomb that could go off at any moment, and who knew what they had planned over the past 6 months.

“It might be a good idea, but the amount of miasma in me is enormous. I had a purifier help me for over a day, and it barely put a dent in the life-attuned energy needed to reach a balance,” Zac said with a sigh.

“Well, perhaps this penniless monk can help benefactor on this front, but only if you’ve decided on your path,” the Abbot said.

Zac thought it over for a good ten minutes, but finally he decided to go with it after all. If the Abbot could help he would accept it. He already was determined to walk the path of the elite, and he felt that utilizing the core rather than discarding it was the path with more potential, even though it was a large risk. Cultivation was taking risks and defying fate. Nothing ventured nothing gained.

“Amitabha, this penniless monk can see benefactor has made his choice,” the monk said with a smile as he bent down and plucked something from the lotus flower beneath him. “This lotus seed contains part of the vitality of the flower. Though it is only a part, it is nigh boundless. Benefactor can slowly absorb it in order to supplement the yang.”

The torrent of life-attuned energy swirling around the lotus flower got distinctly weaker, and Zac suspected it lost around 20% of its power. Zac understood what kind of sacrifice the old man made as he looked at the wound in his chest.

“Why are you doing this?” Zac couldn’t help asking.

“Amitabha, do good deeds to gain merit. If benefactor wishes to look at it as another way, see it as this penniless monk sowing seeds of karma,” the old monk said with a smile.

Zac said nothing more as he received the seed. He sat down and started absorbing the energy in the seed. It was as though an endless surge of pure life entered his body, and in just minutes his drained body felt like it was back in top condition.

The Core wasn’t so easily satiated though, as it greedily kept absorbing the energy from the seed. A storm of energy exited the seed as it entered Zac’s body and gathered beneath his navel. The huge amounts of energies were painful, but Zac kept pushing his body to the limits in order to finish as quickly as possible.

After roughly twelve hours the speed of absorption started to dwindle slightly, allowing Zac to once again talk with the monk who hadn’t moved the whole time.

“Benefactor’s body is truly resilient. If this penniless monk was able to absorb energy at that speed I would have been able to leave this flower weeks ago,” the Abbot said with a shake of his head.

“This gift is immeasurable,” Zac said. “I do not know how to repay you.”

Zac was regretting not buying the second Fruit of Ascension with contribution points so that he could give it to the old monk. He still was holding one, but he was planning on giving it to his sister.

Besides, it was unclear how helpful it would be to the man in front of him. The fruit didn’t really have any healing properties, and Zac suspected the old man in front of him already had improved his constitution to E-rank. It would almost be impossible not to evolve after sitting in this level of vitality for two straight months.

“Benefactor does not need to repay this old man. This penniless monk only wishes that benefactor does not give up on humanity and uses his gifts for good.”

Zac could only nod and mentally promise that he’d find some way to make it up to the Abbot as he looked inward. There were still surges of life-attuned energy entering his head, but it had changed quite a bit since he looked at it last.

For one it had almost doubled in size, and secondly, it wasn’t pure black with some golden specks like before. It now held a much even distribution of colors, though

the black was still a majority. He guessed it would take another 12 to 15 hours before he'd reach equilibrium.

More impressively there actually seemed to be fractals naturally forming on the bead, though Zac had no idea what they meant. They were extremely intricate and written in both gold and black. It seemed there was a profundity behind them that still was beyond what Zac could understand.

As the two sat and absorbed the energies from the lotus flower the two discussed various things. The old man was a cultivator, which wasn't surprising to Zac. What was surprising was that most of the monks who had spent their life in the monastery were cultivators as well. It clashed with what he knew about the randomness of who was a cultivator and who wasn't.

Zac also gained some clues as to where his sister might be. The monk knew of a large town some distance away from the edge of the Dead Zone that was a drop-off zone for Caucasian cultivators. It was called Kingsbury, and it sounded like it would take Zac roughly two days to get there if he hurried.

What was worse was that the monk mentioned that the town had gotten integrated with the New World Government a few weeks ago. Zac wasn't sure whether it was a coincidence or not, but it was cause for worry. However, he forced himself to stay put. It was as the Abbot said, rushing would only have an opposite effect.

After another 17 hours, Zac could sense that the core in his body was finally in equilibrium. He was extremely impressed with the lotus flower that the monk sat on. One single seed was able to offset the entire amount of miasma in his core, and there still was a good deal of energy left inside it.

However, when Zac made to give the seed back to the old man he refused with a shake of his head.

"Keep the seed, it might come handy," the Abbot said. "Remember, the heart is all."

"Thank you, I will remember this," Zac said as he stood up and walked toward the door.

He took one last look at the small courtyard and the congenial old man who sat looking up at the clouds with a smile on his face.

Soon Zac was running through the woods toward Kingsbury. The rumors that the Abbot mentioned kept gnawing at him, making him unable to calm down. It felt too coincidental that the town was getting with the government just as he was about to arrive.

It all smelled like a setup to him. They were trying to lure him to Kingsbury, but what kind of plan they had was unknown. The problem was that Zac couldn't understand why the government would do something like this. They had to know that if they took his sister hostage to harm him they would put themselves square in his crosshairs.

They already knew how he dealt with things by looking at the aftermath in Greenworth. The stupidity of it all made Zac doubt whether he was just paranoid. Still, he would rather be safe than sorry, so he hurried toward the town, cutting a straight line through the forest.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 183 - Kingsbury**

## A note from TheFirstDefier

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As soon as he had exited the sphere of protection from Mount Everlasting Peace his core once again had started to absorb miasma. However, it wasn't a problem for Zac anymore, as the lotus seed provided him with the life energy he needed. Besides, now that his core was balanced the amount of life energy needed to maintain the balance was minuscule compared to before.

It went to show that while the bead was balanced it was still able to absorb more energy. However, Zac wasn't sure whether pushing more energy into the core was something he should be aiming for until he knew what he was dealing with.

After talking with the Abbot for almost a day he didn't feel as bad about the bead anymore, rather the opposite. He was excited to dig into the mysteries it contained when he had some time. He was especially curious about the fractals that had somehow appeared by themselves on the small core. Perhaps they were a clue how to harness the massive energy the core contained.

Zac was still stunned by the generosity of the Abbot. It was a bit of an uncomfortable feeling to be so far in debt to a stranger. No matter what Zac had tried while he absorbed energy from the bead the Abbot had refused to accept any gift in return, no matter if it was healing pills or crystals.

The only thing he could think of was to provide as much information as he could to the monks, from the various incursions to the threat of the Dominators and shapeshifters. He also set up an alliance with the monastery, which in a sense was a large gift, as it gave the monks a path of retreat in case the undead came again.

It was a new function he possessed now that he was a Lord, which essentially allowed him to put individuals and factions on what could be seen as a "friend list" in a game. It would allow them to teleport to his teleportation array, even when it was closed to strangers.

It meant Zac had three modes to his teleporter now; private, trusted, and public. His teleporter was already set on trusted at the moment, which allowed anyone from his faction, and now also the monks, to use the teleporter. Otherwise, his troops would be stuck on the island and unable to join Billy.

As he ran through the forests toward the east he kept trying various things. Between the stairs and the long talks with the Abbot he felt he'd gained a deeper understanding of the Dao, and he was trying to incorporate it into his fighting style.

Not only that but, he also needed to test his improved Dao Seed. During his fight with the ghost he realized that the seed had gotten a lot more flexible since it got upgraded. He needed to know the effect of adding it to various skills.

His experimentation had an unexpected result, as his movement skill **[Loamwalker]** skill gained a level and reached Middle mastery. It was almost instantaneous after he incorporated his Dao of Trees into his steps, clearly showing what the criterion for the upgrade was.

Zac was elated as the movement skill was integral to his fighting style. After the upgrade he kept trying it out in various ways until he properly understood the changes.

Zac realized that his energy consumption decreased by quite a bit when he infused his legs with the Dao of Trees. It wasn't to the point that he would be able to use it non-stop for hours, but it helped with one of the largest downfalls of the skill; its high energy consumption.

As for the effect of the upgrade itself, it was a simple upgrade to the range of the skill. At low mastery each step could take him a few meters forward at the most, but after it improved to middle rank the range improved to around 15 meters.

This, in essence, improved his maximum speeds by a few folds as well as each step moved him forward around 4 times the distance compared to before. The downside was that the further he walked the higher the consumption was, and to use the skill to its maximum effect was quite costly, even with the empowerment of the Dao.

As Zac kept going he also found that good news sometimes came in pairs. The second day after he leveled up his movement skill another prompt suddenly appeared in front of him. This time it was the **[Forester's Constitution]** skill that gained a boost.

The only reason for the upgrade he could come up with was that it required time spent in forests to level up, since its boost was dependant on staying in forests. Other than that he had no idea, as the skill was passive, and not something he could train with.

The improvement wasn't great, though it was convenient. At low rank it gave a 10% boost to Endurance and Vitality as long as he was in a forest, and otherwise a 5% boost.

But at middle proficiency, it gave an 11% boost as long as he'd been in a forest the last 24 hours. It was quite convenient as he wouldn't suddenly lose attributes the moment he entered a town anymore. The lower boost improved slightly as well, clocking in at 5.5%.

He'd hoped that his other new skills would have improved as well, but most of them were still at Early Proficiency, apart from **[Thousand Faces]** that couldn't be improved upon. Still, as he opened up his menu he felt his repertoire was starting to become quite diverse.

#### **Skills**

**Inquisitive Eye - Proficiency: Early. See through their secrets. Upgradeable.**

**Book of Babel - Proficiency: -. Enlightenment through understanding.**

**Mental Fortress - Proficiency: Middle. Enduring Stability. Upgradeable.**

**Thousand Faces - Proficiency: -. If you hate who you are, change it. Upgradeable.**

**Nature's Barrier - Proficiency: Early. Brave thousand storms with Gaia's protection. Upgradeable.**

**Axe Mastery - Proficiency: Late. The seed of Dao is planted. Upgradeable.**

**Chop - Proficiency: Late. There is greatness in simplicity.**

**Forester's Constitution - Proficiency: Middle. Man and Nature One Entity. Upgradeable.**

**Loamwalker - Proficiency: Middle. Trod the unbroken path. Upgradeable.**

**Nature's Punishment - Proficiency: Early. Awaken the wrath of the world. Upgradeable.**

He possessed most types of skills now. The only thing he felt he was missing was another attack skill. **[Chop]** was still good for weaker targets, but his only good attack for stronger enemies was **[Nature's Punishment]**. The problem with that skill was that it cost such a huge amount of energy, only allowing him to use it once in a fight.

Still, Zac didn't worry overly much as he was only one level away from 60 and he was somewhat certain he'd gain another skill at that point. Therefore he didn't

avoid any towns or cities either as he pushed straight his destination, trying to find targets to kill along the way.

Unfortunately he realized he wouldn't gain his level before he arrived at Kingsbury, as there simply were almost no zombies around. He was closing in on the edge of the Dead Zone and the towns he passed through were completely raided.

At first there were some scattered zombies left, but after another half day of traveling there wasn't a single one in sight. Zac didn't really care though as there would always be opportunities to get the level at a later point.

Another day passed as Zac kept moving, finally exiting the Dead Zone proper. Kingsbury wasn't a real frontier town, but rather some distance further away. It only took an hour for him to reach the town though with the help of his Automatic Map.

The town was of decent size, at least comparable to what was left of Greenworth. However, he didn't recognize any of the structures, so Zac suspected that only the cultivators got dropped off here. The other parts of Greenworth likely ended up somewhere else.

The order in the town seemed quite a bit better than most places as the guards didn't exhort him for a bribe when he tried to enter. He'd already changed his face with **[Thousand Faces]** again, not wanting to let anyone know about his presence before he found out about the fate and whereabouts of his sister.

This time he didn't accept when the prompt that showed up as he entered, not wanting to make his presence known. He had asked the Abbot about the prompt, and the old man hadn't heard about that function either, telling Zac it likely was unique to Lords.

He still didn't understand how it worked, as he didn't get the prompt in the beginning after becoming a lord. Zac guessed that only the monastery was run by someone powerful enough, and the system gave him an option to give due respect and announce himself.

As for Kingsbury, he soon realized it was due to it having come under the control of the government, another powerful entity.

After having entered the town proper Zac did what he used to do for information and simply entered the first restaurant he saw. He was surprised to find that the inside smelled of stale alcohol apart from just food.

He looked around and saw that people were drinking something, though they didn't really seem to be enjoying the taste.

He sat down at a counter and simply ordered the drink the others forced down the throat.

"Don't recognize you, new in town?" the man asked with some disinterest as he poured a glass.

"Yeah. I heard a bunch of cultivators from Greenworth are here? Is that true?" Zac answered, trying to sound casual as he took a swig. "Heurk, is this gasoline?"

"It's Kingsbury moonshine, kicks a punch doesn't it?" the bartender said with a laugh. "Yeah, they're here, though maybe only 2000 of them are left alive. Dangerous on the frontier," the bartender said with a shrug.

"How would I go about finding an old friend?" Zac asked with a wheeze, his throat feeling like it was on fire.

"Government taking a census now that they're in control, could ask them? But it's a bit chaotic with the trials coming up," the bartender answered.

"Trials?" Zac asked with a sinking feeling.

"Yeah, some government hotshots are holding it."

“What did the people do?” Zac asked

“Well, all kinds of things it seems,” the bartender hesitantly answered.

“It’s bullshit!” a drunken man from some distance away suddenly shouted. “They are just rounding up people they don’t like and slap bullshit charges on them.”

“Jeez calm down, you’ll get yourself into trouble,” another man said as he dragged the drunkard out of the tavern.

“No point in staying here if the government is going to get involved, there are tons of frontier towns welcoming able fighters,” another man muttered.

From there the discussion devolved into a debate into whether it was better to live in a government or an unaffiliated town, not giving Zac much more pertinent information.

“I know a few people who might live here, how do I know if they got arrested?” Zac asked, trying to steer the conversation into a better direction.

“Well, there’s a list at the town square. They’re making a production of the whole thing,” a man answered with a shrug.

Zac forced himself to stay a bit longer before he stood up and rushed to the town square. In front of a statue in the middle of the square a huge signpost was erected, and there was a group of people standing in front of it.

Zac pushed himself to the front and saw it was a printed list of names and the crimes they had committed. His heart started to pound faster and faster as he scoured the list name by name.

A chaotic jumble of emotions exploded in his mind when he suddenly he saw his sister’s name on the list. Her name being present meant that she was still alive. The largest worry in Zac’s heart since Greenworth was that she’d already perished in the Dead Zone.

But she had survived after all. That she was apprehended as a criminal by the New World Government wasn’t great, but it was far preferable to being dead. This situation was something he could deal with, either through diplomacy or violence.

The fact that she was on trial for attempted murder didn’t matter to Zac. As he saw it she either was innocent or she wasn’t. If she was innocent he’d save her. If not, he was sure Kenzie had a good reason. These times were brutal, especially to a young girl. Depending on what happened he might help her finish the job.

Since he knew what was going on he simply needed to find the prisoners and take it from there. However, an hour later he sat down on a park bench with a frown, unsure what to do next. The government had hidden away those who would stand trial, and no one knew where they were being kept.

Most believed they weren’t even in Kingsbury, but teleported in through the newly added teleporter in order to avoid a prison break. That meant that Zac couldn’t simply bust her out even if he wanted to.

Furthermore, he didn’t dare to walk up to the government’s office to demand to see her. It might backfire, resulting in her disappearing out of reach forever.

According to the sign in the square there were two days until the time of Kenzie’s trial, and Zac decided to simply wait until that time. He found a place to stay during the wait, and simply sat down in his room, trying to figure out his next move.

As he sat there the relief of finding out his sister was alive was slowly being replaced by a feeling of helplessness and worry. Who knew what was happening to his sister while he sat and waited.

Until now he'd blocked out any and all speculations about the fact that something might have happened to her, but it wasn't possible any longer as he was so close now.

Various thoughts or worst-case scenarios kept whirling in his head, and the worry started to change into something more primal.

It was slowly turning into anger, a wave of burning anger that threatened to set the whole town ablaze.

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#### **Chapter 184 - Trial**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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A pang of hunger woke MacKenzie up, though she would prefer to stay asleep. She hurt all over from the beating yesterday. These government workers were lunatics. One of them simply walked into her cell and started swinging at her until he had been forcefully dragged away. If she hadn't been taught to minimize the damage taken she might have actually died then and there.

She really started to believe the rumors that her brother was on the outs with them. She slowly sat up with a groan and closed her eyes to meditate, as it helped block out the pain and the depressing surroundings a bit.

"What did they do to you?" an angered voice suddenly said outside the cells, and Kenzie's heartbeat sped up when she recognized the voice.

"They finally caught you as well? Good riddance," she said with disgust, as she balefully glared at the obese old man outside the bars.

"I told them you belong to me, yet they damaged you like this?" the old continued, ignoring Kenzie's remark. "Someone will pay for damaging my property."

"What do you even want with me? Everyone already knows that little thing of yours doesn't work," she said with ridicule.

"You little slut," Harold growled, anger smoldering in his eyes. "Just wait until this farce is over. The government judicators won't stay here for long. Then you'll know punishment."

She threw the disgusting old man a disdainful glance before she once again looked away.

"I'm stuck here now, but sooner or later you will be the one judged," she retorted.

The old man guffawed, making his chins jiggle. Kenzie couldn't believe that there actually were a few women in her age that went to him willingly just for protection. She'd rather eat zombie meat than go that far.

"This new world loves the strong. The government doesn't care about Kingsbury. They care about the power of the council, and mainly me. They'll look the other way if I take home a girl or two because they need our strength for the fight against the invasions. You're just a dime a dozen, no value. I'll be just fine."

Kenzie wanted to retort something but knew there was no point. What Harold said was true. She knew that some of these trials were just for show. If the government

really cared about justice they would have locked up Harold long ago. Yet he was fine, even able to come and go at this prison just to taunt her and Lyla.

Still, she knew judgment was coming for Harold. Zac was still out there, hopefully looking for her. She just hoped he would arrive sooner than later.

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Finally, after having calmed down after a while Zac started to plan his next move. There was no point in letting anger take over, at least not yet. He also wasn't ready to just sit around for two days doing nothing.

The first thing he did was to take out the corpse of the Undead Lord along with his cosmos sack. There honestly wasn't much remaining of the man, as the huge wooden hand had completely destroyed his body. Zac took the corpse in case there was some good gear to salvage, but there simply was nothing that was still intact.

With some disappointment he threw back the corpse into a sack, instead focusing on the pouch of the undead. Zac knew the man should be rich, but the wealth inside made even Zac's eyes widen. The undead empire really was on another level.

The most promising sight was a mountain of Nexus Crystals, even eclipsing the ones he found in Rydel's pouch. However, Zac quickly realized something was off with the crystals. They held a tinge of turquoise rather than the normal white sheen.

He quickly took one out and was surprised that it actually contained pure miasma rather than Cosmic Energy. Zac then figured out it was nothing odd about it, as the undead couldn't cultivate using normal crystals.

If Zac had to guess there had to be at least 100 000 crystals in the pouch neatly stacked. Even better, there were actually over 100 crystals that held a far stronger sheen. Since he'd used E-Grade crystals before it didn't take long for him to realize that these were E-Grade Miasma Crystals.

At first Zac felt he had been handed a mountain of garbage, but soon realized that these crystals might be just what he needed if he wanted to keep growing his Core. Just because he had reached equilibrium didn't mean the Core was completely formed.

However, he still didn't have any source that could complement these death-attuned Crystals. The energy left in the seed was limited, and he didn't want to completely exhaust it.

Since there were crystals that contained miasmatic energies, perhaps there were ones containing life-attuned energy as well. Zac would have to check with Calrin when he went back to the island later.

There were all kinds of things apart from the crystals. Zac found a whole arsenal of what could only be torture devices, and there were also quite a few books and crystals containing information. There were also various gadgets and tools, though most didn't seem very useful to Zac.

Zac actually had problems to get many of the tools working as he tested them one by one, and he could only guess that it was because they required death-attuned energy to use. While Zac had a lot of it in his core he still wasn't able to harness that power, so he could only helplessly put the tools back one by one.

However, a few of the items ran on normal energy rather than miasma. Perhaps they were trinkets the undead gave to living servants, or just spoils of war. One bracelet, in particular, seemed quite useful as it could create a sturdy shield around the wearer.

It needed to get socketed with a crystal, but its effect was quite strong when augmented with one's personal Cosmic Energy. It wouldn't stop people like Zac, but it should be strong enough to ward off bullets until it ran out of energy.

It wasn't really useful to him with his endurance and defensive skill, but for people without any good skills to protect themselves, it would come quite handy.

There were also quite a few weapons, though almost all of them held uncomfortable sinister energy, especially the bone scythe that likely was the Corpse Lord's main weapon. It was extremely durable, but Zac was loath to give it to someone, afraid it would corrupt them.

As for the various notepads, books, and information crystals, there was nothing much of use to Zac at the moment. There likely were valuable knowledge inside, but it was all in a script that Zac didn't recognize.

He knew that the undead possessed their private language, and all the text was in that script. Even the crystals didn't contain a translation function. While the **[Book of Babel]** skill could translate speech quite well there were severe limitations to written text, so Zac would have to get it all translated somehow before researching the contents.

Over the next two days, Zac went around Kingsbury to piece together the situation bit by bit. The government had arrived at the town roughly two weeks ago, and after just a short meeting with the ruling council, it was announced that the town of Kingsbury would integrate into the New World Government.

This was good news to Zac, as the town got integrated almost at the same time as the Auction was held, which meant that the government's presence likely wasn't a direct result of his actions over in New Washington.

The proclamation had generally been met with a positive attitude, as life was tough this close to the Incursion. The hope was that the government would provide food and security, both of which were currently lacking in the area. There were a few grumbles amongst the Zombie Hunters though, as they had grown accustomed to the wild west-like lifestyle close to the Dead Zone.

However, there were rumors of large-scale movements in the Dead Zone, and many felt a storm was brewing on the horizon. Zac could only silently agree after having witnessed the events in the incursion as well.

The undead were starting to organize. Zac didn't know when they would explode into action, but it didn't feel like they would wait until the leaders got their limiters removed and advanced to E-Grade. The presence of a teleporter with access to multiple government towns was a lifeline for the citizens in case something happened.

The subsequent events were met with a far more tepid response though. Great chaos erupted during a night, with two of the four councilors mysteriously dying. It was generally believed that they were against the integration with the government, though people talked in hushed tones about the matter.

As soon as the two leaders died multiple places were raided, one person after another being captured. There had been quite a few deaths and destruction as some wouldn't let themselves get captured without a fight. The government said they were capturing all criminals in the town to improve safety.

For the most part, they were right. Quite a few bad apples were rounded up, both cultivators and mortals. There were gangsters, murderers and rapists that got captured or killed one after another. Streets that were extremely dangerous to walk before became safe overnight.

However, many got arrested for no apparent reason, and the only charge given was "threatening security". A theory that Zac only learned of by listening in on a conversation between two drunk patrons was that many of those who got captured arbitrarily either were cultivators from Greenworth or leaders of hunting parties.

The men who spoke about the matter concluded that the government was trying to pilfer the riches of successful cultivators and zombie hunters to pay for the expansion, but Zac had another guess. People from Greenworth might have been caught in order to find out more about him and his sister.

As for Kenzie, Zac learned the charge of attempted murder was likely real. Zac almost went on a rampage when he learned about one of the councilors called Harold. It looked like that the one Kenzie had attacked was this very man, but her power wasn't enough so she failed.

It wasn't very hard to find out that information, as Harold's actions were well known in the city. The night the councilors died, two women who worked under one of the killed councilors were seen fighting against Harold in the middle of the streets.

Some said they fought because the two wanted revenge for their killed leader, others said that they tried to escape capture.

The more Zac learned about the man the angrier he got. The old pig was the same as the leaders of Greenworth. The only reason that old man wasn't turned into mangled clumps of flesh yet was simply that Zac couldn't find him, even after breaking into his mansion with the help of [Thousand Faces].

Zac still hadn't figured out whether this all was an elaborate trap for himself, or whether it was just an odd coincidence, even after two days of sleuthing. He had tried searching for any hidden forces or weaponry while he waited, but couldn't find anything. If the government was planning something they were keeping it close to their vest.

Of course, that wasn't to say that he didn't have a few aces up his sleeve. While he didn't find Harold in his mansion, he did find the Nexus Node for Kingsbury. That gave him a few options that might come in handy depending on how things played out.

But the only real solution for the situation he could find was to stay put in his disguise as long as possible, trying to find out any clues by observing the trial. He'd only move when he knew what was going on. He still had a small hope that the government would do the right thing and mete out proper justice. If the whole town knew Harold was guilty, then so should they.

Zac sat on the bleachers of a stadium, looking down at the spectacle on the field. The government had refitted a small arena into a courtroom and even allowed the public to spectate.

It appeared that the government wanted to show both their prowess and that the rule of law existed even in their frontier towns. Of course, Zac was also very aware that this might all be an elaborate trap for himself.

Zac suddenly sensed a weak disturbance in the energy beneath the stadium and looked down with a small smile. The teleportation array was actually placed right beneath the arena somewhere. It made things quite simple.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity a group of government officials entered the field from a side-door and took a seat at the judge's table prepared. Zac scrutinized each and every one of them, but he couldn't recognize any of them from his visits to New Washington.

At the same time, a few other people entered the stadium, and Zac's pupils narrowed when he saw a fat man in his 60's in the front of the group. Zac was sure it was Harold, the most likely suspect for the untimely deaths of the other two councilors. And more importantly, the likely culprit behind Kenzie's apprehension.

It took all of Zac's self-control to not go over right then and there as it would mess up his rescue. However, all self-control was quickly crumbling when he saw the state of the prisoners as they were led out in a long line. He completely exploded in

rage when he saw his sister walk with a limp dressed in rags, with a black eye and her hair in grimy stripes.

Today heads would roll.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

That seems like a nice place to stop for the week, eh? :)

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 30 chapters ahead) please check out my

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

### **Chapter 185 - Reunion**

Zac's plan to adopt a wait-and-see approach was completely thrown into the back of his mind and was quickly being replaced with far more violent solutions. The stands around Zac started to ominously creak as the air around him distorted, prompting those around him to move away with fear in their eyes.

Zac was unable to control his rage after seeing his brutalized sister. The seat he sat at exploded into splinters as Zac pushed forward, catapulting himself down to the field.

"Hey! You can't go down here!" one of the guards standing along the stands shouted as the whole squad pointed their guns at Zac.

Zac only threw a glance at them as his aura rolled out like a tidal wave, drowning the guards in it. His aura was now empowered by his Dao of Heaviness, which didn't only empower it, but also allowed him to control its spread.

The huge discrepancy in power between Zac and the guards and the empowerment of the Dao had turned his aura into a proper attack though it wasn't a skill. The eyes of the guards quickly rolled up in their heads as they slumped down on the ground unconscious.

Chaos erupted on the stands, and a group of guards came running into the arena, but Zac didn't care. He activated **[Loamwalker]** and with two instantaneous steps he found himself standing in front of Kenzie, and a storm of emerald leaves started to whirl around the two.

A few soldiers with hair-trigger temperaments fired a few shots at the storm of leaves, but they were immediately neutralized. Furthermore, every attack was met with a stone ripping through the air and turning into deadly projectiles, instantly killing people. In seconds no one dared to attack, and instead turning to their superiors for orders.

Zac's eyes reddened as he looked down at the marred face of his little sister, but he knew he couldn't relax just yet. MacKenzie opened her mouth to speak, but with lightning-speed he pushed a few pieces of Springroot into her mouth.

She swallowed the herbs with surprise, and Zac scoured her face and mannerism for anything off as he used his observation skill on her. His sister's appearance had thoroughly pissed him off, but he had to make sure this wasn't another situation like the one with Janos.

**[MacKenzie Atwood - Human. Level 33 - XXXXX]**

Zac's brows lifted in surprise, both at her level and at the fact that the line showcasing her highest attribute was blocked. Very few people were able to block that attribute from his tests back in Port Atwood, and it likely meant that her Intelligence or Wisdom attributes should be quite high.

Between the fact that she was fine after swallowing the root and the skill he was mostly satisfied, but he needed to make sure.

“Who are you?? What did you feed me?” she hesitantly asked, but was unable to back away due to the leaves whirling around the two. “You need to leave, the guards are coming.”

Zac quickly looked back at the guards who surrounded the two with their guns at the ready, but he didn’t care. He was pushing his **[Nature’s Barrier]** skill to the limit, and unless powerhouses like the Corpse Lord showed up they could forget about getting through in the short run.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” Zac with sad eyes said as he tousled her hair like he’d done so many times before.

“Zac?” she hesitantly asked, likely having trouble reconciling the familiar voice face with the unfamiliar face.

Zac only nodded, and two tears were quickly pooling in MacKenzie’s eyes, and she moved forward to hug him. However, she was held at a distance by Zac’s arm, and she looked at him once again with confusion in his eyes.

“What did you draw on the wall beneath my bed when you were four years old?”

“What?” MacKenzie couldn’t help blurt out. “Never mind that, we need to run.”

As if collaborating with that statement a huge slam shook the judge’s table as the judge, a somber woman in her fifties, stood up.

“You are encroaching on a government trial, flaunting the rule of law. Are you making yourself an enemy of the New World Government?”

Zac barely spared the judge a glance, keeping his focus on MacKenzie.

“Perhaps I am, perhaps I’m not. My comings and goings are none of your concern. If you have a problem you can report it to Thomas Fisher,” Zac tersely responded.

Loud murmurs erupted in the stands, and the judge looked enraged. However, Zac ignored all that and refocused on his sister, his eyes slowly hardening.

“Answer the question.”

MacKenzie seemed to suddenly have understood something and quickly responded.

“A talking poop,” she said with a slight blush.

Zac slightly smiled and nodded as he followed up with a few more questions. Kenzie was quickly answering them as she got more and more nervous, her head darting around at the troops that were amassing around them.

Zac felt it might be time to finish up as well, and finished with one last question.

“When did mom die?”

“Mom isn’t dead! She’s missing!” she angrily retorted as if by reflex, her head snapping back toward Zac with an angry scowl.

Zac was finally satisfied, and with deft movement put the defensive bracelet on Kenzie’s arm.

“This is a defensive item that can protect you for a bit,” he quickly explained.

“What are you going to do?” she nervously asked back. “We’re completely surrounded.”

“Well, that’s up to them,” Zac said with a shrug as he turned back to the enraged Judge as he stepped forward, his face turning back to normal.

“I am Zachary Atwood, also known as the Super Brother-Man,” he said, completely unleashing his aura.

Shouts erupted in the stadium, and multiple guards fell over or backed away from the billowing power Zac emitted. Frowns of anger or worry could be seen on the government officials as they seemed unsure what to do.

“I am taking my sister with me away from here,” Zac said, disappearing in the next second.

The guards barely had time to react before Zac was back again. This time holding a squealing Harold by his neck. The old man was desperately trying to get free, his face quickly turning red.

Zac wasn't planning on doing anything to the old man just yet, but he saw him trying to slink away through an emergency exit during the commotion. He couldn't let that man get away after what he'd found out about him during the past two days.

“Let me go! I am the mayor of Kingsbury,” Harold wheezed out, as he pleadingly looked at the judge who seemed to have found her bearing once again.

“Everywhere I go I find that the justice and rule of law The New World Government rattle on about is relative. The rich and powerful can do whatever they want, no matter how disgusting or morally corrupt, all while the government looks the other way,” Zac said as he threw Harold down on the ground, stomping down on one of his legs.

A sickening crunch erupted as the old man screamed in pain, unable or afraid to get back up again. He only tried to slowly crawl away from Zac toward the judge's table.

“I've only been in the area for a short time, yet it has been impossible for me to not learn about Harold's crimes against humanity. Yet he doesn't stand shackled to be judged, but rather gets a promotion from you people. I'll give you one chance to set things right,” Zac said, giving the judge an even stare.

“We are aware of the reports but have found them unsubstantiated. While many women live at Mayor Harold's residence they have willingly moved there. We have ascertained that after an exhaustive round of interviews. The government works by facts, not by malignant rumors. Since the government doesn't yet have a stance on polygamy, Mayor Harold has committed no crime,” the judge answered tersely.

Snickers and murmurs erupted on the stands, and even a few of the braver souls boo'd at the judge until a few of the soldiers turned their attention to the troublemakers. Zac only shook his head in disappointment. He had a strong feeling this would happen, but it was still a let-down.

“Your government still hasn't closed a single Incursion, but you have time to shield scum like this pile of garbage. You are truly disappointing,” Zac said as reality cracked like a mirror above him.

The gargantuan hand wrought out of wood emerged as it had a few times before, radiating power and finality. Shouts could be heard from all over, as both soldiers and spectators looked at the skill with horror, hurriedly moving away from it.

“Stop him!” the judge frantically shouted, her strict demeanor blown away by the terrifying power the hand emitted.

Various attacks pelted the hand, both guns and skills of magical nature. However, the attacks were as ants trying to bite an elephant to death, and the hand was barely affected. Zac simply held his hand outward, and swung it down as he gave Harold a look devoid of emotion.

“No!” the old man shouted as cosmic energy gathered around him.

However, it was to no avail as the hand slammed down into the ground like slapping a mosquito. The slam created a huge shockwave that blew most of the soldiers off their feet, and even the spectators in the stands had to take cover.

The attack contained almost boundless force, as this time the hand wasn't imbued with the Dao of Trees, but rather the Dao of Heaviness. The whole stadium shook as an enormous rumble was heard. The hand soon disappeared, leaving only a crater that made it look like a meteor had slammed right into the stadium floor.

As for the old mayor, there was not one piece of him remaining intact since the slam had completely disintegrated him. At least Zac could tell the man died due to the surge of Cosmic Energy entering his body.

Zac surveyed the destruction wrought by **[Nature's Punishment]**, satisfied with the result. He didn't only do it for shock-and-awe, but also to destroy any subterranean levels of the stadium. The government had tried to be sneaky by placing the Teleportation Array somewhere hidden in the underground levels beneath the stadium, perhaps to be able to bring quick reinforcements.

However, they likely hadn't expected the level of damage he could bring with a single attack. The force between **[Nature's Punishment]** and the Dao of Heaviness was even above Zac's expectations. It would likely take hours to dig out the array, stopping any reinforcements from interfering.

Apart from the mayor everyone was largely fine, except for some broken bones and scrapes. The soldiers were scrambling to their feet, their eyes widely daring around, until they hesitantly turned to Zac who stood rooted like a tall tree, his robes still swinging by the winds his attack created. No one said a word, waiting with trepidation at Zac's next move.

Killing the mayor had alleviated much of Zac's fury, and he felt there was no need to keep the killing going. He knew that most of these soldiers were just normal people following orders. They weren't aware of the shady dealings of the people at the top, or of the threat of the shapeshifters.

He was just about to announce him leaving when an extreme sense of unease filled his heart, and he unhesitantly reactivated his defensive skill as he quickly looked around for any threat. An extremely loud gunshot that was extremely familiar to Zac could suddenly be heard from the other side of the stadium.

Zac almost instinctively activated his defensive shield on his gear, but his brows rose in horror when he realized that he wasn't the recipient of the attack. He immediately activated **[Loamwalker]** to get back to his sister's side, but it was too late.

The bullet from the sniper rifle slammed into the shield from the bracelet, and the shield proved insufficient as it cracked, allowing the bullet to proceed toward his sister. The brief time the shield held at least provided Mackenzie with a brief time to react, and she repositioned herself with surprising speed.

However, she didn't have time to completely dodge the attack, and the bullet slammed into her shoulder with much of its power remaining. A fountain of blood erupted from the wound, and she fell together with a wail.

The next instant Zac flashed in front of his sister, rage filling his face. His axe was already in mid-swing, and as the edge ripped through the air a gigantic blade formed upon it. The fractal edge grew to ten meters in an instant, and it flew toward the area the sound came from with the speed of a missile.

The attack completely destroyed a large section of the arena, blowing a hole in the ceiling. In a hidden alcove in the corner a man suddenly fell down with a scream,

a huge sniper rifle falling with him. The man was bleeding profusely, the huge blade likely having at least partly hit him.

The wound seemed fatal, but there was still no surge of energy after the man slammed into the ground with a wet thud. Since he looked largely incapacitated Zac instead bent down to his wounded sister.

“Ouch that hurts,” she said with a groan, but Zac was relieved to see that the wound wasn’t too bad.

It looked like the bullet had punched straight through, and while it bled profusely it would likely heal quickly with some help. He quickly fed Kenzie one of his strongest healing pills as he replaced the crystal on the defensive bracelet before he once again focused on the man with murder in his eyes.

A few of the soldiers hesitantly aimed their gun at him, but a look from Zac quickly quashed any thoughts of resistance from the others.

“That man is not from the government!” the judge quickly shouted, perhaps afraid that they would be implicated by his actions.

Zac only snorted and flashed over to the dying man’s side, his axe at the ready. Something was off with this assailant, and Zac’s gut told him it was a shapeshifter trying to sow discord between himself and the government. He wanted to expose his identity to the world, which hopefully would be a wake-up call for everyone.

“For the Red,” the man coughed with hatred in his eyes as he looked up at Zac, and cosmic energy gathered in his body.

Zac knew what those gathering energies meant and realized his plan was for naught, so he unhesitantly moved to destroy the shapeshifter’s head before he could explode. However, his axe hit nothing as the man disintegrated into a pool of goop. However, Zac knew something was wrong when he didn’t gain any cosmic energy. He looked back at his sister and found a bloody monstrosity reform closer to his sister.

It looked like a skinned human that had been left to bloat in the sun for weeks, and cosmic energy churned around it in ominous ways.

“Run!” was all Zac had time to shout as he tried to get back, but it was too late as the monster exploded, golden flames blanketing the whole arena.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have a

Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

#### **Chapter 186 - Return**

A wave of golden flames pushed toward Zac who unhesitantly activated the shield of his robes as he punched through the fire. He was full of remorse for his lapse in judgment, leaving his sister alone like that. He’d thought the sniper was out of commission, but clearly he was wrong. Besides, he really hadn’t expected them to try to kill his sister, as it made no sense. Leverage her as a hostage, perhaps. But not this.

The scale of the explosion was far beyond that of the demons when they chose to kill themselves. He knew that the power of the bracelet was nowhere strong enough to withstand the power of that blast at such close proximity. He could only pray that she had a breath of life left, which would let him do something about it.

In no time he found himself back at Kenzie’s side, his heart beating like a drum. When he arrived at the center of the blast everything was in ruins burning pieces of

flesh were strewn around, as everyone within at least 5 meters was dead without a doubt.

However, Zac breathed out in relief as there was one clear exception to the carnage. Kenzie was lying unconscious on the ground, completely unscathed apart from her earlier wound. Surrounding her was a blue shield looking a glass cube. A small blue light was hovering within the cube a few feet above his sister, and it was clear from the rays it emitted that it was the source of the protective shield.

What made Zac confused was that he couldn't feel a trace of cosmic energy from the shield. All skills and defensive gear emitted energy signals, but the odd thing above Kenzie might as well be a normal stone from the energy it emitted. Zac looked down at his unconscious sister, wondering what sort of opportunity she'd run into to attain such a wondrous thing.

The next problem was how to get to her. He walked toward the shield and touched it, but it was completely solid. Even when he started to exert quite some force it didn't budge in the slightest. The defensive power was clearly excellent, likely even above that of his own robes, and he was starting to worry that he wouldn't be able to get her out.

Suddenly a red light flashed in the hovering ball above Kenzie, and a red beam hit Zac straight in his chest. Zac quickly moved back as he moved his axe to block the light, but he quickly realized the beam was harmless. Zac stopped and confusedly looked at the small ball, only to see it fly down and enter the head of his sister.

A few seconds later the shield flashed out of existence, and Zac ran over to his sister who woke up with a groan.

"What happened?" she asked with some confusion as Zac helped her up.

"The guy who attacked you blew himself up. You were saved by a weird ball shielding you," Zac said

"Uh, ok," she answered with a troubled face, not meeting his eyes.

Zac frowned, but this wasn't the time to ask what was going on. She clearly knew what he meant, but the issue didn't seem simple. Judging from her reaction it might be a big secret, so he was thankful that the thick smoke from the fires had covered the whole area.

The magical fire soon died down, and the smoke covering the area was blown away by the wind. Zac looked around at the destruction with a grimace. There were unmoving bodies everywhere, even up on the stands. Even more were nursing various degrees of burns, and cries and groans could be heard from every direction.

From a quick glance at least 10% of the people in the arena were killed by the desperate attack by the sniper, most of them civilians. It made Zac sick to his stomach, but now wasn't the time to mourn.

The government was quickly trying to aid those in need, seemingly having the situation under control. Zac thought about helping out, but he didn't dare leave his sister's side again. Instead, he threw over a bottle of pills to the judge, who caught it hesitantly.

The judge, whose hair was in disarray and covered in soot, understood what was inside and immediately passed pills to soldiers and civilians as she was shouting orders until the situation was starting to calm down.

More and more people looked over at Zac with some trepidation, unsure what would happen next. Someone had tried to murder the sister of the strongest man in the world right at a government trial. Who knew how he would react. Zac somewhat understood what was going on, and spoke up with a loud voice covering the arena.

“I know that the New World Government wasn’t behind this attack and that the man who blew himself up wasn’t part of your organization. Certain forces want to create a conflict between me and you, but I am not the enemy of the New World Government. I am done with Kingsbury. If anyone has a problem with what happened, they are welcome to go to Port Atwood,” Zac said.

“I will also warn everyone. Shapeshifters walk amongst us. One of the most powerful incursions on earth has sent out thousands of spies who can take anyone’s form. It is almost impossible to distinguish them from humans. We believe they are behind various events that have led to high rankers perishing, and they have infiltrated many major forces already,” he continued.

“And I believe that the attack we just suffered was one of them as well. The golden flames are the calling card of the Church of Everlasting Dao, the force with the shapeshifters.”

The people in the arena looked skeptically at each other, and Zac could only shake his head as he saw their reaction. He had to get the message out, but after that everything was up to these people. He could only pray that they believed him and spread the word.

“Their goal is to splinter humanity so that they can pick us off one by one, and we cannot allow that to happen. However, there is a solution. There is a cheap herb available in the general stores called Springroot. It is harmless to humans, but to these shapeshifters it’s a deadly poison. That is the only method my force has found to identify them. Everyone should carry some with them in order to expose these things, and hopefully we can stop them that way.”

With that Zac felt he was done. The multiple scares where he thought he’d lost his sister just as he found her had left him rattled, and he just wanted to get out of here before something unexpected happened again.

The government officials seemed only too happy to see the humanoid monster gone as well, and let him go without making a fuss. Kenzie was quite weak since she woke up, so Zac had her climb up on his back. He would normally have carried her but wanted his arms free in case of another attack.

“Wait, we need to get Lyla. She was in prison with me, I saw she was taken here as well before it got crazy,” Kenzie weakly said as she looked around.

“Uhm,” Zac could only answer as he looked around at charred body parts around him.

“She was at the edge of the prisoners over there. She might be fine, hurry” she said as she pulled his robe.

Zac only shook his head and walked over to where she pointed. He had a hard time believing that any of the prisoners were alive. From how it looked the government didn’t have any means to block the cosmic energy of the prisoners, but even he wouldn’t be unscathed that close to the blast unless he used some of his defensive means.

However, to his surprise, Kenzie pointed out a girl lying unconscious close to the edge of the field. Her clothes were in tatters and she was unconscious, but she was clearly alive. She’d actually reacted much in the same way as he did when faced with a suicide bomber long ago, as a burned carcass was draped above her for protection.

Zac pushed the corpse away and poured some water in the face of the girl. With a few sputters she woke up, widely looking around. She didn’t have time to react before Zac pushed some Springroot into her mouth, making her cough. Kenzie frowned and lightly slapped him on his head when she saw the treatment of her friend.

“Can’t you be gentler?” she asked unhappily as glared at Zac.

“I needed to make sure, I don’t want to get stabbed again,” Zac answered with a shrug as he observed the girl’s response.

After noticing she was fine he also took out a healing pill, though one of a lower grade, and gave it to the girl who hesitantly accepted it.

“It’s a healing pill,” Zac only said as he helped the girl to his feet.

Kenzie, who was still hanging on the back of Zac smiled at Lyla.

“This is Zac, my big brother. He’s the Super Brother-Man,” she said happily. “I’m leaving this town. Come with me.”

“Your brother is the number one ranker and you never mentioned it?” she said with a wry face as she swallowed the pill. “Where are you going?”

Kenzie opened her mouth, but no words came out as she realized she didn’t know.

“Port Atwood, my town,” Zac said, realizing it seemed he had to take another person with him. “You should know, if you come with me you might not be able to get to a government town in a long while. My relationship with them is... complicated.”

“Ok. I don’t want to stay here anyway. What if they come for me again? Harold is probably only going to be replaced with another asshole,” she muttered as she started to walk toward the exit.

“Are we in a hurry?” Kenzie suddenly asked.

“Well, not really. They won’t be able to use their teleportation array for an hour at least. Why?” Zac asked as he followed the girl out of the arena.

He took one last look around at the people in the stands and the government official, most of which were silently staring back at him. He really didn’t know what he could or should do in this situation. This new life of his was just too tiring with its endless duties and expectations.

“There are some things I want to get before we go,” Kenzie said, breaking his train of thought.

“I went to your home and picked up your clothes and stuff like that,” Zac said.

It was true, he went over to her Kenzie’s place during the two days he waited, making sure looters didn’t steal anything important.

“Really?” she asked with a smile. “But I’m not talking about that. Lyla and I hid a few things in a stash in case something happened.”

Soon they found themselves at an abandoned house at the edge of a town, and after being prompted Zac moved a bookshelf, showing a hidden entrance.

“We created this place when Harold was starting to become a nuisance, in case we needed to make a quick escape. We figured we could sneak back and get our things during the night or something,” MacKenzie explained as Zac looked down into the dark cellar.

Since it was pitch black Zac took out a lantern powered by cosmic energy that gave off a warm light. He gingerly walked down the stairs, ready for any type of assault in case someone had found the stash. Even his defensive skill was activated around the two of them once again, just in case.

However, it was completely empty down there, allowing Zac to finally relax. The cellar was pretty small, but it was well organized with two small cots and a few shelves of gear and provisions.

It seemed the two did not own a Cosmos Sack, so he threw one over to his sister who had jumped down from his back.

"I wish I could take a bath, I am completely sticky," she muttered as she packed her belongings into her new pouch.

To both the girls' surprise Zac simply took out a large barrel along with a canteen that held enough water to fill it up.

"It's cold but clean. Make it quick, we need to leave soon," he said.

He'd made sure that there was no one following him but he couldn't be sure. They couldn't waste too much time down here.

"Well, you wanna watch you perv?" MacKenzie said with a roll of her eyes. "Go wait upstairs. It's the only entrance so we'll be fine."

After some hesitation Zac acquiesced, walking towards the stairs again, but before he got up two arms embraced him from behind.

"I knew you'd come," MacKenzie murmured with a low voice.

"Of course, I'm the Super Brother-Man, after all," Zac smiled as he walked up the stairs.

Soon he heard splashing and subdued talk downstairs, so Zac simply took out a chair and sat down with a sigh. His heart was finally calm, far calmer than it had been in a long, long time.

-----  
"Report, my child," the voice on the other side of the communication crystal said after the static died down.

"The Super Brother-Man showed up as we guessed, Father. Unfortunately, it did not go as planned. The sniper failed to kill the sister," the acolyte Terzun answered.

"So the mission failed?" the voice said with some displeasure.

"It is Unclear. The Monarch-Select still killed the newly appointed mayor, and quite a few people perished when the sacrifice used [The Ultimate Sacrifice]. The target did not, however, conquer the town, and instead left soon after. I believe he's heading either toward the sect inside the Undead Empire or another town."

"... Very well. It's an acceptable result. The sacrifice was simply a local forcefully injected with The Purity of the Boundless Heavens. He would soon expire in any case," the priest said.

"Our resources are quite limited so far from our own Incursion. We will fan the flames from our side. Clean things up on your side, make sure all mentions of the sister's name is absent from all reports. Otherwise it will be hard to explain it as simple incompetence," the voice continued after a brief pause.

"Did the government's plan fail as well?"

"No, I made sure to plant a spy next to the monarch-select as well," Terzun quickly answered.

"Good. Try to find out the next move of the monarch-select. Report to me if he returns. But remember, this isn't your true mission. Keep monitoring the unholy beings, they are our real enemy."

"I understand..." Terzun said with some hesitation in his voice.

"What?"

"With respect Father, is all this subterfuge really necessary? Why aren't we simply purifying these humans? None of the Human Empires has claimed this planet, and while the Monarch-Select showed great power, he is not a match for the High Vicar."

Only silence came from the crystals, making Terzun believe the priest on the other side had disconnected, but after a while he spoke up again.

“Something is odd about this planet. The bishops want to understand what’s going on before we start the great purge.”

*Something odd?* Terzun thought with confusion. Since when did the Church of the Everlasting Dao care about such things?

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 187 - Hatchetman’s Rage**

As Zac drove the car through the Dead Zone Kenzie told him much about what happened to her during the six months since they last saw each other. As for Zac, he was a bit hesitant to speak about his experiences, as there were two others in the car.

Lyla was obviously one of them, but before they left Kenzie was approached by one more person. The other girl was Olivia, and he actually somewhat recognized her. She was one of Kenzie’s old friends, and he had met her a few times before the fall. Apparently, the two only found each other again a month ago, and Kenzie invited her as well to Port Atwood.

Her story was pretty impressive, as she’d done something similar to himself. It turned out Olivia had been traveling just like him when the fall happened, and she got randomized to a town a month’s travel away from Kingsbury. Just like Emily and her parents did, Olivia almost immediately set out on a journey to find her way home until she heard about the cultivators in Kingsbury.

Unfortunately, none of her family were cultivators, so they were likely either back at Greenworth, or wherever the other parts of the city had ended up. Since she met Kenzie she decided to stay put for the time being. Zac was a bit surprised she tagged along, as it would likely be easier to get back to Greenworth if she stayed in the town.

Then again he realized it might be his fault, as anyone even slightly related to him might get into trouble as a result of his actions. Perhaps he could send her back with Julia later, so Olivia could hopefully find her way back to her family.

Kenzie clearly trusted them, but Zac had learned to be cautious so he spoke very little about what he’d been through. He only explained that he found himself on an island and through a lot of battle managed to create a town.

The two in the back seat seemed a bit wary of him still, and he couldn’t blame them after his display yesterday. They mostly sat quietly in the back seat, only responding when talked to.

It took two days until they got back to Mount Everlasting Peace, and Zac was relieved to see that nothing had changed since he was here a week ago. He had been afraid that an undead attack was imminent due to the movements he saw, but the monastery was as tranquil as usual.

As they arrived the same old monk who led him up the stairs the last time walked forward.

“Amithaba patron. The Abbot sends his regards,” the old man said, placing his hands together.

“Greetings venerable,” Zac said with a small bow as he put his car into a Cosmos Sack.

He had been a bit embarrassed as he didn't know how to address the monks in his earlier visit, so he also looked it up while he waited for the trial to start. There were still a lot of things he didn't know about Buddhist conduct, but at least he shouldn't disrespect the monks by mistake.

"I guess patron wishes to use the teleportation array?"

"Yes," Zac said. "I am staying here for a while though."

"You're not coming with us?" Kenzie asked with some confusion.

"Not just yet. I need to head into the Dead Zone for a few days," Zac answered.

This was something he'd decided on earlier. There really wasn't much for him to do back home in Port Atwood. His next goal was the Hegemon quest, but there were a few weeks left before its time limit was up, and it was the same with the Treasure Hunt.

Since Kenzie was safe he could finally breathe easily, but it also meant he needed to look forward. He was currently only one level to level 60, which hopefully would provide him with a skill that increased his overall power.

Besides, he hoped he could cull the numbers of the undead horde a bit, which hopefully would give the monks more time to prepare themselves. It was the least he could do from how much they had helped him.

He wasn't comfortable with taking the three with him since he was heading toward the core, and who knew what would happen. Now that his wound was healed and his bead was under control he felt much more confident and wasn't afraid to cause some havoc. He was pretty confident in his ability to keep himself alive, but the same couldn't be said for the girls.

He'd already used his inspection skill on the three as part of him making sure they were not shapeshifters, and both Kenzie and Lyla were level 33, which was quite impressive. It seemed they'd pushed themselves pretty hard since Harold had been lusting after them for months.

Olivia was almost as impressive, reaching level 32 without having access to an incursion for a long time. Those who traveled were constantly put in harm's way, so it wasn't too surprising that they gained power quickly.

"Oh, and I brought a lot of Springroot as well. You should have everyone coming to your monastery eat this. It is not dangerous to humans, but to certain invaders it's deadly," Zac said.

"Amithaba. Patron needs not to worry about the lizard people. Their disguises cannot block the sight of the Abbot, as karma is not something that can be hidden behind a transformation skill," the old monk said with a laugh. "One of them tried to infiltrate the monastery some time ago with no success."

Zac could only gape in response, throwing a glance up at the mountain top. The old Abbot was truly full of mysterious means. It also meant that the Abbot was only humoring when Zac told him about the shapeshifters earlier, as he already knew about it.

"Give people this when you go through," Zac said as he handed his sister an envelope. "There are a lot of knowledgeable people at Port Atwood. Go find Alyn if you want to become stronger."

"You're dumping me here and immediately go on an adventure? Are you already tired of us?" MacKenzie said with a snort as she turned to the old monk. "Can you believe this guy?"

Zac only shook his head with a smile, as he knew she was just joking around. Soon he'd opened the teleporter leading to his town, and saw the three off. After saying his farewells to the old monk he set out toward the core of the Dead Zone.

The next few days Zac kept a frantic pace as he scouted out the inner area of the Incursion. On the second day, he found a zombie horde quite similar to the one he got the quest for earlier. There were around 150 000 Zombies, all stumbling toward the center like the horde before it.

It made Zac realize the horde from earlier wasn't an isolated incident. The undead were truly gathering. It filled him with some hopelessness, as there were just too many zombies in the Dead Zone. Conservatively counting there should be at least a billion people who were turned. Even if Zac kept swinging away for years there would still be plenty of them to go around.

The only good news was that he still hadn't spotted a single high tier undead at least during the last two days, meaning they likely had receded back toward the core again. He didn't know if it was thanks to him killing the Corpse Lord, but in any case, it was good news.

Still, Zac didn't hesitate to head down and start cutting them down by the dozens. He didn't need to keep a frantic pace since he had no time limit this time to hound him. Therefore he simply summoned a large fractal edge from [Chop] that he kept attached as he methodically kept swinging away.

Large amounts of nexus energy kept entering him, and as before it was joined by large amounts of miasma. However, Zac was happy to note that even though the bead still accepted the deathly energy it wasn't going out of control this time.

It took far less miasma from each Zombie, and the large amounts of life-attuned energy in the core kept the balance even though the miasma was increasing at a steady pace. Only when roughly 60% of the core was made from deathly energy did he feel that the core started showing signs of instability.

By this point he'd mowed down at least 20 000 zombies, bringing him closer to the next level. However, not wanting to cause a scene again he stopped his rampage and quickly distanced himself from the furious zombies.

When he'd created some distance he quickly took out the seed from the lotus flower and sat down for two hours to restore balance. Only when he was back at an even split did he once again get to his feet. It wasn't difficult to find the zombie horde again as they didn't move too quickly, and Zac once again went to work.

He repeated the process a few times until he finally sensed he passed the boundary and reached level 60. Not wanting to waste more time on these weak targets he quickly distanced himself one final time and took up his status screen.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**60**

**Class**

**Hatchetman (F)**

**Race**

**Human (E)**

**Alignment**

**Port Atwood - Lord (Earth)**

**Titles**

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Core

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Early Strength

329

Dexterity

162

Endurance

230

Vitality

197

Intelligence

90

Wisdom

85

Luck

93

Free Points

3

Nexus Coins

57 703 653

Zas he looked at his screen he couldn't help wonder what others would say if they found out he made 7 million nexus coins from one day of grinding. Of course, it was only possible since the Zombies were gathering up into large clumps.

For once Zac hoped that he could count on humanity's greed and that there were tens of thousands of zombie hunters out at the moment desperately killing zombies for the almost free money.

Zac put his 3 points into vitality, bringing it past 200 as well. By now he started to feel a bit set with that attribute, making him think of what to focus on next. He would have to talk with Ogras or Alyn about it, but perhaps it would be prudent to put some more points into his last two attributes, Intelligence, and Wisdom, as both were starting to severely lag behind.

However, that wasn't what he was interested in at the moment, so instead, he quickly brought up his quest panel. He wasn't surprised there was a new quest on the screen, but he was quite surprised when he saw the progress.

**Hatchetman's Rage (Class): Earn "Butcher" Title. Reward: Hatchetman's Rage skill (1/1) [COMPLETE]**

Zac couldn't help but sardonically smile when he saw the class content. Perhaps it was quite a number for normal cultivators to kill 100 000 creatures, but he passed number that a long time ago. It was pretty clear it was an offensive skill judging by the name of the skill and how to complete the quest. This suited Zac just fine, and he only hoped it would be good for single targets.

Since the quest was marked as complete he only needed to get back to his Nexus Crystal to turn it in. With that he closed the screens and refocused on what to do next.

He knew that he hadn't really accomplished much apart from lining his own pockets, but then again he simply couldn't find more valuable targets to kill.

He had been traveling for two days already and was some distance into the core zone. If he kept going he was afraid he'd end up in the headquarters, facing more than he could handle at the moment.

The incursions had stabilized long ago, which meant that they had some more functions. They were able to set up certain arrays for example, and Zac wasn't knowledgeable enough in that regard to dare get too close. The undead were extremely wealthy, and he was afraid he'd get trapped in an illusion array or something similar, becoming a sitting duck.

Since there was not much else to do he simply turned back toward the mountain. When he finally came back to Mount Everlasting Peace he initially wanted to say goodbye to the Abbot but was disappointed to find he was in seclusion. With nothing else to do he headed toward the teleporter.

The array was actually down at the foot of the mountain, rather than up in the temple, which had surprised Zac a bit.

"I hope I'll see you all again," Zac said. "Remember, if things get out of hand here you can always come to Port Atwood. Even if the mountain is lost we can reclaim it."

"If heavens wills it, we will meet again patron," the old man said with a kind smile as the portal flashed to life.

"Here is a small offering to your temple. I hope it will come to use," Zac said and handed over a pouch.

It contained a wide variety of pills and a large pile of Nexus Crystals. Zac hoped it would help their war efforts in case they got attacked again, at least to the point they managed to evacuate.

"Thank you, patron. The Abbot is currently unavailable, but he asked me to convey a message. 'To forgive is not to condone other's actions, it is to bring peace to your heart'. Safe travels patron," the monk said and once again put his hands together.

Zac didn't say anything as he left with a nod, the portal flashing shut behind him.

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#### **Chapter 188 - Secrets**

After a brief moment of darkness, Zac once again exited, but the unfamiliar sight gave him a start. It almost looked as he was standing inside a world tree, as the walls were living trees sprouting leaves around them. However, they were far taller than the usual ones he'd seen so far, reaching for the skies. There was also a good deal of holes in the structure at strategic places, flooding the floor in natural light.

The demons had been busy, as they'd grown a structure around the array. Zac noticed the design was slightly reminiscent of how it looked in New Washington, though the teleportation lobby was built with the signature Demonic architecture.

Zac suddenly felt there was a group of eyes upon him and guessed there were defenders hidden up amongst the branches in the air. It proved there were also proper protocols in place to make sure nothing untoward happened at this important location.

He was quite happy with the transformation and full of anticipation to see what else had changed in the weeks since he set out on his journey. There was only one exit in the building, and Zac eagerly moved toward it.

“You can’t just leave! You must register yourself first,” young woman nervously standing behind a counter said with a shaky voice, piquing Zac’s interest.

“Register?” Zac asked, but before the receptionist could answer three demon guards jumped down from the tree crowns.

“Lord Atwood,” they all said with a small salute, and Zac nodded back.

“Lord? I’m sorry!” the girl quickly exclaimed, but it was quickly waved away by Zac.

“What’s going on here?” Zac asked the demons who appeared.

“Administrator Adran has set up routines for visitors. Due to many people coming and going nowadays, a system to know who’s here has been put into place,” the demon, whose name Zac remembered being Yuruf, answered.

“There’s traffic in the teleporter?” Zac asked confused as the teleporter was still set to trusted.

“Only between the internal array system,” the Yuruf answered. “There are currently 12 arrays active in the archipelago.”

“I understand. My sister and two of her friends should have arrived some time ago. Are they settled okay?” Zac asked.

“Yes, we followed the instructions in the letter. Your sister is currently living in your compound. The other two have been provided houses in the residential district. They are spending most of their time at the academy improving their power,” the demon answered.

There were too many things within his compound that would be hard to explain, so he didn’t wish two strangers to stay there. It was better to make clear from the beginning, which is why he had them stay in the residential area from the start.

“Good. Have there been any trouble in the town while I was gone?” he asked.

“Nothing much. A few hotheads acting up, but nothing that we couldn’t handle. There also have been some disputes amongst the craftsmen, but the Administrators would know more about that,” Yuruf responded.

“I’ll visit them later. One last thing, are the fighters back from the fight in the other Incursion?” he asked.

“They returned some time ago. The mission was a success, though there were some casualties,” the demon nodded.

“I understand, keep up the good work,” Zac said as he headed toward the exit.

He didn’t actually register himself in the end. It wasn’t because he felt himself above it, but since it was a matter of security. Powerhouses like himself were the biggest deterrence from attacking a town, and if people didn’t know where he was, they would likely be less likely to cause trouble.

Satisfied Zac walked toward the exit, but before he left the large lobby Zac couldn’t help notice the large sign hanging by the exit.

**Welcome to Port Atwood, the home of the Towers of Myriad Dao!**

**Don’t cause trouble.**

**Don’t enter the restricted areas.**

**Don’t forget to shop at The Thayer Consortia, the best deals on Earth!**

“Uh,” Zac couldn’t help say as he looked back on the demon guards. “Towers of Myriad Dao?”

Yuruf scratched his chin as he looked at the gaudy lettering of the slogan, looking a bit embarrassed, before explaining the situation.

“The castellan of the Towers somehow found out about this sign. It felt... very strongly... that its grandeur should be advertised to all visitors immediately upon arrival. When Administrator Adran refused, citing security concerns, it wasn't happy. A sign large enough to block out the suns that advertised the Towers appeared over the town. Thus the sign here.”

Zac could only groan and exit, inwardly complaining about the insane Tool Spirit.

It only took a minute of walking before the trees gave way to the town proper, as quite a bit of the forest had been cut down. At first look, Zac had a hard time believing the sight that met his eyes.

A proper town with a wide array of buildings sprawled out in front of him. The town wasn't like anything he'd seen before, but rather a mix of various styles and concepts. Buildings wrought from living trees stood wall to wall with modern buildings that could fit right into some trendy affluent district.

The new Port Atwood felt very refreshing, with large amounts of nature being mixed with the structures. It was a far better place to work on one's Dao or cultivation than the dirty and run-down towns on the mainland, and Zac had no difficulty believing that many would wish to move here if given the opportunity.

There was still a lot to be done though. There was no sort of pavement on the roads, and construction was taking place all over. People, a lot of whom Zac didn't recognize, kept scurrying back and forth, many carrying lumber or tools meant for construction.

Zac decided to head straight for his private area after a bit of hesitation, moving straight toward a large gate in the wall separating his private district with the newly emerging town.

He noted that the wall was manned by a few demons and Valkyries, who perked up when they saw his approach. However, with his robe and shiny bald head he was easily recognizable and the warriors hurriedly opened the gates for him.

“Welcome back,” one of the Valkyries said with a small bow.

Zac didn't know how he felt about the bows and curtsies the population was starting to perform. He would have to talk with Ogras later to see whether he was responsible for it.

“Thank you. Is my sister at home?” he asked.

“She left for the Academy some time ago,” the guard answered.

“Could you have someone call her over,” Zac said.

“Of course,” she said with a nod, and one of the Valkyries immediately ran toward the direction of the Academy.

Zac simply thanked the guard, and soon found himself back in his familiar courtyard, relaxing and enjoying a bottle of whiskey he had saved for himself for some time.

Some noise from the outside half an hour later told him that his sister was back, and he shouted out to let her know which building he stayed at.

“I still can't believe that this whole place yours. You've gotten an expensive taste,” Kenzie said as she walked into the beautiful courtyards with widened eyes.

“Well, Emily lives here as well. I assume you've met her by now? And sometimes I have guests. You can take whatever building you like if you haven't already,” Zac explained as he indicated for her to sit down.

“Was this place really just an uninhabited island before?” she curiously asked.

“Yeah, in the beginning it was just me and a bunch of barghest on the island,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“What about Hannah?” she asked with a weird face.

Kenzie knew that he was away on vacation with his girlfriend when the integration took place.

“All of them turned out to be cultivators. What are the odds?” Zac said with a sardonic smile. “I still don’t know where they ended up.”

“What would you do if you found her? Would she live here as well?” she asked.

Zac only threw an amused glance at his sister. He knew she wasn’t the biggest fan of Hannah for some reason, but he was a bit surprised she still held on to those kinds of feelings after such a long time.

“I don’t know. Maybe not?” he said with a shrug.

“So you’re like the king of this island? I’ve never been treated so well before,” she said, changing the subject.

“Uh, I guess. And don’t take advantage of people. I don’t really bother with all that though, I have other things to worry about,” Zac answered.

“Then what do you do all day? Just sit here and drink like some hobo?” she said with a glance at the bottle of whiskey he had by his side.

Zac snorted and shook his head.

“I wish. I need to get stronger,” Zac said, his face turning serious. “I promised to protect you at dad’s grave, and there are so many enemies.”

Kenzie only looked down with sad eyes. He’d told her about their father the day he saved her, not wanting to hide it from her. Though she had cried a bit she soon recovered, only mentioning that she wished to visit the grave as soon as possible.

It was a harsh reality, but most people had already come to terms with the fact that most of their friends and family had passed away. There barely were any families that had gone unscathed by the fall, and theirs wasn’t an exception.

“By the way, those towers over at the entrance look so cool. You could learn a lesson or two from Brazla,” Kenzie said with shimmering eyes as she looked the towers shining in gold and white in the distance.

Due to the height of the structure and the extremely gaudy display, there were few places in Port Atwood where you couldn’t spot at least part of the building. As if by responding to her words the rainbows and celestial rays increased in intensity, almost reaching a blinding luminescence.

“Living in a place like that would be like living in the middle of a Las Vegas Casino,” Zac said with a grimace. “Have you talked with the Tool Spirit?”

“Yeah, he’s a nice guy. I think he’s a bit lonely, so I usually visit him once a day for a bit,” she nodded. “He says that one of the inheritances is a good fit for me.”

“Oh?” Zac said, curious.

That also worked as an excellent segue into why he’d asked her to come back to their home. There were still a few questions in Zac’s mind, questions that weren’t proper to ask in front of the other two girls.

The more he thought about the weird ball that entered Kenzie’s head, the more uncomfortable he got. It was simply unnatural that something so powerful didn’t give off a single speck of energy. He wanted to get to the bottom of the matter now that they were alone, so he could help out if there was some trouble.

But before he had time to go into that issue he was interrupted by Kenzie.

"I heard you've traveled a lot the past months. Did you find any clues about mom?" Kenzie blurted out with hopeful eyes before Zac had a chance to ask his questions.

Zac was taken by surprise by the question, as he honestly hadn't really thought about his mother since the integration.

"I couldn't even find her before the world got randomized, I wouldn't even know where to begin to look now," Zac answered with a shrug.

Zac saw his sister was gearing up for an argument they'd had many times before, and could only groan inwardly. However, he quickly had an idea and took out a small box from a pouch. It contained the things he brought from their home in Greenworth, and he took out the amulet his father had left.

Their father mentioned that it was a memento from their mother in his diary, and Zac thought giving it to Kenzie might pacify her a bit. But before he had time to hand over the amulet they were interrupted by two demons entering the courtyard.

"So you're back," Ogras said with a small smile as he sauntered inside.

"Don't you ever knock?" Zac asked with some annoyance as he looked over at the demons entering the courtyard.

"Get yourself an array if you want privacy, otherwise I'll treat it as an open-door policy is in effect," Ogras answered as he threw one of his annoying smiles toward Kenzie. "Hello again, beautiful."

Zac's eyes thinned as he glared toward Ogras, his aura starting to leak out a bit. Kenzie noticed her brother's change in demeanor, and with a roll of her eyes slapped his arm.

"Cut it out," she muttered under her breath.

"So sister-in-law is here as well. It is good to see you again," Alea said as she pushed Ogras out of the way as she walked toward Kenzie with a warm smile, not even sparing Zac a glance.

"Sister-in-law?" MacKenzie asked with some confusion as she let Alea hook her arm in hers.

"Don't let that human girl hear you say that," Ogras said with a grin, drawing an angry glare from Alea.

Kenzie simply seemed amused by the chaos the two were creating and was content to be a spectator of it all.

"Alea is just kidding around," Zac said to his sister before turning to Ogras. "What human girl?"

"Oh, we found a girl that claims to be your girlfriend. Hannah something," Ogras said with a shrug.

"Hannah's here?" Zac said, his face quickly souring as he glared at his sister.

She only shrugged her shoulders with an impish smile when seeing Zac's face. Alea's mouth curved up in a smile as she saw Zac's reaction, but only ushered Kenzie out of the courtyard.

"Come, let's sightsee a bit. Let those two bores talk things out. I have a great tea that I have saved for a special occasion such as this," Alea said as she pulled Kenzie away.

Just before she exited the courtyard she threw one last look at Zac.

"It's good you're back."

"Have fun," Zac distractedly said as he waved the two away, a confused frown adorning his face.

Ogras snickered as he looked at a peeved Alea, who turned away with a harrumph.

However, the mirth on Ogras face quickly drained away as he saw the amulet in Zac's hand.

"Why do you have that thing?" he said with an uncommonly serious voice.

"Why do you care?" Zac asked with some confusion as he looked down at the memento in his hands.

"Because it is a Technocrat insignia."

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#### **Chapter 189 - Leandra**

Zac skeptically looked up at Ogras as he fiddled with the amulet in his hands.

"What are you talking about? It's impossible that this is something from the Technocrats. I picked this up on Earth years ago," Zac said, hiding the true origins of the Amulet for now.

"Trust me, I know. The demonic horde is very much in favor of The Ruthless Heavens, which makes the Technocrats one of our prime enemies. Everyone learns to identify their kind in case we run into them in mystic realms or out in the wild somewhere," Ogras said.

"What I am curious about is how it could have gotten here. It doesn't make sense..." Ogras muttered until his eyes suddenly widened. "Unless Earth was a planet owned by the technocrats."

"What? I think we humans should have known about that?" Zac answered with some skepticism.

However, the calmness was only on the outside. His head was hammering fast as his mind was a mess. If Ogras said was true, just what did it mean? Was his mother an alien? The note left by his father said that he should use the amulet if he wanted to find her. Did his father know something as well?

The matter of Leandra, their mother, was still shrouded in mystery. She had simply disappeared not long after MacKenzie was born, and his memories of her were quite hazy by now. His father refused to talk about it, even though Kenzie repeatedly had tried to arrange a meeting with her. Their dad only responded once, saying that their mother had gone home to her family and that she wasn't coming back.

Zac had left it at that, always bearing some resentment for her actions. He had just been a kid as well, but he still remembered the sadness that had marred their father's face as he took care of the infant MacKenzie.

However, Kenzie didn't have that resentment and kept pestering Zac to help her find Leandra. Finally Zac relented a few years ago, even hiring a private investigator to track the woman down. Oddly enough there wasn't a single proof of her ever even existing. Even their birth certificates didn't mention her, only listing their father as a parent.

The only explanation that the investigator could come up with was that Leandra was an illegal immigrant, which is why there was no paper trail of her existence. Zac had to give up at that point due to a complete lack of clues, much to Kenzie's disappointment.

But now another, far more fantastical, explanation had revealed itself. There was a possibility that she was actually an alien, as crazy as it sounded. But that possibility only led to more questions.

What was she doing on earth? Why did she leave, and why didn't she come back? If she had to leave, why didn't she bring her family with her? Questions whirled around in his mind until cough awoke him.

"What?" Zac said, looking over at Ogras.

"I said that some technocrat might have used this place as a lab for experiments. I mean, they want to remove The Ruthless Heavens right? Perhaps someone was researching a planet outside Heaven's control," the demon said.

"That might be it. Well, it doesn't really matter I guess," Zac said with a shrug, as he put the amulet away. "If they were still here they should have shown themselves by now, right? Or packed up and left."

Ogras' eyes thinned a bit, but he didn't push the matter any further, much to Zac's relief.

"So what's your plan with your girl?" the demon said instead. "Want me to take care of the problem? I'm sure Alea is willing."

"A lot has changed in the six months since the fall," Zac said with a sigh, ignoring his comment. "I am not the Zac from before, and she likely isn't the same Hannah either. Where does that leave us?"

"Well, you should probably figure it out. The girl has repeatedly asked about you, causing some ruckus. No one has dared to say no to her so far, unsure what your reaction would be," Ogras retorted with a widening smile, likely looking forward to the coming chaos. "I haven't let her inside the inner area though, much to her annoyance."

Zac only shook his head, unsure how to respond. He had myriad things on his mind at the moment, and Hannah suddenly being back was truly not something he'd expected. He'd actually mostly forgotten about her, having more pressing matters on his mind until now.

"So you're back already from the rat incursion?" Zac asked, eager to change the subject.

"Yeah. It was a success. It only took 2 days, wasn't a too desperate a fight. That giant had actually exhausted their reserves quite a bit all by himself. He'd been killing Ratmen at least 18 hours a day for half a year," Ogras said with a wry smile. "Don't make that guy an enemy, he must have some special constitution. I've never met anyone having that strength at such a low level."

"What?" Zac asked with some shock. "You don't think we're his match?"

"In a head-on confrontation? Probably not," Ogras said. "I'd guess that mammoth has over 500 strength, and his club takes perfect advantage of that. He crushed the defensive array the Ratmen had set up with just one swing, taking half their town with it. I'm not sure I would have been able to destroy the array at all, no matter how much time I was given."

"He must have done some crazy things in the tutorial. Of course, if we wanted him dead it wouldn't be too hard, he's not very balanced. He needs a good support system to bring that disgusting Strength of his to full use," Ogras added with a vicious glint.

Zac could only shake his head in disbelief. He knew that the tutorial gave out good benefits to the top cultivators, but this was above what he expected. It seemed he needed to be careful around the others as well, especially Thea and Salvation.

"So what's next?" the demon suddenly said.

“What do you mean?” Zac asked.

“Didn’t you fight up till this point just to find your sister and provide a place to stay? You’ve done that now,” Ogras said as he gestured at the many courtyards in the area.

“Are you pushing for my retirement?” Zac asked with a small smile.

“Just curious,” Ogras said with a shrug.

“I have a quest,” Zac said after some hesitation. “A trial of sorts. I plan on doing it before the Treasure Hunt starts.”

“I thought you were skipping the treasure hunt?” the demon asked.

Zac only sighed as he shook his head.

“It’s not like I have much of a choice. I can’t stop and relax in this shitty new reality. If I do then someone will kill me.”

“The will of The Ruthless Heavens,” Ogras said with a grin.

“Actually, regarding that point I have a suggestion. You’re nearing the bottleneck. There are a few things that can’t be done after you evolve,” the demon continued.

“Hmm?” Zac asked halfheartedly.

“Well, there are two opportunities before you. The first is The Tower of Eternity. Ascending the tower can only be done before evolving. Not taking that opportunity would be a huge missed chance. Everyone who gets the chance to go there will take the trial,” the demon said.

“Secondly are the inheritances. The inheritance needs to begin at F-Grade Class as well according to the Tool Spirit”, Ogras added.

“Alyn mentioned the Tower some time ago as well, just what is it?” Zac asked curiously.

He didn’t mention that he stood to gain an entrance token soon, and actually was already thinking of going. He knew the demon wanted him to go for some reason, and Ogras would be more forthcoming with information if he thought he was trying to trick him into going.

“It is unclear,” Ogras said, but quickly added when he saw Zac’s skeptical face. “It’s something that has just been there since the beginning of time it seems like. Some believe that it houses the Brain of the Ruthless Heavens. However, you can only get to the tower with the help of a token as it is impossible to find without them. Many extreme hegemony have scoured the multi-verse for the tower intending to make it their treasure, but it’s always eluded them.”

“The tower consists of 9 floors, and each floor is demarked by 9 tiers. The further you manage to travel up the tower the greater the rewards. In theory, the highest possible grade is 81, nine by nine. However, I’ve never heard of anyone getting that far,” Ogras continued.

“So what are the rewards?” Zac probed.

“The tower contains all manner of treasures, and it also provides a Title that gives stats depending on how far you reached,” Ogras simply answered.

It sounded a lot like the title that the cultivators got from the tutorial Zac realized. Perhaps pushing all the way to the 9th floor would give a huge boost to his combat power. However, Ogras next words shocked him.

“If we help each other out, we stand a chance to make it to the fourth floor, perhaps even pass a few tiers there,” he said with desire in his eyes.

“What?” Zac asked, shocked. “Only the fourth floor? Isn’t the towers limited to F-Grade people?”

“Oh, you think you’re some hotshot because you can beat up some useless cultivators on this baby planet? You are strong, but only in the context of this planet. Don’t look down on the forces of the multi-verse. There are F-Graded people with advanced Daos and unimaginable titles, people surpassing a thousand points in a single attribute before they evolve.”

Zac’s eyes widened in shock. It was a good reminder that he couldn’t get complacent. Lately, he’d almost felt like an immortal as he met various people. But he was just a normal person who had caught a few lucky breaks when his planet got integrated. It couldn’t compare to whatever the great forces of the multi-verse provided their young.

“Wouldn’t that mean we’d be risking our lives going there?” Zac asked skeptically.

“Well, getting stronger always comes with risks. But those kinds of monsters are rare, and people are more concerned about ascending more tiers in the tower rather than expending energy on fighting with strangers. Just keep your head down and push forward,” Ogras said without a care.

Zac felt things weren’t as simple as the demon was implying, but he knew that the Tower of Eternity wasn’t something he should ignore if he wanted an Epic Class.

“Besides, we’ll be able to watch each other’s backs. We only need to get an inheritance each before we go, which would boost our survivability noticeably,” the demon concluded.

Thoughts clicked in Zac’s mind as he looked over at the demon, who innocently looked back. It seemed there was an inheritance really he wanted, and Zac was pretty sure which one it was.

“We need to get an inheritance?” Zac asked wryly.

“Of course. You should get one as well. It might be dangerous but the opportunity outweighs the risk by far,” Ogras said. “Besides, I can undergo the test first, scout things out. So to speak.”

Zac only snorted in response. The two spoke for a bit more before the demon receded into the shadows again. He seemed a bit annoyed that Zac wouldn’t give a clear go-ahead on the inheritances, but Zac didn’t really care.

He would likely give one to the demon sooner or later. He was pretty sure Ogras wanted The Umbra inheritance, and Zac had no use for that. But he wouldn’t just give it away before thinking things through properly. They were one-time gifts, and he only had eight of them. As for himself, he was a bit unsure of what he should do. He currently felt that there were multiple interesting choices available.

His initial thought had been to go with The Titan inheritance, since he was mainly strength-based. An alternative was The Undying Fiend, which sounded to be Endurance or Vitality-based. One would improve his battle prowess and the other his survivability, and either sounded like a good option.

However, his experiences in the Dead Zone made him look at a new option, the Lord of Cycles-inheritance. While Zac couldn’t be sure, it did seem to align with his new core and new attainments into the Dao. That was provided that the cycle the inheritance spoke of was the cycle of life and death, of course.

It all came back to what he was aiming for. He still had a hard time to decide whether he should focus more on the core and Dao, or his axe-work. The largest risk as

he saw it was that he might need to somehow attain another Dao Seed that could act as the opposite of the Dao of Trees.

The Sharpness and Heaviness weren't really suited to represent the miasma-filled side of his core, making his skillset a bit mismatched. Zac had thought about the issue for days now and still couldn't come up with a solution.

However, there was still time, so Zac once again tabled the matter as he stood up and headed toward the Nexus Crystal. He really needed to speak with his sister, but she was off god knows where with Alea, so he would have to wait.

In the meanwhile, he had a skill to attain. Soon he found himself at the crystal, and as he touched it a surge of information entered his mind as he gained a new fractal, and this time it was right on his chest.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 190 - Top Tier Cheat**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Early chapter because Path of Exile servers are getting patched :)

Zac's mind was filled with a burst of information told him how the skill worked, but he still chose to try it out after some hesitation. He headed over to an empty area inside his compound that was still just forest and activated the new fractal. A huge torrent of energy surged from the area and entered his body. This wasn't the same thing as absorbing energy, but rather forcefully ripping it out of the atmosphere.

Cracking sounds could be heard throughout his body as it felt like he was injected with a hundred adrenaline shots. Boundless power surged into his limbs as he took out his axe without thinking. The extreme amount of power gathering within him needed an outlet.

With a roar, he swung his axe with all his might as the innocent trees. It was as though a bomb had gone off in the forest, with decimated trees covering the area.

He felt as though he could topple mountains at the moment, but after roughly thirty seconds the feeling was gone, replaced by a sense of weakness. The skill **[Hatchetman's Rage]** was a boosting skill, that actually increased all his attributes by 25% for around ten seconds.

Better yet, it seemed as though the increase also worked on the attributes he gained from titles as well, as he gained over 80 points in Strength while the skill was in use. A boost of 25% was not something to scoff at going by how attributes worked.

It would increase his combat strength by quite a large margin during the effect, which would help him push him ahead in a close battle. It might even allow him to defeat a stronger opponent in a quick turn-around if he caught the enemy unaware.

However, the skill wasn't without its drawbacks. It seemed it messed with his head a bit. When the energy entered him he felt ready, and willing, to take on the world. It also left him weakened after usage. It didn't consume a lot of Cosmic or Mental Energy, but it was rather as though his body was overtaxed, like he might have felt after running a marathon back in the day before the integration.

He slowly headed back to his courtyard, and it took over an hour before he was back in good condition again. Clearly, he had to be careful with the skill, just like with

Nature's Punishment. He needed to end the fight by the time the effect ran out, otherwise he'd be a sitting duck.

Familiar steps could be heard after a while as he saw a flustered Kenzie run over.

"What's going on? What happened earlier, did you get into a fight with Ogras? The destruction could be seen from the town" she said as she looked around with a frown.

"I only tried out a new skill of mine," Zac said with a shrug. "Sit down, we need to talk."

"You destroyed a forest to try out a skill..?" his sister said with a shake of her head, but she still sat down next to him.

Zac suddenly had a thought and opened the Town Shop. Not long after two small arrays were erected around the courtyard. One was an **[E-Grade Small Scale Silencing Array]**, whose job was to block any sound from escaping, and also impede any types of spying skill.

The other array was a normal illusion array that hid the interior, the very same type as he used around his camp before. It should look like the courtyard was empty from outside, from how understood it. He still had the original array somewhere, but he didn't remember where it was anymore. Since it was quite cheap he bought an upgraded version for 250 000 Nexus Coins, making it even harder to see through.

Finally, he put up a third array, the weak defensive one he'd purchased some time ago. Wasting no more time Zac took out the amulet and handed it over to Kenzie, who accepted it with a confused glance.

"What's this?" she asked as she held up the intricately designed amulet.

"I found this amulet with a note from Dad when I visited Greenworth. The note said that it was a memento from mom, and that we might be able to use it if we wanted to find her," Zac explained, hiding nothing.

Kenzie looked at the small amulet with marvel, as though it was a map leading to some grand treasure.

"How do we use it?" she excitedly asked as she grabbed Zac's arm.

"That's the problem. I just found out something pretty weird about that thing. It might not be from earth. Ogras said it is a Technocrat insignia, like an emblem from a Technocrat Nobleman,"

"Technocrat? What's that?" Kenzie asked with some confusion.

Zac suddenly realized that the Technocrats might not be a subject that was broached in the Tutorial, as they opposed the System.

"It's an extremely powerful force in the multi-verse. I don't know a lot about them, apart from the fact that they are an enemy to most other forces, and that they don't use Cosmic Energy. Instead, they use extremely advanced technology, like science fiction stuff. They are the most advanced force in the multi-verse in that sense," Zac explained.

Kenzie's eyes widened, until she looked down the amulet in her hands with a slight frown, saying nothing. Zac would have thought his sister would have a ton of follow-up questions, but she only silently stared at the amulet. But her silence told him that it might not be as big a shock as he expected, and soon he understood why.

"What's going on?" Zac asked. "I saw that shield around you when the guy exploded back in Kingsbury. It didn't contain even a scrap of Cosmic Energy. And the ball flew right into your head afterward. Are you ok?"

"I... I think I understand now," she said.

“When the tutorial started, I was the same as everyone else. Luckily I survived the first trials and got stronger. However, after the fifth trial, I suddenly heard a voice in my head. It wasn’t the System, but someone else,” MacKenzie began. “It told me it had finalized integration.”

“Another voice?” Zac asked with some concern.

“Yeah. At first I thought I had gone crazy, but the voice told me it was an assistant system. I soon figured out that it was real as it warned me of imminent attacks that I didn’t notice myself. Since then it’s helped me in various ways, and I probably wouldn’t have survived the tutorial without it. It changed the way I channel my Cultivation Manual to become more efficient, it helps me in battle, and in all kinds of ways. It even modifies my skills to become stronger,” she explained.

Zac frowned as he looked at his sister, thinking of the ball in her head. From the way she explained it, it almost seemed that there was an artificial intelligence helping her. But that should be impossible, as that type of technology and the Cultivation System shouldn’t be impossible to merge.

It was one of the basic rules of the multiverse as he saw it, and the very reason that the Technocrats were so desperate to either destroy the System or create an Apostate of their own. The Dao of Technology was blocked, and merging cosmic energy and technology should be impossible. The thing in her head sounded like something impossible.

“It never told me what it was, so I guessed it was some special reward I got from the system for some reason. But now I think it might have been mom who left me with this thing to protect me?” she said, her face brightening. “Perhaps she knew the integration was coming and wanted to give me something to help me survive.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Zac said after a while.

However, inwardly he wasn’t as sure. Zac saw a very different scenario. He thought back to what Ogras said earlier, that Earth might be a lab for experimentation by the Technocrats. Did their mother experiment on Kenzie when she was an infant, potentially putting her in danger?

Finding ways to trick the System and integrate technology to a cultivator should be a huge goal for the technocrats, and the first step in creating an Apostate of their own. If what Kenzie said was true, the thing in her head might be a highly valuable Technocrat technology.

Still, he didn’t say these things out loud. There was no point in starting to argue about such things. And there was nothing he could do about the situation, apart from trying to get stronger in case something happened. But he knew he was just kidding himself. The Technocrats could be considered an A-Grade force.

They could incinerate this whole planet in an instant if they wished, and there was nothing he or anyone else on Earth could do about it. He could only pray that he was wrong about his speculations, or that something unexpected had happened, making the Technocrats unaware of the marvel inside Kenzie’s body.

Suddenly Kenzie handed the Amulet back to Zac, who took it with some confusion on his face.

“Mom already gave me this assistant to protect me, so you should keep the amulet. It might have some method to help you as well,” she said.

“Are you sure?” Zac said, but in truth he was quite happy to take back the amulet now that he knew more what was going on.

He was afraid that it might be a beacon or tracker of sorts, so he would prefer to keep it away from Kenzie if possible.

“Hmm... How about this,” Zac said as he opened the Town Shop again.

Soon another box appeared in front of him, and he took out another amulet and gave it to Kenzie.

“Since you don’t want that amulet, take this one instead. It was very expensive, so wear it at all times,” he said with a smile.

His sister rolled her eyes, but she still put it on with a smile.

Zac wasn’t lying when he said it was expensive. It cost 20 000 000 Nexus coins and was one of the most expensive Arrays in his Town Shop at the moment. It was called **[E-Grade Supreme Ward]**, and was a mobile array just like his Mother-Daughter array.

However, its function was much more varied. It was a defensive talisman that protected the wearer in all kinds of ways, as long as she stayed within a certain range from Port Atwood. It was an array that many forces bought for their young to protect them from sudden assassinations.

It had a few functions. First, it had a strong shield that automatically protected from sudden attacks. It might not be necessary for Kenzie, but it was better than nothing. However, Zac bought it for its other functions. For one it protected against spying or scrying skills, making it hard to locate her or spy on any secrets inside her. It also protected against mental attacks or hypnosis.

It was the only thing he could think of right now that might keep her hidden from any potential spies of the multi-verse. He truly believed that the fact she possessed an artificial assistant must be kept a secret to protect her. That thing inside her might be even more explosive than his Creator Shipyard. Kenzie might be hunted down by the various forces of the multi-verse if they knew, and who knew what the Technocrats would do.

“Does anyone else know about the assistant thing in your head?” Zac asked.

He was determined to keep this secret just between the two of them, even if he was forced to do some gruesome things.

“No, I knew it was a bit odd from the start, so I never told anyone, not even Lyla,” Kenzie said with a shake of her head.

“Good. Let’s keep it that way”, Zac said with relief. “I will try to look into the Technocrats some more, but we need to be careful. We don’t know what happened to mom. If she truly is a Technocrat the situation might be pretty complicated. The Technocrats have so many enemies, and we might implicate both ourselves and mom if we rush things.”

“I know,” Kenzie said, not being able to hide some of her disappointment.

“Hey, don’t worry. We finally have a lead for the first time ever. We’ll find her. But we need to focus on getting stronger as well,” Zac said with a smile.

“I get it, I’ll be patient.”

“By the way, you never told me what class you were,” Zac asked instead, changing the subject.

“Well, I picked Acolyte, a Normal Grade mage class,” his sister answered. “But Jeeves, oh that’s what I call the voice, upgraded it to Elementalist, an Uncommon one.”

Zac could only speechlessly stare at Kenzie for a while. That thing in her head was truly a top tier cheat.

“What about you?”

“Well, it’s called Hatchetman, a Rare class,” Zac said with a shrug.

“Hatchetman? How’d you get such a stupid-sounding class?” she asked with a smile.

Zac could only shake his head and tell the tale of what he was doing when the integration happened. Soon Kenzie was laughing as Zac explained how he fumbled along with his lumberjack's hatchet, living in a dented and bloodied camper, looking like a hobo covered in strips of snake leather.

"So, what are you going to do about Hannah?" she suddenly asked.

Zac grimaced at the question. With only a shake of his head he got up to his feet and wistfully looked in the direction of the town.

Some things couldn't be prolonged any longer.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 191 - The Network**

Zac still wasn't sure what he should do with Hannah as he slowly walked toward the gate leading to the town proper. When Ogras told him she had been found he felt... nothing. Simply too much time had passed since they last were together.

The time they had spent apart was more than twice what they had actually been together, and since then Zac had experienced one life-altering event after another. And it wasn't like they were some childhood sweethearts or soul mates. They were two lonely people who had found each other on a dating app.

Besides, the little he'd heard about her causing trouble since she arrived at his island made him quite annoyed. However, he would have to form his own opinion, as there usually was a hidden agenda behind the demon's words. But in the end, Zac knew he was just psyching himself up with various justifications and excuses.

He almost wished that some weird void would open up and spew out a horde of monsters. He would much rather go through a deadly battle than this muddled situation.

Soon he arrived at the gate once more, and after asking the guards headed toward a certain neighborhood of the residential district. It didn't take long to find the building, since not only was the neighborhood one of those closest to the gate leading to Zac's area, but it was also guarded by a demon and a Valkyrie.

Zac's brows scrunched together in displeasure as he walked up to the two guards who quickly recognized him.

"Lord Atwood," the demoness quickly said.

"You two can go back to your usual duties. This place doesn't need guards," Zac said with a nod.

The two guards gave each other a quick glance and quickly complied and left. Zac took a deep breath and knocked on the door. It didn't take long before he could hear hurried steps, and the door was practically thrown open as Hannah hurried to open it.

She looked as beautiful as when they first met, perhaps even more so. Say what you will about the integration, the Cosmic Energy made people look better, as long as they survived. However, to Zac's surprise she didn't wear normal clothes, but rather robes similar to those that Alea and Alyn wore.

There was a hint of confusion in her eyes for a second as she looked at him. Zac couldn't blame her, as he'd truly changed a lot more than most. However, Hannah soon realized who he was and her eyes quickly filled with tears.

“Zac!” she said and threw herself in his arms, her body wracked by cries. “I didn’t know if I’d ever see you again.”

“I am glad you’re fine,” Zac said with a smile.

“I heard that you came back,” she said after having found her bearing. “Come in.”

Zac hesitated for a second but soon followed behind her into her house. It was neat and clean inside, though the furniture was quite eclectic. He briefly wondered how she managed to get so many things on this isolated island. Then again, many of the surrounding islands had a lot of buildings that were deserted, perhaps there was a lot of it lying around.

“Are the other three okay?” Zac said as he stopped in the living room.

“Only David’s still alive,” Hannah said with a shake of her head. “Izzie and Tyler didn’t make it.”

Zac could only nod, not being too surprised. He knew that only two people surviving was the expected outcome, and that only half of a tutorial group dying was considered one of the best outcomes.

“I wanted to find you, but we were trapped on that island, and that crazy guy messed with our heads,” Hannah said, placing her hand on his chest. “But that’s okay. We’re finally together again.”

As Zac looked down on her beautiful face he forgot about everything for a second. He remembered the awkward first date, turning into a relationship that gave respite from the bleak reality of being an adult with no real direction in life.

However, reality soon came crashing back to him, and he knew that those times would never come back. Her house might feel like a secluded enclosure hiding them from the world, but it was only a mirage. Shaking his head Zac extracted himself from Hannah with a sigh.

“Hannah, we need to talk.”

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Zac was still feeling sour walked into the large building that was currently the core of operations of Port Atwood, but he forced himself to regain control of his emotions. Meeting Hannah again had been a roller-coaster of emotions. But then again, most break-ups were.

He realized he had painted her as some sort of villain in his mind, desperately grasping at every negative he heard in order to make himself feel justified. But ultimately, there was only one justification. They had simply fallen out of love since the apocalypse, and their relationship died along with the fall.

Besides, he didn’t know what to believe. Ogras had insinuated that she was causing trouble, but she had looked completely baffled when he’d mentioned it. As she explained things she tried to work in the government, thinking it would help him to have people he knew and could trust there, and not only strangers with their own agendas.

Zac could somewhat understand that sentiment as he walked through the halls of the large government building. The faces he saw were mostly those of strangers, and even those he recognized he barely knew the names of. There was no one of those that ran his town that he would dare trust his life to.

That wasn’t to say that Hannah necessarily had his best in mind. While she seemed the same as the girl he dated half a year back, no one had truly gone through the integration without changing a bit. Everyone had gotten harder, more cynical. Those who didn’t were long dead.

In the end, he had promised he'd find work for her and David, but Hannah had rejected it, saying that she wanted to focus on getting stronger. She even mentioned joining the academy. Zac only acquiesced and promised he'd provide the two with resources. It was the least he could do.

Not long after Zac entered the large building a clerk that Zac didn't recognize hurriedly ran up to him with a small bow.

"Lord Atwood," she said with some reservation in her voice. "Administrators Abby and Adran are expecting you."

"Lead the way," Zac simply said.

He wasn't sure how he felt about the address, as it felt odd to be called a lord by the humans. He guessed the employees had adopted the mannerisms from the demons, who had stricter hierarchies in their societies.

Soon he found himself in a meeting room with the people, or eyeballs, responsible for keeping his town running.

"I am glad to hear you found your sister in good health," Abby said as she bobbed in the air.

"Thank you. How have things gone while I was away?" Zac asked.

"Well, Port Atwood has advanced on various fronts. Today 83 432 citizens are within your network," Adran began.

"Network?" Zac asked.

"We have started setting up various satellite facilities on neighboring islands. These settlements are equipped with **[F-Grade Teleportation Arrays]**, and therefore can be easily accessed. We currently have five settlements, whose purposes are mainly various types of resource farms," Abby filled in.

"Five settlements? The guards at the teleporter said there's twelve," Zac said with some confusion.

"Two teleporters lead to the larger human towns that are able to self-sustain. We saw no reason to move everyone here to drain resources," Abby explained. "We believe that living in Port Atwood should be considered a boon, and something only for those who contribute to the faction. Therefore, when we find refugees on new islands they usually get moved to one of the other towns."

"And the other teleporters?" Zac asked.

"Another two are for the beastman settlements. One leads to Azh'Rodum, and the eleventh goes to the Zhix hive," Abby said.

"There's still one more, no?" Zac said.

"Yes, but it is a bit special. It leads to a small camp we placed on an extremely large island we found. It is the only island so far we've found that's even bigger than this one. From what we can tell the island is uninhabited, but it is teeming with strong monsters," Adran said as he handed Zac an information crystal.

"So it's a place for our people to gain combat experience and levels?" Zac asked as he accepted the crystal.

"Well partly that. But there are also energy signals that indicate that there actually might be a Mystic Realm somewhere on the island," Abby said, once again starting to bob around in excitement.

"Oh?" Zac said, somewhat unperturbed.

"What's with that reaction? That is huge news!" the Stargazer said agitatedly. "Depending on what's inside it could be an enormous boon for Port Atwood."

“But couldn’t it just as likely be full of E-Graded monster, or even worse things?” Zac retorted.

Exploring a mystic realm was an extremely dangerous undertaking, and some forces had to sacrifice thousands and thousands of people in order to secure it. And even then, the realms might not lead to any benefits in the end.

A mystic realm was a huge gamble, and Zac wasn’t sure he had the resources to roll the dice at the moment. He only really had a few hundred combatants, far too little to venture into a dangerous place like that.

“Well yes, but great rewards always come with some risk. That’s the way of the universe. Besides, we don’t need to explore it right now, apart from perhaps sending a scouting party to sound things out. If it’s dangerous we’ll simply reinforce the portal, and revisit the issue when we’re stronger,” Abby explained.

“Is there any risk of something emerging from the Mystic Realm to wreak havoc?” Zac asked.

“It’s highly unlikely. Unless we open the vortex from our side they can’t do much. They would need to brute force it, and that would require extreme powers. If such strong beings lived inside the mystic realm, they would have broken out long ago,” Adran explained.

“Well, I won’t send anyone inside there against his will,” Zac said after some deliberation. “But if someone wants to take a gamble, we can give it a try a bit later. I will visit the island and take a look for myself. But for now, I want to focus on the Incursions.”

“Well, I am sure that Ogras has told you, but the Ratmen Incursion was vanquished, becoming the second incursion being closed on the planet. We also found two more potential targets while fighting over there. The residents of Billyville had allies who also live close to Incursions,” Adran said.

“Oh?” Zac said. “Are they affiliated with the New World Government?”

“One is unaffiliated, while we are unsure about the other. However, both of them wish to wait until after the Treasure Hunt,” Adran said.

“What do you two think?” Zac asked.

“The Ratmen Incursion should be considered a low tier Incursion, just like that of Clan Azh’Rezak,” Abby said, drawing a glare from Adran. “Both the incursions mentioned by the allies of Billyville sounds like medium-tier Incursions, and you would likely need to join unless you’re willing to accept mass casualties among your soldiers. As for the high-grade ones, I am not sure we’re ready to take those on at the moment.”

Zac nodded his head in thought, not too surprised. The fact that it only took a few days to eradicate the Ratmen Incursion proved they couldn’t have been too strong. The easier Incursions were dealt with, leaving the harder ones. He also felt he had to agree with Abby’s assessment of their current power.

Even with 3 of the generals taken out of commission in the undead army, he wasn’t confident his side could vanquish the Incursion. There were still another 3 generals remaining along with the leader. Furthermore, they would be at the core of the incursion where the Miasma should be thickest, along with who knows what kind of Arrays.

Zac also understood why people wished to postpone attacking the incursions until after the Treasure Hunt. From how it sounded there would be quite a few power-ups waiting inside for the powerhouses of Earth, which would help immensely in the fight against the invaders.

The only question was how long the mission would last. It wouldn't do any good if it took months to complete since that would leave most towns without proper defense from their most powerful people, while also allowing the limitations of the invaders to be removed.

The briefing went on for another hour, and it seemed everything was under control. He wasn't really needed for anything, as he was mostly used for deterrence so that no one would act up. Besides, with the demon soldiers walking the streets people were keeping themselves in line.

Since it was getting late he soon headed back to his home to rest up. Soon after he came back Emily came by his courtyard, forcefully scampering over the decorative wall, uncaring that the gates were closed. The teenager had met up with Kenzie earlier, and from what he could tell the two had hit it off well.

It appeared she was overloaded with gossip, and a seemingly unending stream of juicy tidbits came pouring out of her mouth. It was everything from the fact that Ryan was trying to woo one of the Valkyries, to an Ishiate workshop exploding in the commercial district twice in one day.

There apparently had been a large fight between Emma and Julia as well, something about their future path. Zac could guess that while Emma wanted nothing to do with the government, Julia wasn't so sure. He made a mental note to sit down with the government official soon.

He hadn't really talked with her since she arrived, but the events at Kingsbury made him realize that he needed to do something about his relationship with the government before the shapeshifters ruined them from within. Turning Julia into a proper liaison for Port Atwood might not be a bad idea.

Finally, the teenager reminded him that her birthday was in a few weeks before she scampered off. Zac only smiled and shook his head, his spirits lifting somewhat. He threw the matters of Hannah and Port Atwood into the back of his head, and instead focused on what was ahead.

His next goal was the quest for hegemony, but since he didn't know how long it would take there were still some things he needed to get done first.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 192 - Island Tour**

After resting up a few hours Zac stepped through his private array, arriving at one of the first satellite towns of Port Atwood. Only a brief moment was needed to understand that this was one of the farming-villages that was created to provide the town with a steady supply of grain and vegetables.

Two Valkyries were resting by the gate, but quickly got to their feet when they saw the teleporter activating. Normally there were no guards stationed at the portal, as this place was only accessible through the main teleporter and the traffic was controlled from there.

However, Valkyries and freshly recruited warriors were sent out to all the satellite towns en masse to clean out the islands. There would always be a need for some warriors to safeguard the area from beasts in the future, but the manpower needed would be drastically reduced if all dangerous wildlife was culled first like on the main island.

Zac nodded to the two resting Valkyries before he headed out toward the fields. This personal inspection was something he had decided to do before he left for the Hegemon mission. For one he was still feeling a bit emotionally unsettled from yesterday, and he didn't want to undergo the trial when he wasn't in peak mental condition.

But more importantly, he felt the need to show his face a bit more, and make sure that everything was running smoothly. Hannah's words struck a chord with him, reminding him that he couldn't entrust everything to others.

He generally believed the demons and Abby the eye were working with his best interest in mind, but he also knew that both Abby and Ogras sometimes fudged the truth in order to reach their goals. The only people on the island he felt he could truly trust were Sap Trang and Kenzie, but both were focusing on improving their power.

Showing his face would give the population a reminder who was the true leader of Port Atwood.

The fields were abuzz with activity, where demons and humans worked together to get production going. The fields still looked mostly barren, apart from a few places having sprouts emerging from the soil. Most of the work still consisted of clearing out the area of trees and stone, turning the island into proper arable land.

After looking around he spotted a familiar face. It was the demon who was in charge of Agriculture for clan Azh'Rezak.

"How are things progressing?" Zac asked as he walked up to the demon

He looked over at Zac with some surprise but quickly found his bearings.

"Lord Atwood, I didn't expect to see you here today," he said. "Things are progressing just fine. It might not look like much at the moment, but I believe we will have our first harvest within two months. Of course, it's all mortal-graded seeds we're planting."

Mortal-grade was what things below F-Grade ranked was called, and another name for it was unranked. The normal grain and vegetables were all unranked as they didn't naturally contain any Cosmic Energy.

The thick Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere might imbue the vegetables with some energy, but it was negligible. You would have to eat an insane amount of tomatoes or wheat grown from mortal seeds to gain a power-up.

"Sounds good. Have you procured any spiritual seeds yet?" Zac asked.

"We have bought some, though it might take a few years until production is to a point that it can feed the upper echelon of the island," the old demonic farmer said with a shrug. "We have planted a few small fields on the main island for those things, and we should start to see results within a year."

"How come you didn't plant everything on the main island? God knows we have a lot of free space," Zac said.

It was true, as his main island was enormous. Even with his speed, it took hours to cross the whole thing, and it would be possible to fill the large empty areas with fields. Currently, 99% of the island was just forest where barghest roamed. That would allow the crops to benefit from the even denser energy in the atmosphere of the main island.

The old farmer's eyes lit up, but soon he shook his head.

"Actually, farmland absorbs a huge amount of Cosmic Energy, especially Spiritual Herbs. If we planted too much on the main island you'd soon notice that the density of energy in the air would get worse. That's why forces' herb farms are in Mystic Realms, as their towns would turn into energy-starved ghettos otherwise," the demon said.

“It wouldn’t be a problem in the short run as the population is still quite small, but as the citizens grow more numerous and more powerful, the energy consumption will increase. It’s better that we already have a proper infrastructure before reaching that point. And it’s not like it is a problem that these crops take a few weeks longer to grow due to the sparser energy, everyone will be fed,” the farmer continued.

“Understanding the balance between the energy in the heavens and the earth with your farmland is something every farmer needs to understand. If you get too greedy and plant too valuable things, you’ll likely lose the harvest.”

Zac finally understood why the plan had been to farm on other islands from the start. He completely agreed with the farmer’s sentiment. The Vein beneath the island could only produce so much energy per hour, and it was better that energy went to his citizens and creating more Nexus Crystals first hand.

Besides, since the island was quite close to his own the Cosmic Energy in the area was still pretty dense, making it a great place for farming. Zac stayed on for a bit and talked about the plans for the island with the various farmers until he bade farewell and moved to the next one.

The next island he visited was a mining encampment, and the foreman to the shaft did not share the farmer’s view on balance. His eyes glistened when he talked about the treasures of the deep, seemingly itching to go down there and hunt for treasures.

The man might as well have been a dwarf going by the greedy gleam in his eyes. It was only after talking with a few of the other miners that Zac found out the foreman didn’t care about the treasures, and only cared about the thrill of the hunt.

This mining encampment was not mining for crystals like the mine at Azh’Rodum, but rather for various metals. It was placed on an island with a mountain with a reddish hue. The foreman explained that while they had only encountered mortal grade metals for now, they might encounter F-Graded materials as they dug deeper.

Zac was a bit disappointed that there were only ordinary resources here, but then again only normal materials were needed to produce all kinds of things for the town.

Like this Zac went from satellite village to satellite village seeing how things were going. He was happy to see that there weren’t really any problems so far for the Demons and Humans working together. Actually he heard of a few couples having formed already. He’d been afraid the vastly different societies the demons and humans came from would cause some friction, but humans were flexible if anything.

After he was done making rounds he left for his final destination, the mysterious island that held the potential entrance to the Mystic Realm. The scene when he stepped out from the teleporter was quite different from the others.

There were only a guardhouse and a few tents, with four demon guards sitting around a concealed fire having supper. They quickly got to their feet when they noticed Zac’s arrival, but quickly calmed down when they noticed it was only Zac.

“Where’s the Mystic Realm entrance?” Zac asked after greeting the guards.

“It should be a couple of hours of travel north,” one of the guards answered. “The teleporter was placed close to the edge of the island to give us some room in case something happened.”

“Like what?” Zac asked with a frown.

“There’s a risk of the teleporter getting interference from the entrance before its properly stabilized. If it burst some extra amounts of energy everyone would be

stuck here until rescue came by boat,” another demon explained. “Also, it’s just too dangerous further in. We can only handle the beasts at the edge.”

“Strong beasts?” Zac mumbled, taking another look around as he left the camp in the direction the demons indicated.

He finally realized that the camp was mostly hidden within a small crevice of some small hill, secluding it from three directions. Furthermore, when he turned around after walking a bit he noticed to his surprise that the camp was completely gone, making him finally realize where his old illusion array had gone.

This was a completely different setup compared to the ones he’d seen on the other islands so far. The Stargazer had mentioned that there were strong beasts on this island, and it seemed that might have been an understatement if the demon guards had to be that careful.

He wanted to have a proper look for himself about what was going on with this island. He was afraid that Abby was downplaying the dangers to his town for the chance of a large payday. He didn’t delude himself that the well-being of the humans in the town was her main priority. Besides, there was something else he wanted to test while he was here.

The forest had a more tropical feeling compared to the one on his own island, though the level of mutation seemed largely the same. As he walked through the woods he concealed his aura tightly, and it didn’t take long until he was accosted by a beast.

#### **[Crazed Lemur - Level 58 - Strength]**

The level of the beast made Zac’s brows rise. It was almost the same as his own, and it was just the first thing he met on the island. Zac took out his axe and swung it at the primate, but it deftly dodged as it almost flew into a tree nearby.

Before it even landed it pushed away from the trunk, causing cracks on the tree from the force, instantly rebounding toward Zac with a screech. This time Zac focused properly and swung his axe once again with lightning speed.

A torrent of blood splashed the ground, as the primate lifelessly fell to the ground. Zac frowned as he looked down on the beast, the blood quickly slouching off from his robes. The strength of the animal wasn’t what bothered him, even though it likely was a match for most of the demonic warriors.

It was the fact that the core in his body hadn’t absorbed a smidgeon of Cosmic Energy from the kill. Zac had hoped that he would be able to keep improving his core by using normal kills, where the neutral energy would fill into both sides of it. Since the core had formed he’d only killed the undead, making him unsure of how it worked.

Unfortunately, the core stayed completely inert as a surge of Cosmic Energy entered Zac’s body. He already knew that this was a distinct possibility, as he knew that the Core didn’t care about the energy from normal Nexus Crystals. He did, however, know that the Miasma Crystals were effective since he’d briefly tried it while waiting for Kenzie in Kingsbury.

Zac shook his head as he kept moving deeper into the jungle. It appeared that he would have to visit the Sky Gnome and open his wallet after all. The core hadn’t shown any indication of how much energy it needed to be completed, and feeding it might turn him into a pauper.

While a couple of million nexus coins was quite decent, he knew that in terms of wealth in the multi-verse it was nothing. Zac knew that to simplify things the system actually graded Nexus Coins, just like with crystals.

A thousand Nexus Coins was worth one Nexus Coin (E), which meant that he had roughly 30 Nexus Coins (D). The system hadn't even bothered to convert the coins to higher tiers since his wealth was just too low to make it worth it.

Still, he'd have to check with Calrin before he started to despair. The mining operations were proceeding smoothly in his crystal mine, and he might be actually able to do a straight trade between Life-Attuned Crystals and neutral ones, not spending a single coin.

Zac instead kept pushing toward the center of the island and noticed that the energy in the atmosphere kept growing. Furthermore, the closer to the core of the island he got, the stronger the animals became. It appeared the island had built a strict hierarchy, where the stronger beasts got to have territories with denser energy.

To his delight, he noticed there was another boon to coming to this island, apart from the Nexus Coins and high-grade meat. The beasts might not have been able to improve his core, but something else was gleefully feeding as the beasts fell one by one. **[Verun's Bite]** was turning the excursion into an all-you-can-eat buffet.

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### **Chapter 193 - Merit and Debt**

As soon as his targets were above level 60 **[Verun's Bite]** started to absorb blood again, just like it did with the mink he killed long ago. Zac was delighted, as he hadn't found anything that it wanted apart from blood and the stone.

As he kept going toward the core of the island the fights got more intense, creating widespread destruction in the area. After an hour Zac started to imbue his strikes with his Dao to end the battles quickly. After having walked for two hours he'd killed well over a hundred strong beasts, and his Cosmos Sack was quickly filling up with high-level carcasses.

He also made some interesting discoveries about his axe. It appeared that it didn't just take any type of blood. Every time he killed a beast it took a small amount of its blood, but far from all of it. Furthermore, it only took blood from each type of beast once. Zac ran into a pair of leopards for example, and the axe only absorbed blood from the first kill.

It almost felt like the axe was taking trophies in the form of blood from the various types of beasts it killed. Zac started to hypothesize that perhaps the method to upgrade his axe was to collect enough types of blood.

That realization made him stop for a second, making him wonder if the types of beasts he killed had any impact on how the Axe would turn out when it upgraded. Perhaps feeding it with inferior blood would result in an inferior upgrade.

However, now was not the time to worry about such things. Everything was still a hypothesis. And besides, if the axe followed convention it would require a few types of E-Grade blood to evolve. If the blood had an impact on the upgrade, then the E-Grade kills would likely be far more important than the F-grade blood.

With that in mind, he kept cutting a path straight toward the core of the island. He was initially worried that the commotion he caused would draw attention to himself, but he soon realized he didn't need to worry about that. Raging battles kept happening all over, with beasts fighting for territory, or just for the heck of it.

However, suddenly a primordial roar echoed through the forest, coming from somewhere close to the center of the island. Even Zac stopped and hunkered down, his body physically impacted by the reverberations it caused. It was the call of an E-Grade beast.

Zac didn't move a muscle, instead warily looked around for a minute until he got up to his feet again. After the powerful roar there was no follow-up, perhaps meaning that it was simply a reminder of who was the king of the jungle.

It appeared that the other beasts in the area came to the same conclusion, and soon the forest was filled with the roars of various beasts once again. Zac hesitated a bit but decided to keep going. He really understood why Abby and Adran had no idea whether there actually was a Mystic Realm here or not.

Unless Ogras personally entered the fray, anyone else would simply throw their life away heading to the core of the island. Zac knew he wasn't immortal either, and started to keep going more carefully, not wanting to lure whatever was the source of the animal cry earlier.

He was pretty confident that he would be able to defeat a normal E-Grade beast, as he'd gotten quite a bit stronger since he fought the Fiend Wolf. However, there were many unknowns in this forest. For one, being a beast that had already evolved told Zac it was no average animal, but it likely had its own lucky encounters.

Furthermore, there was nothing that said that there was only one of them at the core of the island. Who knew, there might be dozens of E-Ranked beasts idling about, and that would likely be too much even for Zac.

He kept sneaking forward, now starting to avoid battles. The closer he got to the core of the island the calmer it was. There likely weren't as many beasts in the top tier of power, and the fights for territory might not happen as often. Any battle here would likely garner quite a bit of attention, something Zac really didn't want at the moment.

After a while, Zac finally stopped, as he'd reached an edge leading to an abrupt cliff. He quickly got down on his knees and looked around, and realized he was next to a huge crater. Just a quick glance around told him that it was over a hundred meters deep, and at least a few kilometers across.

The bottom was covered with another forest, with huge trees fighting for space. He got a sense of foreboding as he looked down at the dense forest, hesitant whether he should actually head down or not. Before deciding anything further he instead took out a pair of binoculars, trying to glean anything of importance.

It was with some relief he realized that he wouldn't have to go down after all, after seeing what was going on in the core of the crater. There was an area of a few hundred meters where nothing grew, creating a stark contrast to the lush surroundings.

In the middle of the desolate field, something that could best be described as an anomaly was fluttering about. It reminded Zac a bit of the phenomenon that occurred when he used **[Nature's Punishment]** as it looked like cracks in reality.

However, the center of the anomaly was far more chaotic, looking like a large hole that phased in and out of reality. Zac pretty much knew he was looking at a wild unstabilized entrance to a Mystic Realm, even though he'd never seen one before. He simply couldn't imagine it being anything else.

That at least proved that there wasn't a supreme treasure in the center of the island causing the high density of the energy the beasts enjoyed. He took out a crystal that recorded the scene in front of him before he started to move backward.

Judging by the high density in the area the Mystic Realm likely had a quite high density of energy as well, rather than being a desolate pocket of subspace. Zac saw no

point in going down into the crater to investigate further at this time. The crater was likely home to the most powerful beasts, including the E-ranked one that roared earlier.

He started making his way back toward the secluded camp, going in a slightly different direction. The fights with the elite monsters on the island didn't hold him up much but provided both a good deal of experience and Nexus Coins.

When he reached the camp he told the demons about his findings, and they looked quite excited by the Mystic Realm. Zac realized he likely wouldn't have any trouble finding volunteers for exploring the realm in the future, going by the demonic guards in front of him.

He stepped through the teleporter, this time finding himself in the main arrival lobby. From there he walked to the commercial district for the first time since coming back.

Before he left the district had simply been former battlefields and forests, with the only exception being the Thayer Consortia Headquarters. But as he walked he saw that the district had changed much in the same way as the residential district.

The square that would be the core of the district stood finished, and there actually were a few hawkers having set up stalls. From what he could tell they mainly sold daily necessities for now, but Zac was sure that it would improve in the future.

The plots of land surrounding the square was still mostly empty as they were earmarked for special buildings. One exception was that the Thayer Consortia owned a satellite store placed right next to the future placement of the bank.

It was time to enact some things that they had decided upon in the meeting earlier, so Zac brought up his menu and started to browse structures to purchase. Since he'd become a Lord and Port Atwood was deigned a World Town more structures had become available for purchase. Of course, the drastic increase in population helped as well.

Most of the structures still were locked out though, as it seemed that a pretty basic requirement of most structures was to have a population of 1 million, which Port Atwood wasn't even close to. He wasn't sure how he'd get there in the short run, as the archipelago he controlled simply wasn't very populated.

Even when they found people on an island there was usually only something like a hundred of them. The upside was that the average strength of these people was far higher compared to those who were safe within large towns on the mainland. There were barely any people below level 15 in Port Atwood, a sight that was quite common in places like New Washington.

Soon he found the structure he'd agreed upon yesterday with Abby, but before he was able to buy it he was interrupted by a familiar figure walking up to him.

"What are you doing here?" Zac asked as Alea walked up to him with a smile.

"I was bored, so I was thinking of having tea with the Sky Gnome," Alea said, as she looked at the empty plot Zac had been focusing on. "But this seemed more interesting. What are you doing?"

"I'm getting the Contribution Store we talked about some time ago," Zac answered as he made the purchase.

A large building was quickly materializing in one of the empty plots close to the square. It looked like a large box with huge rectangular windows letting light in. Otherwise the building was completely unadorned, apart from a large sign hanging above the 4-meter tall doors.

**[Merit Exchange]**

“Golems and their sense of beauty,” Alea said with a shake of her head as she surveyed the contribution center before she turned back to Zac.

“So, are there any benefits to being friends with the big boss himself? Do you provide any good discounts?” she said as she hooked her arm in his with a wink.

Zac smiled a bit at the quip and was about to answer, but his smile froze when he saw a familiar face in the distance.

It was Hannah who was holding a leather armor that seemed to be one of the latest creations by the inscriptionists. She was mutely staring at Zac and Alea, who were likely looking like they were in the middle of a romantic outing from how Alea acted.

Zac wanted to say something but Hannah simply turned around and walked away with hurried steps. Zac extricated himself from Alea with a sigh, but as he did he noticed a small smirk on Alea’s face that was quickly erased. However, it was too late to hide and Zac felt rage build up inside him. Alea had played him, probably in order to hurt Hannah, who she saw as her competition.

“Never do something like that again,” Zac said with a growl, his words punctuated with a wave of a brutal aura that pushed Alea back and drained the color from her face.

Zac’s mood had been completely soured by Alea’s ploy, but he would have to set things right later. With a face that made the citizens quickly and quietly leave the area he entered his newly purchased building.

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Humiliation rushed through Hannah as she hurriedly walked toward her home. David had told her she was being delusional, but she had refused to believe the rumors. She thought she knew Zachary, and that he wouldn’t do something like that.

Scenes of sneering glances by the citizens the past week flashed by in her mind one by one as hurried down the streets. It almost felt like everyone that she passed was laughing at her, and her folly.

How could she have been so stupid? People must have been thinking she was a gold digger, trying to curry favor in order to gain some benefits from the big boss. Was that to be her fate, to live in the shadows of her former lover and his new mistress?

Finally she was back home, forcefully slamming the door behind her as she entered her little sanctuary. The walls shielded her from the stares of the world, and she breathed out in relief.

The exhale seemed to have drained her energy as well, as her legs slowly gave out, and she found herself sitting down on the floor. Two streams of tears couldn’t help but emerge as the suffocating feelings from yesterday exploded in her chest.

She was truly a fool. She had thought herself like the princess in some fairytale. Not only did Zac’s army save her and everyone else from the lunatic that kept them prisoners for months, but he also turned out to be a real prince. The real protagonist of the new world they lived in.

But clearly she was no princess. Even after yesterday she hadn’t given up, instead hurrying over to the merchants to get some gear. She needed to get stronger so that she could stand next to Zac with her head held high. But the prince had already found a new princess, shattering her dreams.

Sadness and humiliation was quickly transformed into fury as she thought of that woman’s sneer. Hannah just knew that demoness whispered poison in her boyfriend’s ears for months, ruining everything. The anger gave her strength and she started pacing back and forth in her living room, imagining strangling Alea with each step.

Here eyes fell on the bottle of champagne she'd arduously acquired for her and Zac's reunion, and with a snarl she hurled it into the wall, creating a fizzy explosion.

"That demon bitch," she spat out between grit teeth.

"So you got kicked to the side, huh? What did I tell you?" a voice sounded from the shadows, making Hannah turn around.

"Shut up," she snarled at David, who only sardonically shook his head.

If Zac had seen the man today he would have been shocked. David had seemingly turned into a completely different person, and he radiated a sinister aura. The fall changed some far more than others.

"These demons will push us out of the picture. Zac is our chance to rise, you saw those Inheritances. They are our opportunity. We need to get stronger so we can protect ourselves. Remember what happened to Izzie," David said.

Hannah stopped her pacing, a frown emerging on her face. It was true. This life was no fairytale, and Zac was clearly no prince charming. Her eyes slowly hardened until she looked up at David with a nod. A small smile emerged on his face, and he took out a slender dagger from within his robe.

"Take this. You wouldn't believe what I had to endure to obtain this offensive array. It will be useful to us," he said, placing the handle in Hannah's hand before leaving the house.

The dagger felt cool to the touch like she was holding a piece of ice, and she thoughtfully looked down on it. She had waited for so long, only to be toyed with and betrayed. Just what was the debt, and who were the debtors?

**[New quest: The Price for Betrayal]**

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**Chapter 194 - Savings and Expenses**

Some commotion took place when people saw a building appear out of nowhere, many curiously looking at what was going on. However, no one dared to get close after seeing Zac enter looking like a stormcloud, allowing him to be undisturbed in his meeting with the Manager of the contribution manager.

"Greetings Lord Atwood," a mechanical voice sounded as soon as he entered. "Thank you for choosing the **[Furem Harq Merit Exchange]**."

The voice pulled Zac out of his brooding, and he put the matter of Alea and Hannah aside. He would simply have to talk to Hannah later and explain the situation. While he hadn't done anything wrong he didn't want Hannah to think he immediately ran to a new girl after breaking up with her.

The structure he'd purchased was a contribution management service. He'd long decided that he would purchase this service rather than trying to build a system up from scratch. There were so many things to consider, such as how to measure and grade all sorts of contributions to the town. Furem Harq was an ancient clan that had worked in this field for over a hundred million years.

That time span was mindboggling for someone who until recently had a hundred years lifespan. On earth, great dynasties were measured in thousands of years, but they were just like the blink of an eye compared to the longevity of the Furem Harq company.

The Golem-led company was on the slightly more expensive side when it came to these services, taking a larger cut, but they had many other advantages. For one they guaranteed the safety of all resources managed by them, apart from attack by a B-grade powerhouse or above.

Apparently those kinds of people were considered walking natural disasters, and no one would insure against the appearance of that kind of old monsters. Still, the policy was more than enough for an infant world like New Earth.

They also allowed a Lord to take out resources representing 25% of the deposited value at any of their subsidiaries through the multi-verse. It meant that if Zac ever got to the point that he left earth to explore other galaxies he'd have a convenient way to get some money that Port Atwood would continuously generate.

Most importantly they had a completely unblemished record even after running their business for such a long time.

"Hello, welcome to Port Atwood," Zac said, turning to the living machine that spoke earlier.

It looked quite different compared to the Creators. Rahm had looked like a faceless statue before he changed into a human shape, but the golem in front of him was a different breed.

It seemed to be created by liquid metal, forming smooth outlines that changed as the golem moved. Interestingly enough its various body parts didn't actually connect, but were somehow held together through some invisible power.

It also had a humanoid face, though it was slightly jarring to speak to a head floating on top of the torso.

"I am Khar. Please, this way," the golem said, and walked to a large desk where they both sat down.

From there the golem asked about most aspects of Port Atwood, from what resources they possessed to what they valued and what their goals were. Zac truthfully told the golem everything, apart from mentioning the Creator Shipyard. He knew the questions were designed to find a proper contribution model, so he didn't hold back. Besides, it wasn't like the paltry wealth he'd accumulated was worth much of anything to this golem.

"I would suggest we start by using model FH-83004. It is a merit exchange designed for emerging forces such as yourself," Khar said. "It focuses mainly on development, rather than things such as war. The merit allocation is designed to promote personal improvement in citizens, and creating new types of facilities, setting the foundations for Port Atwood to keep growing."

"What the downside?" Zac asked.

"It is more expensive to run than many other models. Performing things as gaining a class, and later evolving, are rewarded with contribution points. These things are usually taken for granted in established forces. There are also "bounties" in creating facilities not yet available in the faction, or finding materials that are currently lacking. It's a method to teach the citizens how to improve by pushing them forward with money," the golem answered.

"Can it be changed later if needed?" Zac asked.

"Certainly. You, or your representative, can at any point change the model or make adjustments to the current one. However, be aware that sweeping changes to contribution are often met with displeasure by citizens," the Golem answered.

“Ok, we’ll follow your suggestion. A Stargazer named Veth-Abarak, or Abby, is my administrator, and will come by and iron out details later,” Zac said as he put down a few cosmos sacks on the table. “These are the initial materials for exchange.”

The pouch contained most of the things he’d collected since the integration, most of them coming from dead Demons and the pouches of Rydel and the Corpse Lord. Of course, he’d already taken out everything that might prove useful for him in the coming months, or things he didn’t want to be sold such as the notebooks of Mhal.

“For now the whole inventory can be public,” Zac added after some thought. “For the Dao repository, Abby will go over the respective prices for the skills. The skills can only be listed but not bought so far. I need to inquire about some things first.” “The value of the things in the pouches was likely equivalent to well over a hundred million nexus coins, and hopefully seeing the mountains of wealth would make his people work harder, and also increase the trust in his faction.

“Certainly. Going by the model and the expected revenue turnover the coming month I would project the cost to be-” the golem said, but was interrupted.

“Is it possible that the Furem Harq could give the Kar’Arvadina-branch of the Iliex some face?” a lifeless voice suddenly sounded from behind, making Zac turn around.

With some surprise, Zac noticed that it was Rahm. It was a rare occasion for one of the Creators to leave their shipyard, and Zac could only guess it was due to them recognizing the force behind the Merit Exchange. Both of them were big players in the multi-verse after all.

However, Zac soon realized that he might have underestimated the Creators by quite a bit, as the branch manager practically flew out of his chair as he ran over toward the creator and almost fell down into a kneeling position in front of him.

“Lord Iliex, you honor our small clan with your presence,” he hurriedly said. “We were not aware that Port Atwood was friends with a branch of your great clan. Our clan will, of course, be happy to cede our charge for the management of this branch.”

“Business needs to have a price for no strings of Karma to be sown. A charge of one percent should be fine,” Rahm said.

“Of course, it’s as you say. We’ll follow your instructions,” the manager quickly nodded.

Zac only gaped at the exchange. A one percent fee was the lowest the merit control center would ever go, but only huge forces with revenues millions of times larger than Port Atwood got those kinds of deals.

“Good. And I count on your discretion about our presence to not inconvenience Lord Atwood. Currently, we are modeling our production after the Allbright Empire’s designs,” the Creator continued, his face still completely wooden.

“It won’t leave this one’s mouth on threat of death,” the manager hurriedly assured.

The Creator nodded in affirmation before it turned to Zac.

“Foreman Karunthel sends his regards,” Rahm said, before simply walking out again.

Zac added visiting the spider-boss to the list of things to do. He had just saved Zac a lot of money, and he needed to thank him personally. After the short intermission by Rahm, the foreman was quite a bit more helpful, even giving a few tips of things other successful factions had done to quickly improve their town.

The golem also heavily discounted the contribution plaques that they would distribute later. The plaques were both a wallet for the contribution points and also a

recording device of sorts. It could somehow understand when people contributed to Port Atwood, and automatically awarded points according to the algorithm Zac had chosen.

Zac was astounded by the thing and wondered how such small plaques could have so many magical functions. The golem explained that the plaques were actually only subsidiary arrays to a mother-array in the branch. The mother-array in turn was just a subsidiary of an extremely powerful array in the headquarters of the Company.

After finishing his meeting with the merit exchange Zac headed toward the Thayer Consortia. Zac was happy to see that the derelict buildings on the compound had all been swapped out with new ones, giving the business a far better impression.

The inside of the store had changed as well, and the once empty stores were fully stocked with all kinds of things. However, a large section of the store was covered with leather armors. Bringing the artists and watchmaker had been a good idea it turned out, as they had changed their profession and were quickly becoming promising inscribers.

“Lord Atwood,” Calrin said as he approached with a frown.

“Hello, Calrin,” Zac said with a small smile as he saw the angry gnome. “You look chipper.”

“I still don’t understand why you need a merit exchange. Those places are bad for business,” the gnome grumbled.

“Well, they still need somewhere to spend their Nexus Coins,” Zac said with a shrug. “Besides, I heard that you’ve started opening branches?”

That perked Calrin right up, and he nodded enthusiastically.

“Indeed. There are currently subsidiaries in the two human towns, and one of the beastman villages. The subsidiaries generally sell a slightly improved supply of the things you can find in a normal General Store, with extra sections containing mainly the products of Port Atwood,” he said with a smile.

“However, there’s still only money coming in from our own people. I hope you’ll go out and help open branches in the mainland,” Calrin continued.

“I’ll work on it,” Zac promised. “Perhaps I can get some business during the treasure hunt in a few weeks.”

“Good. So what brings you here?” Calrin asked.

“Let’s go somewhere more private,” Zac simply said.

Calrin only nodded and led Zac to one of the private rooms that was meant for appraisal of treasures that customers brought in. The Thayer Consortia didn’t only sell items after all, but also purchased anything that they thought they could make a profit from.

After the doors were closed Zac brought out one of the miasma crystals and placed it on the table.

“A miasma Crystal? Their uses are a bit limited, so they’re amongst the least valuable attuned Crystals,” Calrin said hesitantly.

“I’m not selling them. I need crystals that are the opposite of miasma stones. Is there something like that? Like life-crystals?” Zac asked.

“Is the wound still bothering you?” the gnome asked with a frown.

“No, it’s healed by now, but I still need the crystals. Preferably on a large scale,” Zac said.

“Well, there are crystals called Divine Crystals,” Calrin said after a while. “They hold lifegiving energy, though it cannot heal wounds without being processed into pills.

However, there are no F-grade Crystals of that sort. Generally, Nexus Crystals with elemental affinities are usually E-Graded and up, depending on the element. Some, like Time Crystals, are at least C-Graded from what I understand.”

“What about the Miasma Crystals?” Zac asked.

“They’re an exception. From what I’ve heard they aren’t formed naturally, but produced through unknown means by the Undead Empire,” Calrin answered with a shrug.

“So, can you get your hands on Divine Crystals?” Zac asked.

“Yes, but they are not cheap,” Calrin said as he prodded the Miasma Crystal on the table a bit. “There are a lot of uses for Divine Crystals. Many powerhouses even decorate their cultivation areas with them, as they improve the ambience. They can also help prolong the life of the elderly, though the effect is somewhat limited.”

“How much?” Zac could only sigh.

“An E-Grade Divine Crystal is roughly 100 times the price of a Normal E-Grade Nexus Crystal,” Calrin said.

Zac could only groan at the quote, as it was even worse than he’d thought. One crystal being over a hundred times more expensive meant that each E-Grade Divine Crystal cost half a million.

“Is that generally how much more expensive an elemental crystal is?” Zac couldn’t help ask.

“It’s on the more expensive scale, but it’s usually 50 to 100 times more expensive. It’s simply much more beneficial to use attuned crystals to improve at higher stages. They also make Arrays and such far stronger. They are simply superior.”

“Fine,” Zac said with a sigh. “Try to get 25 of them as soon as possible.”

“Always a pleasure of doing business with you,” Calrin said with a widening smile.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 195 - Making Rounds**

Zac could only wryly shake his head at the Gnome as he coughed up a deposit for the Crystals. At least the purchase wouldn’t completely financially ruin him.

“There’s another thing,” Zac said as he took out the Lotus Seed. “This came from a lotus flower that emitted intense amounts of life-attuned energy. Do you know what this flower is? My skill couldn’t identify the flower.”

Calrin carefully took the seed and looked it over.

“I can’t tell for certain, but I would guess that it’s from a D-Graded flower called Lotus of Harmony. The seed is quite drained, so it’s quite unsure whether it can germinate, but I’d give you 25 million Nexus Coins for it.”

Zac’s eyes widened at the quote, and he wondered just how much it was worth before he absorbed all the energy. His debt to the Abbot just kept growing.

“I’m not selling, I want to try and plant it,” Zac said.

It was worth 50 Divine Crystals, but Zac would still much rather have a lotus, like the one Abbot Everlasting Peace had.

“Hmm...” Calrin said. “Well, I’m no expert, but it just needs water and dense cosmic energy from what I know. It will slowly convert Non-attuned energy into life energy.”

“Do you think it would survive being planted in the Cosmic Water at the mountain?” Zac asked.

“Probably, it is a D-Grade treasure after all. But again, I’m no botanist. Don’t come crying to me if the seed gets absorbed by the pond. Besides, it might come into conflict with the Tree of Ascension if they are planted in too close proximity. Spirit Herbs are like beasts, they have territories,” Calrin explained.

Zac simply nodded with some thought. He’d already formed an idea before, and he couldn’t wait to try it anymore after Calrin said it was plausible.

After he left he quickly headed to Azh’Rodum through the teleporter, and rushed into the mountain. Soon he found one of the entrances he’d used before when he fled into the caverns. He wasn’t interested in going into the mines at this time, but he had another goal in mind.

After a dizzying number of twists and turns, he finally found himself in front of a large boulder. He was happy to see that everything looked the same as he moved the boulder out of the way.

Cosmic Energy, dense enough that it almost felt like it slapped him in the face, rushed out of the cavern as the boulder was moved. Zac quickly entered the cave and closed the boulder behind him.

The inside was similar to when he woke up here some months ago, apart from the fact that the energy seemed even denser than before. The various flowers were even lusher as well, all teeming with energy.

Zac picked a few of the various things growing in the cave, suspecting that most of the herbs and mushrooms should have evolved into graded plants by now. Perhaps they were worth some money, or at least possible to clone and farm.

But that wasn’t why he was here. He walked over the edge of the pond, and after some hesitation simply dropped the seed into the water. He could only pray that the intense energies in the pond would rekindle the spent energy of the seed, rather than destroy it.

It was a big gamble, but if it paid off his cultivation cave would kick up a notch in grade. Now he could only wait and hope for the best. There was one more thing he did before he left, which was to place multiple arrays to protect the cave.

The population on his island was growing, and it wasn’t impossible someone would stumble upon this place before the mountain had been turned into a properly restricted area. His goal was for much of the mountain peaks to be turned into large private residences for those who wanted to cultivate in peace and had the wallet to pay for such a luxury.

The valley with the tree of ascension and the pond of Cosmic Water would be his private property though, as he couldn’t risk having people ruining his tree. He still didn’t know what might come of it since its transformation, but it was still valuable.

Since he was done with the cave he left, heading up to the valley. Life was slowly coming back to the secluded spot between the peaks, as the density of energy was just too high for it to remain as desolate grounds. Grass and small shrubs had replaced the dry husks of the trees that the Tree of Ascension absorbed.

He also noted that the size of the pond had grown back, though not to its original size, which was something he hadn’t noticed from his cave. Zac was quite relieved, as it meant that his vein was creating more of the magical water.

He still didn't have much use for it, but it was apparently a great addition to most types of crafting. For example, quenching a new sword in Cosmic Water would likely improve the quality of the weapon a grade. However, his faction could still only create low-grade things, making such a method a waste of money.

Soon he found himself in front of the tree, and to his disappointment, it looked very much the same as last time he was here. It still was weirdly mutated, but thanks to his Dao of Trees he could sense that it wasn't dying, but rather slowly recuperating.

As he looked around he found that the area had been completely cleaned. Last time he only looted the possessions of the corpses, but now he realized he hadn't seen a single dead demon or monkey around since he entered. Perhaps Ogras had sent someone to clean up the area.

Or it might be Alea, Zac realized, as he looked around the well-tended area in the vicinity of the Poison Tree. She might have worked hard to make sure it didn't die. The treasure that came from it would likely either be good for a power-up of a poison user, or an ingredient for an incredible poison.

Since everything was under control Zac returned to town. After some thought Zac decided to head to the tavern. When he arrived he noticed the structure had expanded or rather been grown, by quite a decent margin. It now had multiple levels, and the base floor had swallowed a neighboring structure as well.

It was afternoon by now and Zac noticed that the place had quite a few people in it, sitting in groups with mugs in front of them. A few waitresses were scurrying around as well, placing dishes and taking orders.

When Zac entered a hush fell over the first floor, as everyone gazed upon him with a wide arrange of emotions.

"Hey! What are you all staring at," a shout came from the bar. "Have you never seen a humanoid tank before?"

Some snorts or subdued laughter could be heard, and Zac headed over to the bar with a smile.

"I see you have expanded," Zac said as he sat down on a barstool.

"What can I say? The apocalypse makes people thirsty," Ryan said with a wide grin.

"What's everyone drinking?" Zac curiously asked.

"Local beer. Or mead I guess?" Ryan answered and poured a glass from a tap. "The demons almost hounded the poor brewer to death, but he managed to create the first batch in almost record time. We have two versions, a normal beer and a stronger version for the high-levelled people."

Ryan placed it in front of him. And Zac took a swig. Objectively it didn't taste great, but it was not bad for a newly set up operation.

"So what brings you here?" Ryan asked.

"I have been too busy lately so I haven't had much time to check on Port Atwood. I thought you might know how the citizens feel about their situation," Zac explained.

"Well, I think people are generally happy here. Especially now that they are good and drunk," Ryan said, looking thoughtful.

"No complaints?" Zac said skeptically.

"I guess one complaint is that it's a bit hard to level up for combat classes. The forest is full of those demon dogs, and very few can kill them. So they're stuck as there's no other prey, meaning they will fall further and further behind. Some even think it's by design so that they'd be forced to join the Army to get stronger," Ryan hesitantly said.

“Hmm,” Zac said with a nod.

It wasn't something he'd considered, but the barghest had grown pretty strong by now. He'd considered them a great tool for grinding, but that was because he had extreme attributes and that he fought them when they were affected by stronger limiters to their attributes.

If Zac looked at it as a video game, Port Atwood was the newbie village for many. But it was surrounded by a high-level zone, not letting people level up. There needed to be a clear path of progression for people, like the increasingly powerful enemies in an RPG.

It was something he needed to remedy, as he wanted his citizens to become stronger. The more powerful people that lived on this island, the safer it would be from attacks. He would have to ask Abby or Adran to fix the situation somehow.

“I'll see if some islands can be turned into safer grinding areas or something,” Zac said. “By the way, do you know anyone who has worked a lot with animals before the fall?”

“Worked with animals?” Ryan answered with some confusion. “Hmm, I think I heard from a customer a week ago that she worked at a pet store before the integration.”

“Oh?” Zac said intrigued. “Where is she now?”

The two kept talking about various matters in the town for a few more minutes until Zac finally downed his drink and left. He walked following Ryan's directions, and soon found himself outside a building that looked like an apartment structure at the edge of the residential district.

They were structures that were being erected for the various people that didn't bring much to the table. The experts and high-level individuals usually got their own houses, whereas the refugees had to make do with apartments. Zac felt it was a bit elitist, but both Abby and Ogras was insistent that they needed to create that type of society to force more powerhouses into existence.

He found the correct number on the third floor and knocked on the door while looking around. Soon a slightly malnourished-looking girl opened up the door, looking startled upon seeing Zac's odd appearance.

“Can I help you?” the girl hesitantly asked as she looked upon Zac's unfamiliar figure.

“I am Zachary Atwood. I heard that you once worked at a pet store?” Zac asked, trying to look congenial.

“Atwood? Like the big boss?” she asked, her eyes widening a bit.

“Yes, the pet store?” Zac prodded.

“Ah? Yes, I worked at a pet store before. What's going on?”

“How would you like to get the chance to work with pets again, and even get a class for it? It would be a well-paid position as well since we need that kind of expertise,” Zac explained.

“You need someone to look after your pets? I can do that,” the girl said, her face brightening.

“Good, come with me,” Zac said with a smile.

Zac didn't mention that the pets he talked about were a hive queen for an alien ant species and hyper-aggressive demon dogs. That would be a happy surprise for later. For now, he needed to get her enrolled with Alyn and undergo the training regiment she had designed to make a beastmaster out of the pet store worker.

He soon dropped off Lily, which was what the girl was called, to Alyn. The schoolmistress looked very excited to try out her hypothesis in creating a beast master class without a heritage and immediately got to work.

Before it got too late Zac also went to the port to thank Karunthel for lending some help with the negotiations. He also tried to visit Hannah to explain the misunderstanding earlier, but she wasn't at home.

Finally, he was done with everything he needed to do at Port Atwood. There was also the issue with the Tool Spirit, but he felt he had to put that issue on hold for the moment. Partly because Brazla was just too annoying, and partly because he suspected any negotiations might go awry before he could provide it with some updates on the beautifications of its surroundings.

It was already late when he got back to his home, but he noticed that Kenzie still was out. She never mentioned anything about it, but Zac felt that her imprisonment had left a mark on her. She stayed at the academy all day, continuously sparring or meditating in the array, almost with a fanatic fervor that reminded him of the Valkyries.

It didn't feel like a healthy way to process, but perhaps mental health would have to take a back seat for the moment. Fear and helplessness might propel her forward when she'd otherwise stop trying to improve. With the thing inside her head, she needed to get strong so she could protect herself in case he wasn't around.

Since there was nothing much else to do for him, Zac decided to finally go through with his trial for hegemony. He didn't know how long it would take, but he had provisions for quite some time in his pouch. He also had all manners of pills and tools to help him out with most scenarios.

However, suddenly he realized a problem. How the hell did he start the trial?

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#### **Chapter 196 - The First Step of Hegemony**

Zac opened his quest menu to begin with and tried to mentally command the trial to start. When that didn't work he tried to physically press the quest, but in the end he only swiped his hands through the air.

From there he tried various things, from touching the Nexus Node to doing various things with his teleporter, but he had no luck. Finally, he remembered something that Abby said earlier. After he finished the quest his town became a World City.

One large difference between normal Cities and a World City was that the latter could provide off-world teleportations. And while his arrays were nowhere near strong enough for that at the moment, he did possess something that could do just that. The Nexus Hub.

However, that possibility gave Zac some pause. The Nexus Hub was meant for off-world transportation. If the Hub was truly the method to start the quest, it meant that he would be transported god-knows-where in the multiverse.

What would happen if he failed? Would he be stuck in some other corner of the multi-verse? He also didn't know how long these trials would take, as there was virtually no information on them.

However, Zac soon reignited his resolve. He already had made up his mind about doing it, and honestly being teleported directly by the system or through the Hub didn't

matter much in the end. Besides, he had prepared a Coward's Escape just in case, and those pills usually threw people right out of these kinds of trials.

But still, he chose to wait before he left, not wanting to go off-world before he'd talked with his sister. She knew about the quest, but not that he would be gone for an unknown amount of time. It was almost midnight when he heard her coming back toward his mansion, and Zac was still up meditating as he only slept a few hours a day. He quickly walked over to the courtyard Kenzie had chosen, and entered after knocking.

His sister looked a bit surprised to see him but still welcomed him to sit down.

"What brings you here so late?" she asked with a smile.

"I'm going to do Trial quest now, and it might actually take me off-world," Zac explained. "I just didn't want you to worry while I'm gone."

"Off-world?" Kenzie said, actually looking a bit excited. "That's so cool. You might become the first human to step on an alien planet. Take pictures."

"What about the tutorial?" Zac asked with a smile.

"I don't think that counts, that was a temporary space and not a real planet," Kenzie said with a shrug.

Zac only nodded in response, looking up at the stars.

"I heard a rumor you broke up with Hannah?" she hesitantly said after being silent for a bit.

Zac only nodded and briefly recounted what he'd done the past day.

"I know you weren't a big fan of her, but please make sure that no one harasses her while I'm gone. I feel bad how it went down, and I don't want others causing trouble for her," Zac said.

"I didn't think Alea would do something like that," Kenzie muttered, looking a bit disappointed. "You need to talk to Hannah before you leave. Don't be a jerk."

"Fine," Zac said with a sigh. "I'll leave tomorrow morning instead after I've talked with her."

"Good," Kenzie said with a smile. "You've always been a bit awkward, but you need to talk things out properly. And don't worry, I'll find a new girlfriend for you while you're away. What do you think about Lyla? She's nice, and she's asked about you. As for her body, I can promise that—"

"Worry about yourself," Zac interrupted while rolling his eyes, before taking out a box from his pouch. "I forgot to give you this the other day. It's a **[Fruit of Ascension]**. It will not only improve your race to E-grade, but apparently it will even help when upgrading your class in the future."

Kenzie's eyes lit up as she looked at the box, but after a brief hesitation shook her head.

"I don't need it. Jeeves helps me upgrade my Race, and says it will be done in two months. Besides, he'll upgrade my class anyway, so the effect of this fruit is a bit wasted on me," she said. "You should give it to someone else who has helped you a lot."

Zac mutely stared at her for a bit, before he wryly smiled and took back the box. Some people just had it too good. The two kept talking a bit longer until Zac finally left after exhorting Kenzie to not overdo it with her training while he was gone. As for who he'd give fruit to, there was no hurry to decide.

Early the next day he got up and walked over to Hannah's house once again. This time there were no guards outside, and Zac simply knocked on the door and waited. This time he heard sounds inside, but still no one opened the door.

“Hannah, it’s me. Please open up,” he said, imbuing his voice with some cosmic power to make sure she could hear it.

The sounds inside stopped, and finally the door opened as Hannah stood there with a frown, dressed in training gear.

“What do you want?” she tersely said as she looked at him.

“I... I just wanted to say I’m sorry for that display yesterday. I am not dating Alea, and we haven’t done anything. She acted like that to mess with you, and I told her off for it,” Zac explained.

“Ok, it’s none of my business anyway,” Hannah answered with a shrug.

“I just didn’t want you to get the wrong idea. All I said yesterday was true, and Alea had no impact on us,” Zac continued.

“I got it. You only broke up with me because you don’t like me. Thank you so much for clarifying it for me,” Hannah sarcastically retorted.

Zac could only sigh at the cold reception and hope that things would get better with time. He wished he knew what to say to set everything right, but perhaps it was impossible, at least this close to the break-up. At least he’d cleared the air from his side, and now it was up to Hannah to accept it or not.

“As I said earlier, if you need something, just ask me or Kenzie, and we’ll do our best to help you in the future,” Zac said and walked away.

He didn’t want to prolong the uncomfortable situation any further and immediately head toward the teleportation area. If he had looked back he would have seen Hannah standing in the doorway looking at his departing figure, her eyes cold as ice.

Not wasting another moment, Zac teleported over to Azh’Rodum and quickly walked south. The huge crystal still stood on the field where the incursion once was. The small guardhouse next to the crystal was unmanned nowadays, as there was nothing anyone could do with the Hub at the moment.

The crystal still looked inert, but Zac went ahead and touched it just in case. A prompt immediately appeared, telling him that his suspicions were correct.

**[Start Trial?]**

Kenzie already knew what he was about to do, and as for the other people, it was just as well that they didn’t know he was gone. Besides, for all he knew the trial wouldn’t take too long to complete. With determination he accepted the prompt.

The moment he accepted a blinding light flashed, forcing him to blink. When he opened them again the scenery had completely changed, and he found himself standing in a large field. When he used the teleportation arrays it usually took some time as he moved through the darkness, but the Hub seemed to use some superior technique as it only took a blink.

Zac guessed it was lucky for him, as it might take years to travel to some random planet in the same way that the teleporters used. He quickly looked and he could immediately tell that he wasn’t on earth anymore. For one the sky was almost black, and another clear indicator was that the Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere was almost nonexistent, to the point that it almost felt like earth before the integration.

His knowledge was a bit limited on this front, but Zac guessed he was either on a declining E-Grade world or even an F-Graded planet. Even amongst the same grade there could be large differences, and the better F-Graded worlds might have enough energy for people to reach the top of the F-Grade within their lifetime.

However, evolving on such a planet was likely a pipe dream unless some very special circumstances took place, like someone finding a series of lucky encounters.

However, the sky or the sparse energy wasn't the real reason he didn't think himself still on earth anymore. There was a medieval army consisting of odd humanoids standing around him, thousands of faces looked at him with various expressions.

The humanoids were pretty short, barely reaching Zac's chest, with thin frames. They had a large set of eyes that were pitch black, with white sallow skin. The top of their heads had white or grey hair that generally was long and tied in various braids and knots, with colorful bands woven into it. Their hands and feet looked oversized compared to their bodies, almost to comical proportions.

Zac guessed they couldn't weigh much more than 30 to 40 kilos, but still they wore thick metal armor and carried large grisly weapons, which told of surprising strength in their small frames. He did sense that there was some power in many of the aliens, though no one had the aura of a powerhouse.

The sense of power was most obvious in the few aliens that stood in front of him, looking at him with expectation. Zac didn't feel any sense of danger from his sixth sense, so he didn't believe that these things were his enemy, at least not yet. This gave him some time to try to figure out what was going on. His quest only said to complete the trial, but never explained what the trail was.

As he looked around he saw that the crystal that had transported him here didn't follow him, but he rather found himself standing on what almost looked like a very crude fractal. He almost felt like a demon lord for a second, having been summoned by some hapless acolytes.

"Lord General, what is that being?" one of the weird humanoids said as Zac looked around.

Its voice was slightly high pitched, but overall it sounded like a human's.

"The tablet only said that a powerful champion would be summoned," a well-equipped alien hesitantly said as he held a few ancient-looking scrolls in his hands.

**[The first step of Hegemony. Step forward with purpose. Let nothing stand in your way.]**

While it wasn't exactly clear what the system wanted him to do, it appeared that the system had created a scenario for him to fulfill, almost like in a video game. What he didn't understand was whether this was all a simulation, or whether he'd actually been thrown into a real conflict in some corner of the multi-verse.

It felt a bit coincidental that he accepted the quest the moment these things tried to summon some champion, lending some strength to the first theory. However, the multiverse was impossibly large, with a mindboggling amount of populated worlds, where most of them were these low-tiered ones.

Perhaps there was always happening things that would suit the purposes of the system's quests, and it simply dropped him here to let him figure things out himself. The aliens seemed content in trying to understand what they had summoned, so he took the time to check up on them as well. He turned to the two aliens who spoke earlier, and used his identification skill on them.

**[Antaya - Solvim - Level 28- Dexterity]**

**[Dresdo - Solvim - Level 42 - Endurance]**

It appeared their species was called Solvim, and neither of them was too strong. Still, Zac was surprised they could gain levels at all with such sparse energy in the surroundings. It must have taken years, perhaps decades, of effort to get to their current point.

"Hello," Zac said after a bit. "I think I'm supposed to help you out somehow. Are you looking for a hero-for-hire?"

Zac speaking words they understood seemed to startle the group who stood in front of him, but the man with the scrolls soon regained his bearings.

“Greetings Lord Champion, I am Dresdo, General of the East,” the man said. “We are on the edge of ruin, and in desperation tried the summoning the Ancients mentioned.”

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 197 - Multiple Variables**

It appeared the general was about to continue, but drums in the distance interrupted him. It sounded like a call to war, and Zac frowned and walked toward the source of a ruckus. The leaders of the Solvim hurriedly followed behind as he walked up a hill to get a better vantage of the situation.

As soon as he reached the crest he saw a sea of warriors neatly lined up a kilometer away from the army he apparently belonged to. Only a quick glance was needed to see that the armies weren't evenly matched, as the enemies outnumbered them at least twice over.

“These guys are your enemies?” Zac asked.

“Filthy opportunists,” Dresdo spat. “They take advantage of our precarious situation, trying to mount a sneak attack while we are occupied.”

Zac frowned as he listened to the general. He wasn't sure what to think about this situation. Judging by the sound of it, this wasn't some battle of good versus evil, but rather a war between two nations. He had no idea what the so-called precarious situation was, he didn't know if these aliens around him had committed some atrocities before, prompting the current response.

It put him into an ethical dilemma. Judging by the power of the troops around him, the other army couldn't be too strong either. Otherwise, they'd already steamrolled the smaller army. If he wanted to he could simply wade into their ranks and cause utter mayhem, destroying their army within the day.

But could he conscionably do that? What would that say about him? If he went through with this he felt he be some scum who was okay with doing anything, as long as it made him more powerful. It wouldn't be too different from starting to annihilate Ishiate, or even Human settlements just to gain experience.

Besides, it seemed too simple a scenario. Killing some weaklings wouldn't be much of a test, and Zac felt that the System didn't wouldn't give him that easy of a time. Was the challenge showing the resolve to actually do anything, including killing an army of sapients that had nothing to do with him, all in the pursuit of power?

“So what is the precarious situation you mentioned?” Zac asked, trying to get a clearer understanding of the situation.

The general looked a bit hesitant, until he shrugged his shoulders.

“A great beast has arrived in our kingdom. It's not something that we have ever encountered before. There are rumors that it's arrived from the great beyond. Its powers are believed to be in the fabled Ascended rank,” Dresdo said.

“Ascended rank?” Zac couldn't help asking.

“It has broken through the great barrier at level 75 and reached a higher stage of existence,” another of the aliens explained.

“The Royal Family of Orrin and many of our elites are currently occupied in fighting the beast, but it’s an arduous process. These scum from the neighboring country saw our plight as an opportunity to break our bonds of friendship, not only ignoring our request for assistance but even attacking us,” the other Solvim angrily added from the side.

Zac perked up from the explanation, but he got a bit hesitant as he once again looked at the army stationed in the distance. Just what did the system want from him? Fighting an E-graded space-beast sounded much more like a trial, but if that was his job, why did he end up in front of the army instead of the beast? Zac once again opened his quest screen to take a look at the quest to find some hints of what to do.

**First step of Hegemony (Unique, Limited): Enter the first trial within a month. Defeat the challenge. Reward: [Tower of Eternity] token, [F-Grade Dao Treasure] (0/1)**

The line didn’t update or give him any further hints after he’d arrived, leaving Zac perplexed. It was the first time a quest didn’t explicitly say what he needed to do. Did that mean that he needed to figure it out himself, as it was part of the trial? Or did it mean that there were multiple ways to complete the quest?

Zac mulled over the options for a bit until he turned toward the general.

“So, what goal did you have in mind when you summoned me?”

“Well... We hope that you can lead us into battle and destroy their army,” the general said as he glared at the soldiers on the other side of the field.

“I thought as much,” Zac said with a sigh.

Leading soldiers into battle wasn’t something he was ready to do, as he still had no idea what he was doing. If it came to chopping, then he was their guy, but anything more complicated than that he’d just embarrass himself.

In the end, Zac decided he would just have to follow his heart. He didn’t feel right slaughtering an army that wasn’t his enemy. From the sound of it, they might be in the wrong here, but Zac didn’t feel it was his place to put his finger on the scale.

What he could do was to go over and kill the beast. Not only would it save the lives of the citizens of the kingdom, and it would also free up soldiers to push back the invaders, which meant that both objectives would be completed.

Besides, killing the beast should be the harder option, and might even give him some extra benefits compared to killing a bunch of weak warriors. Something like a hidden reward. And even if that wasn’t the case, it would still likely help him with his work with upgrading his axe. He was approaching E-Grade, and his weapon needed to match.

“So, where is this beast?” Zac asked.

“It’s two days march to the south, it won’t interrupt the battle here,” Dresdo dutifully answered.

If it was two days by these people’s standards, Zac should be able to get there in under a day if he pushed it.

“Great, I’ll go kill the beast quickly, you just need to stall for two days,” Zac said as he turned away from the enemy army.

“Err, champion, what are you doing?” the general said with alarm. “If you leave we’ll be overrun within the day. They outnumber us three to one.”

That made Zac stop in his tracks. Just what would happen if this battle was lost while he was hunting the beast? Would he automatically fail? This quest was truly starting to become a pain in the ass, throwing so many variables at him. Zac turned around and immediately walked toward the enemy army.

“Wait, we should discuss a plan for this battle!” the alien shouted as he ran after him. “They have two full legions opposing us, and it consists of elites. May I ask, what level are you?”

“I’m level 60,” Zac answered with a shrug.

“What? Only level 60?” the Solvim, disappointment flashing in his eyes as he stopped following. “That’s at the level of the great protector, but even he isn’t able to thwart an army on his own.”

“Level isn’t everything,” Zac said. “Don’t worry, things will work out. Wait here while I go talk with their leader.”

The general did as Zac said and stopped some distance from his own army lines, looking at the back of Zac. Of course, whether he stayed behind because he believed in Zac’s words or whether he didn’t want to get himself killed was another question.

The distance between the two armies wasn’t too great, and soon Zac was only a hundred meters away from the enemy army who warily looked at the approaching figure, their weapons at the ready. Zac tried to discern anything out of place, looking through the lines of soldiers.

But no matter where he looked he couldn’t see anything different. The opposing army was comprised of the same type of humanoids, and after repeatedly using his identification-skill he knew they were of the roughly same strength as well, mostly being between levels 15 and 30. It truly seemed there was no hidden trick to the army in front of him.

He quickly spotted an area with warriors more richly decked compared to the average soldiers, and using **[Inquisitive Eye]** found that there was one of them at level 44, matching the general from his side. Since he’d found his target he started walking again.

“Halt!” one of the captains shouted at him, but Zac didn’t care as he kept advancing.

The army wouldn’t let Zac approach unimpeded, and a few deterring arrows sailed toward him. These kinds of attacks didn’t have an effect on Zac anymore, and he didn’t even bother activating his defensive skills, instead simply waving the attacks away as he unleashed his aura to the fullest.

“Fire at will!” the general immediately shouted with alarm after sensing the waves of power radiating from Zac.

The sky immediately blotted out with arrows heading straight toward him. If even a tenth of them hit he’d be turned into a porcupine, but Zac wasn’t worried. He simply kept walking toward the area where it seemed the leaders were stationed.

Waving away this amount of arrows would take quite some effort, so he finally activated his defensive skill. Emerald leaves started to quickly whirl around him as though he stood in the center of a tornado, each leaf blocking tens of arrows before it disintegrated.

Not wanting to waste such a gift Zac simply put the bundles of arrows into his pouch as they fell one by one, and in just a few short moments he’d gathered over a thousand of them. It was clear that since the cosmic energy was so sparse in this world a lot of attention and effort went into augmenting their strength with tools.

The arrows were of high quality just like the gear he’d seen the soldiers wear, at least on the same level as those that were made in Port Atwood. They only lacked some inscriptions, after which they’d be fit to use by the Valkyries.

Initially, he considered farming arrows for a while but soon changed his mind. While none of the attacks individually was a threat to him, his cosmic energy was being depleted at a very quick rate due to the unceasing attacks.

He activated [**Loamwalker**] and after just a few short steps found himself in front of the general, who backed away in alarm.

“What are you? Why are you attacking us?” the general said with a shaky voice, barely able to stand straight due to the towering aura Zac emitted.

The surrounding soldiers were in far worse states, and everyone within 20 meters had simply fallen down unconscious. The other soldiers powerlessly looked on, not daring to attack anymore since their leaders were lying unconscious all around their assailer.

“You could say I’ve been hired by the kingdom of Orrin to end this situation,” Zac said as he looked down on the general, purposefully making his voice heard by the whole army. “I will go and kill that beast that is occupying a large part of their army now. I need your army to stand down for a week. After that, I don’t care what you do.”

“And if we don’t?” the general said.

“Then I’ll go to your kingdom and kill your King, or whoever rules it, along with every high-level official and general you possess,” Zac said as he added the Dao of Heaviness to the aura he emitted.

Even the general couldn’t stand after the addition of the Dao, and he plopped down to his knees, only staying somewhat upright as he held himself up by stabbing a sword into the ground with shaking hands.

“What happens after a week?” the general forced through clattering teeth.

“After a week I don’t care what you do. The beast will be dead, and it’s up to your countries to decide what to do from there. I won’t interfere,” Zac said with a shrug.

“How do we know you won’t turn and attack us anyway after dealing with the beast?”

In response, Zac only shook his head as he walked away. As he left the thick of the army he kept channeling his Dao into his aura, which also made any errant arrow that was still shot at him powerlessly fall into the ground like they suddenly weighed a ton. An order to cease attacks was soon shouted out by the general, letting Zac leave unaccosted.

“They won’t attack you for a week. Don’t attack them during this time either. I’ll go kill that beast now,” Zac said as he gave Dresdo a pat on his shoulder when he returned to his side.

The man didn’t respond, and only blankly stared at Zac like he was some mythological beast.

Sometimes it was a bit fun to play the Demon Lord.

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#### **Chapter 198 - Competition**

Zac was quickly running through the countryside, idly gazing at the alien landscape as he passed it by. It was a weird feeling seeing both normal things like leafy trees, followed by sights that he couldn’t even explain. An example was an enormous

flying beast that slowly drifted overhead that reminded Zac more of a zeppelin than a bird.

At first, Zac had thought it was the monster he was supposed to kill, but after using **[Inquisitive Eyes]** on it he realized it was only level 18. More interestingly he even spotted a small cottage on top of the animal with his binoculars as it flew away. He didn't think this was what the astronauts at NASA were imagining when they talked about space exploration.

He was surprised to note that the planet seemed to be in a state of perpetual gloom with barely any light to brighten the scenery. There was a sun in the sky, but it was so small and ineffectual that it almost might as well have been another star in distant space.

However, the weak light didn't seem to have had an overly severe impact on the flora of the world, as he passed both farms full of crops and healthy forests as he sped through the country. Zac was guessing that while the energy in the atmosphere was sparse, it was enough to nurture normal unranked growth across the planet.

It made him wonder what would happen if the energy got any worse. Would the planet and its citizens simply die out? Was he walking on the dying carcass of a planet, or simply one that had always worked differently from how he was used to?

Still, all this wasn't any of his business. He couldn't get invested in some world that was placed god-knows-where. He simply kept his head down and kept running, every now and again stopping to ask for directions. Of course, every time he did so he caused widespread panic, as the general population was not aware of their army summoning some strange giant.

It was quite clear that this wasn't a planet that often saw visitors from outer space, even though it was integrated into the multiverse. Then again, that was usually the case, as there simply were too many planets for the large forces to bother with all the small and worthless ones.

A planet of this level generally didn't have the means for intergalactic teleportation, which meant the hassle of actually traveling here outweighed any value that could be squeezed out of the planet.

It turned out he had overestimated the distance to his target, as it only took him around ten hours to reach his goal. At least he was pretty sure he'd reached his goal. In front of him, a large medieval city stood surrounded by an army far larger than the one he was summoned to. A rough estimation put them at over 10 000 men, though it could be even more of them on the opposite side of the city.

The city itself was fortified by a wall that was mostly unscathed, except for a large breach that was around ten meters wide. Initially it looked like a siege was taking place, but Zac knew that wasn't the case.

A large crash could be heard from inside the town, followed by an angry bellow that reverberated out into the countryside. The beast was inside, causing chaos and widespread damage. The army wasn't besieging the town, but rather guarding it to keep the beast trapped, not wanting to release it out into the wild.

More surprisingly it seemed that the army was utilizing either an Array or a War-Array to cast a huge shield that sealed the whole town. Zac hadn't expected to see techniques like that from this energy-starved world, where the armies seemed to exclusively consist of physical classes.

He knew just how expensive running arrays were, and he couldn't imagine that there were Nexus Crystals aplenty on the planet. The country of Orrin was expending a huge amount of resources to seal the town and the beast.

Still, this wasn't a long term solution. The beast was running rampant inside, causing widespread destruction. Structures kept getting smashed, but Zac was unable to get a good look at its shape due to the walls. However, he knew the beast at least as large as the Fiend Wolf, as he still caught glimpses of something black above the wall.

Zac wondered just what the plan was as he approached the army from behind. He could clearly hear the beast rampage inside, but the soldiers just stood outside waiting. He didn't know what they were waiting for, but it worked out fine for him.

The appearance of a human cause quite a bit commotion among the ranks of the Solvim warriors, and they scrambled to set up a defensive front. Zac stopped for a bit, pondering what to do next. Technically he was on the side of these people, so he didn't want to risk ruining his quest by forcing himself through.

"Greetings traveler, I am Perav. What has brought you to the kingdom of Orrin?" a strong voice sounded as an elderly-looking male quickly approached, followed by a few younger warriors.

"I was summoned to your world by Dresdo. I have come to kill that thing you've trapped inside," Zac said, pointing toward the town.

The faces of the warriors who heard the conversations underwent a flurry of emotions, ranging from disbelief to elation. However, the leader who spoke with him and a few of the warriors who accompanied him were more measured in their response.

"You are a champion summoned through the ancient ritual?" the old man said, looking a bit perplexed.

"I guess," Zac answered with a shrug "Can I enter now?"

"Please go ahead, Champion. We are grateful for you heeding the call. Be careful, the beast is a formidable foe," the old man said.

Zac only nodded and proceeded through the ranks who quickly opened a path for him that lead to the breach in the wall. Before entering he stopped next to the array, and as he touched the shield Zac noticed it felt similar to the one he possessed in Port Atwood.

It was one-directional, meaning he would be able to pass through it from one side, but as soon as he entered he would be trapped inside. He would either have to kill the beast or break through the shield to get out if he found himself outmatched by the beast.

The old man was both respectful and didn't seem to contain any hidden killing intent toward him, but Zac still didn't like the feeling of being trapped like he was entering the Thunderdome. Still, even though the shield was maintained by thousands of warriors, he felt confident that he could cause a breach if he truly needed to escape.

If he combined both his new skill and **[Nature's Punishment]** he would be able to exact an enormous amount of force, and nothing these Solvim threw at him should be able to impede that amount of power. So Zac simply took a deep breath as he steadily walked through the barrier.

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The King of the Kingdom of Orrin silently gazed at the back of the alien warrior, until he turned a corner and disappeared from sight.

"Father, what's going on?" one of the richly-equipped warriors next to the old man asked. "I thought that the summoning circle didn't work? Haven't we tried it on multiple occasions in history?"

"I am not sure," Perav said with a sigh. "But he is the first off-worlder to come to our dying planet in eons. If he wants to fight that beast, let him. Our plan would

sacrifice so many lives to ensure success. If he can solve our problems we are in his debt.”

“And then what?” the man probed. “The alchemists say the horn of the beast might be the key for one of us to ascend.”

Perav sighed and shook his head. He knew how important it was to create an ascender. It was the first, and hardest, step in being accepted into the fold of the immortals. If their ascender then managed to come into the good graces of some Venerable their whole planet might be revitalized.

“We cannot afford to offend an off-worlder. For one he dares fight an ascended beast alone, and secondly, we do not know what kind of force that he belongs to. You cannot imagine the power of some of the warriors of the great beyond. They could level our whole kingdom with a wave of their hands,” the old man answered. “Who knows, he might be just the person who can save our planet.”

The younger warrior didn't say anything, but only wistfully looked up at the stars.

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It wasn't very hard for Zac to localize the beast. It was going berserk in the town, pummeling through one building after another. Initially, he had been a bit disgusted by the army, as it had seemed that they had locked their citizens inside along with the beasts.

But as he walked toward the beast the streets were completely desolate, telling of an earlier evacuation. He tried to walk as quietly as possible as he got close, as he still hadn't seen the full form of the monster.

While the energy contained in the bellow earlier made it seem that the monster couldn't have evolved too long ago, he wouldn't take any unnecessary risks. If there was one thing that Alyn had made sure he understood was to never take anything for granted. There were myriad beasts in the multiverse, many who possessed weird and unpredictable attacks.

Finally, he got close enough to see it around a corner, as it had briefly stopped after destroying a large mansion. This close there was no question about it. The beast was truly E-Ranked, but recently evolved. As for the type of beast it was, Zac had no idea as he didn't dare to use his identifying skill on it just yet.

At first Zac had thought it was a huge rhinoceros, but he soon realized that he was slightly off on that point. At further scrutiny, it felt like the beast was the result of a mutant bison ox mating with a unicorn. It's back reached roughly four meters in the air and it had a stocky build covered with a thick black fur.

Just looking at its body Zac felt that its method of fighting should be somewhat similar to that of the barghest. The thing looked like it was built for devastating head-on charges. However, the huge muscles weren't what gave Zac pause as he scouted the beast.

It was the huge horn that shot out of its forehead, reaching over three meters. It almost looked like the horn was made out of opal, as it was white and shimmered in a rainbow of colors. However, the colors weren't refractions, but rather wild energies that were somehow trapped inside.

Just looking at the sharp horn from the distance was enough to fill Zac with some trepidation, and he had a feeling it wasn't so simple that it was only used for stabbing. However, since the beast looked a bit unwieldy Zac felt confident he would be able to whittle the beast down while avoiding frontal attacks with the help of **[Loamwalker]**.

But before he could put thoughts into action a blaring sense of danger entered his mind, and he unhesitatingly activated a defensive charge from his robes. Not only

that but he also immediately used his defensive skill and had multiple layers of leaves superimpose from the direction he sensed the deadly danger.

The next instant a gloved fist came crashing at him, causing a sonic boom right before it slammed into the shield. The fist contained some sort of intractable force, and Zac immediately realized it was some sort of Dao. He didn't want to risk facing the same situation as with the Corpse Lord, being afflicted with an unknown Dao, so he quickly rotated the Dao of Trees in his body as well in order to create a third layer of defense.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm as the shield cracked like brittle glass, and the emerald leaves were ripped to shreds soon after. The only thing he could do was to use his arm as a shield, tightening his muscles while using his Dao for all he was worth.

The ground was ripped to shreds when the fist landed, and Zac was shot away like a cannon-ball, completely destroying a building from the impact. Stars swam in his eyes but he quickly refocused, ripping away the debris of the building on top of him and scrambled up to his feet.

His arm hurt like hell, but after a quick check he was relieved to feel that it wasn't broken. He immediately summoned his axe and faced his new assailant with a grim face. When he saw who had punched him he completely blanked out for a second, as it wasn't some hidden powerhouse of the small aliens as he'd expected.

It was a young human, likely around Emily's age. At least Zac assumed that he was human, though he'd never seen anyone with purple hair before. The youth was seemingly unarmed, apart from the gloves and large bracers he wore.

The two angrily stared at each other for a few seconds until they both spoke up at the same time.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Why the fuck did you attack me?"

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**Chapter 199 - Average**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

Happy Holidays!

The youth was decked in a pair of loose pants lined with intricate fractals and a sleeveless vest that went all up to his throat, leaving both his arms bare. His body was of the wiry kind, like something that made Zac think of kung-fu masters rather than bodybuilders, but Zac knew only too well just how much power that was contained in his arms.

Just as Zac scouted out the new variable entering the fray, so did the teenager hesitantly look over Zac. Soon after Zac felt the fractal from [Mental Fortress] flash, meaning he was getting probed or attacked by a mental skill. Looking at his opponent Zac guessed it was the former.

"Why aren't you answering? Just who are you? Did my siblings send you?" he angrily said, warily keeping his distance from Zac after his sneak attack failed.

Zac ignored the question, instead quickly using his skill **[Inquisitive Eye]** just like the other guy did. But for the first time since he acquired it, it almost failed completely, giving even less information than when he scanned his sister.

A muddled row could be seen, only telling Zac the name of the enemy. If even that. Because the only thing that was legible was “Average”, with the rest being blocked. That meant one of two things. Either there was a huge disparity in Intelligence or Wisdom, or he possessed far superior means to block mental attacks. In either case, it indicated that he wasn't a simple opponent.

Zac soon got his answers, as one of the teenager's bracelets shone with a white luster that reminded Zac of the diadem Ogras used to protect from mental attacks. The teenager started and looked down on his arm, immediately raising his guards afterward.

“Average? Is that really your name? I don't know who you are, much less anything about any siblings of yours. Why did you attack me when I was about to fight that beast? Are you the one that unleashed it on these people?” Zac asked, taking note of every move with vigilance.

He couldn't be completely sure, but it felt like the teenager was roughly as strong as he was. Not only did he move like a lightning bolt, but there was also enough strength behind his punch to hurt him. There also was the issue of the mysterious power contained in the punch, and Zac not being able to identify it properly was a bit unnerving.

“I knew you were a liar! Everyone in this sector knows who I am. Who else dares to have hair this stylish? Only I, the great Average-“ the teenager angrily said, but his introduction was rudely interrupted by the bellow of the frenzied beast.

There was no way the demon bull hadn't been alerted by the commotion the two caused. It had barely restrained itself due to the enormous amounts of energy released from the strike of the teenager. But after observing the two small humans for a bit longer, it apparently felt confident in attacking.

To Zac's surprise the teenager didn't seem alarmed but rather elated that the beast was bearing down on him. The air around his fists started shimmering like stars as it distorted from dense energy gathering, and he actually seemed ready to meet the charge from the beast head-on.

Zac had a decent idea of what the brat was about to do, and he felt he couldn't allow him to attack the beast. This so-called Average had muddied the water of his quest completely. Did the system expect this kid to be here? Was he the real challenge?

All these variables cropping up were a pain in the ass, but Zac could only fight for now. He instantly swung his axe toward the teenager, and as the edge sliced through the air a huge fractal edge from **[Chop]** appeared. After a brief hesitation, he also imbued the strike with the Dao of Sharpness before launching it at the human rather than the beast.

Zac was afraid that the kid would simply shrug off the attack if he didn't put something extra in the strike, and he couldn't let the teenager kill the beast. He had a strong feeling that his mission would be a wash if he just watched someone else claim the head of the bison-monster.

The fractal edge flew at the pugilist with full force, slicing the cobblestones on the ground to ribbons on its approach. Average clearly had good battle awareness and immediately noticed an attack was incoming. However, even with the knowledge his eyes widened in alarm from the huge size of the incoming attack, and he threw himself down at the ground in order to avoid the attack that wanted to slice him in two.

To Zac's surprise Average moved like an acrobat, pushing off from the ground with his hands and flew up towards the head of the charging beast.

“I knew it! You work for eleventh brother, don’t you!” the teenager screamed angrily as he kicked the beast with enormous force. “He always does things like this!”

Due to Zac’s strike, Average was out of balance and couldn’t properly utilize that dense energy that he had gathered in his fists, and the pugilist only managed to transfer some of it to his feet in time. But the effect still shocked Zac. It sounded like a bomb went off as the foot slammed into the side of the head of the beast.

Even though the attack had been interrupted there was just as much force in it compared with the sneak attack the teenager used against him, and Zac made a note to be wary when that odd energy appeared again. The bison was actually lifted up in the air and thrown into a neighboring building as well with a wail.

Initially, Zac was worried that the strike had actually killed the beast, but he soon realized more was needed to kill a true E-Grade creature as it got up to its feet with a shake of its head. This time it didn’t mindlessly charge again, and instead kept its distance as it emitted a low growl.

Since the beast looked a bit groggy Zac took the opportunity to scout it out and tried his luck with his ocular skill.

**[Moonpike - Star Ox - Level 79 - Strength]**

The skill actually worked this time, and it gave a brief rundown of the animal. The level and its main attribute weren’t a surprise, but what made Zac a bit confused was the first two lines of information. It had a name. Did it mean that the ox was intelligent enough for the system to consider it a cultivator? Or perhaps it only meant that the animal had an owner that had named it, like the Heralds he had fought earlier.

Average landed a bit haphazardly, angrily glaring back and forth between his two enemies. He seemed to want to say something else to Zac, who could only shrug his shoulders.

“I don’t know anything about your family circumstances. But I cannot let you claim the kill of that beast, even if we have to fight over it,” Zac evenly said, completely unleashing his aura.

“What the fuck! I can give you the corpse, but I need to be the one to kill it,” Average angrily shouted back, seemingly shocked that someone didn’t let him have his way.

“No deal,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“You rogue cultivators are god damn lunatics. A thousand E-Grade Nexus Coins! That’s over 10 times the value of the horn. Leave me alone and it’s yours,” he said, not being able to hide an air of superiority.

That actually made Zac stop for a second. A thousand E-Grade Nexus Coins were equivalent to a Billion normal Nexus Coins. That was far more than the total wealth he had accumulated so far. Perhaps it was worth to fail the quest for that amount of money.

He soon steadied his mind though. Failing the quest wasn’t so simple as to only lose a Dao Treasure and an entrance ticket to the Tower of Eternity. It would also mean losing access to all future quests in the chain, and all the rewards they would bring. And a quest chain called The Path to Hegemony surely wasn’t something simple.

“I am sorry, but I have an important quest to kill this beast. I have nothing against you, but you need to back off from this one,” Zac steadily said.

“You think I’m afraid of you? I know you haven’t evolved, and I can count the worthy rivals to me in the F-grade in this sector on my hands, and you are not one of them. I offered you a peaceful solution, but you wouldn’t have it,” Average said, cracking his neck while glaring at Zac.

A monstrous aura erupted from the youth as well, almost matching that of Zac's. It was as though the two forces fought for supremacy in the air.

By this point, the beast had gotten back on its feet, and it warily growled as it watched the youth. It clearly didn't want to eat another of those monstrous strikes, and instead leveled its gaze on Zac. With a roar it charged at Zac, who frowned as he glanced over at the incoming animal.

Torrential amounts of killing intent, garnered from killing hundreds of thousands of beasts poured out of Zac on top of his normal aura, and the beast quickly stopped in its tracks. It was as though as it had seen an apex predator who wanted to feed on it, and it didn't dare fight Zac either.

Instead, the beast seemed to have had enough of the situation and started to slowly back away from the two, careful not to make any hasty movements. Zac knew it was stuck inside the town for now and didn't mind its actions. The youth warily stepped back a bit as well due to the killing intent, some hesitation finally appearing on his face.

"Are you an unorthodox cultivator? There shouldn't be any of you in this sector," he said.

"Unorthodox Cultivator? I don't even know what that means," Zac said with a shrug, which seemed to calm down the youth a bit. "Winner gets the beast."

"...Good!" the pugilist said, and immediately disappeared after.

This time Zac was ready, and after sensing the changes in the surroundings quickly swirled around and swung his axe straight down in a tremendous swing. A grating sound could be heard when the edge of the axe was deflected with the help of one of the bracers on Average's forearm, and immediately after a knee came flying toward Zac's gut.

Zac angled his body to avoid the blow, immediately trying to ram his shoulder into the chest of his youth afterward. However, a lightning-quick jab in his jaw stopped him in his tracks, forcing him to back away. With a grunt Zac shook his head, immediately getting back in the thick of it.

Both of them wordlessly agreed to not use any of their skills, as whoever won had to fight the beast afterward. Unfortunately, Zac quickly realized that the situation wasn't really in his favor. Clearly his enemy had great combat experience, likely having trained in hand-to-hand battles since young.

With an angry glare Zac refused to give up and stubbornly kept going, trying every trick he had learned from his Axe Mastery skill and his countless battles. After having fought a while Zac felt that the two were quite close in at least Dexterity and Strength, though Zac guessed that Average had a closer balance of the two attributes compared to Zac's 2:1 ratio.

At least Zac had a feeling his Endurance and Vitality were a notch above the teenager's, as the youth didn't dare use his body to block Zac's punches and swings. He wasn't like the Corpse Lord whose body had turned into a defensive treasure in other words.

Instead, the teenager mostly used deft movements or his magical bracers to avoid taking any direct damage by Zac's various attacks. Zac himself was continuously hit with powerful punches and kicks, and he knew he'd be black and blue come tomorrow.

Initially, Zac's goal was to break those bracers so that the kid would be forced to give up, but he soon realized his folly in that plan. The bronze hoops around his forearms were clearly high-grade treasures, likely far better than anything Zac

possessed. Even after having intercepted tens of swings from [Verun's Bite] there wasn't a single mark on them, though Average's arms were shaking a bit.

Zac's body was getting beaten like a slab of meat, and he had a feeling he would pass out before Average ran out of steam. The pugilist was like a machine, continuously launching forceful attacks that made Zac wince. The fight had actually lasted less than a minute, but Zac was already starting to feel woozy.

Though the two only used their bodies to fight they caused widespread destruction in the town, pushing through the buildings like two intertwined tornadoes. He knew he needed to do something to change the situation quickly.

Besides, he didn't want to let the beast roam freely too long. Perhaps it would actually manage to break through the array given enough time. Then he and the brat would truly look like fools.

Zac even started contemplating using [Hatchetman's Rage] to subdue the kid, but he was afraid that would escalate the situation into a true life and death battle. Normally he wouldn't shrink away from that, but he felt the situation wasn't as simple as two people fighting for some treasure.

Average, in spite of his name, seemed to come from a truly powerful faction from the small pieces of information that could be gleaned from what he had said earlier. And they weren't on earth anymore where tools and other items were a bit limited. Since he could throw out a billion Nexus Coins like nothing he likely had some supreme defensive treasures, so an-all out fight would probably backfire on Zac instead.

Fortuitously, Zac soon caught on a small hint. Every time the youth dodged one of the brutal swings of his axe there was a brief hint of fear in his eyes. Between what Average said earlier and this lack of real life-and-death experience it wasn't too hard to figure out what was going on.

The teenager was a greenhouse elite. He was given all kinds of advantages to boost his attributes and trained in combat with great instructors. But he was still young, and his power didn't come from numerous bloody battles. He let his fear of being seriously hurt or killed affect him somewhat.

Since he had nothing to lose Zac decided to try a gambit. After blocking another punch with his arm Zac swung his axe overhead straight at the youth's head, intentionally leaking some killing intent. It was a huge swing that would no doubt kill the teenager if it hit, but there was no way such a wide swing would go unpunished.

As Zac expected a lightning kick slammed into his wide-open side, causing a few ribs to crack. Zac groaned and dropped the axe, causing the eyes of the teenager to widen in elation. However, the next moment the now freed hand closed around the leg of the pugilist.

There was no dodging any longer as Zac held one of his enemy's legs in an iron vise, which brought the two to a state of mutual destruction. Average wouldn't give up, and engaged Zac in a brutal close-combat melee. For every strike Zac managed to land on the locked-down teenager, he received two in return.

But Zac simply soaked up the damage with a stone-cold face, his eyes boring straight into the increasingly frantic eyes of the teenager. The strikes between the two sounded like continuous thunder throughout the town as knuckles met flesh. This kept going for a while until Zac was about to land his fifth strike in the face of Average, whose left eye was closed shut and nose crooked.

Suddenly a red shield sprang up and blocked Zac's strike.

"Shit! I give up!"

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### Chapter 200 - Star Ox

After taking a look at the swollen face of Average for a few seconds Zac let go of his opponent's leg and slowly got to his feet.

"So the ox is mine, right? No interference?" Zac said after spitting out a mouthful of blood and cracking his neck.

It felt like every part of his body was swollen and pulsating, but he had work to do. He simply took out a healing pill and swallowed it to manage the pain.

"I've been called many things in my life. Handsome, generous, dashing. But never a liar," Average said as he got to his feet as well. "Besides, we have hundreds of Star Oxen back in one of our Mystic Realms, what do I care about this one?"

"Then why the hell did you make this such a pain in the ass for me?" Zac angrily said.

"Dad told me to find and kill this one, and if I did it he'd consider letting me change my name," the youth admitted, looking a bit embarrassed.

"Your name is actually Average? I thought it was some method you used to block your real name," Zac said, not being able to stop a snort.

Average glared at Zac for a bit before he deflated.

"It's my crazy dad. He said he wanted to see if a bad name would spur a child to improve faster. 'Greatness through embarrassment' he called it. More importantly, do you truly not know who I am?" he said, a bit curious.

"No idea. I'll go kill that bull now, just stay out of the way," Zac said.

"See if I care when it stabs you in the ass," the teenager muttered, but followed Zac's word and sat down after eating a pill.

Zac only shook his head and headed toward where the beast slunk away. While he knew he wasn't the best discerner of people, he felt that Average wasn't lying. He wouldn't likely interfere in the fight. Of course, Zac would still keep an eye open just in case.

It didn't take long for Zac to find it, as it was currently dismantling the wall on the opposite side of the town. Large pieces of rocks were flying as it pierced the wall over and over, the rocks seeming like butter to the large horn.

Its senses were quite sharp, and it somehow noticed Zac's approach from behind almost immediately. As though it felt pushed against a corner the ox bellowed and stomped the ground threateningly, its feet causing small earthquakes in the ground. Zac warily looked the beast over, not in a rush to make a move.

He had a feeling there was something special about the animal. He'd already killed an E-Ranked beast before, and that was when he was far weaker compared to now. Of course, that had been a desperate battle, but still, he didn't think this would be a walk in the park.

But just looking at the beast didn't tell him anything, apart from reinforcing the notion that something likely was up with the horn that crackled with wild energies. He summoned a large edge with **[Chop]**, and the next moment disappeared.

Immediately after he appeared beneath its torso, the edge soaring up toward its stomach. Zac had already imbued his strike with the Dao of Sharpness. It was this very

combination that had cleaved the Fiend Wolf in two, and it was a good measure to test the bison.

The edge slammed into the thick hide, but Zac was disappointed to find that apart from a few long strands of fur being cut, there seemed to be no effect from the swing. It didn't even manage to penetrate the skin.

It wasn't that the beast had an impenetrable skin, but rather it felt like there was a strong energy blocking the edge to cut through. Zac couldn't be sure, but he guessed that the Dao of Hardness should have properties that worked a bit like this.

The beast angrily roared, and it appeared it felt truly afraid as torrential amounts of Cosmic Energy whirled about. It was planning something big, and Zac wasn't sure what he should do, so for now he kept swinging. He tried to hit various body parts with his edge, this time after swapping over to the Dao of Heaviness.

The kick of Average seemed to have had an effect, so he instead went with blunt force damage. He focused on the joints of the beast, trying to immobilize it, but he simply wasn't able to breach its defenses with **[Chop]**.

Suddenly a sense of danger enveloped him, and he quickly backed away from the beast with his movement skill, only to see the bison simply plop down on the ground, causing the ground to shake. It felt like a weird decision for the beast, but admittedly it managed to force Zac away.

However, the next moment Zac's brows rose as the horn started to shine with blinding light as it was leveled toward him. Acute danger flooded Zac's mind as he quickly scampered out of the way, pushing his movement skill to the limit.

The next moment a blazing pillar of light ripped through the position where he just was, like a prismatic laser that destroyed anything in its path. The attack was instantaneous, and if it wasn't for his high Luck he would have been turned into motes of light by now. Zac couldn't even see where the beam ended, as everything it hit was completely disintegrated as far as he could see.

Zac's brows rose in alarm, finally realizing why the cosmic energy had surged so much earlier. He really didn't want to let it fire another of those devastating attacks, as he held no delusions that he'd walk away from one of those beams. This time he was able to get out of the way in time, but there was no telling if it could move the beam as well.

But just as Zac was about to charge toward the bison once more it was surrounded by large motes of multicolored lights, floating about all around it. Zac frowned and took out a stone from his pouch, immediately throwing it at one of them.

An intense explosion erupted from the light, containing enough force to throw Zac on his back even in the distance. His cracked ribs, courtesy of Average, made themselves reminded, as he slammed down on the ground.

The mote of light exploding wasn't the end of it. It also caused a cascading effect amongst the neighboring stars, causing a concussive explosion blanketing a whole area. Even if he managed to avoid the first blast somehow in melee range, the other ones would have surely hit him.

Zac quickly crawled up on his feet again and spat out some gravel from his mouth as he surveyed the scene. The bison was a real cheat. It had essentially set itself up like a cannon, repositioning itself as Zac tried to move around it. Furthermore, to avoid being assaulted it summoned moving mines all around it, each containing enough force to hurt him.

Even worse it looked like the animal was able to control the motes, meaning he couldn't simply dodge them, as they would follow him anyway. As soon as the area calmed down some of the remaining motes quickly drifted over, along with a few new

ones appearing in short order. It took less than 5 seconds before the minefield had once again been reinforced.

The only good news was that it still hadn't fired off a second shot from its horn, meaning it likely took a while to charge up to its full effect.

Zac didn't relish the thought of pulling out his aces at the moment, as Average was still around. Zac honestly didn't believe that the teenager would do something at this junction, but he didn't want to take any unnecessary risks.

But something needed to be done, as the horn was gaining brightness at a steady pace. He looked down on his forearm and steadied his breath. The Cosmic Energy in the area surged as Zac activated his newly acquired skill, **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

Boundless power coursed through his veins, and he had to suppress an urge to simply charge at the beast waving his axe like a madman. He felt like an agent of destruction but he forcefully steadied his mind and started to pour torrential amounts of it into his forearm, starting the charge of his own ace.

However, that wasn't all, since he also summoned five enormous blades with **[Chop]**, each almost ten meters long. As soon as the charge was almost done Zac let loose a roar and released one fractal blade after another at the minefield the beast had created.

The world turned white from hundreds of explosions going off in quick succession. This time Zac was ready and dug his heels in and summoned **[Nature's Barrier]** to withstand the shockwaves.

He was almost blinded by the cascading explosions, with lights swimming in his vision. A loud ringing rang in his ears as well, and it felt like he was under the effect of a flashbang grenade. However, he had accomplished his task, so he pushed forward his hand with a growl.

Reality cracked and the hand emerged, empowered by the Dao of Trees. A few things were different about it this time. First of all, it emitted a much stronger aura than before, and Zac attributed it to the increase in stats from **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

But more interestingly the wooden arm contained red shining veins that coursed through the whole thing. It looked a bit sinister, but Zac didn't have time to analyze it as he commanded the hand forward toward the sitting bison.

A few motes were spawned in the path of the hand and exploded on impact. Luckily, the hand was imbued with the Dao of Trees, and only some scorch marks remained after the hit. It might have been a different story if tens of the motes detonated on it, but Zac had already cleared most of them out.

However, Zac didn't feel relieved as his danger sense kept building as the horn of the bison was nearing the same level of blinding brightness as when it fired its last shot. This time it was quickly swiveling its head back and forth in the direction of Zac, likely aiming to destroy a wider area.

Time was running out and Zac did the only thing he could think of. The huge wooden hand closed the last distance and gripped the huge horn. Searing heat was transferred from the wooden hand to Zac's, but the feeling was nothing new to him.

Zac aimed to push its head to the side to avoid the incoming laser, but he had underestimated the power of his skill. An extremely loud snap echoed through the area, followed by a high-pitched screech as the horn was broken off.

Zac was shocked, but wouldn't let the opportunity pass as there still was some time left on his skill before it ran out of steam. He pivoted the hand and with all the remaining force he could muster he drove the huge horn straight into the body of the bison.

A huge fountain of blood shot straight up in the sky as the animal essentially was impaled into its ground from its own body part. It let out a last desolate bellow before it stopped moving forever, its death infusing Zac with a huge amount of cosmic energy, bringing him clean to level 61.

The remaining floating mines in the vicinity soon disappeared, turning into a dense amount of cosmic energy that spread through the town. It allowed Zac clear passage as he slowly walked over to the corpse, the adrenaline from the fight quickly turning to tiredness all over.

The axe in his hand started to gleefully vibrate as he got next to the bison, and Zac dutifully placed its edge at the still bleeding wound of the animal. A good deal of blood entered the axe, and Zac almost thought that he could hear a happy purr from inside it.

Not long after the effects of **[Hatchetman's Rage]** ended, and he was overcome with a wave of tiredness. Between his two fights and using both his axes he just wanted to curl up and sleep, but he wouldn't lose his battle-readiness until he felt he was in a safe place.

"Wow, that was pretty crazy," a voice came from behind, making Zac straighten his back and turn around, hoping that his weakness couldn't be discerned.

It was unsurprisingly Average, who likely had spectated the battle from somewhere closeby. The fact that he had stayed away from the battle from start to end somewhat proved to Zac that the youth might be a bit spoiled, but he was true to his word. There was a moment of opportunity to steal the kill after the animal was impaled, but Average didn't take it.

He also couldn't sense any danger, so Zac didn't mind him approaching.

"I didn't expect it to have such strong attacks, so I might have gone a bit overboard," Zac said as he ripped out the huge horn from the bison and put it in a pouch.

"Star Ox are pretty well known for their star beam. Ahh, I'm so unlucky! If you didn't get lucky and caught my leg, I would have been the one to rip the horn off and stab the animal," Average said with a sigh as he prodded the corpse of the Star Ox.

"Luck had nothing to do with it," Zac said with a shrug as he stored away the beast carcass as well. "In 100 sparring duels you would probably defeat me in most of them, but in a real battle, I would always be the one to walk away. You lack life-and-death experience."

Average frowned and looked like he was about to argue with him, but was interrupted before he could start anything.

"Haha, well spoken, brat!" a rough and extremely loud voice suddenly echoed through the town, making Zac warily look in all directions.

The fact that someone else was in the town without either of the two of them noticing wasn't a great sign, giving Zac a sinking feeling.

That feeling only amplified when he noticed the abject horror on Average's face.

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#### **Chapter 201 - Greatest**

The teenager clearly knew the origin of the voice, and he obviously wasn't happy to hear it. Zac warily took out his axe once again, trying to figure out means to escape.

He truly wasn't in a condition to fight with someone who made Average this afraid. However, he soon realized the folly of any thoughts of escape as a pressure that felt like, unlike anything he'd ever felt before blanketed the whole town.

The next moment a man who looked to be in his forties appeared next to Average as if out of nowhere. He wore similar gear as the teenager, but comparing the two was as though comparing a matchstick fire to the sun. Zac knew the true aura of the man was restrained, but he barely was able to stand up just from being in his proximity.

This was a true old monster, someone far above anything he'd encountered so far, even eclipsing his realm of understanding. The only thing that had felt similar before was when he saw the axe-man in the vision, though the man in front of him likely wasn't quite that powerful.

But there was a big difference between seeing something in a vision and with his real eyes.

The pugilists were clearly related, as they shared the same weird hair and many facial features. It didn't feel like a mystery to Zac, the man was Average's father. The dad's build was quite a bit bulkier, but there wasn't a shred of fat on his body. It was also clear that this man was no greenhouse elite like his son.

His whole body was crisscrossed with scars, much like Zac's own body looked like by now. But more importantly, he radiated a killing intent that felt strong enough to drown the whole planet they stood on, and it was on a completely different scale compared to his own.

Zac wondered just how much slaughter one had to undergo to passively emit such an aura. If someone had told him that this man had destroyed a whole planet, he honestly would believe them.

"Brat, why don't you look happy to see your father? And you're even calling me crazy?" the man said as he flicked Average on his forehead.

However, the power in that love-tap was enough to blast Average into a house, just like what happened to Zac when he got punched. But Average seemed fine apart from a quickly growing bump, and quickly scrambled out of the ruins of the house, albeit with some complaint on his face.

"What father, you're just a clone," Average muttered, brushing some dust from his vest.

"Shitty son, it's still a wisp of my consciousness inside, no?"

Zac was shocked at that exchange. The monstrously powerful man was just a clone of the real thing. He already knew from Alyn that clones created from techniques were far weaker than the original body. To be this powerful with only a small part of the original's body's power, just who were these people?

"And what was that embarrassing display earlier? I trained you for almost twenty years to be fearless and indomitable, yet you gave up after only a broken nose. Next time you better lose a couple of limbs before you give up," the man snorted, and finally turned toward Zac.

"Not bad for a little Progenitor, you show promise. I'm guessing you're here on a quest?"

Zac was still a bit shellshocked from the aura the man emitted, but he forced himself to snap out of it. He didn't dare to lie in front of this man. Somehow he knew Zac was a Progenitor, and who knew what else he'd gleaned. Zac wouldn't be surprised if the man used some high tier observation skills that **[Mental Barrier]** didn't even notice.

“I am Zachary Atwood, it’s nice to meet you. May I ask how you knew I was a Progenitor?” Zac tentatively said to him.

“This old man has been around for 80 000 years. If I couldn’t see through some little brat I might as well throw myself into a sun,” he laughed. “I am Greatest, by the way, Average’s father. And don’t worry, your quest is probably completed. I’m simply shielding the area for a bit so we could talk without you getting whisked away.”

Zac’s mind moved a mind a minute as he tried to unpack the various things the man said. First of all, Zac understood where he got the naming sense, and he could only throw a pitying glance at Average, who only rolled his eyes in response.

The next shocker was his age, as anyone that old had to be at least C-Grade race as far as Zac knew. That, in turn, meant that the man in front of him was at least a D-Grade powerhouse. However, Zac had a feeling he wasn’t that simple.

He had no proper frame of reference yet of the powerhouses of the multiverse, but Zac would guess that the man in front of him was stronger than D-Grade. This was only reinforced by the last comment. It appeared that the man was able to shield the area from the System.

He already knew that it was possible to manipulate the System to a certain degree, as stronger forces were somewhat able to snag the incursion slots that were supposed to be randomly awarded. But he’d never heard about this type of manipulation.

It was extremely alarming, as it meant that it was possible that the man in front of him, or people of similar power, could lock down space around themselves. That would mean that using things as Coward’s Escape or Teleporters might be useless when fleeing from powerhouses.

“You gave my son a valuable lesson, so I help you out in return. Wear this until you’re as powerful as me,” the man said.

The next moment something appeared out of nowhere in front of Zac, and he hesitantly took it. It was a bracelet that looked like those the two pugilists wore. Zac didn’t hesitate, and quickly put it on. He didn’t believe there was any malice behind the move. If Greatest wanted to kill him he would already be dead.

*‘The Specialty Core you’ve managed to grow is both a blessing and a curse and will enable a miracle if it doesn’t kill you. Many wouldn’t even hesitate in cutting you open just to study it. This little trinket will hide it from the world, and at least no one in D-Grade will be able to sense it,’* the man’s voice sounded in Zac’s mind.

Zac was truly alarmed this time. It was as though Greatest could see through everything about him. Not only that, he seemed to understand what the core was and called it a Specialty Core. Unfortunately, Zac had no idea what it meant, as he’d never heard anyone mention it back in Port Atwood.

He was both relieved and a bit disappointed after hearing Greatest’s opinion. Relieved that it was something good that many would want. But at the same time, it wasn’t something great to the point that he was interested in it. Initially, Zac had believed he had created some miracle of the ages, but perhaps the reality wasn’t quite that exciting.

For the first time, Zac didn’t look at the powerhouse in front of him like he was some sort of primordial beast, but rather a treasure trove of information. This man was no doubt far more knowledgeable about pretty much anything compared to anyone on his island.

The answers to so many questions he had lied with him, and perhaps even the solution to all the predicaments on Eart. There was no doubt that this man could

singlehandedly destroy all the incursions and the dominators without breaking a sweat. He likely even had a bunch of underlings who could do so.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, and Zac was about to ask the man for assistance, but before he had a chance Greatest started talking again.

“Brat, let’s go. This was a valuable lesson for me as well. I’ve been too lenient with you due to your mother, seeing as you shrunk away from the face of death. You need some real battle experience, so I’ll ask The Red Emperor to accept you into the Eternal Legion for a campaign or two. If you survive I’ll allow you to change your name,” he said with a widening smile.

All color quickly drained from the face of Average, and horror even eclipsing that from earlier filled his eyes. But he knew better than to fight with his battle-crazed father, and could only stare at Zac like he wanted to cry but had no tears left.

“Haha, little Progenitor, if you ever find yourself in the Red sector of the Allbright Empire, come and have a drink with this old man. If I’m in a good mood I might even let you try one of our Certain Death trials!” the man said, ignoring his son.

“Wait!” Zac shouted, but it was to no avail.

The next moment the two simply disappeared, leaving Zac alone with a slew of questions. Only a few seconds later he got a prompt telling him that his quest was complete, and a crystal spawned next to him. The quest didn’t hand out the rewards though, and Zac guessed he would get them at his own Nexus Node back on Port Atwood.

Zac sighed as he looked up at the stars. Meeting Greatest had been eye-opening in more ways than one. He couldn’t wait for the day that Earth had braved the trials of the integration, and he didn’t have to fight tooth and nail for every advantage.

He also realized that it was a pipe dream to depend on others for help with his own problems. It was unreasonable to expect some random powerhouse to help out a place like Earth, making an enemy of the Undead Empire and the Cult of the Everlasting Dao in the process.

But it wasn’t all bad. He knew that the Allbright Empire was a vast force that had all kinds of opportunities. It wouldn’t be a bad place to travel to in the future. Having already made a sort of connection with such a powerhouse over there might open all kinds of doors.

One could even see it as the hidden reward for the quest since meeting Greatest might be worth far more in the end compared to some Dao Treasure. But that was all for later. He needed to focus on the present, and there was a Treasure hunt to reap some benefits from in two weeks.

Zac only took one last glance around the town, before he touched the crystal and disappeared. As for the fate of the warring states of the Solvim, that had already left his mind.

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Unbeknownst to Zac, two people stood in the air, looking down at the town as Zac touched the crystal.

“So he really was a Progenitor,” Average said with interest, seeing his new rival disappear. “No wonder I didn’t recognize him. I still believe I would have been the one to win in a life-and-death battle though.”

“The only way you’d beat him is relying on treasures I gave you. Then it would have been me that defeated him, not you. Remember, items are only a crutch. Only our fists are eternal,” Greatest said with a snort.

“Why did you give him that bracer? Didn’t you craft it for Lord Greenwood’s new personal disciple?” Average asked, knowing better than to argue with his unreasonable father.

“I’ll just say the craft failed,” the man said with a grin. “It’s more important to sow the seeds of karma.”

“Was he really worth it? That was tens of thousands of E-Grade Nexus Coins you threw away,” Average muttered.

“We’ll find out in a few thousand years,” Greatest said with a nonchalant shrug.

“But if he was so important, why didn’t you send someone to help him out? I’ve heard how messed up the situation on those new planets are. Isn’t he almost guaranteed to die? I know you would be able to send someone with him through the Nexus Hub.” Average skeptically asked.

“If I did so then my gamble would have been truly worthless,” Greatest said with a shake of his head. “For now that brat was only a promise of greatness. But If I stepped in at this juncture he would likely never pass the second bottle-neck. Besides, I believe he is well on his way to solve those issues himself. He is quite impressive even by progenitor-standards.”

Average only looked down again one last time, before summoning a huge vessel. There was no network in this remote pocket of the Red Sector, and it would take over a week to get back home. He briefly wondered if he’d ever see that brutal guy again.

But he soon put it out of his mind, as he had his own things to worry about.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 202 - Specialty Core**

As soon as Zac touched the crystal he once again found himself in front of the Nexus Hub south of Azh’Rodum. When he looked around he also noticed two boxes neatly placed right in front of him.

He took up the first one and opened it, finding a densely inscribed plaque inside. He picked it up and a stream of information immediately entered his mind. It was the entrance token to the Tower of Eternity, and there was quite a bit of information it provided.

He could use the token at any moment after reaching level 50, so technically he could use it right now if he wanted. Of course, he wouldn’t go just yet as he wanted to push as far as possible, reaping the maximum amount of benefits. Therefore he’d first do both the treasure hunt and the first step of the inheritance he ended up choosing before trying the Tower.

He also learned that the token was personal, and could not be sold or traded. Finally, anyone had two shots at the tower, after which they would be eternally looked out of it. However, to take the trial the second time another token had to be earned somehow.

Zac put the token away into his pouch and opened the second box. Inside was a small shimmering vial with a luminescent liquid splashing around inside. Zac sighed a bit in disappointment when he saw the content. The liquid was the Dao Treasure, and Zac knew the method of using it was quite simple.

He simply needed to drink it to obtain its effects. However, he didn't do so just yet, as a Dao Treasure wasn't quite as simple as an attribute fruit. The vial would place him in a state of enlightenment, somewhat like his state when he improved his Dao of Heaviness back at the auction, but it wouldn't guarantee a new Dao Seed or improve one.

As far as Dao Treasures went, it was one of the more mediocre ones. But then again, he already knew it'd only be an F-Ranked treasure. Besides, while it wouldn't give him a completely new seed like some treasures did, it would at least give him a shot at improving a current one.

The best way to utilize this type of Dao Treasure was to first decide on which seed to improve and take the first steps on the type of insight he wanted for it. That would maximize the chance to gain something from the vial. Of course, using the vial to improve his Dao of Sharpness would be far easier than his Dao of Trees, since one was still at the low stage, whereas the Dao of Trees was just missing one step to reach its peak.

Zac had some difficulty in choosing which way he should go on the matter. For one he knew that improving the Dao of Trees would bring far more attributes than the others, but at the same time its usefulness in battle was a bit limited.

Conversely, it felt like a bit of a waste to use his treasure on the Dao of Sharpness, as he really should be able to improve it by himself since it still was only on the first stage. He wasn't in a hurry since there still were roughly two weeks before the treasure hunt started, but he felt he would have to use it before then, to maximize his battle potential.

Having packed away both his treasures he walked north toward the demon town. Azh'Rodum was still somewhat deserted, as many of the demons lived in Port Atwood nowadays. But some people were walking the streets, humans and demons alike.

The simple reason was the Nexus Crystal mine. Those who worked the mine lived in the town, only sometimes heading to Port Atwood. However, those who lived here had special passes, and normal citizens of his town couldn't get here unless they managed to pass through the sea of barghest and Gwyllgi to get here.

This was of course to protect the rich resources of the area. There were plans to sooner or later to turn the whole mountain into a restricted zone with the help of Arrays, but such an undertaking would cost over a hundred million Nexus Coins and wasn't something he could prioritize at the moment.

Since he was here anyway he couldn't resist heading over to his hidden cavern and was elated to find that the density of the Cosmic Energy in the air felt slightly sparser compared to before. Zac felt it was good news since that hopefully meant that the bead was absorbing large amounts of energy.

Still, he couldn't discern any changes to the bead down at the bottom of the calm pond as of yet. He wasn't surprised at that though since the Lotus was a D-Grade treasure after all. Even with the help of the pond it would likely take a long time for it to grow to the state he saw at the Abbot Everlasting Peace's monastery.

Since everything seemed to be going according to plan Zac headed back to Port Atwood. He'd only been gone for a day, but he still went over to Calrin's. The Attuned Nexus Crystals weren't anything rare, and it shouldn't take the gnome much time to acquire them.

Zac's current venues to become stronger were at the moment slightly limited. There was still the island with the Mystic Realm, but even if he battled for two weeks straight he doubted he'd gain more than a level tops, seeing as he just gained level 61.

That would barely provide any benefits, and there were better ways to spend his days before the Treasure Hunt.

He felt that he needed to improve himself in other manners. Levels weren't where he was lacking. That became quite clear from his fight with Average. The teenager had completely dominated him in the fight until Zac turned it around by taking a large risk.

Zac was simply lacking combat proficiency. He had learned some of it from battle, but battle with animals and **[Axe Mastery]** could only take him so far. He had encountered the same problem with Rydel back in the final fight of the Demon Incursion. A large amount of attributes were worthless unless he could properly utilize them.

While he knew that he couldn't get as good training as Average received as young, there should be something he could do. Zac didn't know exactly what level Average was, but he guessed that the youth should be level 75, at the stage of gaining as many titles and other advantages as possible before evolving.

Greatest had said that he'd trained his son for almost twenty years, making the youth older than he looked. It wasn't anything surprising, seeing as Average likely reached E-Grade Race long before he turned 16 years old thanks to various treasures.

Since it only took Zac 6 months to reach level 61 he felt that someone close to being 20 years old from such a prestigious background should be max leveled by now, even if they went slow and steady. Gaining the levels were usually the easiest step in evolving, but it was rather other things that hold people back.

From what he understood some spent a decade at the bottleneck before advancing, though he still didn't know exactly why. Alyn and Ogras had always been a bit diffuse about what happened in E-Grade, only saying that one would become a lot stronger. Until now he hadn't really cared, but it was quickly becoming more and more relevant.

Resuming his training to improve his battle techniques wasn't the only option. Another way to get stronger was his Dao, and he was planning on spending some time on that. But in the end, Zac believed his Core to be the most promising venue to improve. Greatest clearly understood what it was, and mentioned it was a good thing. He quickly wanted to infuse it with more energy to complete its construction.

He felt he shouldn't be too far off, as a large part of it was covered with fractals by now. Perhaps a final push was all that was needed before he could start to unravel its mysteries.

After a quick walk he found himself at the Thayer Consortia, sitting down once again with Calrin. The little gnome quickly produced 25 luminous crystals, each emitting dense and refreshing energies.

"Twenty five E-Grade Divine Crystals," Calrin said.

"Great," Zac said as he placed them in his pouch. "By the way, have you ever heard of the concept of a 'Specialty Core'?"

Zac tried asking the Sky Gnome since he might be the most knowledgeable person on the island, apart from the Creators. However, while they came from an extremely powerful faction they were almost fanatical about crafting, caring little about other things. Meanwhile, Calrin did hail from a former C-Grade family after all.

"Specialty core?" the gnome questioned as his face scrunched up. "I'm not sure... Wait! I've read about it in some of our old scriptures before we were forced to sell them."

"Oh, what do you know?" Zac enthusiastically asked.

“Well, not much, to be honest. From what I understand they are quite rare, but they can enable things out of the norm, so to speak?” Calrin hesitantly said.

“Huh?” Zac could only say, not feeling any clearer about what his core was.

“Hmm... Say for example there’s a lightning mage. He is specialized to inflict as much damage as possible, but each strike costs a lot of Cosmic Energy,” Calrin began explaining. “He realizes that a good addition to his skill is the ability to create large clouds that can generate the lightning bolts for him, saving him a lot of energy.”

“Sure,” Zac nodded along.

“But his class is specialized, his pathways don’t work with those kinds of skills. So he gets a Specialty Core that is attuned to water and wind. Suddenly he can create the clouds through his Core, and his fighting style has gotten much more versatile.”

Zac felt he understood the concept, though he had some difficulty understanding exactly what it meant for his own core.

“So the Specialty Core adds more elements you can use?” Zac probed.

“Well, no. That was just an example. From what I understand the names come from the fact that they are created with a specific purpose in mind. Adding an element is just one example,” Calrin explained. “But they are very rare, I’ve never met anyone with one. Perhaps they are more common in the higher planes, I’m not sure.”

By higher planes, Calrin simply meant the sectors with higher tier planets. While there weren’t any strict hierarchy it seemed, planets were generally lumped together with other planets around the same energy, due to being placed in a part of the multiverse with a certain level of ambient Cosmic Energy.

Earth already was in a pretty good spot, seeing as it started as D-grade, though where on the scale of D-Grade still remained to be seen. But it also meant that there likely weren’t any high tier planets in the close vicinity, apart from perhaps a C-Grade planet being the core of the sector.

Conversely, it was possible that Earth was one of the main planets in a sector with mainly E and F-grade planets. Actually, that felt like an even more likely scenario, seeing as how energy-starved Earth was before the integration.

In the end Zac thanked the gnome for his help and left for his compound. While he still didn’t exactly know what his Core would do, he felt he had a clearer picture of the situation. And perhaps everything would become more apparent the moment his core was finished absorbing energy.

Zac couldn’t wait to try it out and only informed the guards to tell his sister he was back before he went into seclusion to start absorbing the crystals. Soon he sat in his courtyard with the arrays erected with a Divine crystal in his hand.

The Core greedily ate the energy the crystal contained, and it felt the fit was far better than any other life-attuned energy he had given it so far, except the pure energies contained in the lotus seed. The amount of energy was excellent as well, and it felt like he sat in a spring of life, every cell in his body vibrating with vitality.

After roughly two hours he started to sense some instability in the core due to the life-attuned energies overpowering the other side, and he quickly took out one of his E-Grade Miasma Crystals. Absorbing a Miasma Crystal was, as expected, the opposite of the Divine Crystals, and it felt like he was gripped with a cold hand of death as he absorbed its energies.

This process kept repeating for a few times until he hesitantly decided to hold one crystal in each hand and started absorbing again. The energies wildly clashed in his body, causing quite a bit of pain, but in the end it was manageable. The important

thing was that his rate of absorption had doubled, and Zac didn't move for day after day.

His mind was completely emptied, and he only focused on the vast amounts of energies that passed through his body on its way to his Specialty Core. After a few days, he had absorbed over a hundred times the energy he had available in his body at any given moment, clearly displaying the extreme amounts of power the small core contained.

It was only on the sixth day he felt a change. His core finally seemed satiated.

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#### **Chapter 203 - Duplicity**

Zac was quite relieved when he put away the half-absorbed crystals. He had already expended most of his stock of Divine Crystals, and he was starting to fear that his core was simply a bottomless hole. But now he knew there truly was a limit to it.

Zac closed his eyes and focused his senses on the core, trying to understand what it did. It had undergone quite a change unbeknownst to him the past week. Before he started to absorb the E-Grade crystals it had been a chaotic jumble of gold interchanged with black, likely representing life and death.

Now the chaos had given way to order, and there was a clean line of demarcation, which each of the halves of the Core seemingly consisting of one of the colors. This only was the surface though, as Zac's mental sight had no means to penetrate the surface of the Specialty Core.

Covering the core were dense patterns of inscriptions, but even after looking at them for half an hour he didn't really find out anything of use. Calrin had said that Specialty Cores served a special function, but Zac simply had no way to discern what this one would do from his clues so far.

He knew that the fractals were created by the Apostate of Order to follow a certain ruleset, but as far as he was concerned it was all unreadable hieroglyphs so far. He had rather hoped to receive some sort of information burst to explain the core when it was done, but there was no such luck.

The core also didn't respond in the slightest when he tried to infuse it with Cosmic Energy or his Dao, no matter how much he tried. It felt like he was staring at a treasure trove just out of reach. With a sigh he opened his eyes, admitting defeat for now.

The good news at least was that he probably wouldn't be in any danger any longer when he traveled the Dead Zone. Since his Core was satiated it shouldn't absorb any more miasma when killing Zombies or other undead.

The bad news was that his gambit to get stronger before the Treasure Hunt through the core seemed to be a wash. However, there still was a week to go, and he could at least work on his Dao. Zac opened up his status screen to take another look at his Seeds, but something odd made him stop in his tracks.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

61

Class

Hatchetman (F)

Race

Human (E)

Alignment

Port Atwood - Lord (Earth)

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Core

Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Early

Core

Duplicity (F)

Strength

344

Dexterity

162

Endurance

231

Vitality

201

Intelligence

90

Wisdom

85

Luck

93

Free Points

3

Nexus Coins

20 853 653

There actually was a new row for his core, right beneath his Dao Seeds. The System had named his core duplicity, which felt like a clue. Zac didn't think it meant that the core would help him become a better liar, but rather referred to the two halves of it.

Unfortunately, there was no menu for him to go further, such as his Dao Screen or Title screen, and that simple line was his only clue. But Zac remembered he actually had a title about his core, and perhaps it might give him some answers.

**[Core: Successfully form a Core. Reward: 5% Strength, ?????????]**

To his surprise the Title had actually changed, now giving out a pretty good reward. When he first received the core it had given him nothing, only displaying a line

of question marks. The question marks were still there though, making Zac a bit confused.

As he saw it there were two possibilities. The first possibility was that the core simply wasn't complete yet, and it being satiated with energies was just the first step in building it. That would explain why it was completely inert even though it was complete.

The other possibility was that the question marks showed that the Title could keep improving. In the status screen the core was shown in the same way as his Class and Race, with an (F) behind it, showing it likely could be upgraded in the same manner.

Or perhaps it was something else entirely, he was simply speculating at the moment. But seeing the title made him remember something he had forgotten in all the excitement, something that might spell trouble down the line.

Until he met Greatest he had been operating under the assumption he was essentially growing a normal cultivator's core ahead of schedule. He based this on the fact that it was positioned right where a normal core would appear when reaching D-Grade, and it being tightly integrated with his pathways.

But from how Calrin explained it a Specialty Core was like an add-on to a warrior, rather than swapping out the core. What would happen to him in the future when the spot for his normal core was already occupied? Was it possible to move his new core?

Various thoughts and scenarios whirled in his head, but finally he reluctantly tabled the matter. He simply knew too little about the situation, and there was nothing he could do at the moment. In any case, a 5% boost to his Strength wasn't shabby, making it well worth the week he spent on nurturing the core.

Zac put his three free points into Endurance and closed his menu. He was initially going to make a decision on his Dao Seeds, but he felt he needed to clear his head first. For the first time in almost a week, he stood up and stretched his stiff body before leaving his courtyard.

It was around midday, and neither Kenzie or Emily was at home. He was a bit bored so he decided to head to the Academy. He wanted to see his sister, and Alyn would perhaps have some helpful knowledge about Specialty Cores.

The academy had changed quite a bit the past weeks, forming a compound of its own. Before it had simply been a large field of gravel where the Valkyries trained, but now it felt like a real place of learning.

There were over ten structures that held either classrooms or training facilities, and the large training field had been turned into five fields, each with different settings for the gravity array. He was planning on taking a tour but stopped when he passed the field with the lowest gravity boost.

Emily was currently facing a demon warrior, holding a small tomahawk in each hand. The demon was unarmed, and simply blocked her strikes by redirecting their trajectories.

"Your strikes still lack ferocity," the demon said. "You and your attacks need to be indomitable. The axe is not like a sword, where there exist myriad techniques. The axe is a simpler tool, with fewer ways to attack. It is easier for me to block you because it's easy for me to guess your attack patterns."

"So what should I do? And don't say change weapon," Emily huffed.

"Make it so that it doesn't matter if I know what you're about to do. Crush all resistance, break all defenses. Does Lord Atwood hide his intentions in battle? No, he simply pushes forward, crushing tactics with power," the demon said, clearly with some approval in his voice.

Zac scratched his chin with a wry smile as he walked away. While what the demon said at the end sounded like a compliment, it also made him sound a bit like a simpleton who only charged straight ahead. He really needed to add some brains to his brawns.

It seemed that Emily hadn't listened to either Alyn or Alea, swapping to a more magically inclined class. But Zac wouldn't stop her from following her convictions. If she felt that strongly about using axes, it probably was for the best if she kept it up.

Zac didn't interrupt the training and let her be since he knew that Emily was working extremely hard in preparation for her sixteenth birthday. She had been hungering to get stronger since Fort Roger, and she was almost there now.

Instead, he headed over to Alyn's. The schoolmistress still chose to stay inside the academy, though her simple house had received an extensive upgrade. Recently he had learned that the reason so many demons helped Alyn out with various things. She had quite a few suitors.

It appeared that the combination of ruthlessness and graceful and intellectual demeanor made the schoolmistress quite a catch in the eyes of many of the demonic warriors. It was even to the point that a few of the warriors had mainly stayed behind on Earth because she did so.

"Lord Atwood, what brings you here?" Alyn said with a smile as she opened her door and indicated him to sit down in a chair on the patio.

"I simply wanted to take a look at the progression of the academy," Zac said as he sat down. "It looks you have everything in hand."

"Everything is proceeding fine. It turns out that you stopping me from whipping the children did not lessen the children's productivity. I still have much to learn it seems," Alyn said.

"We have also found a few islanders who were teachers before your world got integrated, and we are currently teaching them a revised curriculum along with the children. Within a year we will have operations running for children between 6 and 18."

"That's great. And the armies?"

"Apart from the Valkyries there currently are around 2500 humans in training. Around half of them are cultivators coming from Refugee's Harbor. However, they're still mostly a hodge-podge group of people of various strengths and weaknesses. They lack structure and discipline," Alyn said with a sigh. "Currently they wouldn't be any use in assaulting an Incursion."

"I'm sure you can whip them into order. No need to be as lax with soldiers as with the children," Zac said with a small smile. "What about the beastmaster I sent you?"

"You mean the pet caretaker?" Alyn said, raising an eyebrow. "Well, I think she should get some sort of class choices related to beasts. We are currently getting her acquainted with barghest and the Ayr hive in hopes to improve her choices before rushing her to level 25. She was a bit reluctant at first but she came around after I explained about the bond between a beastmaster and its horde."

"Great, keep me posted on that," Zac said with a nod.

The two kept conversing about various topics for a bit, and Zac even broached the subject of Specialty Cores. Unfortunately, Alyn knew even less about them than Calrin, only having heard that stronger forces sometimes depended on Specialty Cores for their advanced Heritages to work.

"Where does Kenzie usually train?" finally asked, after having gone through everything he needed for the moment.

“She’s over at the fourth quadrant. She’s quite impressive, you know. She has a mage-class, but I’ve never met someone with such amazing reflexes. She’d make a great swordfighter or pugilist as well,” Alyn said, her eyes brightening up. “Perhaps a hybrid Class at E-grade, like I’m pushing for with Emily.”

Zac was a bit confused, but then it hit him. Kenzie had never displayed any particular feats of athleticism back in the day, though she played a bit of basketball in school. But now she had an AI helping out. Perhaps it could provide her with similar features as his **[Axe Mastery]**, except that it also worked in battles.

He realized his sister might even be able to help him train his close combat. From what he understood Jeeves refused to help others, but if the two sparred the AI would help both of them out whether it liked it or not.

Zac walked over to the field, and soon found Kenzie sit in a corner of the field. She was currently wielding a Fireball in one hand a floating Icicle in the other as she ran through an obstacle course. There were targets planted at various places, and it seemed it was set up so that she was supposed to shoot an attack of a specific element depending on the markings on the targets.

Zac let her finish her run, after which she came up to him, a slight sheen of sweat covering her.

“Impressive,” Zac said with a smile.

“You’re finally out of your hole?” she said with a slightly accusatory tone. “I thought you would stay in there until the treasure hunt.”

“Honestly I’m only out to take a breather. There’s still a lot to do. What are you doing?” Zac asked, changing the subject.

He knew he hadn’t spent a lot of time with his sister since he saved her, and he felt bad about it. But at the same time, there was simply so much to do. He was desperately struggling to keep his edge in order to keep himself and the citizens of Port Atwood safe.

“I’m training coordinations. Jar... My friend said that a big weakness for mages was adaptability and close combat. He designed this course so that I will get better at adapting my attacks, and to better handle myself while fighting. He says that standing still and shooting fireballs is the same as waiting to be killed,” she explained.

Zac had to agree with the AI after thinking back to his fights with mages. They were quite annoying and their attacks were often very strong, but usually when Zac caught up to them the fight was over. One swing or two and they were dead. It felt extremely prudent to learn some footwork in conjunction with the spells. If she could keep shooting fireballs while running to maintain her distance from her target she would be far safer.

“Sounds like a smart idea,” Zac said approvingly.

“More importantly, you should go see Hannah,” Kenzie said. “I tried to tell you three days ago but you were unreachable.”

“Hannah?” Zac said with a frown. “What’s going on?”

“I think she’s in trouble,” Kenzie said, looking a bit concerned.

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#### **Chapter 204 - To Forgive**

## A note from TheFirstDefier

Happy New Year defiers!

“She came to me a few days ago, wanting to speak with you. She looked pale and haggard,” Kenzie said with worry on her face. “I tried to ask what had happened, but she wouldn’t say. She only said she really needed to speak with you.”

Zac frowned, an unsettling feeling emerging in his chest. Was someone making things difficult for Hannah because she was his ex?

“I went by her house yesterday,” she continued “It looked some had harassed her. The door was broken.”

“Did you talk to her again?” Zac said with some agitation.

“No, I couldn’t find her since then. But I told Ogras to have people patrol her neighborhood,” Kenzie said.

“I’ll fix the situation,” Zac said, leaving without another word.

Anger was burning in his chest as he moved toward Hannah’s house in the residential district. He couldn’t help but believe that someone was harassing her due to her complicated relationship with himself.

It wouldn’t be impossible that it was someone doing things to Hannah in a misguided attempt to suck up to him, or perhaps it was someone who simply delighted in kicking people when they were down. But whatever the case was it had thoroughly enraged Zac.

Even if the feelings of affection had cooled over the past months, Hannah was still someone who held a place in his heart. She was someone who knew Zac, rather than the Super Brother-Man. Whoever was behind this would regret inserting themselves into his matters.

He soon arrived outside Hannah’s house once again, and it was just like Kenzie had said. The white door from earlier was actually cracked open, now resting against the wall. A new door had been installed, though it clearly was a makeshift solution as it didn’t properly fit in the doorframe.

That wasn’t all. Multiple windows were broken, and it looked like someone had thrown mud at the villa. Zac stood completely frozen for a few seconds, unbelieving at what he was seeing. Suddenly he saw a slight movement in one of the windows, telling him that Hannah was home. This time he didn’t knock, instead immediately entering in haste.

Luckily it was clear that no one dared to actually enter the home of Hannah, leaving the interior intact. A sound was heard and Zac could see a haggard-looking Hannah step out of a doorway holding a pillow in front of her.

“Are you okay? What’s going on?” Zac said with concern.

Hannah didn’t say a word and only started sobbing. Zac moved over to her by instinct and placed his arms around her. Suddenly a slight prick of pain erupted in his stomach, and he moved away with some confusion.

To his shock, Zac saw that a dagger was firmly embedded in his gut. He couldn’t understand how he could be attacked like this without any alarm bells going off, or more importantly that Hannah would attack him. Zac furiously looked up at his ex, but before he had time to do anything a boundless cold erupted from the weapon.

“You...” was all Zac could say as darkness took him.

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A storm of emotions rushed through Hannah's head as she looked down at the unmoving corpse of her former boyfriend. Adrenaline coursed through her veins, to the point that her hands couldn't stop shaking.

She'd truly done it, she had managed to kill the strongest man in the world. She knew that meant she had gained the Lordship title, and that she was in control of both the huge wealth of the town and the Dao Repository. The path to becoming a true elite of the world was opened.

She thought she would be elated, but as she looked down on Zac she only felt empty, disgusted even. She had seen true anger on Zac's face when he had stopped to see the damage she and David had orchestrated to make him run here in a hurry. An unsettling feeling was starting to rise in her chest, the scene of Zac arriving playing over and over in her mind.

"I wasn't sure you'd go through with it," David said as he stepped out from his hiding spot behind a false wall, panting and pale.

When he saw her conspirator Hannah's chaotic thoughts quickly stilled, and she turned over to him with a frown.

"I can't rely on others to become stronger. It doesn't matter if he slept with that bitch or not. I still have my goals, and he was in the way of them. And what's with you?" Hannah asked, calming her raging emotions.

"Do you think it's easy to mask the killing intent from his senses?" David huffed. "More importantly, is he dead?"

Hannah's eyes suddenly widened in a horrifying realization.

"I haven't received any energy! He's still alive!" Hannah frantically said as she looked down on the knife that blazed in golden luster.

The knife she got from David was called a **[Purifying Dagger]** for some reason, and it stole all the living energies out of a body to a certain extent. The knife would have no effect on a Zombie, but to a human it essentially was a death sentence.

It was the very dagger she received from David when they started hatching this scheme. He had apparently gotten it in the tutorial for completing a difficult quest and kept it secret until this day. Its weakness was that it could only be used once, becoming scrap metal afterward. David had multiple times exhorted her to make the stab count for that very reason.

Unfortunately, it seemed out that there was a limit on how much vitality it could absorb. But even with the enormous power of someone like Zac, it should at least have absorbed a large chunk of his life force since Zac was truly looking like a pale corpse at the moment.

As she looked down on Zac who blankly stared up on the roof, she knew he wasn't long for this world even if they left him alone. It had probably passed a threshold where the lack of vitality would cause a chain reaction where one organ after another shut down.

However, David frowned and immediately rushed toward Zac, not wanting to take any chances. But before he had time to decapitate his former friend a shield of shadows appeared over the lifeless body of Zac.

In the next instant a spear penetrated David's gut, lifting him up in the air. He screamed in pain but he was unable to extricate himself. He helplessly hung in the air, blood freely raining down on the floor.

"Now look what you have done," a desolate voice said with a sigh as the demon leader stepped out of the shadows holding a spear. "You might just have doomed your planet. For what? Revenge for him dumping you?"

“For power. I got a quest that gave me lordship if I managed to kill Zac. We did it, giving me complete control. I know you want [The Umbra] Inheritance. Help me solidify my position and it’s yours. Anything else you need that Port Atwood has, you will be given,” Hannah quickly said.

This wasn’t what they had planned. The idea was to solidify their position and take control of the Arrays covering the town before anyone even found out Zac was dead, and from there negotiate from a place of power. That Ogras had somehow found out about them was highly unnerving, and it felt as though things were getting out of control.

“What would it matter in the big picture if two pieces of trash like you got your hands on the inheritances? You would just squander the gifts anyway, and then get killed by the invaders,” Ogras said with a sneer as he threw the wailing David into a wall.

“Besides, you seem to be under a misconception. You think you’re qualified to negotiate with me?” The demon continued, looking down at the unmoving body of Zac. “You’ve ruined so much for me, and you think I will let you live in peace? Your newfound lordship title won’t help you. The Ruthless Heavens respects power, and you don’t have it.”

The next moment the demon stood in front of Hannah, and before she had time to react he clutched her throat and lifted her up in the air.

“Don’t worry. I will not kill you. Since I can’t be the lord, someone else will have to bear that burden. And you will just have to pray that we survive the coming years. Because you can trust me in this regard; if this planet falls and becomes my tomb, no one shall suffer more than the two of you until I meet my demise,” the demon growled.

“Let me handle it,” an abyssal voice suddenly said, making Ogras quickly turn around.

It was Zac, who was slowly getting to his feet, a black ichor trickling down his mouth. At first Ogras seemed relieved, but when he noticed the face of his friend his pupils shrunk to a needle-point, and he couldn’t help but take a step back.

-----  
Rage and betrayal were coursing through Zac’s mind as he slowly got to his feet. He knew that he might have been dead for a bit, but somehow he’d heard everything that was said. He couldn’t believe that his two former friends would conspire to kill him.

He also had to admit that he was shocked that they actually succeeded. He hadn’t thought many on Earth could harm him anymore, let alone kill him. But that horrible knife that Hannah used sapped all the life in his body.

He still couldn’t completely understand how he still was alive, as he clearly felt himself dying after he fell down on the floor. But soon after the core in his body went haywire, spewing out a torrent of miasma that still filled every corner of his body.

Perhaps the death-attuned energy had staved off true death, but Zac knew it would be a pain to get his body under control again. He remembered what an undertaking it was to cleanse his wound earlier.

The miasma also caused some odd reactions in his body, as his sense of sight and smell was all messed up. He could still see the others just fine, but it was as though as there was another filter superimposed upon his normal sight.

It took him a brief moment to understand what it was. It was life. The miasma somehow caused him to see pure life that made the others shine in an enticing light. Initially, he thought it was heat he saw, but after turning his head he saw that wasn’t

the case. He could see the same effect on the trees through the window, and the flowers planted in the window sill.

It was a magical sight, and Zac wondered if this was how the undead saw the world. The same nactually went for his sense of smell, as he could actually smell the life coming from Hannah and Ogras. It was a sweet and refreshing scent, like a subdued perfume.

The effect also felt reminiscent of the energies from the skills that the purifiers used, though what he saw was more subdued and natural. He turned his head to the wounded David at the side and saw that small motes of life were leaving him from his wound. He was slowly bleeding out, his life leaving with him.

But more importantly, that wasn't the only different thing about him.

He didn't understand why everything was so different at the moment, and could only attribute it to the deathly part of his core. Still, all these questions would have to wait for later, as he needed to deal with the situation.

"Just because of a misunderstanding you tried to kill me?" Zac said with a sigh as he walked toward his former lover whose horror was evident in her eyes. "Or was it greed?"

He blankly looked at Hannah for a few more seconds, the silence only broken by the wheezings of David. Zac once again turned his eyes the man who was still huddled in the corner.

"I wondered why you didn't seek me out. I have been back for some time, after all. If you wanted to get stronger you could have just asked, and I would have helped you. But it turned out David was already dead," Zac said with a sad sigh.

"What are you talking about?" David spat out between grit teeth. "You shouldn't be alive."

Hannah looked quite confused as well, not understanding the exchange. Ogras' brows rose however as he looked over at the wounded man in concern. Zac only evenly stared at the person in front of him. When David saw the faces of Zac and ogras his frantic face suddenly turned completely calm.

"You didn't die, but you have fallen. Purity will come for you," David said, closing his eyes.

The next moment Cosmic Energy Gathered around David, his body starting to glow with a golden sheen.

But it didn't get further than that as tens of shadow blades chopped his body into mincemeat in the blink of an eye, effectively stopping the self-destruction.

Zac coldly looked the lifeless body seeing the motes of light quickly disappearing somewhere. To his surprise, a few of the motes entered his body, and he sensed the life energy entering the golden part of his core.

"God damn cultists," Ogras only spat. "This was a tricky one. I didn't actually kill him I think, I received no Cosmic Energy."

"The weapon should have come from him," Zac said with a frown, looking down at the shining knife. "We'll find him."

The reason he was so confident was his newfound sight. As long as he didn't lose it he wouldn't need any Springroot any longer. It was clear as day to him that David was a shapeshifter, as a ball of golden fire emanated vitality from within his heart.

"He must have been one of the true elites that came through the Incursion. Are you ok?" the demon hesitantly asked, bringing Zac out of his musings.

"I will survive," Zac said with a shrug, turning to Hannah.

"Please, I- David tricked me," Hannah frantically said.

“I forgive you,” Zac said after a while, causing Hannah’s eyes to widen in surprise and hope. “You were manipulated by a foreign invader.”

“Yes! It was David, no that thing, that kept telling me to kill you!” Hannah agreed, her head bobbing up and down.

“But to forgive is not to condone the actions of others,” Zac muttered, mostly to himself, as he turned to Ogras. “Throw her in a dungeon for now, until I decide what to do with her. If we don’t have one, build it.”

“Sure. Are you truly okay?” Ogras asked, knocking Hannah out cold.

Zac looked down on his former lover, whose face was in the middle of a transformation from hope to despair when she lost consciousness.

“I am fine. Why do you keep asking me that?” Zac asked with a frown as he looked back up at the demon.

“Well, for one I know it kind of messes with your head to be betrayed by those close to you. I should know, my personal maid tried to murder me when I was 8,” the demon said with a shrug.

“But I mostly ask because you’ve turned into a god damn Zombie.”

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

A nice little cliff to round off the year :)

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 30 chapters ahead) please check out my

Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have a

Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

#### **Chapter 205 - Draugr**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

We’re kicking off the new year with style!

A new month also means a new drive! [Start the year right by supporting this Defier](#), and as a reward you will be able to read up to 30 chapters ahead of the RR releases.

“What?” Zac asked with a sinking feeling, hurriedly walking over to a mirror in the house.

He was shocked at what stared back at him, and he finally understood the odd stares from the three earlier. Ogras wasn’t kidding around with his comment, it truly seemed that he was looking at an undead rather than himself. Of course, it was still his features, but he now looked deathly pale like he’d lost all his blood.

But the largest difference was his eyes. They weren’t the murky empty eyes of the normal zombies, and neither were they the balls shining a red sinister life like those of Mhal, the Corpse Lord. Rather they were like two black holes. The whites were completely gone, and only true blackness covered them. When he looked at them it felt as though he was looking down into the abyss.

It was such an unreal feeling seeing himself like this that he had to touch his face to make sure he wasn’t dreaming.

“What’s going on?” he said, his voice now a bit shaky.

It started to look like the purpose of his core was to give him a second chance at life, though as an undead. The dagger should have killed him, but instead he stood here completely fine.

“That’s what I’d like to know. Are you living? Are you dead?” Ogras said from the side, still keeping some distance from Zac. “Its weird, even if you died and somehow turned into a sentient Elite Zombie you shouldn’t have retained any memories. Undead are completely different people just inhabiting a former person’s body.”

Zac quickly opened his status screen to see if he could glean any information.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**1**

**Class**

**-**

**Race**

**Draugr (E)**

**Alignment**

**Port Atwood - Lord (Earth)**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Core**

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Early Core**

**Duplicity (F)**

**Strength**

**344**

**Dexterity**

**162**

**Endurance**

**220**

**Vitality**

**188**

**Intelligence**

**90**

**Wisdom**

**85**

**Luck**

**93**

**Free Points**

**0**

**Nexus Coins**

**20 853 653**

The sight made him completely befuddled. There were a few shocking changes to his screen. First, the fact that both his level and class were completely reset,

returning him to level 1. The next thing was that his race no longer was human, but something called a Draugr.

What was confusing was that while he might have lost his levels and his class, all the benefits remained. His attributes were almost unchanged as far as he could remember, and his Titles and Dao Seeds were still there. The only difference was that the boost to Endurance and Vitality that he gained from **[Forester's Constitution]** seemed to be gone.

He started to get an idea of what was going on, his eyes darting toward the line with his core. But to make sure he opened the ladders. As he suspected he was still in a comfortable lead on the wealth- and level ladder.

Zac could only assume that he was somehow split into two entities due to his odd core, each one possessing its own status screen. If he truly had been reborn as an undead he shouldn't have all these attributes or still stay on top of the ladder.

He even knew of a few rankers who had fallen in the Dead Zone, turning into Zombies. They immediately were removed from the ladder, just like when anyone else died. That could only mean that the system still considered him to be alive.

Of course, this was only a theory tinged with desperation from his side, and he still didn't know how to use the core. Even after it got satiated he wasn't able to interact with it, and it was the same result now even after it had somehow awoken. It would take some time to figure everything out before he could decide his next move.

"I am fine. I think it's just the miasma in my body that went out of control. It might take some time to get it back in line," Zac said, hiding what was really going on for now.

"Miasma?" Ogras said with a frown. "I thought you said you got better."

"Well, it's complicated," Zac evaded. "It's like what you said with the unholy beacons. Destroying them is a waste when they can be useful."

The demon leveled an even gaze at Zac for a while, finally shaking his head.

"I don't know what you've done, but you are playing with fire. The multiverse is full of people who have turned into abominations in their pursuit of power. You need to wield the power, not let it wield you."

Zac could only grimace in response. He knew that growing an unknown core that was partly compromised out of miasma was a crazy gambit, but at the moment he didn't have a lot of alternatives.

"Don't worry, I know what I'm doing," Zac could only say. "Or well, I don't really. But I'll be careful. More importantly, how did you show up so quickly?"

"Fine. But remember, if you die to some stupid experiment we're all fucked," Ogras said. "As for why I'm here? Your sister told me something odd was going on, so I checked it out. I found no evidence that this girl was attacked, making me think she did this to her own house. I wanted to find out what she was planning, so I stayed in the vicinity. I didn't expect them to almost kill you."

"I still don't understand how it's possible," Zac said as he looked down at the shining dagger. "Just what is that thing?"

"Not sure, but I would guess it's an offensive array rather than an actual weapon. Otherwise, it shouldn't have been strong enough to almost kill you," Ogras said.

Zac was inclined to agree. Not only did the thing slice through his robe, but it effortlessly pierced his body. Hannah simply shouldn't be strong enough to accomplish that. But if this dagger was something like the Thunder Punishment Balls still in his Pouch he understood why it was so dangerous. The one-time offensive arrays held extreme power.

He only didn't expect it to look just like a weapon. Clearly, the Church of Everlasting Dao held various means beyond the understanding of both Ogras and himself.

"I'll look into the weapon. Please try to find out just how a shapeshifter could replace David, and if the real one is still alive somewhere. Perhaps he kept him for questioning. He did manage to trick Hannah for potentially weeks, after all," Zac said.

"Have they reached the archipelago, or was it just a cultist lying in hiding from the incursion? It even managed to block my danger sense and fake its death right in front of us," Zac added with a frown. "How is that even possible?"

"Nothing is unbeatable in the multi-verse. Any powerhouse has a good deal of Luck accumulated through the years," Ogras explained. "But there are many means to trick it, at least temporarily. That's a major part of the pure Assassination classes. You can't let your Luck be a crutch for you. Always be vigilant."

Zac's eyes thinned slightly when he heard the demon's explanation. What Ogras said made sense, but he wondered why such an important piece of information never had left his mouth over these past months. Was the lordling still planning things in the shadows?

"As for the fake death, I have no idea. I think this guy must have been a second in command or a leader of the shapeshifters, he's very slippery. It seems we will need to buy a lot more springroot. Be careful of anyone approaching you now. He might have more of those daggers," Ogras continued with a frown as the shadows swallowed him and the unconscious Hannah.

Zac could only sigh and take out a hooded robe from his cosmos sack to hide his new appearance. He also picked up the weird knife that Hannah used on him, as perhaps it was a clue in all this.

Finally, he headed back home. He snuck over the wall when no one was looking, as he wasn't ready to show his appearance to the guards. His mansion was empty at the moment, with both Emily and Kenzie luckily still at the academy. He quickly erected his set of arrays around it so that he wouldn't be interrupted.

Zac sat down and started to ponder on his next move. The first goal for him was to turn back to a human, as he didn't want to stay a so-called Draugr forever. However, he never received a shape-change skill or something similar from the core. And this was provided that he was correct about the function of his Specialty Core.

He could only turn his sight inward, looking at the core inside his body, trying to glean any hints. And to his surprise, he saw one. Before he turned to an undead his core was completely balanced, but now that balance was off.

The side with the miasma had shrunk by at least 10 percent. The intricate fractals still covered the core though, creating a fine mesh on it. Perhaps it meant that the core expended some of its deathly energy to transform him.

Zac could only guess that the clue was in the fractals on the core. He still had no idea where they came from or how they were formed, but there was nothing else that could explain the weird things that were happening to him.

He slowly went over them one by one with far more scrutiny compared to before, trying to glean any meaning from them. The minutes turned to hours as he scoured the small orb over and over again until he started to see a pattern. For the first time since the fall, he felt he had some use of his job as an animator for a marketing agency.

Just like he needed to look over his designs frame by frame, he looked over the inscriptions fractal by fractal, trying to understand how they fit together and what they meant. And he actually made some progress after arduously creating a mental map of what was going on.

While at first glance the two sides seemed to possess quite similar fractals, there was a startling difference between the inscriptions of the life-attuned and death-attuned sides. There were more of them on the life-attuned side.

And after slowly mapping out just what the difference was, he was realized that he recognized what remained. The inscriptions on the two halves of the cores formed a mostly closed network of pathways that were only connected at two places. After understanding the base framework he could see what was added on the life-attuned side.

It was his own pathways he got from the class Hatchetman. They were somehow added into the larger mesh on the life-attuned side, whereas the equivalent addition was missing on the death-attuned side.

While the phenomenon was weird, it wasn't too surprising that it looked like that. He was currently level one without a class, and he had already realized that his pathways were already gone. That was a big reason he had first thought he'd truly turned, as the familiar routes for his power were missing.

But Zac felt positive after having discovered the fractals for the Hatchetman class. Together with the other facts it truly felt like the core only stored his class in the half containing the life-attuned energy. Now the next question was how to load it up again, so to speak.

But that wasn't really what was on Zac's mind at the moment. It brought to question something even more exciting. Was he able to gain two classes from now on? Just what would happen when he leveled up with this undead form?

The question burned in his mind but he restrained himself from doing anything drastic. At first, he just wanted to rush out into the woods and start killing barghest by the truckload, rushing toward level 25.

But he also realized that this might be an opportunity. He knew far more about the system now compared to when he first was weak and alone on the island. Perhaps he could accomplish some amazing feats and gain titles with his status as a level 1 warrior.

The first title that came to mind was His Title chain that began with **[Giantsbane]** and ended with **[Slayer of Leviathans]**. He didn't know where the limits to that title chain lay, but he felt there might be a final, ultimate title for killing a beast 75 levels higher than himself.

That was because it would mean that he surmounted an entire grade in a fight. He suddenly felt infinitely lucky that he wasn't the one that killed the shapeshifter that had taken David's form. Zac believed that getting the **[Slayer of Leviathans]** quest shouldn't be an impossible endeavor for many people, as a level 50 without any titles wasn't very strong.

But killing an E-ranked being at level 1 should be extremely uncommon, even in the context of the whole multiverse, and should bring big benefits. It made him once again lament that he had no one like Greatest to consult about other opportunities like that.

All kinds of plans and opportunities flashed through his mind, and his worry was slowly being replaced with excitement.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New year, new Zac!

If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 30 chapters ahead) please check out my

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## Chapter 206 - The Correct Path

### A note from TheFirstDefier

New year, new drive! [Start the year right by supporting this Defier](#), and as a reward you will be able to read up to 30 chapters ahead of the RR releases.

Suddenly Zac's train of thoughts was interrupted by a familiar figure pacing outside his array looking fidgety. He blankly looked at her figure for a few seconds before removing the array with a frown.

"What do you want?" Zac asked as Alea started at the shield disappearing.

"I... Heard from Ogras what happened. I just wanted to see if you were okay," Alea said with some hesitation in her voice.

"I am fine," Zac calmly said.

"That's great. I was worried," Alea started saying, but was interrupted by Zac.

"Until now I've looked the other way regarding your eccentricities, such as poisoning me and others, chalking it up to mostly harmless pranks. But we're facing the reality of it now. All actions have consequences. I know you didn't mean it, and there were other factors at play. But you have a part in what happened today. Your actions on the square helped push Hannah along her path of no return," Zac said with an even voice.

"I..." Alea only managed to get out, looking physically hurt by his words.

However, Zac didn't stop.

"I have decided to remove your title as Head of Security for Port Atwood. Hannah will spend an undetermined time locked away for her crimes, and I don't trust you with her. You're also no longer to come and go as you please in my restricted area. I need some space," Zac finished and closed his eyes.

Alea looked at Zac with red-rimmed eyes for a few seconds before she turned and walked away, the courtyard once again turning deathly silent.

Zac silently looked at the departing back of the poison mistress. He didn't regret what he said, as he'd felt it since she played him at the market square. He was, however, a bit surprised that he felt no internal turmoil or confusion.

It was as though his Undead form had put a damper on all his feelings. They were still there somewhat, but there was a sense of disconnect with them. He briefly wondered if this was the case with all undead who had evolved to regain intelligence.

Perhaps it was necessary, as the zombies had an inherent bloodlust. It would be impossible to build a society if the higher undead couldn't control their urges, so the unfeeling state might be a result of evolution.

He didn't get much further before approaching steps once again echoed in his compound. It seemed Ogras had rushed around to spread the news or something. This time it was his sister who rushed into the courtyard with worry in her eyes.

"Are you okay?" Kenzie said as soon as she saw him.

However, Kenzie stopped a few meters away from him, looking at his new appearance with a frightened gaze.

"I'm fine," Zac said with a sigh as he once again erected the arrays around the two.

He then proceeded to explain the situation, covering both his core and the events that unfolded back at Hannah's. Kenzie silently listened to the narration, except exclaiming in shock upon the fact that Hannah had been the one to stab him.

The two of them silently sat in front of each other, not saying anything for a while, until Kenzie spoke up.

“What will you do with Hannah?” she asked.

“I don’t know. For now, she’ll be incarcerated,” Zac said, looking troubled.

He knew that in most empires out in the multiverse the punishment for trying to assassinate a leader would be execution without a doubt. But he wasn’t willing to go there with his ex-girlfriend, even if she tried to kill him.

“You know,” Kenzie said after mulling it over. “You said that David had been replaced with one of those shapeshifters. The thing could have used some mental skills on her. You know, she was hypnotized along with the others back in that town. I think I’ve heard that if you’ve been hypnotized once you get more susceptible to it afterward?”

Zac gave a start and looked over at Kenzie with surprise. That truly wasn’t something he’d considered so far. He had been busy with his own transformation so he simply chalked it up to betrayal because of greed mixed with anger.

“I heard about the matter in Refugee’s Harbour. But I don’t think hypnosis can make you kill someone, as that would be against their base instincts,” Zac finally said with a shake of his head.

“But it could make someone more paranoid, slowly make them crazy,” Kenzie retorted.

Zac silently thought it over. It truly was a distinct possibility that the shapeshifter did more than just provide the dagger. Still, did it even matter? The milk was already spilled, so to speak. And he didn’t believe that someone could be enticed to murder without there being a seed of hatred and malice to begin with.

“So when will you turn back?” Kenzie suddenly asked, changing the subject.

“Well, that’s the problem. I don’t really know,” Zac said as he scratched his chin.

“Why did you turn in the first place?” Kenzie asked.

“Well, perhaps the Core went haywire because I briefly died?” Zac hesitantly said.

He honestly didn’t know why the change happened at that moment, and could only guess it was some sort of failsafe built into the core.

“Didn’t you say that the knife you got stabbed with sucked out all your lifeforce?” Kenzie said. “Perhaps you turned to a zombie because that’s the trigger, rather than a defense mechanism.”

“It’s possible,” Zac said with a nod. “I also thought I might revert to a human if I remove all the miasma in my body.”

“So why don’t you?” she prodded.

“Well, for one it might actually kill me, I have no idea,” Zac said. “But I also believe that shouldn’t be the only way to trigger the change. I can’t die every time I want to shapeshift, and I don’t have any more of these cultist knives.”

“So you’re going to stay a Zombie until you find another way to change?”

“I’m a Draugr, not a Zombie,” Zac said, causing Kenzie to roll her eyes at him. “And I’ll try to revert before the Treasure Hunt at the latest. I can’t run around in there as an undead.”

“Besides, don’t I look pretty cool now? Like a vampire or something,” Zac said and struck a pose.

“No way, you look really scary with those eyes of yours,” Kenzie said, finally smiling a bit at the situation. “So what are you going to do?”

“I want to try out a few things. Gain a few titles and see if I can get a new Class,” Zac said. “Who knows, I might even be a cultivator now?”

“Dual-class, that sounds pretty cool!” Kenzie said, her eyes almost sparkling. “You should get a cool mage class, become the strongest hybrid.”

“Well, first of all, I don’t know how it’ll work,” Zac said. “If it will work at all.”

However, Kenzie brought up an interesting point. What would be the best class to match with his Hatchetman class? A mage class would help shore up his currently lacking Intelligence and Wisdom, making him a truly balanced warrior.

However, a dexterity-based class wasn’t a bad idea either. Currently, he was forced to put a lot of points into Dexterity just to keep up with his growth in Strength. It had come to the point that he had decided to change to a 2.5:1 split from the original 2:1 so that he could focus more on Endurance and Vitality.

He arrived at this reasoning from his fight with Average. His main attribute was Strength, and he needed to play to advantages. It didn’t matter if he was hit 10 times, as long as he got one big hit in the fight would be over. He only needed to be able to endure the 10 strikes, so to speak. That’s why he wanted to work more on endurance.

That also meant that an Endurance-based class, if there was such a thing, would be a good choice as well. Then he would be truly unkillable. Honestly, he felt either choice was good and had a hard time deciding what to do.

But it was still all speculation. He needed to reach level 25 first and see if it worked out as he intended. And he needed to see what options he got before deciding any further. There was also the issue of the Fruit of Ascension.

One of its effects was improving the choices in taking a class. But would that effect be expended if he got a class for his undead half? It felt more prudent to use its effects in trying for an epic class at E-Rank than getting a first class.

Or could he eat another one since he technically was a different person? There simply were so many things he didn’t understand. He needed information.

“What are you thinking about,” Kenzie asked, dragging him out of his reverie.

“I just feel that there’s so much I don’t understand,” Zac said with a sigh. “It’s hard to plan things out when everything is just guesswork.”

“Why don’t you ask Brazla?” Kenzie said. “He’s super old and his creator was a top tier C-Grade warrior according to him. He might know.”

Zac’s face scrunched up when hearing the name of the crazy Tool Spirit, but he had to admit that Kenzie might be on to something. However, the only problem was whether he’d help. There were two other ways as he saw it. One was to buy an information package through Calrin, and the other was asking the Creators.

Unfortunately, he was unsure whether he could afford the information from the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes. Just some basic information cost him 15 million Nexus Coins. Advanced topics such as dual classes and Specialty Cores were probably prohibitively expensive.

Meeting Average and his dad had made him realize how utterly poor he was in the big scale of things since the teenager was able to throw out a billion Nexus Coins just to shoo someone away. As for the Creators, there was a risk for things leaking to higher echelons in the multiverse.

“I guess I could try,” Zac sighed.

“I’ll come with, I haven’t talked to him today,” Kenzie said with a smile.

Soon the two stood in front of the gaudy towers, drowned in cascading rays of divine lights. Its surroundings were still not very exciting, but at least the uneven forest floor had been swapped out with a proper and uniform square.

Of course, it was likely too bland for the extravagant taste of Brazla. Unfortunately, there simply wasn't much he could do about it at the moment. His funds were mostly tied up in creating the contribution system.

"Little chick, you have once again come to bask in the glory that is the Great Sage Brazla? This time you even brought a Draugr to showcase?" the familiar voice echoed when they entered the hallways lined with the huge statues.

Not long after Brazla appeared. It was only the second time they met, but Zac was surprised to see that Brazla was looking completely different. This time he was donned like some royal conqueror, though all equipment was made from gold and platinum rather than serviceable materials.

His armor was completely studded with various gemstones, each somehow emitting almost blinding glimmers of light. Zac felt helpless the moment he saw the spirit, but he held his tongue.

"Hi Brazla," Kenzie said with a smile. "You look like a real warrior today."

"The world should sigh in relief that The Great Brazla is confined to the interiors of this building," the tool spirit said with a serious nod. "This one's might shakes both the heavens and the earth."

"You remember Zac?" Kenzie added.

"You went and turned into an undead, little Lord?" Brazla said, somewhat surprised. "Odd choice if you ask me. I would have thought a mortal would have preferred to die from old age, rather than getting taken by the Madness."

"The madness?" Zac asked confused.

"The undead aren't immortal, though they don't grow old. They instead go insane, their bloodlust overtaking everything else. Finally, they turn too stupid to even move, withering in place into goops of miasma. Quite disgusting," Brazla said, looking unconcerned.

"Not everyone can be an immortal like you Brazla," Kenzie said with a smile. "We were wondering if you know anything about Specialty Cores and Dual Classes?"

"What doesn't the Great Sage Brazla know?" the Tool Spirit said, puffing up his chest.

However, the next moment he looked suspiciously at the two of them.

"But why should I tell you? You promised to fix my surroundings, but they still look like a pauper's square."

"I'm heading into a treasure hunt into unknown lands in a week," Zac said. "I'll find something unique in there to improve your surroundings if you help me out this one time."

"Hmm... Well, alright," Brazla said. "What knowledge do you seek, mortal?"

"Dual Classes," Zac said, ignoring the attitude.

"What about it?" Brazla said, a bit disinterested. "It's possible. Is that what you're trying for by turning into an undead?"

Zac only nodded, not explaining any further. It appeared that Greatest's tool was working as intended since the Spirit didn't seem to notice anything off about him, instead thinking he simply was an undead.

"Well, it's extremely rare," Brazla continued. "Far rarer than body-and-spirit dual cultivators were back in the Pre-System era. However, there is one race where all

of them have dual classes. Of course, The Ur Wanderers are extremely few in numbers, born darlings of the multi-verse. Even The Great Brazla can't help but be a bit jealous of them."

Zac only nodded, not wanting to interrupt the tool spirit while it was actually being helpful. He could only assume that the Ur Wanderers were a powerful species in the multiverse. While species weren't equal in the multiverse, one could say that they were balanced in a sense.

Humans were quite weak, usually at the bottom of the rung. But they were extremely numerous, and out of every billion of them, a powerhouse might rise. Other races had huge advantages, sometimes even becoming C-Ranking Class upon adulthood by default. But these kinds of races were always far scarcer in numbers.

"So what do they do? Get two similar classes, or opposites?" Kenzie prodded.

"There are no rules to cultivation, little chick," Brazla said with some disdain. "Everyone has their own path. Finding the correct answer for oneself is half the struggle of becoming strong."

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#### **Chapter 207 - Titles**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New year, new drive! [Start the year right by supporting this Defier](#), and as a reward you will be able to read up to 30 chapters ahead of the RR releases.

Zac could only nod at what Brazla said, his own thoughts running along the same lines. He had started to believe that one wouldn't become truly strong by brainlessly copying others. That's why he never had any interest in checking out the heritages he owned.

That wasn't to say that one couldn't benefit from the knowledge of the previous generations. However, one first had to understand oneself and keep useful information, discarding the useless.

"Have you also heard of specialty cores?" Zac interjected, satisfied in simply knowing Dual Classes was a possibility, though clearly extremely rare.

"Of course," Brazla said. "A few of the inheritances of this very building even contains the means to create one. Those I've studied extensively."

Zac felt a bit troubled that the tool spirit somehow had managed to weasel itself into the inheritance zones to mess around. He could only hope that Brazla hadn't destroyed anything inside.

"What would happen if a Specialty Core is currently is taking the spot of where the Cosmic Core would normally go?" Zac asked.

"Well, they'd probably explode when the Cosmic Core was created," Brazla said. "Unless it's a Modifier-type, I suppose."

"What's that?" Zac asked with anticipation.

Brazla only snorted in response, and from somewhere got a golden nail file and started using it. Zac had to push down his rising exasperation. He knew that the tool spirit only acted like this to annoy him since it was just a hologram and didn't even

possess real nails. But that fact only made it more annoying, which was a source of frustration in of itself.

“Great Sage Brazla, surely someone with your magnanimity wouldn’t hold back this small amount of knowledge from your admirers?” Kenzie said with a wink.

“Hmm, true. This little information means nothing to The Great Sage of Ages,” Brazla nodded, putting away his file. “Modifier-cores are Specialty Cores that directly interact with a Cosmic Core in various ways. The most common example is the Specialty Core called ‘Shield’, which simply acts as a shield around a Cosmic Cores to protect it from attacks.

“But they can be much more integrated than that,” the tool spirit continued. “I’ve heard about one from my master that had the Cosmic Core grow inside it. The purpose of the Specialty Core was to extract energy faster than normally possible. It resulted in extraordinary firepower, but also hurt the cultivator’s body.”

Zac’s eyes lit up from the information. He didn’t believe that sort of core had anything to do with his own, but it told him that it wasn’t necessarily a problem with his position of his Specialty Core. If his real core simply grew inside his Duplicity Core, everything would work out okay. Perhaps it was even needed if he wanted to be able to switch between living and dead sides.

With the help of Kenzie buttering the megalomaniac tool spirit up, they soon had the answers they needed. Unfortunately, it didn’t know of any other open titles that could be attained by abusing the discrepancy between his level and strength.

According to Brazla, there were a few titles that could be awarded to youths who showed great potential at an early stage, even before they were able to cultivate. It could, for example, attaining Dao Seeds or upgrading their Race, even killing cultivators.

These were the so-called Heaven’s Chosen who were able to blast out with awe-inspiring power right out of the gates, and accumulating more and more advantages through their great start, just like himself. But since he was already level 1 he couldn’t get these titles since he was supposed to get them before turning 16.

The rest of the titles were generally trials and hidden Mystic Realms with known rewards. But those kinds of things were all locked out of reach for Zac since the Nexus Hub would stay inoperational until he managed to unlock its functions with some quest.

After a particularly hair-raising tirade where Kenzie spoke at great lengths about the greatness of Brazla he was even so happy that he fished out a crystal containing a basic rundown of publicly known titles.

Zac threw a glance over at his sister, who only smiled mysteriously. Zac started to understand why she visited the tool spirit every day. Just what kind of valuables had she managed to squeeze out Brazla simply by throwing away any shame and butter him up?

The crystal confirmed what the spirit had said. There weren’t a lot of public titles, and Zac had pretty much all of them. He also had a few that weren’t listed, such as Luck of the Draw. It did however show that the next attribute-linked title would come at 5000 points total points, but only if those were gained while still in E-Grade.

It also confirmed that there was a title higher than Slayer of Leviathans, which was great news to Zac. But otherwise, it was mostly mentions of various public trials or mystic realms, and a short comment about recommended strength before attempting them.

It seemed that his dream of cheesing a large number of extra titles wasn’t meant to happen. Still, there were a few of them. Not counting the Core skill, it was perhaps

possible to gain another set of his Class-related titles, doubling up on the rewards. And perhaps there were additional titles for having two classes.

Judging by the title guide there wasn't much of a reason to stay at level one, so the next goal would be killing the E-Grade beast. However, he honestly wasn't too certain about his chances. Since his pathways were gone, so were his skills, leaving him only his Dao Seeds and his brawn.

The only thing that remained seemed to be the effects of **[Forester's Constitution]**, and Zac guessed it was because the skill worked like a title, giving a passive attribute boost.

It truly depended on what kind of monster lurked in the crater containing the entrance to the Mystic Realm. If it was something with roughly the power of the Fiend Wolf he wasn't too worried. He was far stronger than he was back then, and he was confident he'd make short work of that animal as he was right now.

But it was another matter if he encountered something like the Star Ox. That thing was exceedingly dangerous, and if he didn't possess **[Loamwalker]** he would have perished from its devastating beam. Perhaps he would actually need to enlist a certain Demon for this excursion, just in case.

"If you see Ogras, can you tell him I need to see him?" Zac said as he exited the towers with his sister.

"Why don't you call him?" Kenzie asked, looking a bit confused.

"What?" Zac asked confused. "Are phones operational again?"

Kenzie only rolled her eyes at him as she took out a crystal.

"It's Kenzie. My brother needs to see you," she said and put away the inscribed gem. "You two really are boneheads, you two haven't even exchanged means to communicate?"

Zac could only awkwardly shrug and head back toward their home. It was a relief to leave the Towers of Myriad Dao behind, as he was afraid he would get blinded if he stayed much longer. Ten minutes later the demon appeared in Zac's courtyard, immediately sitting down with a grunt.

"Your girl has been put in custody, I have Janos taking care of the situation until we can get a Desolation Array in place. Janos said that she's been subject to some mental manipulation skills, something far more skilled than what the bumbling hypnotist did at Refugee's Harbor. Not even he can unravel it in a short while," Ogras said.

Pain and shame filled Zac's heart, as he had no idea such things had happened right beneath his nose. But he forcefully pushed those thoughts away, focusing on what he could do at the moment.

"What about the Shapeshifter?" Zac asked.

"Gone in the wind. The island is just too big, he could be hiding anywhere. The barghest in the woods won't be a hindrance to him. I guess he never stayed inside the town for long periods in order to not be exposed. I asked around, 'David' was rarely seen after arriving in Port Atwood," Ogras said as he took out a bottle of wine and took a swig.

Zac could only nod with some annoyance. He knew just how easy it was to slip by unseen on this huge island, as that was exactly how he'd survived for over a month with a demon army around. And this cultist was likely far better at sneaking around than he ever was.

"But we did find the real David in a hidden basement beneath his home. He's still alive, if barely. The physicians are working on him, and they don't expect him to

wake up for a few weeks. So, unfortunately, we won't be able to get any real clues from him," the demon continued.

Zac perked up at that. David was a good guy, and he hoped that he would pull through this calamity that had befallen upon him.

"Good. We'll take a tour of the town later to see if I can spot any other Shapeshifter. I need you to kill them, as I cannot gain any energy at the moment. But more importantly, I need you to accompany me somewhere," Zac said.

"Spot them? How? Just what's going on with you?" Ogras said skeptically.

Zac hesitated for a while, but he finally relented. Ogras knew about so many secrets of his already that it didn't feel like another one would matter.

"Why don't you just inspect me, and you'll understand," Zac said.

Since his pathways were gone his skill **[Mental Barrier]** was no longer there either, which in of itself was a problem that needed to be addressed.

"Are you playing with me? I can't see shit," Ogras said, a bit annoyed after a few seconds.

Zac was confused until he felt some warmth on his arm. It was the bangle from Greatest. It looked like hiding his core wasn't the only function of the item. Instead, he shared the first rows of his status screens. Of course, it was only up to his alignment.

"What the hell?" Ogras said, shocked. "Level one? Draugr? Miasma acting up my ass."

Zac only snorted and shared the ladder next.

"So it's like this," Zac started, and explained about his core and what he believed it meant.

Ogras only looked at him for a few seconds afterward, until he shook his head with disgust and took a large swig of his wine.

"I should just strap myself to your back, and sooner or later a Divine Treasure will randomly land on my head. Your luck is just disgusting, makes me want to ram my head into a wall," Ogras spat out.

Zac's lips slightly moved upward. It was always fun to get a rise out of the demon.

"Well, you can try getting stabbed by the Corpse Lord's scythe if you want to try replicating it," Zac said.

"So, why are you telling me all this?" Ogras said, not wanting to entertain Zac.

"I want to hunt an E-Grade beast while still level one," Zac said.

Ogras' eyes widened a bit.

"You're going to perform the Legendary Hunt? Shit, that's a pretty good idea."

"Legendary hunt?" Zac asked confused.

"That's what it's called among demons. I heard that some families try for that tile on the higher grade planets. No one on my planet was ever close to trying it though. It would be amazing if someone even managed to get a Dao Seed before embarking on the road of cultivation in Clan Azh'Rezak for example, much less fighting an E-ranked beast," Ogras explained.

"Well, what are you waiting for, let's go," the demon added, actually looking a bit excited.

"Are there any other advantages you can think of I should do before moving past level 1?" Zac asked, just to make sure.

"There's none I can think of. If you didn't get any titles for having seeds or evolved race at this stage the other low-level Titles are likely not possible. The only other possible exploit I can think of is if you entering the Tower of Eternity after your

main class already has evolved. You'd be able to run straight through it like a bull," Ogras said.

Zac's eyes lit up at that. As Ogras said, that might be the biggest exploit possible. Reaching the top floor of the Tower of Eternity should give insane rewards.

"Well, let's go then, I want to reach as high a level as possible with this class before entering the Treasure Hunt," Zac said, heading to his private teleporter array.

Soon the two found themselves walking through the dense forest on Mystic Island, as Zac had decided to call the island with the entrance to the Mystic Realm. Zac had quickly found another use for his new sight upon entering the forest.

He could essentially spot any living creatures from a great distance away since they lit up the forest like a beacon due to their life force. It allowed them to avoid almost every battle as they walked toward the core.

Now and then Ogras was forced to quickly and quietly kill a beast though, as even with them avoiding beasts as much as they could they were still spotted occasionally. But soon they found themselves at the edge of the crater, looking down at the forest beneath.

"Well, Mr. Hunter," Ogras said, looking over at Zac with a grin. "Let's see if you have what it takes."

The next moment the two were swallowed by the shadows.

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#### **Chapter 208 - Apex Hunter**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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The next moment the two found themselves at the bottom of the crater, both warily looking around. Ogras had already covered them in a sphere of shadows, hiding their presence and muting their sounds.

"The cosmic energy here has an even higher density than the mountains of Port Atwood," Ogras said with some surprise, his eyes shining with greed. "The Mystic Realm must be really thriving. Perhaps it's a leftover herb garden of some powerhouse. We need to quickly need to stabilize it before all energy leaks out, ruining the treasures inside."

"Or it's the home of a horde of D-Grade monsters," Zac said with a snort as he took out his axe. "Do you think the beast is close to the entrance, or at the edge?"

"Being too close to the field is extremely dangerous, with shifting cracks between the dimension appearing at random. If a crack opens where you stand you'll suddenly be split into two without a chance to react. The beast you heard should be somewhere near the edge of the barren field though since the energy would be densest there," Ogras answered after some deliberation.

"Ok, let's go," Zac nodded.

The two warily made their way through the forest of the crater, but they were happy to note that it seemed completely deserted. There were some critters scuttling

about, but they couldn't find a single beast. Hopefully, it meant that the crater was the exclusive territory of the Lord of the island.

It actually was easier than they expected to find their target. A huge tiger was lazily sunbathing at a hill not too far away from the core of the crater, its snores making the ground shake. It was roughly five meters long, but apart from its size and slightly dark hue it didn't look much different from a normal tiger.

Clearly it had grown lax after having the whole crater to itself, with no real rivals on the island. Zac hoped that meant that the beast simply was lucky to have had a good early start on the island, allowing it to capitalize on the best area to keep growing.

"Please take care of it if something wants to join the fight. But don't help me out unless I ask," Zac said as he took a steadying breath.

Memories of his first real battle with a large beast resurfaced. It was his desperate struggle with Vul, the barghest alpha. The situation right now was a bit similar to that time, since he still didn't possess a class when fighting the first Herald.

However, this time he didn't feel ready to soil his pants from fear. Instead, Zac calmly looked the slumbering beast over for any clues to hidden aces. Since it was E-Grade it would have to have at least one Dao Seed, and Zac hoped it was an offensive one.

The natural defenses of E-Grade beasts were high enough, and Zac wasn't sure he'd be able to kill the animal if it had something like the Dao of Toughness. He only had his body and this Daos at the moment, and no skills to amplify his powers.

"Good luck," Ogras only said as he receded into the shadows.

Zac hid for another few moments and observed the snoring beast until he started to push the miasma in his body down toward his legs. He knew that the amount of energy available to him at level 1 was extremely limited, but he didn't want to ration it. His goal was to get in and quickly kill the animal before it could retaliate.

He slowly inhaled and adjusted the grip of his axe, before exploding into action.

He didn't have **[Loamwalker]** to push his speed to the limit, but he did have almost 350 strength to propel himself forward, each step creating an explosion of stone flying all over and leaving a crater in his wake.

He didn't expect to be able to sneak up on the beast, as it was completely out in the open, and the aura he passively emitted was much too conspicuous. Instead, he chose to ignore any attempts at stealth, instead pushing forward with maximum speed.

The tiger woke up with a start as he approached, but before it could orient itself Zac was in melee range with his axe falling. A strike containing everything Zac could muster, and enhanced with the Dao of Sharpness, struck the throat of the tiger like a falling meteor. Over half of his available Miasma was contained in that strike.

The power was so great that the beast was slammed into the ground, and a large jagged rip could be seen. But to Zac's disappointment the damage didn't look deadly. He didn't stop for a second, and followed the swing by forcefully kicking the throat of the beast with all his accumulated speed and his Dao of Heaviness.

It sounded like something was damaged in the throat of the tiger as it gave out a weird gurgling in pain. But while the beast had been too lax about its security since it was all alone in the crater, it wasn't any pushover.

Weird cracks in space burst out from the animal, completely shattering the hill and the closest trees. Zac was affected as well, bloody wounds opening over all his exposed skin even before he could use his defensive gear. He was lucky that he had such a high Endurance, otherwise he feared he would have been diced into small cubes by the attack.

He wasn't sure what the attack did, but its effect was similar to The Dao of Sharpness. However, he couldn't discern the attacks themselves, but only the results.

Even though Zac wasn't seriously hurt he was briefly stopped by the weird wave, and the tiger capitalized on it to attack him with a fierce swipe. This time Zac used his defensive charge to block it, but it cracked in no time.

The strike almost made Zac black out as he flew across the air. He had wrongly thought Dexterity was its main attribute since it was a feline beast, but clearly it was Strength. To Zac's horror, he noticed he was actually flying toward the large field housing the Mystic Realm entrance.

Vicious cracks in space randomly spread all over the field, anyone able to cut him into pieces without any effort. He knew no defensive measure would be able to put up the slightest resistance against a dimensional tear, and he immediately started sprinting back toward the tiger the moment he landed.

Zac thanked the stars for his high Luck attribute as he bobbed and weaved going by his gut instinct, praying that a tear wouldn't crop up right inside his body. Luckily the cracks weren't too densely spread at the edge of the field, leaving decent wiggle room to get out. He kept running and jumping around until he finally reached the edge of the clearing.

However, Zac's brows furrowed when he noticed the tiger standing in wait, just at the edge of the clearing. Their eyes locked for a second and Zac roared as he jumped straight at it. The tiger roared straight back, and it was clear that it wanted to swat him back into the lethal field.

The beast understood just how dangerous it was close to the entrance, and it tried to have the dimensional tears do its work for it. But Zac didn't flinch at the incoming paw but instead unleashed his Dao Field for his Seed of Heaviness to the fullest just before he arrived at the monster.

The odd mental heaviness from his Dao froze the tiger for a split second, and that was all that Zac needed as he passed by the incoming paw and embedded his axe into the left eye. Immediately after he plunged a tomahawk into the other eye of the beast with his left arm, completely blinding it.

The tiger wailed in pain and started to trash all over, and Zac swiftly jumped out of the way. Its throat was still bleeding, but Zac knew it wouldn't be enough. With a sigh he waited a bit for an opening, once again jumping in to attack the same spot on its throat as before.

Since he'd managed to blind the beast the fight was essentially over, though it took a couple of sneak attacks until the tiger finally bled out. It also managed to get in another decent swipe at Zac when he attacked, though this time he wasn't punched into the field of dimensional tears.

Zac sat down next to the corpse of the tiger, heavily panting, letting the System drown him with a deluge of refreshing power from gaining multiple levels. Felling an E-grade beast at level 1 was no joke, even if many factors were in his favor. This tiger was on the bottom rung as far as evolved beasts went, but a kill was a kill.

He was pretty spent, so he took out a crystal as he opened his status screen, but he quickly threw the crystal away after it felt like hand caught on fire. Confused he looked down at it, only to realize his mistake. He had suspected this might be the result, which was why he also hadn't dared activate his Dao of Trees so far.

He had been occupied with checking out the results from his battle, and had forgotten to pick out the correct type. He quickly swapped out his nexus crystal with an F-Grade Miasma Crystal and once again opened his menu.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**22**

**Class**

-

**Race**

**Draugr (E)**

**Alignment**

**Port Atwood - Lord (Earth)**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Core, Apex Hunter**

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Early**

**Core**

**Duplicity (F)**

**Strength**

**344**

**Dexterity**

**162**

**Endurance**

**220**

**Vitality**

**188**

**Intelligence**

**90**

**Wisdom**

**85**

**Luck**

**93**

**Free Points**

**42**

**Nexus Coins**

**21 533 653**

The experience gain was extraordinary, pushing him straight to level 22, just 3 levels shy of level 25. He also sensed that he wasn't too far off from gaining another level as well. It was just crazy to think that one kill was equal to all the pain and struggle he underwent the first month up until killing Vul.

But that was simply how things worked, the difference in Cosmic Energy gained between different level beasts was far higher compared to the difference in Nexus Coins gained. It was the same with the amount of energy needed to gain another level, as it increased exponentially.

However, Zac was a bit confused as he looked at his status screen. His attributes were exactly the same as before, his new title not giving him a single point. He quickly focused on his new title to see what was going on.

**[Apex Hunter: Solo kill enemy one whole tier above you. Reward: Effect of Attributes +10%]**

Zac's brows rose in surprise since this was something he hadn't encountered before.

"Nice fight, you looked very heroic jumping back and forth to avoid the cracks like a monkey," Ogras said as he emerged from the shadows.

"Whatever. It worked, didn't it?" Zac snorted. "More importantly, take a look at this. What does this mean?"

He displayed his new title to Ogras, who whistled in surprise.

"So it was a high tier Title, should have figured," Ogras muttered.

"High tiered Title?" Zac asked confused.

Of course he knew that some titles were better than others, but he never had heard of any classification like this.

"Yeah. Low tier titles give static rewards. They are good in the beginning to help accumulate other advantages, but by the end of E-Grade class they are mostly worthless apart from those that give luck. The mid-tier gives the percentage boosts. These are what most people desperately try to gain, as they will always be useful.

"Next are the high tiered ones, who also gives percentage boosts. But these titles work differently. Each one will independently boost your whole attribute after the other titles have been added. And they each do this independently of each other. The effect can get enormous."

Zac understood what he meant. This was a top tier title that worked just like his Hatchetman's Rage-skill. Instead of boosting his base attribute, it instead increased the effect of the attribute. This boost was far better, especially for him who already had a bunch of percent based boosts.

"Not bad," was all Zac said as he placed his axe in the wound of the tiger that still bled profusely.

It wasn't a top tier beast, but he wouldn't turn his nose at the blood of an E-Grade animal, and clearly neither did his axe. It greedily sucked in a good deal of blood, and it actually started humming and vibrating. But soon it calmed down again and the sounds stopped.

"It's almost there," Ogras commented from the side.

Zac nodded with anticipation as he tucked away his axe. He would have to ask the explorers to keep their eyes open for more E-Grade beasts lurking on the islands they visited. Most of them in his territory were still unexplored after all.

"So what now?" Ogras asked curiously.

"I need to gain a couple of quick levels before the treasure hunt. You can go back if you want," Zac said.

His goal was to attain a class first, then figure out how to turn himself back into a human.

"Sure, but I'll take a leg of this guy, I deserve a nice meal as compensation for acting bodyguard," he said as a couple of shadows severed one of the tiger's hind legs after some effort.

Zac only smiled as he stored the rest of the tiger. For the following two days there was a new apex predator on the island, sneaking from territory to territory like a

deadly specter. When Zac finally left, it was as though a terrible pressure had left the island, and the beasts could once again go about their lives.

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#### **Chapter 209 - Classes**

Zac eagerly walked rushed toward his Nexus Node, unable to contain his excitement. He was truly curious about what kinds of classes he could expect from his new race. It was, in a way, both a test run for his level 75 evolution, and a testament to his struggles so far.

If he had available Epic classes now it would mean he was on course for epic E-Grade classes down the road. Of course, he knew that the criterion for getting an E-Grade Epic class was much higher than an F-Grade one, but it was a start.

He soon found himself in the building containing his private Nexus Node, and opened up his menu one last time to see everything was in order.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**25**

**Class**

**-**

**Race**

**Draugr (E)**

**Alignment**

**Port Atwood - Lord (Earth)**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Core, Apex Hunter**

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Early**

**Core**

**Duplicity (F)**

**Strength**

**352**

**Dexterity**

**200**

**Endurance**

**245**

**Vitality**

**188**

**Intelligence**

**90**

Wisdom  
85  
Luck  
93  
Free Points  
0  
Nexus Coins  
22 508 653

The boost of 48 free points was a huge gain for three days of grinding. He'd already spent them all, putting 5 points in strength, 27 into Dexterity, and 16 into endurance. The strength was to pass 350, which might help unlock some special class, and the others were simply to keep his build balanced. It was just as well since he was running a bit behind on his Dexterity, something he was able to clearly feel in his battle with Average.

But before he could touch the crystal he sensed a familiar presence, and he turned around.

"Just watching the excitement," Ogras said with a small smile.

"If you got the opportunity to get a second class, what would you want it to be?" Zac asked, curious if the demon had come to the same conclusion as he himself had during the past days.

"Hmm... I would likely want a hybrid mage class also focusing on Shadows," Ogras said after some hesitation.

"Oh?" Zac said, a bit surprised.

It actually was somewhat different from what Zac had expected.

"My shadow attacks benefit from Intelligence and Wisdom, even though I am mainly a warrior class. Two classes focusing on the same concept would also allow me to walk further the path of shadows, instead of splitting my attention," Ogras explained.

Zac felt it was a distinct possibility the demon had thought it over since hearing of Zac's opportunity. It was a well thought out answer that would have a high chance of having long term benefits, and somewhat of a low-risk choice.

But all theorizing was useless if he couldn't get the type of class he hoped for. It was time to see what the system thought of him. Without waiting any further he simply touched the Crystal, and it immediately started the class choice. Zac let out a sigh of relief before checking the new window that appeared, since he hadn't been sure it would work until now.

[Top 5 Class choices]

[Reaver - F Grade, Rare. *A roving army of one, filled with unrelenting violence.* Upgradeable.]

[Greenfingers - F Grade, Rare. *Keeper of the grove. Defender of nature.* Upgradeable]

[Undertaker - F Grade, Rare. *With only the trees and the dead for company.* Upgradeable]

[Undying Bulwark - F Grade, Epic. *Unbreakable. Unflinching. Unrelenting. The Undying marches forward.* Upgradeable.]

[Big Game Hunter - F Grade, Epic. *Dragons, Primordials, or the Abyssal Behemoths -They all look good above the mantel.* Upgradeable. ]

**[Random F-Grade Class. 0% Common. 25.0% Uncommon. 44.2 % Rare. 30.8% Epic. Roll the dice.]**

Zac couldn't help but let a grin spread on his face as he saw the choices, making Ogras snort in annoyance from the side. The demon couldn't see the available options, but he could likely make an educated guess. There wasn't even the option to follow Alyn's advice and pick a lower rarity class.

His options were clearly far superior to his first round, and he even had two choices for Epic classes. It was what he'd hoped for, and a sort of validation for his ceaseless struggles of the past months.

Still, Zac seriously looked through each and every class, since even the worst one was of Rare rarity, and none would be a garbage class. It was quite annoying that the System provided no proper clues for the classes, and he had to perform some guesswork.

Reaver sounded like a stronger warrior class, much like his Hatchetman class. It was likely awarded due to his consistent fighting style. While it clearly was suited to Zac's attributes, it felt like it brought nothing new to the table, and he unhesitatingly looked at the next one.

He was unsure of what the main attribute Greenfingers would be. But getting the option was likely based on his high Dao of Trees, which might mean it was a Vitality class. It should use nature to fight, and perhaps be useful in growing spiritual herbs. While it was an interesting option he had no clue how that kind of class would work with an Undead Race, so he passed on it as well.

Undertaker was the next choice. Zac felt it touched upon multiple parts of his skill set, and had some connection to death. The problem was that while it felt fitting, he had a hard time imagining what it would provide to him. The System really was too stingy with its explanation of its classes.

That left the final two choices, the Epic Classes. Big Game Hunter should come from him gaining the Apex Hunter title. Hunter classes were generally Dexterity-based, and would likely make a great addition to his Hatchetman class.

Currently Dexterity was the attribute he put most of his free points in, just so that he would be able to keep up with his ever-growing Strength. Getting a Dex-focused class was one of the main ideas he had, and getting an Epic one would be a huge help.

It would also likely broaden his arsenal for attacks, perhaps adding ranged capabilities through a bow. All in all, it would make him more well rounded, and the attributes would complement his Hatchetman class well.

It even had a somewhat matching theme with Hatchetman, as a hunter could be considered nature-related. That would be convenient in the future, as improving one Dao might benefit both classes.

The final choice was the Undying Bulwark class. From the description it seemed to be an undead-specific class that should focus on Endurance or Vitality. This was actually the second route he had formulated over the past days while hunting.

At first he had thought of gaining a mage class to balance out his low attributes in that area. That would also help with ranged attacks, just like a hunter class. But he reluctantly put that idea to the side.

He didn't believe that there would be any synergy between his two builds if he did that, leaving him with two strong archetypes. But he would rather focus on one archetype and push it to its very limits. He therefore wanted to go with another warrior class that would complement Hatchetman.

Another strength-based class didn't seem like a good idea, as it would add nothing and make his attributes too lopsided. That left either an Assassin class or a Tank class, to borrow from gaming terms.

Either of them would boost another of his important attributes, and leave him with free points to shore up his shortcomings, making him a monstrous melee fighter. If he picked Big Game Hunter he likely wouldn't need to put any more points in Dexterity. That would leave him the freedom to either focus on becoming even more lethal or shoring up his defenses with his free points.

It was a very flexible path where he could adjust his build as he went. Conversely, the undying class would likely help with his survivability, but it would also mean that he would have to keep putting most of his free points into Dexterity to not become too slow.

Both seemed like good options, and he felt like there was no clear winner. As for the lottery option, he didn't even consider it. There was no chance to get an Arcane class, which was the tier above Epic. And while the chance for an epic class was great, there was no point since he had two great options to choose from.

But after a few minutes his eyes turned to Undying Bulwark and he picked that one with determination in his eyes.

It came down to suitability in the end. Zac had his hands full just with improving his current fighting style. Learning to fight with a bow or sneak around wasn't really his style and would take focus from his axe techniques. The meathead juggernaut battle tactics were already ingrained into his brain, and the Undying Bulwark class felt more appropriate for that.

Besides, he was making a gamble for the long run. Right now his two sides were completely separated, but who knew what would happen in the future. If he somehow managed to combine the two Classes, or at least use their skills simultaneously, Undying Bulwark should be a better choice.

A defensive class would complement Hatchetman far better than another Offensive class like a hunter as he saw it. It would also allow Zac to focus even further on evolving one side into pure offense, and the other into pure defense.

He might have made a different choice if this was his only class, as Undying Bulwark might not be the greatest offensively, which would affect his leveling ability. But with the help of his massive attribute pool he felt he would still be stronger offensively than most people. Furthermore, if needed he could get a great offensive skill from Brazla.

The familiar burst of cosmic energy inundated him, and his mind was filled with the schematic for the pathways that belonged to Undying Bulwark. He was about to check his gains, but Ogras interrupted him from behind.

"So, what did you get?" Ogras asked from behind.

"None of your business," Zac said with a snort. "I still don't know what class you have."

Ogras only tsk'ed, muttering something about being stingy.

"I need to fix my pathways, then we'll try to hunt down the Shapeshifters," Zac said.

"Fine," Ogras said with a nod and disappeared.

Zac remembered just how painful it was to draw his pathways, so he needed to seclude himself to make sure nothing went wrong. He immediately headed toward his courtyard so he could activate the arrays there.

As he walked he finally opened his menu to see the results.

**[Class: Undying Bulwark, Grade-F, Epic]**

**Endurance +10, +10%.**

**Vitality +5, +5%.**

**Level: +6 Endurance, +2 Vitality, -1 free point per level.**

**Skills:**

**Bulwark Mastery (LOCKED)**

**Deathwish (LOCKED)**

**Fields of Despair (LOCKED)**

Zac's brows rose in surprise. It actually stole one of his free points, rather than give out another one. But it still gave a total of 7 points per level, compared to the 5 from Hatchetman.

At least one thing was clear. He probably wouldn't need to put any more points into Endurance in a long time, perhaps ever. Six points per level was an insane boost, twice what he got in Strength from Hatchetman. Add to that the point he got from his other class, and soon his enemies would tire themselves out before they could even hurt him.

It also gave three skills that were available right from the start, and he'd need to complete some quests to unlock them. He honestly had no idea what the two last ones would do. The first one was a mastery skill, just like his current Axe Mastery.

However, he wasn't exactly sure what Bulwark meant in this connotation. But there was a real possibility that it might be a quest that would give him a new Dao Seed. Since he got an epic class he was guaranteed to get at least one new seed from a skill vision.

But before he could set out to complete his skill quests there was something else he needed to do. As soon as he arrived at his courtyard Zac closed it down with multiple layers of arrays before he sat down.

Next he started to arduously imprint the intricate pathway system that would cover his whole body. Luckily he hadn't already imprinted a simplistic version of a pathway system that would be needed to be rewritten, so this time it wasn't nearly as painful.

But even then the pathways took the better part of a day to imprint, as they were even more intricate compared to his other class. Early next morning he stood up, and happily studied the results of his efforts.

The fractals that passed through his whole body were reminiscent of that of Hatchetman, but they were also a bit different. The best way Zac could describe it was that they were like two abstract paintings, each conveying a different meaning to the subconscious.

As he inspected the results of his efforts his eyes couldn't help but turn toward the Core. While he had engraved the fractals all night he didn't want to split his focus so he didn't check up on it. But throughout the night the core hadn't given off a single response, staying completely inert.

But unbeknownst to him his Core had changed as well during the night, and the black side now also contained grooves for the pathways to his new class. Now his core was truly complete.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

## Chapter 210 - Masochism

### A note from TheFirstDefier

From this point forward there are some small edits to how I display the status screen. This is simply me trying to make the information clearer and not a change in the story itself.

I also saw that there was a huge bruhaha about how the high tier titles worked. Explanation and some context below:

#### **Spoiler: Spoiler**

The idea is that an “increase in effect” of 10% should have the same effect as an increase in the attribute by 10%, but it works both multiplicatively with itself and with other titles (whereas mid tier titles are additive and only modify the base attribute). There are two more reasons I wanted the best titles to not actually show up as an increase in the quantity of the attribute. 1. Restrictions. There have been more and more mentions of various trials and realms lately. A type of Restriction to gain access would be “Maximum 2500 attribute total” for example. 2. Spying. There are various levels of spying skills and tools. Zac’s Inquisitive eye is still a pretty mediocre skill, and he’s not really a scout-class in any case. Ogras skill for example show much more information. At higher tiers it shouldn’t be impossible for someone to see the actual attributes of enemies. If one has a bunch of high tier titles that means hidden strength that can’t be discerned.

Finally done with the imprinting process Zac checked out the status screen.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**25**

**Class**

**[F-Epic] Undying Bulwark**

**Race**

**[E] Draugr**

**Alignment**

**[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven’s Chosen**

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Early Core**

**[F] Duplicity**

**Strength**

**352 [Efficiency: 116%]**

**Dexterity**

**200 [Efficiency 116%]**

**Endurance**  
284 [Efficiency 116%]  
**Vitality**  
202 [Efficiency 116%]  
**Intelligence**  
90 [Efficiency 116%]  
**Wisdom**  
85 [Efficiency 116%]  
**Luck**  
93 [Efficiency 116%]  
**Free Points**  
0  
**Nexus Coins**  
[F] 22 508 653

It was clear that his survivability had increased quite a bit due to the increase in Endurance and Vitality. But what he found a bit surprising was that his attribute effectiveness had increased by 6%. A quick look at his list of titles showed that there could only be two reasons.

He was a bit disappointed that there didn't seem to be a title for gaining dual classes, but he soon understood a likely reason to this. His core-title had changed name and was now called Duplicity Core instead. He quickly opened it up to see if anything else had changed about it.

**[Duplicity Core: Successfully form a Duplicity Core Core. Reward: Strength +5%, Endurance +5%.]**

It looked like he had been wrong in his assumptions earlier. The reason question marks were remaining earlier was that he still hadn't received a second class to imprint on the core. Each reward corresponded to the main attribute of one of his classes, and there was nothing to reward until he had both of them.

**[Heaven's Chosen: Attain highest possible tier of class. Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%]**

The second title was the reason for his increased attribute effectiveness. Zac knew that Epic wasn't the highest grade there is, as there are multiple higher grades above it. The title rather meant that Epic truly was the highest possible tier for an F-ranked Class.

**Bulwark Mastery (Class): Mastery is born through battle. Block 5000 strikes. Reward: Bulwark Mastery Skill (0/5000).**

**Deathwish (Class): The body is but another shield. Receive 5000 strikes. Reward: Deathwish Skill (0/5000).**

**Fields of Despair (Class): Draw the ire of at least 1000 enemies at once. Reward: Fields of Despair (0/1).**

The next thing Zac checked out was the skill quests to see how hard they would be to accomplish. He could only blankly stare at the first two ones. He should have figured that the skills for a tank Class would mean getting hit. At first glance he thought the first two could be solved simultaneously, but he soon realized that might not be the case.

While the quest mission for **[Deathwish]** might look like it could be accomplished while doing the first one, he believed that he would actually have to go get hit with his body. In any case, it looked like he would need to recruit some people to beat him up.

He felt the last one would be the easiest. Had he gotten this class before hatchetman he would have had a huge problem completing it, but by now it was only a matter of jumping over to the Undead Incursion. That brought up the question of whether the undead would even attack him while in this form though. But if he started to kill a bunch of Zombies they should retaliate.

In any case, Zac felt that he would be able to complete all of the quests in less than a day, as long as he got enough people to hit him simultaneously. He wanted to try it out immediately and headed over to his sister's courtyard.

It was still around 4 am, so Zac assumed she still would be at home asleep. But to his surprise he found her meditating while facing the sunrise. Zac remembered how annoying it was to get interrupted in the middle of attaining insights into the Dao, so he silently sat down behind her and waited.

He soon closed his eyes as well, starting to meditate on the Dao. He had gained an idea while hunting at Mystic Island. He had been wondering just what that weird attack from the tiger had been until he realized it was a coarse mimicry of the dimensional tears.

The beast had likely been lying on its hill and observed the dimensional scars in the field for months until it finally gained some insight into it. That in of itself was an extremely impressive task, as the Dao of Space was one of the highest concepts according to Ogras.

Zac had felt that if a dumb beast could do it, then so could he. That's why it took a whole day before he left the island. Most of it had been sitting and observing the everchanging cracks.

They were a truly fickle and random force of nature, popping up without rhyme or reason. Wherever they showed up space was simply separated, and anything that was there before was cut into two. Zac didn't hold any hope in actually comprehending the concept of a void edge for his Dao of Sharpness, but something simpler.

It was the randomness and instantaneous speed with which the cracks appeared. He felt that speed was an important aspect of sharpness. If he moved extremely slowly he wouldn't be able to cut a blade of grass with his axe, but if he swung his arm as quickly as possible he could cut a small hill in two without harming his edge.

Sharpness through speed. His blade would be like the dimensional tears, where his enemies would be cut in two before they knew they were attacked. This was the concept he kept pondering on as he waited for his sister to finish her morning meditation.

"Shit!" Zac suddenly heard after an hour or so, making him open his eyes.

Kenzie stared at him aghast with her hand over her heart.

"You scared the crap out of me, why did you sneak up here like that?" she said with a glare.

"Sorry, I didn't want to disturb your meditation," Zac answered a bit awkwardly. "I'll make it up to you, go ahead and hit me."

"I'm not going to hit you," Kenzie said with a roll of her eyes. "Going by what a blockhead you are I'd just hurt my hands."

Zac only smiled a bit, and then showed her the quest window for **[Deathwish]**.

"This is a one time offer," Zac said.

“What a weird quest. Just what kind of class did you get?” Kenzie asked with her brows rising.

“Well, it’s an endurance-based quest to help with my survivability. Most of the quests seem to be centered around getting hit,” Zac explained with a sigh.

A tinge of something flashed in Kenzie’s eyes before she reined it in.

“Well, I am a mage so I can’t punch you. My hands would break long before I hit you 5000 times. Would spells work?” she asked, starting to look a bit excited.

“Well, I’m not sur-“ Zac said, but didn’t get further before a fireball slammed into his chest.

Zac grunted and took a step backward by reflex, but he wasn’t actually hurt. It was clear there was no real power in the strike.

“Well?” Kenzie asked with a wide smile.

Zac threw his sister a glare before opening up his quest screen again. But to his disappointment the quest was still at 0/5000.

“Didn’t Work,” Zac said with a frown, taking out the club he used for non-lethal confrontations. “Try with this instead.”

His sister didn’t say anything, but her mouth curved even further upward as she accepted the club. She swung the bat at his chest like she was trying to hit a home run, but even that had no effect on the quest, as the progress was still at 0.

“Perhaps your robe is stopping it?” Kenzie hesitantly said.

Zac nodded and took off the top half of his clothes, leaving his chest bare. He felt Kenzie made sense. It wouldn’t be much of a deathwish if his E-grade defensive gear soaked up all the damage. His sister swung the club once again, and this time Zac couldn’t help but grimace from the pain.

But luckily it worked, and it counted as progress. The two of them kept trying various things out for over an hour and found out that there were only two requirements to gain progress on his quest.

First, he needed to be hit right on his skin. Even if he only wore a t-shirt it didn’t count as progress. Zac really hoped that didn’t mean that he would have to walk around bare-chested to use the skill in the future. It was already a pain to walk around barefoot due to his movement skill. If this kept up he would soon be forced to walk around naked to have access to all his skills.

Secondly there needed to be a minimum amount of force in the strike for it to count. Just a small lovetap wasn’t enough. With Kenzie’s low physical attributes she needed to give it everything she had in a swing to make it count, and even then it was a crapshoot whether it was enough or not.

Spells did work though, and Zac’s chest was red and bruised from being blasted with ice balls as large as a fist. As for Kenzie, she sat on the ground looking a bit pale, absorbing a Cosmic Energy from a Nexus Crystal.

“What’s going on?” a sleepy voice could be heard from outside, making Zac turn over to see a bleary-eyed Emily enter.

Zac quickly took out a pair of sunglasses from his Pouch and put them on. His pitch-black eyes were the most obvious indicator something was up with him, and he didn’t want to show the teenager his change just yet.

It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Emily, but she was an obvious point of weakness to him since she still couldn’t cultivate and protect herself. Luckily she only went between the Academy with many warriors and his area that was long since protected with arrays.

Since the outer town didn't really need any protection at the moment the Town Defense Array had stayed where it was. It covered the inner area so that no one would just jump over the walls and head to his compound or spy on the Creators.

It was a constant drain on resources, but not a large one as long as no one attacked it, but he felt it was extremely worth it. The whole reason he even created the town was to protect his close ones. Who knew, if it hadn't been running it might have been his sister who was replaced by a shapeshifter rather than David.

"We're training," Zac said, trying to modulate his voice to sound less ghastly. "I have a quest to get hit a bunch of times."

"Wow! Can I help?" the teenager said, immediately perking up.

"No, Kenzie is barely able to hit hard enough for it to count," Zac said with a shake of his head.

"Damn it, why wasn't I born in spring?" she muttered in annoyance.

Zac could only roll his eyes at the teenager.

"Perhaps I can be of assistance?" a voice said as the shadows congealed showing a smiling Ogras.

Zac started to feel that all the people close to him had some sadistic streaks, each of them sporting an eerily similar smile.

"Just get on with it," Zac said with a shake of his head. "And you all don't need to look so pleased about it."

Three hours later Zac walked along the streets of Port Atwood accompanied by the demon, one looking sullen and the other having a refreshing smile on his face. Every part of Zac's chest felt sore, but at least the quest was finished.

He wondered just how one was supposed to complete that quest without attributes like his. If he'd been hit 5 000 times with the same power as the last hours when he was actually level 25 he would have died ten times over.

Even with his current attributes they were forced to take a couple of breaks where Zac swallowed a healing pill. But at least it was done with. And he had to admit the skill he received was pretty interesting.

**[Deathwish - Proficiency: Early. Join your foes in a dance of death. Upgradeable]**

Just like the quest the point of the skill was simply to get hit. Even then he would probably categorize **[Deathwish]** as an offensive skill. The point of it wasn't to decrease the damage he took, but rather retaliate in kind.

The skill was passive, costing some Miasma every second, and for every strike Zac received while it was active his assailer was hit right back. It looked pretty spooky with a shadowy copy of the attacker that was instantaneously created when Zac was struck, which struck right back.

Ogras had taken it as a challenge to dodge, but no matter what he did he couldn't escape getting struck when he landed a hit on Zac. The only option to avoid getting retaliated was to stop the attack or simultaneously defend as he attacked. That's why the demon looked like he carried a grudge as they walked through the streets.

The bad news was that only a part, around 10 to 20 percent, of the original strike was retaliated. But the good news was that calculation was based on the original power of the attack, not the damage Zac's received after his sturdy constitution had lessened the damage he took.

That essentially meant that if his Endurance got high enough he could just stand in a field of enemies, and let them kill themselves by hitting him. The skill also took

very little energy to keep going and was something he would be able to run for the entire duration of the fight on top of using his normal skills.

All in all, it felt like a fitting start for someone slowly turning into a walking fortress.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 211 - Experimentation**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

I've made a small adjustment in the past 3 chapters. Zac no longer gains any bonus Endurance/Vitality from the Forester's Constitution skill, since he doesn't have access to that skill in his current form.

Zac also figured out how to advance his quest for **[Bulwark Mastery]**. There were various ways to block a strike, but the only one that seemed to work was using a shield.

Unfortunately only had an old rusty shield he pilfered when he hunted the Imp Herald in the tunnels. It only lasted for 5 blows at the required power before it broke. That forced them to stop grinding his quest for the moment and instead focus on the other tasks at hand. There were infiltrators to hunt.

By now it was close to 8 am, which was a good time to hunt for shapeshifters. Most people were starting their day, heading out toward either their work or the academy. The sight was almost blinding to Zac, as everyone on the street was lit up like a beacon of life-force.

But Zac inspected each and every one beneath his hood, not wanting to let anyone slip by. So far they hadn't found a single shapeshifter, which was both troubling and a relief. The problem was that they had no idea just how many were still on the island.

According to Ogras there had been a mass exodus for the cultists when Ogras decapitated their leader. A good portion of them immediately ran for the Nexus crystal and teleported away. A few others, likely the more pious ones, had wanted to avenge their fallen leader, even to the point of self-destruction.

Ogras hadn't stayed at that time, instead heading over to the undead incursion to pick up Zac. When the demon later returned to farm the stronger invaders for contribution points the crystals had disappeared, and only some stragglers were left.

They simply had no idea what happened between the moment the two of them fled, until when Ogras returned. For all they knew there might be a whole contingent of lizardmen hiding in the woods somewhere, though that seemed unlikely.

The remaining cultists had been swarmed by undead almost as soon as the Corpse Lord fled, and they were barely holding on when Ogras arrived. As for the black golemoids, if there were any stragglers they were killed by the uncountable zombies as well. But it seemed that their leader had already ordered his troops to fall back before heading over for one last try at Zac's head.

But since one shapeshifter was still skulking around on his island, there could be more. Zac and ogras therefore patrolled the whole town twice, including the commercial district and the academy. At least it appeared that no shapeshifters hadn't replaced anyone else in the town proper, or any key personnel.

Zac also took the time to visit the unconscious David, and he couldn't help but feel enraged when he saw him. Even after a few days of intensive care he still looked like he was on the brink of starvation, with his whole body covered in scars. The shapeshifter had thoroughly tortured the poor man, likely to gain the intelligence needed to keep up its charade.

After two hours of patrolling Ogras was clearly bored, and Zac could only give up for now. Since he had to prepare for the treasure hunt he tasked Ogras with devising some method to cleanse the island from any interlopers.

That left Zac to figure out what to do next. There weren't too many days left until the treasure hunt, and he had a hard time deciding what he should do. He wanted to start experimenting to become a human again so that he could gain access to his offensive skills.

But at the same time he was unsure of how often he could change his form. If he changed now he might not be able to freely change back, which meant he wouldn't be able to farm any more levels before the treasure hunt.

Since Undying Bulwark was an Epic class every level would come with a huge amount of attributes from now on, each one giving a great boost to his survivability. If he went all out for the following three days, leaving the last day to swap back to human, Zac expected that he would be able to gain between five and ten levels.

He'd already decided to skip getting the other two skills for now. He had no shield that could last him through the quest at the moment, and he honestly didn't dare step through the teleporter to Mount Everlasting Peace as he was right now.

He was afraid those tens of thousands of scripts on the mountain would blaze to life and smite him out of existence if he appeared. He knew that the mountain itself had been instrumental in fending off and defeating the Undead armies that had tried to raze it.

After some hesitation, he first went to the Thayer Consortia to speak with Calrin. The gnome was shocked enough to fall out of his chair when he saw Zac's appearance, and it took some time to calm him down.

"Odd choice of a skill, transforming into an undead," the Sky Gnome muttered.

"I thought it would be a good skill to infiltrate the Undead Incursion, but changing back was harder than I expected," Zac said with a smile as he took out the huge horn from the Star Ox from his pouch. "In any case, I'd like you to take a look at this."

"Hmm, pretty," Calrin said as he looked at the horn with interest until he looked up at Zac. "What kind of beast is it from?"

"It's from an animal called a Star Ox. I got teleported off-world for a quest and fought the beast then. Apparently the horn was the most valuable part of it, do you know what's it used for?"

"No idea," Calrin said with a shrug. "But it contains a lot of energies even though the beast is dead. I'm sure that it can be used for either weapon making or alchemy."

"I met a person over there who said it's worth around a hundred million Nexus Coins, so it should be something good. See if you can find out more," Zac said.

"Sure. Anything else?" Calrin asked.

"I need a shield, a real sturdy one," Zac continued.

"A shield? And I guess something that's stronger than what can be made on our island?" the gnome probed.

"Yes. Preferably a Spirit tool like my axe. Is it obtainable?" Zac asked.

“Probably not. Defensive spirit tools are far rarer compared to offensive ones. And shields are even less common,” the gnome said.

“Why?” Zac asked confused.

“It’s more popular to have amulets, skills or inscribed clothes for defense compared to a shield. Of course, those are much more limited, but they also don’t slow you down at all,” the gnome explained.

“No one really wants to waste the effort on creating a shield. They are extremely expensive and hard to make, since they need to be able to endure strong attacks not just once, but continuously. Very few materials can handle that,” Calrin continued. “So they are generally only made for order. You would need to visit a skilled blacksmith, but that’s impossible at the moment since we’re stuck on this planet.”

Zac could only nod with some defeat. It was true what the gnome said. He’d only encountered two people amongst the demons who used shields as far as he could remember, and both were common foot soldiers.

“Well, keep your eyes open, just in case,” Zac could only say as he stood up.

“Sure. Remember to get some alliances while finding treasures. We need that extra income,” the gnome said with a wave.

Since he couldn’t get a shield at the moment he decided to focus on gaining a few levels before the treasure hunt. He walked back to his compound and took the teleporter to Mystic Island. He wasn’t afraid that he would run out of prey here, as the island was just enormous, and there should be millions of strong prey to hunt.

Even though time was of the essence Zac spent a good chunk of the following three days also looking at the rifts in space, trying to glean some insight into his Dao of Sharpness. He wanted to improve it before the hunt to increase his offensive power, but if he could evolve it naturally he could use his Dao Treasure on one of his other Seeds.

In the end, he spent 14 hours a day roving through the inner circle of the island, killing one powerful monster after another before he went down the crater and pondered on the Dao for 8 hours.

He gained three levels within the first day, but after that his speed slowed down, only improving with another two the following day and one final level the third day. It was partly due to the requirements increasing, but mainly that it was getting harder and harder to find any good prey.

Finally, after three days passed he had to call it. There was only one day before the hunt, and he needed to get ready.

His killing spree had pushed his endurance all the way to 349, almost overtaking his strength as his highest attribute. Interestingly enough it also seemed that [Verun’s Bite] was finally satiated, no longer wanting to drink the blood of the new beasts it encountered. However, it still wasn’t evolving, making Zac guess that he still needed to find more E-Grade beasts.

Unfortunately, he didn’t manage to make much headway on his Dao, and he knew he would have to use his Dao Treasure for it after he got home. Since he decided he was done he quickly headed toward the hidden camp to teleport back. Finally home he left a message for Kenzie telling her he was back and to come over after she woke up, before once again settling himself in his courtyard.

A large reason he dared to wait until the day before the Treasure hunt to experiment with turning back was that he had found some clues to turning during his fight with the tiger. That battle had almost completely exhausted all his miasma, and at that point he’d felt that the Duplicity Core was starting to wake up.

It was in line with how he turned the first time, with his life-force being stolen by the dagger. The only problem was that when he got close to running out of miasma he started to feel like he was about to die and that the remaining miasma in his body was all that prevented his true death.

It was a weird distinction Zac hadn't realized before now. The miasma was not only the source of power in battle but also the source of life for the undead. If Zac ran out of Cosmic Energy in a fight he would feel weak, but he would be fine after resting.

But running out of Miasma for an undead seemed to be a death sentence. It gave a new meaning to the expression tired to death. He needed to find out if his theory was correct, but it would be crazy not to take some precautions.

It took an hour before Kenzie came to his courtyard after reading his note, and Zac immediately erected the arrays before taking out an E-Grade Divine crystal and an E-Grade Miasma crystal.

"I am going to try to turn back into a human now," Zac explained. "If it looks like I'm dying, try using the Divine Crystal first. If it doesn't work, try the Miasma crystal."

"Are you sure about this?" Kenzie hesitantly asked as she picked up the two crystals.

"Pretty much," Zac lied. "I just wanted you here as a precaution. Here I go."

The next moment Zac started to expel his Miasma through his whole body, and a cloud of death-attuned Cosmic Energy started to form above him. When he was reaching the last of his miasmatic reserves he was overcome with a sense of dread, and he instinctually wanted to reabsorb the energy in the air before it dissipated.

But he ignored his instincts and expelled the last of his Miasma. As the last of the energy left him everything turned black, and the last thing he felt before losing consciousness was falling down.

The next thing Zac felt was a burning fire in his belly. He didn't know if he'd been unconscious for a second or for hours, but he knew his idea was correct as his Core had sprung to life. It felt as though it shone like a sun inside his body, giving off a healing warmth.

However, that warmth was quickly turning into a blistering heat as fire radiated out through it, covering every inch of his body. It felt as though he was being burned alive, and he barely was able to contain a cry of pain. It took all his effort to keep his mind steady as the fire raged through his body, and he didn't even have the energy to get up from the ground.

But finally the Core calmed down, and he opened his eyes with a shaky breath.

"How do I look," he said with a hoarse voice.

Kenzie stood in front of him, looking worried.

"Tired, but human. It looked like you died there for a bit," she said.

"Life through death," Zac muttered to himself before once again turning to his sister. "How long did the change take?"

"Not too long, around two minutes?" she answered.

Zac could only sigh and shake his head in disappointment.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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## Chapter 212 - Final Preparations

Zac had to admit he was a bit disappointed the process to change was so arduous. He knew he already had received a top tier opportunity that would make most of the cultivators in the multiverse green with envy, but he still had hoped it would be quicker.

He had hoped to be able to change his class in the middle of battle, enabling him to turn the tables. But there was just no way to do that with how the change worked. Not only did it take way too long, but he also lost almost all awareness of his surroundings when he changed, making it impossible.

Since the Core was only F-grade at the moment Zac didn't give up all hope though. Every time it upgraded some parts of it function should improve. The only problem was he had no clue how to upgrade a Specialty Core at the moment.

At least it felt nice to be back in human form again. The whole time he was in his Draugr-form he felt assaulted by the Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere, causing him constant discomfort. He understood why Mhal brought a bunch of Unholy Beacons in his invasion of the island.

Zac still had a few of them, as he never got around to selling those he found in the Undead General's Cosmos Sack as well. He was seriously contemplating creating a Zone on his compound where the Cosmic Energy was transformed to Miasma instead.

He needed to figure out a method to contain the death-attuned energy first though, and not let it get spread all over.

"The treasure hunt starts tomorrow. Is there anything I need to do that I've missed?" Zac said as he got up on his feet.

"Well, have you talked with the others?" Kenzie asked.

"Others?" Zac said in confusion.

"There are three people from Refugee's Harbor who's going, and Lyla is going as well," Kenzie explained.

"Lyla's going? Why?" Zac asked with confusion.

Everything Zac had learned about the System pointed toward the Treasure Hunt becoming a slaughterhouse. He roughly knew the strength of Kenzie's friend, and he had to say he was unsure whether she'd survive.

"She wants to become stronger, and this is a chance for that," Kenzie explained with worry. "You'll look after her, right?"

"I'll try, but I can't promise anything. I still don't know what'll happen after we enter," Zac answered.

"That's good enough. Oh, and maybe you should talk to Emily? Her birthday is in a few weeks, and you might still be gone at that time," Kenzie continued.

"Right," Zac said. "Can you have the other trial takers gather at the academy in two hours?"

There was something he needed to do with Emily in any case, so he decided to head over immediately. The teenager still lived alone in his old camper up in the tree, and with a few jumps he scaled it and landed on the large patio.

Emily had decorated it with a sofa and a couple of recliners under a parasol, with large potted plants creating some warmth. The whole thing gave off a very comfortable feeling. Zac had to admit it looked a bit better than his own austere courtyard as he knocked on the door.

After a minute Emily opened up with a yawn.

"What's going on?" she asked with some confusion.

"Eat this," Zac said and gave her some springroot.

“Ugh, I’m starting to get real sick by the taste of this thing,” she muttered, but still complied.

“Sorry, just making sure. I didn’t want to give your birthday gift to a shapeshifter,” Zac said with a smile.

“Birthday gift?” she said as her mouth curved upward.

“Here,” Zac said as he took out an intricate box from his Cosmos Sack.

She immediately opened it up, and inside was a fruit giving off an extremely enticing aroma. It was the Fruit of Ascension he’d kept all up until now. Ever since he found out that his sister didn’t need it he had pondered on what to do with it.

In the end, he decided to give it to one of his closest allies rather than put it into the contribution system. The two people he’d considered were Sap Trang and Emily, but in the end he chose Emily. He knew that Sap might be more worthy of the treasure going by his actions, but he had to think about the future of Port Atwood.

The old fisherman was a mortal just like him, but without any of the advantages that Zac had accrued. Meanwhile, Emily was shown to hold good talent for cultivation, and she still hadn’t even turned 16.

According to the information he’d gathered about titles for himself, there was one title that came from improving Race ranking before even stepping on the path of cultivation. That meant that he could actually put Emily on track on becoming a true elite with the help of the fruit.

He wanted another human elite on the island, and if he could help Emily gain a bunch of titles with the help of the fruit as an initial gift he felt it was a worthy investment. People of Earth might not care about the youths yet as they missed the opportunity of the tutorial, but Zac knew that Cultivation was a marathon rather than a sprint.

Not having access to the tutorial was a missed opportunity, but so what? The multi-verse was filled with cultivators who never went to the Tutorial but still possessed power that the people of Earth could only dream of. Even if Emily missed that opportunity, others would come along.

“This is a Fruit of Ascension,” Zac explained. “It will help you increase your Race even before turning 16, which will put you a step ahead of most cultivators in the world. I have seen how hard you’ve worked, and I hope this will help you become one of the pillars of Port Atwood in the future.”

Emily’s eyes reddened, and she didn’t say anything in response. Her arms only tightly cradled the small box, clutching it tightly to her chest. Zac only smiled and patted her head before walking toward the edge of the patio.

“I am leaving for the Treasure Hunt tomorrow, and I don’t know how long I will be gone. I hope you’ll have grown into a powerful warrior by the time I’ve come back. Remember, try to defeat a monster at least at level 26 as your first enemy for the titles. It will help your growth immensely,” Zac said before jumping down.

“Thank you, stay safe,” he heard before the door to the camper once again closed.

Next he walked over to the government building to speak with Abby and Adran. Abby actually chose to live inside the building itself, whereas Adran lived right next door, so both were essentially always there.

Since he was a lord it was within his purview to delegate certain tasks, and give specific individuals more control over various functions of the town. Until now he’d kept almost all control to himself, apart from enabling others to buy teleportation arrays.

But there were clear disadvantages to this tactic. One example was that he was unable to head to Billyville, even though they on paper were allies. But that alliance never got formalized since Zac was in the Dead Zone at the time.

After an hour-long meeting, he gave both the administrators some more control and set the course for the development of Port Atwood. Most of the islands within his control were still unexplored, and his force was still mapping things out.

Unfortunately, they still hadn't found the main continent either, making Zac wonder just how far in the middle of nowhere they were located. But every week new citizens got integrated into his kingdom, which in turn increased his income through taxes.

Of course, since he chose a pretty generous system at the Merit Exchange his income wasn't enormous. But if his population doubled his income from taxes would eclipse that of his mine.

Suddenly a knock on the door interrupted the meeting, and not long after a secretary walked inside.

"I am sorry to bother you, but the Zhix ambassador wishes to meet Lord Atwood. He says it's urgent," she said.

"Ibtep? Send him in," Zac said with some curiosity.

It was a while since he'd spoken with Ibtep, and he wondered what he was up to. He actually thought the Zhix was aboard the main scouting vessel with Sap Trang, in case they encountered another Zhix hive.

Soon the Zhix entered, this time not donning the large backpack he usually brought around.

"Greetings, Lord Atwood," the Zhix said followed by a very formal bow.

"Long time no see, Ibtep. What's on your mind?" Zac asked.

"Nonet of Hive Kundevi wishes strength upon you for the hunt. Nonet also wanted to give you this," the Zhix said and took out a dagger and what appeared to be an amulet.

"What are these?" Zac asked curiously.

"As you've noticed our kind are a bit enthusiastic in our greetings of new warriors," Ibtep said.

Adran only snorted in his chair, and Zac had to force himself to not roll his eyes. Enthusiastic greetings might just be the understatement of the year. The Zhix ignored the demon's response though and kept going.

"These are the relics of the hive. If you show these along with sending the regards of Nonet when meeting another Anointed they might not immediately attack. As every day passes the Dominators grow stronger, and we believe that every race needs to work together to stop them," Ibtep said with a serious face.

"Thank you for the gift, and give my regards to Nonet. These will be a great help," Zac said as he accepted the two items.

The ambassador stayed for half an hour to teach Zac some basic etiquette when speaking with the Anointed, before leaving with another round of well-wishing. Since he was running out of time Zac also ended the meeting with a final exhortation to aid Ogras in finding the shapeshifters by any means necessary.

Thirty minutes later he sat in an emptied classroom with four others. It was two men and two women. The only one he recognized was Lyla, whereas the others were cultivators from Refugee's Harbor.

Seeing the three made Zac realize that the scale of the treasure hunt might be even larger than he expected before. If these people managed to get tokens, then so

would thousands of others. Lyla had gained another two levels since he saw her last, but she was still only in her mid-thirties.

As for the other 3 cultivators they were around the same level, apart from a woman who was level 38. Apparently she was one of the leaders of the cultivators from Refugee's harbor. Zac honestly didn't feel that they would be much more than fodder at the hunt, but he wouldn't stop people from chasing their dreams.

"I called you all here to discuss the Treasure Hunt starting tomorrow," Zac began.

The people from Refugee's Harbor hesitantly looked at each other until they focused on their leader.

"Are you confiscating our tokens?" she said with a somber expression.

Zac's brows rose from that line of question. He hadn't expected that, but after further thought he guessed it made sense. There were quite a few people stronger than these three on the island, though they were all demons who couldn't go.

But these people still thought that demons was the fourth local race. Honestly, if he could bring the demons he would probably buy the tokens from these four, as it would be far more beneficial to bring Ogras and his generals.

"No. I just called you here to tell you to be careful, and to not use my name unless as a last resort. I have essentially made the whole world government an enemy, and there are false rumors surrounding me on the main continent. Mentioning that you live here might not necessarily help you, but perhaps have the opposite effect," Zac explained with a wry smile.

"I will try to help you if we meet each other, but you shouldn't rely on me either. I am just one person, and I believe that the treasure hunt will cover a huge area. In fact, if you're not confident in staying alive on your own you're likely better off not going," he continued.

However, all of them seemed adamant about going, so Zac could only respect their wishes and only reiterated a few tips. He also gave them each one copy of **[Book of Babel]** so they could talk it out with whoever they encountered and a couple of healing pills each.

By now he was done with all his matters, apart from finally giving himself one last power-up. He went back to his courtyard and sat down to stabilize his mind. After a while he took out the small vial containing the Dao Treasure, but instead of drinking it he closed his eyes and focused on the Dao of Sharpness.

After pondering on the aspect of sharpness he wanted to evolve for an hour he finally opened his eyes, and with one fluid motion drank all the contents of the vial. A familiar sensation overcame him as he saw the vast system of the Dao of Sharpness with his inner sight.

Seeing the whole Dao like this was straining his mind, and it almost felt like his soul was getting continuously cut by the sharpness. Zac didn't waste any time, instead quickly finding the part of the Dao that corresponded with his own insights, and started to absorb that part.

His understanding was quickly formalizing into a crystalized nugget of insight, and he effortlessly passed the threshold to the middle stage. Only seconds later the simulated epiphany from the drug ran out, and he opened his eyes again to check on his harvest.

**Seed of Sharpness (Middle): Dexterity +25, Intelligence +5**

Zac wasn't surprised in the slightest that his upgraded seed only provided Dexterity since the particular insight he gained was into that of speed. Having evolved his seed also meant that he had done everything he needed to do before the hunt.

He got up on his feet to head to his sister's place since he knew that she was skipping going to the Academy today. They had already planned to have dinner together since he might be gone for a while.

But as he started to walk out of his courtyard he saw Ogras stand there with a determined expression on his face.

"Good, you're out. We need to talk."

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### **Chapter 213 - The Hunt Begins**

It was close to 9 am and Zac stood ready in his courtyard, his sister and Ogras accompanying him.

**[Treasure Hunt commence in 5 minutes - Be advised, no Cosmic Sack allowed. A temporary sack will be provided upon arrival. Failure to comply will result in forfeiture of Cosmos Sack]**

Zac's brows rose in surprise, and he quickly took off his Cosmos Sack while the other two curiously looked at him. Even though he'd handed off most of his things to the contribution administrators he still was using the large Cosmos Sack he snagged from Mhal, and it contained all sorts of things.

It seemed that the System wanted to level the playing field a bit, or at least make money a smaller part of the calculation. Perhaps it was afraid someone would bring a mountain of Nexus Crystals or even large war machines or arrays into the trial, messing things up.

It seemed that it would only allow everyone to bring the stuff that one could carry. That still didn't mean that everything would be equal. Zac quickly ran over to his bed and ripped out his linens and placed it on the floor.

Next, he took out a various assortment of things he wanted to bring, ranging from healing pills to thousands of Nexus Crystals. Essentially he put everything cheap on the linens and tied them up into a huge knapsack that could barely hold under the weight of its contents. He simply planned to hold it in his arms upon teleportation and hope that the system would allow it.

As for everything valuable, such as his prepared E-Grade Crystals, **[Verun's Bite]**, his top tier healing pills and his Automatic Map, they were all placed on his person. He also placed a couple of filled water canteens and fasting pills on his person as well.

He still had no idea what kind of environment he would end up in and needed to be prepared for anything. The fasting pills were given to him by Ogras yesterday. There were ten of them, and each of them would allow him to keep going without eating for a couple of days.

He used one of the Demon's ranger knapsacks that snugly ran along his back to store his valuables, apart from a **[Verun's Bite]** and a couple of tomahawks that he put on his belt.

“I wasn’t allowed to bring a Cosmos Sack,” Zac explained to his sister after he’d packed everything, afterward handing her his pouch. “Hold on to this while I’m gone.”

With his preparations done Zac sat down and just waited. When a minute remained until the hunt started he stood up and hoisted the huge knapsack over his shoulder, holding the token in his other hand.

“Take care,” Kenzie said as she looked upon her brother with some worry.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine,” Zac said with a smile.

His gains the past two weeks had been tremendous, and he couldn’t help being filled with confidence. He almost felt like a fox let loose in a henhouse. He was already at the forefront of humanity before his explosive gains as of late. With the help of his new Class, Titles, and Dao improvements he was just a monster in human form.

Next he turned to Ogras who stood close by as well, still looking a bit petulant.

“I know you’re eager, but please wait until the shapeshifters are dealt with,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“Don’t worry. I’ll find that snake even if I have to turn the whole island upside down,” the demon said with annoyance. “Ruining my good things.”

Zac only snorted in response. The reason the demon came by his courtyard yesterday was to share the fact that he had decided to enter the Mystic Realm in search of opportunities. He would pay for the stabilizing array himself as well, which would save Zac millions of Nexus Coins.

However, Zac had told the demon to wait until the shapeshifter problem was dealt with. He wasn’t sure of the cultist’s power, but he was afraid that the cultist would be able to cause a lot of damage if both he and Ogras was missing from the city at the same time.

At first the demon had been a bit unwilling to go with his arrangements. But after Zac promised that Ogras could finally enter the Inheritance for The Umbra after Zac was back from the Treasure Hunt, provided the demon rooted out the shapeshifter first, he was quickly filled with energy again.

Actually Zac had planned to allow the Demon inside the inheritance in any case. As soon as the hunt was dealt with he planned to go on an all-out assault against the foreign invaders, and he needed his allies as powerful as possible. But Ogras didn’t know that fact, so using The Umbra as a motivator worked pretty well.

“The two of you will act as my proxies until I’m back,” he continued. “I have given you the ability to enter alliances in case someone wants to approach us while I’m gone. Abby can buy arrays if needed.”

“Just go and get some more titles. I’ll be counting on you for the Towers later,” Ogras said.

“Stay close to Ogras until the shapeshifter problem is dealt with,” Zac said as he turned to his sister, who nodded.

The next moment the scene in front of him was simply gone, replaced with blackness. It was reminiscent of the weird space he’d found himself in right at the moment of integration. Hopefully, this didn’t mean that there was another roll for survival though.

This time the System didn’t speak in his mind, but a large screen soon appeared in front of him.

**[Welcome to the Limited Treasure Hunt.]**

**[Struggle for supremacy.]**

**[1. Duration of the hunt is 1 month.]**

[2. Kill for points. Higher attribute targets reward a higher amount of points. Higher level targets reward a higher amount of points. Higher value targets reward a higher amount of points. Rewards depend on points accumulated at the end of the hunt.]

Point rewards.

1<sup>st</sup> Place

+10 levels, 250 million Nexus Coins.

2<sup>nd</sup> Place

+7 levels, 150 million Nexus Coins.

3<sup>rd</sup> Place

+5 levels, 100 million Nexus Coins.

4<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> Place

+3 levels, 50 million Nexus Coins.

10<sup>th</sup> - 100<sup>th</sup> Place

+1 level, 10 million Nexus Coins.

[3. Hunt for treasures. Rewarded Titles depend on accumulated value at the end of the hunt.]

[4. Temporary ladders added for Hunters and Gatherers.]

[5. Talents are forged through battle. Every three days Gatherers who have avoided battle will be teleported to an arena to fight for supremacy. Only the winner will remain.]

[6. Hunters can leave at any moment by crushing their token, except when fighting in an arena. Wealth brought back depends on the duration of stay in the hunt. Those who leave early disqualify for any ladder rewards.]

Zac felt some powerlessness when he looked over the ruleset. The method the System used for cranking out powerhouses was quite direct as usual. This would be a blood bath. Not only would killing people increase one's standing on the hunter ladder, but it would also allow them to snatch the riches that their victims had accumulated.

The rewards for killing others were quite extravagant, and even he couldn't help getting enticed. Ten levels was a huge boost, especially for him who was so close to the limit of his class. His leveling speed had greatly slowed down lately in his human form, apart from the insane gain when he formed his core.

But between battling for a month and gaining the first place reward he'd perhaps reach level 75 in one fell swoop.

Of course, he wouldn't be the only one eyeing that reward. It was the same for everyone by now, leveling was getting exponentially harder. A boost of 10 levels would help most pass a level threshold, not only giving them a bunch of additional attributes, but also a new skill.

That together with the awarded titles it would be like giving a tiger wings. And there were men far more scrupulous than Zac that would try to kill everything in sight.

Perhaps people would focus on finding various treasures in the beginning, but soon it would turn into a crazed battle, since killing others was a far better source for treasures than arduously searching the area. Becoming a top name on the hunter's list would likely give a top spot on the gatherer list as well, doubling up on the rewards.

Besides, the system had even put a failsafe into place to ensure people wouldn't hide from fighting. Those who only focused on finding treasures would be forced into what seemed to be a deathmatch, where they couldn't even use their token to escape.

Another interesting point to Zac was that judging by how the calculations worked, he might have just turned into a juicy target. It was clear the system wanted to incentivize battling strong people rather than rounding up a ton of weaklings to kill.

He could only pray that greed wouldn't go to people's heads and that Earth would lose too many of its powerhouses. There were strong enemies waiting at the home front after they got back.

The Zhix was the largest risk in that regard. Those people were simply crazy, and if a couple of Dominators were thrown into the mix this thing could turn into a tragedy real quick. The Dominators were a large reason why he so desperately wanted to get stronger before the start of the hunt.

But with all his new power-ups he had some confidence, even if he came up to the real monsters at the top of the Zhix ladder.

Zac didn't have time to go over the ruleset any longer, as the darkness was replaced with a blinding light, forcing Zac to close his eyes.

The moment he opened them again he found himself standing in the courtyard of a dilapidated temple that emitted an aura of solemnity and vicissitude. He was happy to see that he still carried his large knapsack, and he immediately put its content into a cosmos sack he found already fastened to his belt.

The space of the temporary Cosmos Sack was enormous, tens of times larger than even the one he looted from the Corpse Lord. It might mean that the area was just filled with treasure if the System thought everyone needed enough space to fit a mountain inside their Cosmos Sacks.

After he had stowed away his items he turned toward the temple again. It was uninhabited, but it was clear that it wasn't simply abandoned once upon a time. A huge diagonal cut had cleanly chopped off a large part of the roofing, and even part of the cliff the temple stood on.

Judging by the state of decay it had likely been thousands of years since this place was assaulted, but Zac felt a terrifying sharpness emanate from the sword scar just by looking at it. It was clear that the battle had involved some extremely powerful people to leave such a lasting effect.

The scene wasn't really something he had expected, and he quickly turned around to get a read on the situation. The sight that entered his eyes made Zac's eyebrows rise in shock.

A seemingly endless number of mountains of various sizes stretched all the way to the horizon. That wasn't the shocking thing though, but rather that all of them were filled with various grand structures. There was everything from enormous palaces residing on the top, to hanging structures that ran all along a mountainside. Some of the mountains even seemed mostly decorative, housing statues rising hundreds of meters in the air.

It was a wide array of architectural designs and level of grandeur on the thousands of buildings that he could see, but one thing was the same for all of them. They were dilapidated or had clear signs of battle scarring.

At first Zac thought he was looking upon the ruins of a lost civilization that had fallen to war. But remembering the depictions from the demons he was starting to suspect he wasn't standing on a mountainous capital like the ancient Aztec cities.

It was more likely that this was a large Sect that had fallen due to some sort of tribulation. However, just what sort of tribulation was slightly confusing. The scar on the temple behind him indicated an attack from a cultivator, but most of the damage seemed to come from beasts.

Zac could only hope that it was a beast horde that attacked the sect. If cultivators were responsible for the fall of this faction everything of value should have already been pilfered. That very fact made it seem even more likely beasts were behind the desolation, since otherwise it would be an odd place for the System to arrange a treasure hunt.

The theory that it was a sect also made it quite easy to guess where the best valuables were. The higher status someone had, the higher up on the mountain their residence would be placed. The peaks were reserved for the elders, sect master, and true genius disciples.

Of course, knowledge of multi-verse sects wasn't really needed to guess that fact, as the structures on the top of the mountains were clearly far more extravagant compared to the ones at the foot.

Bloody battles would likely take place at the peaks Zac surmised with a sigh. But he didn't hurry to a peak himself, instead turning back toward the temple behind him.

He took his axe from his belt and vigilantly started walking toward the entrance.

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#### **Chapter 214 - Traps and Ladders**

Only fools would rush up to the mountain peaks, becoming unwitting meat shields to try out whatever trials those places had in store. Because going by how the System operated it wouldn't simply leave piles of wealth for anyone to grab, there likely was a trick to it.

Besides, even if he might not have the highest Luck of everyone arriving here, he should at least be in the absolute top. That he was dropped off right in front of this specific temple might mean there were some good things inside.

There wasn't anything noteworthy to see as he walked across the small square in front of the temple, and he quickly ascended the ten steps to the real entrance. The doors were closed but a simple push opened them with a creak, giving him a clear view of the insides of the temple.

The interiors were completely barren with only two exceptions as far as he could see. There was a large painting hung on the opposite side of the temple, and a simple prayer mat that appeared to be woven by reed in front of it.

Zac got curious and after taking one last look around entered, but the moment he put his foot inside an enormous pressure descended upon his mind. The surroundings changed and he suddenly found himself on a desperate battlefield.

Any way he looked there were bloodied and muddied warriors desperately trying to kill their opponents, their eyes tinged with red in madness and bloodlust. No one cared the slightest about their own well-being, only constantly pushing forward, desperately swinging their weapons.

Zac looked down to find an axe in his hand, and suddenly an overwhelming battle lust overcame him. It was as though a god of war was beckoning him to massacre everything, to stand on top of a mountain of corpses. He wanted to bite into the opponent's flesh and drink their blood and revel in the madness of battle.

The next second Zac grunted as the vision shattered, and he once again found himself in the empty temple. He actually hadn't moved, and he still only stood with one foot inside the building. But his back was soaked in sweat and he was panting from

the strain. There was even a trickle of blood running down his chin, as he'd apparently bit his lip.

It was an offensive illusion array. That was the only thing that Zac could guess. Luckily between [**Mental Fortress**] and his staunch determination he quickly broke himself out of it. Otherwise he'd be a sitting duck, standing in the doorway like a fool.

He immediately regretted not having trained with Janos more. There were various ways to break out of illusions, and he had just now used the most basic one, brute force. But that would only work when his will and determination could overpower the strength of the illusion.

There were far more skilled ways to break illusions that didn't depend on strength to such a degree. It had been on his list of things to learn in the future, but there were always a million things to do, making him forget about it.

But he knew a few basic pieces of information. The most important thing was to never lose a sense of self. The moment you forgot who you were, taking on the role of whoever the illusion provided you, then you were likely screwed.

Losing the sense of self would mean that you stopped fighting the illusion, and it would take a miracle to get out in one piece. As for breaking illusions while trapped, it was actually possible. The world that was created had so-called fault lines, or weaknesses, that one could use to break out.

How to localize them and break the loop of the illusion was an art in of itself, and not something Zac could do at the moment.

But now that he knew there could be arrays he'd be in a better position. His defensive skill was already active, but he started actively control it as he took another step inside. However, this time nothing happened, and another few steps proved that there likely only was one array as protection.

Zac looked out through the door to the vast number of buildings in the mountain ranges. Perhaps all structures had these kinds of protections put in place. If that was true the palaces might be real death traps.

A small temple in the middle of a mountain had an array that almost managed to suck him in. Just what kind of defenses would the grand structures where the elders lived have? Perhaps the treasure hunters themselves wouldn't be the greatest danger to this hunt, but rather the arrays.

Zac put it out of his mind and slowly walked over toward the painting, keeping his mental defenses up and running all the while. However, it truly seemed that everything was safe after defeating the array at the entrance.

He soon stood in front of the mat and the painting, trying to understand their meaning. The painting was only one large character from some unknown script. It was clear that it was derived from the normal fractals, just like those of the Demons and Creators, but it was different from both of them.

The mat looked pretty cheap from first glance, but it likely was made from some high-quality material rather than normal reed. The reason was that it looked pretty much brand new, even though it should have been left here for millennia. Normal reed would have rotted away long ago.

It truly looked like it was a setup to meditate upon something. Someone would sit at this mat and stare at the painting on the wall, trying to reach new insights. After making sure there were no more traps around in the area Zac squatted down and touched the mat.

Nothing happened, making Zac sigh in relief. After hesitating for a bit he sat down on the mat, looking up at the painting. He wanted to see what whoever once sat here saw as he or she looked upon the weird character.

Zac didn't know why, but as he stared at the exquisitely drawn painting he almost felt drawn in, but not like with an illusion. Rather that it was trying to teach him something. Zac let himself get inundated by the feeling, trying to understand the concepts that the sign contained.

However, a jarring sound broke Zac out of his reverie, and he turned around with annoyance. Outside the doorway three humans stood looking around the temple. Since there wasn't really anything else inside the trio soon turned their gazes to Zac.

The three of them didn't enter, but one of them took out a small book and quickly went through it.

"He's not on the list," Zac could hear one of them say with a subdued voice.

Since the temple was completely empty the words carried over to Zac on the other side. Zac's curiosity was somewhat piqued, as he'd never heard of any list. Perhaps someone had compiled a list of rankers with descriptions by now.

He still had the information package he bought long ago from New Washington detailing the top of the Ishiate ladder. However, on that information missive only names were given.

Someone named Starlight was on the first spot and still held a commanding lead according to the Ishiate on the island. He or she was currently level 54, even beating out Salvation, which was quite impressive.

If there was a more advanced copy of the ladder circulating he wouldn't mind getting his hands on it. It wasn't that he was afraid to encounter some of the stronger humans, but he wanted to know what the big players looked like.

It would help him out in his side-mission, creating a business monopoly with the help of Calrin. He was about to ask the trio about it, but they kept talking between themselves.

"Hidden or weakling?" another muttered with a hushed tone.

"No need to risk it, we'll stay low and observe for now," the person in the middle said.

The three nodded and made to walk out again while warily keeping their eyes on Zac. It seemed they had decided they didn't want to fight with Zac for the meager treasures inside.

Zac wasn't surprised. It was just the start of the Treasure Hunt, and only fools would enter fights blindly with complete strangers. The ladders would give an indicator of power within a week or two, but at the moment everything was a mystery.

But Zac truly was curious about that list, so he stood up.

"Wait," he said with a calm voice.

The three hesitated for a second and turned back toward Zac.

"What?"

"What list are you talking about?" Zac asked.

"The Omniscient Eye's elite list, of course," the man said with a frown.

"Omniscient Eye?" Zac asked with confusion.

This wasn't a term he'd ever heard of before. There was an Eternal Eye high up on the ladder, and the Pavilion of Myriad Eyes, but no Omniscient Eye. But judging from the context it seemed to be an individual or organization that focused on intelligence gathering.

“Why play ignorant? Is this an Empire ploy?” the man in the middle said, and the others seemed to ready themselves for battle with worry in their eyes.

The confusion in Zac’s mind only increased, until he started to have a sneaking suspicion. Without another word he flashed right in front of the trio and snatched the book still in the leftmost man’s hands.

The three seemed shocked by Zac’s speed, but they were experienced fighters, each of them unhesitantly attacking with their swords. But Zac barely registered their actions, simply swatting the swords out of their hands with a wave.

Horror appeared in their eyes, and the leader of the three unhesitantly called for a retreat. But how could it be that easy to get away from Zac when they were in melee range?

Zac flashed after them and threw all three down on the ground. But before Zac had time to react they had taken out their tokens, intending to crush it. Zac only had time to snatch the token out of the hands of the leader before the other two instantly winked out of existence.

“Please, my life won’t give you many points and I haven’t collected any treasure yet. Killing me will award you nothing,” the man said with a pleading look.

“I’m not going to kill you, but I need answers,” Zac said as he used **[Inquisitive Eye]** on his captive.

**[Revor - Human. Level 37 - Strength]**

**[Hunter 97 323]**

**[Gatherer 97 323]**

Revor possessed neither the attributes or the skills to block out his middling scouting skill. The man in front of him should be a pretty average trial taker, roughly the same as those from his island.

But what Zac found more interesting were the additional two lines beneath his name. The System provided additional information about ladder positions. That would soon become extremely helpful in finding juicy targets or avoid dangerous people.

The sheer number of participants was also higher than he had expected. He’d realized that the tokens weren’t quite as rare as he’d first thought after seeing the others in Port Atwood. But almost a hundred thousand participants were quite a few.

“Ask me anything, anything,” the Revor quickly nodded.

“First of all, do you possess an identification skill?” Zac asked.

“I do, but only a basic one,” he nodded.

“Use it on me and show me what it says,” Zac commanded.

He felt his bangle slightly heat up the next moment telling him that an attempt on him was blocked. But even so, a screen appeared the next moment looking identical to the two lines that detailed Revor’s ladder position. It was Zac’s own ladder position which was a few spots ahead of Revor’s.

“I can’t see your name, only these two lines. I’ve never seen them before,” Revor quickly said.

Zac nodded in confirmation. It was as he’d expected. Those lines were something added by the System, and not something even a treasure from Greatest could block out. Next, he wanted to find out if his suspicions were correct.

“Open up your ladder next,” Zac said.

The man looked confused, but he complied with the request, and soon two almost ladders appeared in front of them. It was the Hunter and Gatherer ladders, and

Zac sighed when he saw that some already had started to accrue points on the Hunter-ladder. But this wasn't what he was after.

But just as Zac was about to speak up Revor interrupted him.

"I can see your placing again without using my skill!" he said with surprise.

Zac's brows rose and he opened up the temporary ladders as well, and it was just as Revor said. Two lines once again appeared above him.

[Hunter 97 309]

[Gatherer 97 309]

The man's placing had gone down a bit. But since he neither had killed nor found treasure it could only mean that people had died or fled the hunt in that short interval. But that wasn't what Zac cared about.

Neither Zac's bracelet or his **[Mental Fortress]** skill activated in the slightest, but Revor was able to glean information about him even so. It meant that anyone would be able to spy on him without him noticing by simply opening the ladders.

Zac felt that it wasn't great for him, but it might help save a couple of lives. It would give the weaker people a chance to avoid the more murderous powerhouses.

"Not that ladder, the normal one for levels," Zac said, refocusing on the real issue.

"Of course!" the man quickly said, but his face only got more confused.

The next moment a normal ladder appeared in front of him. But just as Zac had expected, he didn't recognize a single name on that list.

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**Chapter 215 - Treasures**

It was as Zac suspected. The man in front of him was not from Earth. The foreign names on the ladder made that painfully clear. Another very obvious point was that there was a group of clear frontrunners in this other world. Seven of the top ten names seemed to be from the same family, with three of them even having evolved.

The fact that there were E-Grade Evolved people among the top warriors of the ladder was a bit troubling. Perhaps the Dominators weren't the only ones he needed to be wary of.

"What's the planet you came from called?" Zac asked.

"Planet? Wait... You don't mean..?" the man said, quickly catching on.

"Yes, it appears we are not from the same place. My ladder is completely different, I don't recognize anyone on yours."

"Just my luck to be captured by an offworlder powerhouse," the man muttered in defeat.

Zac only snorted in response. He had to admit the trio was a bit unlucky, but clearly not as bad as some others, as people were already moving up the hunter ladder by stepping over corpses.

"Did your planet recently get integrated into the multiverse?" Zac asked.

"Yes, around half a year ago," the man quickly nodded.

"What other races do you have on your planet apart from humans?" Zac probed.

"What?" the man said, looking truly confused.

“Didn’t your world get randomized with a couple of other planets with other races?” Zac asked.

“Well, we got merged with another planet, but I don’t know what other races you speak of,” the man said.

“Explain the forces of your planet,” Zac said.

“I am from the Free states of Fyria, a part of the previous planet called Berum,” the man explained. “The the planet we got fused with is called Medhin.”

“Wait, Medhin, like the ladder?” Zac asked with surprise.

“Yes. Medhin is both the name of the planet and the ruling family. From what we can tell the whole planet was conquered by a country called Medhin thousands of years ago. The war took hundreds of years. Since then the same family has been the regents,” the man sighed.

“Those people are lunatics. They didn’t care some God smashed our planets together, and immediately declared war on every country of Berum. They’re fanatics that have been starved for a battle for millennia, and the Medhin family are their gods.”

“So who are the other three names?” Zac said.

“They are the champions of Berum, and the only ones who can keep the Medhin at bay,” the man explained with reverence in his eyes.

“So you’re in an all-out war in your homeworld?” Zac probed. “How do you handle that alongside the Incursions?”

“Incursions? What’s that?” the man asked with confusion.

Zac blankly stared at the man for a while, until he couldn’t help but ask for clarification.

“Your planet didn’t get incursions when it got integrated? Huge pillars spewing out powerful foreign invaders?”

“There’s no such thing on our planet, there is no way for such a thing to be kept quiet,” the man said with a shake of his head.

This was the first time Zac heard of planets getting integrated without getting assaulted by Incursions. Perhaps launching Incursions was only one of the tools in the System’s belt. Besides, it seemed the other planet was filled with enough bloodshed to create powerhouses through a world war.

Zac kept asking various things from the man, and he dutifully explained everything. He was more than eager to spill the beans on the Medhin empire, such as their looks and estimated powers. Apparently, the Omniscient Eye was a traitor of the Medhin world, and the booklet containing the information of all the top individuals was more thorough on the Medhin side.

At the same time the captive was more fleeting in his explanations of his own homeworld, apart from the fact that they weren’t very technologically advanced, and that they consisted of multiple countries that had banded together to rebuff the Medhin Empire.

As for the Medhin family themselves, it was believed that they were low-level cultivators before their integration even started. It was this power that had made the family stand out, and allowed them to paint themselves as gods.

They had also made their whole empire search for precious treasures to further their advancements, keeping all the best things for themselves. According to Revor, all of them were not only high leveled, but also extremely strong for their levels.

Especially the Emperor himself, Nethorep Medhin, was a true monster. He’d decimated an entire army of elite cultivators by himself, leaving unscathed afterward.

Luckily the free states had managed to get their hands on some War Arrays, allowing them to keep the Medhin at bay.

But it looked bleak for them, and they were desperately hoping that this hunt would provide them with the means to turn the situation around. Zac felt bad for the people, but it honestly wasn't his business. He wasn't sure he'd ever meet these off-worlders again.

"A final request. Walk inside the temple," Zac said.

The man looked confused, but he complied. However, after taking a first step inside he stopped. In just seconds he was shaking, sweat running down his back. He was stuck in the array. Zac observed for a bit longer until he grabbed the man and pulled him back out.

Revor's eyes were red-rimmed and he breathed heavily, but he was freed from the illusion when Zac moved him.

"What just happened?" he panted.

"Illusion arrays. I suspect most places are protected by them," Zac explained.

For now, that was all the information Zac needed. The Medhin seemed strong, but he was confident in himself. His weak point was that he wasn't a cultivator, so he couldn't boost the power of his attacks with a cultivation method. However, he more than made up for it in the sheer amount of attributes.

It was also nice to see that the arrays weren't broken as soon as he walked inside. Everyone would have to pass the trial to enter the premises of the various palaces. Since the man had answered everything he needed to know Zac simply decided to hand back the token to him. Zac felt no need to get a few paltry points from the man by killing him.

"Can I ask you? From your world, are there people who are able to kill the Medhin royals?" Revor suddenly asked as he held the token in his hands.

"Yes, a few," Zac said after some hesitation. "Wait, are you leaving?"

"Our meeting was a wake-up call. I am not strong enough to play in these muddied waters. This time I survived, but I fear the next person I meet will not be so benevolent. Good luck, I hope you kill a few of the Royals," the man said with hope on his face before he disappeared.

Zac quietly looked at the empty spot where Revor just stood. He felt that the man-made a sensible choice. People like him would have a high chance of becoming fodder unless they hid in places where the powerhouses didn't deign to go. Most would likely kill people like him, even if the points awarded weren't great.

Zac himself was still a bit unsure how he would go about gaining a placement on the Hunter Ladder. He was reluctant to go on a killing spree just to increase his points.

But soon he decided upon a path. For anyone he encountered, he'd demand their treasures. This was a treasure hunt after all, and it was the Gatherer ladder that provided the most important rewards; the Titles. He needed to be a bit ruthless, and while he wasn't okay with wanton murder he could live with some highway robbery.

If people complied they would go their own way afterward and find new treasure for themselves. If they tried to attack him, Zac wouldn't show mercy.

For the point ladder he would simply hunt the hunters. Anyone high on the hunter list should both be strong enough to provide a good amount of points while also being a murderous lunatic. Hunting these people would have multiple positive effects.

First, it would cut away the competition for the rewards. If he killed everyone above him on the ladder he would be the winner. Secondly, it would save a lot of innocent people's lives to remove those kinds of people from the equation.

Finally, it was the best way to get more treasure. The Top hunters should all be teeming with wealth after a week or two.

After having decided on his path he walked back into the temple. This time he wasn't assaulted by any array as he passed through the entrance, making him believe that the arrays had likely been modified somehow by the System. As long as he passed it once, the array wouldn't attack him again.

He walked over to the mat and grabbed it to put it into his Cosmos Sack, but gave a start when he looked beneath it. To his surprise, there was a golden crystal hidden in a groove beneath the ratty mat, fitted perfectly inside.

He quickly picked it up and infused it with some energy. A screen quickly appeared, looking like a book cover with intricate design. The crystal wasn't a skill crystal, but rather a compendium of knowledge.

As for the subject, it was declared in the title. Luckily for Zac the crystal worked the same way as the information missives from the pavilion, having automatic translation features.

### **[Eastern Trigram Sect - Formation Ledger, Beginner Compendium]**

As Zac looked through the compendium he was getting more and more astounded. This was what considered a beginner compendium? The crystal held almost an endless amount of information, from very simple concepts to very esoteric knowledge.

Learning everything inside the crystal would likely give anyone an extremely robust foundation if one wanted to become a formation master, either as a main Class or as a side profession.

It might not be something Zac had the time to properly peruse at the moment, but it would be a great addition to his town. The knowledge of formations was essentially nil among his people, and if he could nurture a proper formation master he would save a fortune.

Not only would the formation master be able to create new formations, saving Zac the cost of buying them, but any formation actively managed by a formation master would see a great increase in power and efficiency.

Zac quickly put the crystal inside his Pouch and opened up the Gatherer Ladder. As Zac expected he jumped from the bottom all the way up to spot 180. The crystal was obviously a great treasure. But it also proved that others weren't just sitting around.

Such a great find didn't even place him in the top hundred. Next, he put the mat inside and noted with some surprise he rose another 48 spots from that addition. Finally, he detached the large painting from the wall and rolled it up.

The painting itself wasn't considered very valuable by the system, only increasing his ranking by one. But he still kept it as he was curious about that odd feeling earlier before he was interrupted. Going by the hidden crystal the painting might help to give insights into array formations. Finally, he wanted to take away the protective illusion array as well, but no matter how he looked he couldn't find any array flags.

He even ripped off a couple of the wooden planks on the floor to look beneath the temple, but there was simply nothing there. His only guess was that the array was somehow engraved in the structure itself, rather than being controlled by array flags. Unless it was the System who put it in place for the hunt.

Since he was done with the temple he headed outside, pondering on his next move. First, he took out his Automatic Map, but to his disappointment, it only showed

the various mountains. He had hoped that it would name the various palaces to guide him toward the more suitable targets, but maybe the map was too low graded.

Since his current mountain was as good as any he started running up toward the peak. A month was a long time, but the area was just enormous. Even if he only slept an hour a day he would only be able to check out part of the area. There was no time to waste.

As he ran he briefly considered whether he should change his face to stay under the radar, but in the end he decided against it. He felt no need to keep a low profile any longer. If someone had a problem with him he'd deal with it one way or another. Besides, with everyone being able to see the Ladder placements of others there was no point in trying to hide.

A sudden rustle in the bushes made Zac look over, only to see a black shape rapidly closing in on him.

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#### **Chapter 216 - Appeasing the Spirit**

Zac unhesitatingly punched out, and a pained yelp escaped from the beast that tried to ambush him.

The next moment the edge of an axe fell down, cutting the animal's head clean off. Zac stopped to look down at the thing he just killed. He had to say it looked quite a bit like a rat, but one as big as a horse. Its legs were also slightly longer, and its tail was a short stub, and finally its black fur was so thick and stiff that it almost looked like quills rather than hair.

Everything happened so quickly that Zac didn't have time to use his investigative skill on it, but if it truly was a rat there would likely be a lot more of them. But judging by the amount of cosmic energy he received it wasn't very strong, perhaps somewhere around level 40. Most trial takers shouldn't have much trouble with this thing.

Next Zac opened up the ladders once again as he walked toward the beast. He threw the carcass of the rat-beast inside his pouch but soon dumped the body by the side of the path once again. He wanted to test out whether there was any value in the carcass, but since he didn't move a single spot from it he deemed it mostly worthless.

Judging from the mangy fur and nasty smell the meat wouldn't be serviceable either, and Zac would rather just eat the boring fasting pills than this thing. But he was still quite happy with the results.

While killing the beast hadn't helped his Gatherer rank, it did help with his Hunter rank since it jumped up a couple of thousand spots. That meant that killing other trial takers wasn't the only method to try for the top rewards on the point ladder, which was great news for Zac.

Because if there was one thing he was good at, it was the wholesale slaughter of beasts.

Zac kept going up along the mountain paths, keeping an eye out for other trial takers or beasts. As he ascended the mountain he noticed that the cosmic energy was gradually improving the further up he got.

It wasn't surprising that the elite would build their residences at the spots with the most energy, but he wondered why the mountain worked like this. His own mountain was different since the valley was the place with the most concentrated

energy there. Perhaps massive arrays were placed inside the mountains to redirect the energies toward the top.

Disappointingly enough he only encountered three more beasts, which were simply called Mountain Rats according to his skill, in thirty minutes of travel. It made him wonder if his plan of gaining points from animals was a no-go. There simply was too few of them to go have any significant impact on the ladder.

He also started to suspect that something was odd about this mountain. Most of the mountains he could see from looking around were filled with structures and caves, but he was almost at the top and he hadn't seen a single building since the small temple.

He hoped it was because the past owner of the mountain was a real big shot who could keep most of the mountain for himself, rather than it being a trash mountain no one had bothered with for some reason.

Finally, he found himself at the crest of the mountain, and had to take a moment to look at the scene with awe. It was completely flat like someone had cleanly cut the whole tip off in a mighty swing of a sword. He could see it was the same with many of the other peaks, but it still was extremely impressive this up close.

Most of the summit was empty, and only occupied by a large beautiful square, and Zac couldn't help but feel some wonder as he stepped on the enormous tiles. Each of the tiles was over three meters across and gave off a shimmering luster. It looked as though they were made by pristine marble, but golden veins ran across them.

More importantly, it felt as though they somehow cleansed the area with a soothing aura. Zac suddenly got an idea and pressed down his axe between two tiles. With a twist he managed to lift it up, and to his surprise the tile weighed almost as much as a car. He immediately threw the flooring into his pouch.

His ranking didn't change from the tile, but he didn't care about that. He had found a great material to renovate the surroundings of his Dao Repository.

Since they were going to undergo the Inheritance trials pretty soon he really needed to appease the tool spirit. He couldn't risk Brazla throwing a wrench in his and Ogras' plans because he wasn't happy about his view. This flooring would be perfect to surround the Repository with, and they weren't very hard to yank out of the ground.

Zac set about dismantling the entire square, gaining speed with every tile ripped loose. In just thirty minutes half of the flooring was dismantled, and he was closing in on the core of the summit.

In the center of the square, a small-sized palace was placed. He still hadn't gotten close to it as he was saving it for later. Instead, he methodically slammed his axe into the ground once again and put away the tile after yanking it loose.

The tiles were starting to have an effect, as he'd gained two spots from harvesting them. That might not sound like much, but he'd spent half an hour on them, and many others should have found treasures themselves during that time.

That he not only kept his spot but even advanced proved that these tiles were more than just beautiful. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to detile the whole summit before voices reached his ears. Not long after a group of ten walked up together, warily looking around.

Zac frowned when he saw them as he immediately opened up the ladders. The group was in the bottom of the barrel when it came to treasure, but two of them were higher on the hunter list than he was, meaning they'd likely killed a few people on the way up here.

All of them wore the same type of clothes, and it was pretty clear they were from some army. However, since the design of the clothes was foreign to him these people were likely from the other planet.

“Enemy ahead,” a lanky man said as soon as he spotted Zac who was in the middle of retrieving another tile.

“What the hell? He’s stealing the floor?” one of the men immediately burst out, eliciting guffaws from a few of the soldiers.

“Check his ladder! Those tiles must be worth a fortune!” another man suddenly shouted, and the others quickly turned deadly serious as they looked upon him.

A burly man, who appeared to be their leader judging by his slightly more elaborate getup, took a step toward Zac.

“Hand over your Cosmos Sack, and we’ll let you leave with your life,” he curtly said.

Zac’s brows rose a bit. It appeared these people felt there was safety in numbers, especially when his hunter ranking was so low.

“I’ll say the same to you. Leave your sacks and piss off this mountain,” Zac retorted as stashed another tile.

“Fourth formation,” the leader grunted, and the squad was clearly ready for that command.

All of them immediately started to radiate a respectable amount of power, which was all focused on the leader who had taken out two swords. Zac looked on with interest because if he wasn’t wrong they were utilizing a War Array. The only other explanation was that all of the others were somehow support Classes.

The veins of the leader started to bulge, and the air around him vibrated by the huge infusion of power. Clearly his strength had gone up a couple of tiers from the infusion. The others stood rooted in place, not making any moves against Zac.

Two thirds of the people seemed to be continuously infusing their leader with power, whereas the last third erected a dense shield around everyone besides the leader. Zac had to admit that it was a pretty good setup. The largest problem with wars was the huge disparity in power between people, where one powerhouse could decimate thousands of warriors.

But the other planet had already found the solution to this. They made their strongest person far stronger, and Zac would have to guess that the effect was far better than his own Hatchetman’s Rage.

He briefly wondered just how powerful he would become if he got a squad of demon soldiers to empower him in the same way. It would be quite the scene. But Zac didn’t have time to dream any longer as the leader was upon him with surprising speed, his two swords already aiming to cut him in two.

The soldier didn’t want to use any time it appeared, and the skill he used contained an extreme amount of force. Both swords shone in a sinister light, but Zac couldn’t figure out just what type of element it contained.

At first, he was about to clash with the attack with his axe, but at the last moment changed his mind and desperately scrambled out of the way. It wasn’t due to fear he’d lose from the exchange, but rather fear that the shockwave might damage the tiles around him.

The swords were already following him, aiming to stab him in his back, but he flashed away with **[Loamwalker]**, arriving in front of the turtling soldiers. He slammed down his axe with a little bit of power to test its strength and was impressed with how sturdy it was.

He wasn't interested in entertaining these people any longer though, and the next strike contained both his Dao of Heaviness and his full force. The shield immediately cracked, which clearly hurt the defenders as they staggered and even coughed out some blood.

The next moment all of them were dead, as a lightning-quick [Chop] had killed them before they had the time to take out their talismans or erect new defenses. He was surprised to see that the sacks on the bodies automatically turned into streams of light that went into his pouch. However, he didn't have time to check it out, as there was one more of them.

Zac turned around to see the leader unhesitatingly crush his token, but Zac flashed in front of him and with a Sharpness-empowered strike cleanly killed him as well.

It was a bit odd. The first two Zac saw escape with the tokens immediately disappeared, whereas Revor and this leader took a moment before they were whisked away.

The System wasn't very benevolent, and it thrived on conflict. He already felt it noteworthy that it allowed escaping at all. That it would add some hidden caveats felt natural, and Zac was starting to believe that it might have to do with either the ladders or wealth.

The higher one was on the ladder the longer it would take to escape. That way the weaklings might be able to escape, but the stronger people would be stuck in life-and-death battles to a higher degree. Perhaps it would take himself minutes to disappear due to his attribute or accumulated wealth, making it useless in battle.

He was also curious to see how the system dealt with kills that happened during the seconds after the tokens were crushed but they still hadn't disappeared. Soon he got the answer. The decapitated corpse disappeared, but the Cosmos Sack went into his own pouch instead.

After some hesitation he threw the bodies into his pouch as well before resuming his detiling. In another fifteen minutes the square was picked clean, and he instead focused his attention to the palace in the center of the summit.

He stopped some ways from the entrance and took out one of the bodies from before and unceremoniously chucked it over the decorative wall towards the inner area of the courtyard. However, nothing happened as the corpse thumped down on the ground.

Zac still activated his [Mental Fortress] to the max, and after some deliberation he added [Nature's Barrier] as well. All arrays weren't necessarily mental attacks. The crystal he found contained all sorts of arrays, including pure murder formations that summoned all kinds of horrifying attacks.

He warily stepped toward the vaulted gates his eyes darting back and forth, looking for any signs of danger.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 217 - Ransacking**

Just as he took his first step inside the building his danger sense sparked to life. To Zac's surprise it actually came from behind, rather than from something inside the palace. He stood completely frozen, and a second later a dagger appeared out of nowhere.

It headed straight toward his neck through a brief crack in the defensive wall of the whirling leaves around him. But he was already ready for the attack and quickly moved his head out of the way and simultaneously grabbed the hand holding the weapon.

The next moment he held the rogue who tried to sneak attack him by his neck, and it was actually an Ishiate. Zac frowned a bit over what to do with the beastman draped in black. He was on a good foot with both camps of the beastmen, but that didn't mean that he was going to allow people who tried to kill him to roam free.

The Ishiate was trying to say something, but Zac ignored him as he walked inward, holding his captive as a shield. So far there had been no arrays activating, but he didn't believe that a summit palace would have no protections at all.

He passed the inner courtyard, that seemed to have once been a garden but now was only covered in windswept weeds and twisted trees. As he walked the Ishiate tried to wrest himself free with desperate effort, but a slap on the back of his head rendered him unconscious.

Soon Zac stood in front of the main doors into the proper structure, and he used the unconscious beastman to push the door open. It was a bit callous to use him as a human shield, but the man did try to kill him after all.

Nothing happened as the huge door swung open, but he saw there was a mostly translucent shimmer in the air inside. Something was fishy about it, so Zac splashed some water in the face of the assassin until he woke up, and then unceremoniously threw him inside.

The Ishiate quickly regained his senses, and gracefully twisted in the air to land with his feet down, but the moment he touched the ground it was as though the air itself combusted, causing an inferno to erupt around him.

The assassin screamed and tried to run out again, likely forgetting about the token in his muddled state. Zac waited at the door and struck him dead the moment he came within reach. Next Zac took out one of the soldier corpses and threw it inside as well since he still saw that odd shimmer in the air.

This time nothing happened and the corpse lay in the hall unassailed. Perhaps the arrays were smart enough to not expend their energy on people who were already dead, meaning collecting bodies to test the waters might be useless.

Judging by the half-burned state of the assassin it was a purely offensive array that protected the entrance. Zac was even less worried about those than the mental arrays though, and unhesitantly stepped inside as he infused some of his Dao of Trees into the leaves whirling around him.

A large reason he once chose **[Nature's Barrier]** before heading to the Dead Zone was that it gained power based on his Endurance, which meant that the skill had received a huge upgrade in the past weeks. The leaves were far sturdier compared to before, and Zac believed not even the dangerous sniper rifles would be able to get through them any longer.

Just like when the Ishiate was thrown inside an inferno erupted around him the moment he took his first step inside, but the leaves staved off most of the flames before they could reach him. Some of it still snuck past though, but between his flame-proof robes and his high Endurance it only stung a bit.

Zac kept walking through the flames for a few seconds. He didn't dare to run since his visibility was practically zero, and there might be more arrays superimposed on the first one. But soon the flames winked out of existence, leaving Zac slightly toasty but otherwise fine.

He found himself in a large hall, but unfortunately there were no piles of wealth lying around. In fact, the whole place felt very austere, with only a couple of paintings similar to the one from the temple adorning the walls. A central staircase stood right in front of him, lined with crystals that gave off a soft glow.

Zac pondered whether to walk up the stairs or head down to some subterranean basement but quickly chose to walk to a higher floor. If this was a medieval castle there might be a treasury at the bottom floor, but with arrays and Cosmic Sacks, it felt more likely the best treasures would be in the owner's quarters.

After trying a few doors upstairs he found the one that should lead to the private area of the owner of the mansion, but the moment he walked through it felt like he was slammed in the head with a hammer. He only saw white until he finally came to again, and after taking a glance at his watch he was shocked to see that he'd been out of it for over 10 minutes.

He was hit with something like a mental concussion attack, and he was lucky he was alone inside the palace. It was a great lesson for him, no place was safe. He once again entered the room, and this time he wasn't attacked.

The room was quite sparse, housing only a desk and some decorative paintings and crystals. He sensed that the crystals in the walls were probably Divine Crystals, but unfortunately the arrays that kept this place going had exhausted pretty much all energy inside them, making them worthless.

He walked over to the chest and found there was a token and a sack on it. The token looked a lot like the depiction of the placements of some array, and it was the same as the design he saw on the front of the Array Crystal he looted earlier.

Zac suspected it was the logo for the Eastern Trigram Sect, and that the sect actually focused on arrays. Either that or this specific mountain housed people who focused on arrays. He picked up the token and imbued some energy into it, and found it was an identification token for an elder.

After a brief hesitation he fastened it to his belt. Perhaps some of the automatic defensive features in the mountains wouldn't harass him if he had this token. Next he eagerly grabbed the Cosmos sack, but it also turned into a stream of light and entered his temporary sacks.

He touched his sack to check out the contents. Most of the space occupied was the huge tiles currently, and they were neatly ordered in a corner. There were also assortments of low-grade weapons with some basic equipment like tents and bandages, and Zac guessed that was the things from the sacks he had stolen so far.

There was also another corner that was filled with a respectable pile of Nexus Crystals and a few crystals. They actually looked like skill crystals, and he took one out. But as soon as he tried to glance at its contents he was blocked.

It was as though the information was protected by a password, or rather a riddle. He received a stream of information that essentially told him that he needed to gain a certain understanding of arrays in order to get past the protection. It was something like the trials that they would have Brazla perform to gain access to the Repository skills in the future.

There were also a couple of normal notepads and vials with pills inside. Finally, there was a densely inscribed metal ball inside, and Zac curiously took it out. The moment he held it in his hand he couldn't help grunting because he was barely able to hold on to it. It was extremely heavy, making it feel like he was carrying one of those stones for strongman competitions. That was saying something with his monstrous attributes, and Zac figured it must be made from some Spiritual Grade metals.

He had no idea what it was, and it provided no information for it either. After looking it over he put it back. For all he knew it could be a bomb, and he didn't want to carry it in his arms. Zac looked through all drawers on the desk afterward but found nothing interesting besides a large feather that might have been used as a pencil before.

There was also a door that led to an inner room, and after stripping the paintings from the wall he walked inside. It was a meditation chamber with a beautiful panoramic view of the surrounding mountains. There was also a similar mat as the one he had already taken, and he quickly snatched that one as well. Unfortunately, there were no hidden treasures beneath it as with the other one.

He was about to head back but some change in the periphery of his vision made him curiously look over. Something was happening on another mountain. A huge fire had flashed into existence in an instance, spreading over a hundred meters. Zac could even hear the explosion two mountains over.

Looked like someone with pretty decent power was flexing his or her muscles. As Zac was looking more closely at the mountains he actually saw a little bit of movement here and there. Things were really kicking into motion, filling Zac with some eagerness to move on to the next place.

Zac scoured the palace for anything else of value, but he couldn't find it. He did find some exquisite furniture in a dining room though, and unceremoniously threw everything inside the pouch. There was no need to be discerning with the gargantuan space inside, and anything that caught his eye went into the sack.

Since he was done he exited the same way he came, but to his surprise two people stood outside carefully looking at the entrance. However, when they saw Zac emerging their brows rose and they quickly used some sort of escape skill without hesitation, making Zac unable to guess where they went.

Zac tried to figure out their tracks for a bit, but that wasn't his strong suit. Instead, he headed down the mountain in the opposite direction from the one he came from. If that duo wanted to they were welcome to follow so that he could loot their pouches as well.

The direction Zac walked was partly chosen due to not wanting double-track, but also that one of the mountains in this direction looked caught his eyes earlier. It was extremely steep, with a modest mansion on top. The thing that drew his attention though was the hidden hanging fields that seemed to be cut inside the mountain itself, and apparently only accessible from the palace above.

He couldn't really tell from the distance, but it truly looked like fields made for growing Spiritual herbs. Perhaps the fields were holding untold treasures since Spiritual Herbs generally grew stronger the higher their age was. Herbs that had absorbed Cosmic Energy for thousands of years would each be worth a fortune, and he couldn't stop a creepy smile from appearing on his face as he thought about looting a whole field of them.

That very smile seemed to have an astounding effect since he ran into a young girl who was furtively climbing toward the peak he just left. The moment he saw Zac with his grin she flinched in fright, and unhesitantly crushed the token in her hands.

Zac didn't even have time to react before the girl winked out of existence. Her sudden disappearance made Zac more certain about his hypothesis that the delay was dependent on power or wealth, as the girl seemed to be a real weakling, to the point she actually walked with her token in hand.

As he descended the mountain there wasn't really anything really worth noting. There was another temple at the mid-way point, but it was reduced to only rubble. Zac

briefly tried to look through the ruins for some more treasure, but the hanging gardens were beckoning him, and he quickly gave up the idea of a proper excavation.

Finally, after a mad dash he found himself at the foot of the mountain, and to his delight it was teeming with beasts. He saw tens of the black rats frenziedly rip apart the carcass of a large bear, and the next moment he was attacked by a pack of wolves.

It was as though the crevices between the mountains were made out of natural barriers of beasts. Unless one had decent power or a larger group it would be suicide to try to change mountain to explore. Seeing this many targets for grinding his ladder position he wanted to just go on a rampage, but he stopped himself.

Getting a high position on the Hunter ladder this early wasn't necessarily a good thing. People would run for the hills if they spotted him, making it harder for him to liberate people from their cosmos sacks. Instead, his eyes turned up toward the gardens that were no longer visible from this vantage.

Zac had his axe in his hand and greed in his eyes, so a corridor of carnage was quickly carved toward the neighboring mountain.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

Artist's Rendition of the view from the meditation chamber:

**Spoiler:** Spoiler

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#### **Chapter 218 - Alchemist's Mountain**

Zac was almost at the crest of the mountain housing the Alchemist Palace, as he'd named the mansion due to what he hoped to find inside.

He'd entered a couple of buildings on the way up, but he hadn't found much of value apart from a few minor pills and Crystals. After having visited a couple of buildings it was pretty clear that a correlation between the power of the defenses and how high up on a mountain it was located.

He could essentially burst through the ones close to the foot of the mountain without even activating his defenses. But these domiciles were either for servants or low disciples and it wasn't really worth the time for Zac to enter. But from somewhere at the mid he needed to activate at least [**Mental Fortress**] to avoid any mishaps.

As for the pure physical traps he could pretty much tank them with his body, though it hurt more the higher up he went. Endurance was already his highest attribute by now, and it clearly showed as he shrugged off everything from bolts to fireballs as he crashed through the buildings.

He also robbed a trio of cultivators from the other world who went down the mountain with disappointment afterward. Interestingly enough new sacks spawned on their belts just a few seconds after they were robbed of their original ones.

However, after seeing that he only caught some basic necessities and nothing of value he decided to reevaluate his tactics. At least, for now, he'd check the ladders before robbing people. It was true that many a little makes a mickle, but there was no point to rob a bunch of tents and sleeping bags.

The mountain he was currently scaling was far more cultivated compared to the last one, and Zac was currently running up along one of the multiple sets of stairs that

all seemed to be leading to the top. He also hadn't encountered a single animal since passing the half-way point, likely because there was no vegetation from that point.

At first, he was a bit worried about the lack of fauna, but then he remembered how it looked like around his Tree of Ascension. Due to its high energy requirements it killed and absorbed all life in the vicinity. Perhaps the hanging gardens were doing the same and had long ago killed off all other life on the mountain.

Zac was filled with excitement as he closed in on the crest, but a huge shockwave from above stopped him in his tracks. Someone was fighting up above, and the power they displayed wasn't a joke.

He frowned and slowly walked up, careful to not make any loud sounds. The cosmic energies in the air surged as he walked up the last sets of stairs, and not long after a rumble shook the whole mountain.

Zac's axe was already in his hands as he looked over the edge, and the sight made Zac frown. Over a hundred people were actually on the mountain, almost all of them decked in the familiar attire of the Medhin Empire. Most were sitting down as if in meditation, and the only exceptions were three people.

One of them was a young man with an arrogant demeanor who was decked in a golden robe. He stood unblemished in front of the sitting army, and it was clear they were using a War Array to empower him as he glowed with power. It also looked like he had a large blue circle tattooed in his forehead.

The other two weren't as well off. One of them might be dead, lying motionlessly on the ground in a pool of his own blood. Above him stood a woman who was bleeding quite heavily as well, but clearly wasn't ready to give up yet.

What was more surprising was that Zac actually recognized the two. It was Thea Marshall and the shield-bearing bodyguard who had accompanied her and Henry Marshall to the Auction a month ago. When he realized who the two were his eyes couldn't help once again turn to the young man who seemed to have defeated them without much of a problem.

For a second he pondered whether he should retreat, but after a bit he took the final steps up the stairs with a sigh. He couldn't let the third ranker and one of the main combatants against the Incursions die here. It might cause the whole Marshall clan to collapse, and they were only other main force he could partner with at the moment, what with the tense situation with the New World Government.

The young man threw a glance at Zac when he appeared, but he clearly discounted him as a non-threat. Instead, he summoned what appeared to be a tornado of wild energies in his hand and pointed it toward Thea. It flashed in a few colors and reminded Zac of the horn of the Star Ox. However, this jumble of energies seemed to have mainly light blue and brown energies, compared to the rainbow of the beast horn.

Thea's eyes thinned and she grabbed the body of the bodyguard and made to retreat, but a huge fractal appeared above her, somehow rooting her in place. Zac couldn't sense anything apart from the chaotic swirl from the man and guessed that it was something created by the army.

"You can't just leave after your words, woman," the man said with a sneer. "The punishment for rejecting the divine invitation is death."

The next moment he pushed the chaotic jumble of energies forward, and it trembled with power as it closed in on her. Zac saw no option so he used **[Loamwalker]** to flash in front of her, and covered the trio with his defensive skill as he launched a Dao-Infused **[Chop]** at the incoming attack.

The two strikes clashed with a tremendous explosion, and Zac was barely able to keep himself from getting pushed off the mountain as he was blanketed by the wild

energies that ripped through his leaves. Thea and the bodyguard were better off as Zac soaked most of the damage, and she confusedly looked up at his broad back.

Thea's eyes widened in shock when she saw who it was, but they quickly refocused on their enemy.

"Why are you here? You need to leave, those soldiers are empowering that man to crazy levels," she frantically whispered, blood running down her mouth.

"I know," Zac said with a shrug as he turned back toward the man who finally had turned his eyes toward him.

"Who are you? The punishment for interfering in my divine judgment is death," he angrily said as he charged up another chaotic jumble in his hands.

Zac only snorted in response as he tried to use **[Inquisitive Eye]** on his enemy. Unfortunately it failed, apart from showing the man's standing on the ladder. And this person was actually on the fourteenth spot on the Hunter Ladder. This man was clearly a rabid animal from his ranking and attitude. Anyone that high up must have started killing people from the get-go, rather than hunting for treasures.

Now that Zac had the time to properly look at the attack he felt somewhat certain it was a mix of two Daos, mainly something related to wind and something earth-related, which explained the colors. Perhaps the mixing of Daos representing gaseous and solid matter was making the resulting attack extremely unstable, turning it into a bomb.

"I'm guessing you're one of the Medhin?" Zac said as he cracked his neck. "Leave your Cosmos Sack and crush your token, and I'll allow you to leave."

The young man blankly stared for a few seconds until he started to wildly laugh. Meanwhile, the soldiers behind him started to radiate an unrestrained killing intent that could almost match Zac's own. These people truly seemed to be fanatics judging by how angry they became from Zac's comment.

"Allow me to leave? My will is the divine will, only the Great Lord can tell me what to do," he said, infusing his skill with far more power.

However, by now Zac had managed to infuse all the Cosmic Energy he needed into his forearm, and the space above the young man shattered.

"Shield!" one of the captains immediately roared, and a thick golden glow enveloped the young man before the wooden hand even had time to emerge half-way.

But the young royal wasn't the target of the hand as it emerged with lightning speed and slammed down right in the middle of the sitting army. They had a sturdy shield as well, but it wasn't enough to block **[Nature's Punishment]** infused with the Dao of Heaviness.

A tremendous sound echoed out from the mountain, and it almost seemed the gargantuan hand would crack the summit in two. Over two-thirds of the soldiers were turned into meat paste from the attack, and most of the others were wounded or dying from the shockwave.

"You!" the young man roared in anger, but before he had time to react Zac was upon him with determination in his eyes.

"Lord Tyrbat!" one of the soldiers shouted and once again tried to start up the infusion of power.

But suddenly his throat was cut right open and he started to bleed out with widened eyes. The same scene happened amongst most of the living soldiers, and they fell one by one.

Meanwhile Zac swung his axe down imbued with the Dao of Sharpness, the edge aiming straight for the young man's head. Madness was evident in Tyrbat's eyes, and he redirected the attack he'd charged up to intercept Zac's strike.

Zac's swing was like a flash of lightning, cutting straight through the attack, releasing torrential energies all over him. Zac activated a defensive charge from his robe the last second and the axe kept going straight down. But Tyrbat had excellent reflexes and nimbly dodged, displaying great speed even without the help of the War Array.

Zac didn't want to relent though and immediately followed up with another strike. Unfortunately one of the rings on the man's hands lit up and a shield activated that actually managed to block Zac's strike. Meanwhile Tyrbat took out a radiant sphere from his Cosmos Sack.

The ball's glow quickly increased in intensity, reminding Zac of the Lightning Punishment Arrays he still had in his possession. Zac didn't want to let his enemy let this thing go off and desperately tried to swing at the man. But once again a second ring on his hands lit up, creating another impenetrable shield. Meanwhile, a brown shimmer covered the whole body of the Medhin royal.

The next moment the ball exploded, and Zac pushed backward to avoid the blast zone, but his face still got singed by the heat. The next moment another much louder explosion erupted behind him, and he turned around to see that the royal had appeared right between Thea and her downed bodyguard, wildly laughing.

Something had detonated the moment he arrived as he stood in the middle of a crater, but he himself was unhurt. The brown shimmer around him was likely another defensive measure to protect himself while he let the bomb explode right in his hands. It was an extremely effective tactic, as the other two were far worse off than Zac. If the bodyguard wasn't dead before, he surely was now, as half of his body was blasted into nothingness.

Thea was still alive, though she barely managed to stay conscious. Judging by the less damaged floor beneath her feet she had used some defensive skill or talisman to mitigate the effect of the attack. But clearly it was only partly effective since her wounds had gotten much more serious.

Zac grunted and set off again with **[Loamwalker]** keeping his eyes peeled for any treasure Tyrbat took out. The man was trying to kill them with his massive wealth it looked like, and he couldn't let this go on. He swung his axe horizontally, once again imbuing it with the Dao of Sharpness. A bracelet on the man's hands flashed into life once again, and he briefly turned translucent, letting the blade cut right through him.

However, Zac was ready with a follow up as he threw a staggered punch empowered with Heaviness right at the man's face. The effect of the ring was limited, and luckily enough it ran out just before the fist reached his head. A tremendous punch hit the man straight in his temple, slamming him straight down into the ground with enough force to make the ground shake.

Normally his head should have been splattered all over the ground, but somehow he was still conscious, though barely. Zac wouldn't stop here, and chopped down with finality.

"IMPOSSIBLE!" the man screamed as torrential amounts of cosmic energy gathered around him.

But Zac had seen so many last-ditch attacks by now that he didn't even flinch, and with a resounding slam decapitated the young royal. Zac checked his ladder as he was inundated with energy from the kill, and wasn't too surprised to see that he had risen considerably in rankings, actually reaching top 10 on the Hunter ladder.

He briefly wondered what troubles would come from killing one of the top rankers of the other world. The soldier had called him Lord Tyrbat, and Zac remembered he held the 9<sup>th</sup> spot at the ladder, being level 69.

He was likely one of the weaker family members of the Medhin family, but he was still a dangerous opponent. Not necessarily through his own power, but through his army and his treasures. If Zac hadn't been able to kill off most of the soldiers boosting Tyrbat it would likely have been a far tougher fight.

The fact that one of the royals possessed a private army to empower them meant that it was likely the same with the others. In the beginning he thought that only the Dominators and perhaps the emperors would pose a threat, but perhaps that wasn't the whole picture.

A wet cough refocused Zac's attention to Thea who was arduously getting up to a sitting position. Zac threw a last glance at the dead royal before heading over to her. She warily frowned when she saw his approach, but relaxed when she saw him take out a vial.

"A top-grade healing pill," Zac said and threw it over.

Thea hesitated a bit before she caught the vial and took out a pill. She swallowed it after looking it over, nodding toward Zac.

"Thank you," she simply said as she closed her eyes to focus on recuperation.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 219 - Alliance**

Zac surveyed the battlefield and finally walked over to the corpse of the Medhin member. He was still decked in all kinds of expensive-looking rings and amulets, and Zac unceremoniously threw the body into his sack so that he could look over them later.

He already knew from before that the Medhin had monopolized all the best stuff from their empire, and the power of the rings proved that the man's equipment might be even better than Zac's own.

Next, he walked through the whole army, looking at each and everyone for anything that could be of value. Only the things inside the sacks were transferred over automatically upon a kill, but not the things on their bodies. But it seemed there wasn't really anything of interest.

Finally, he walked over to the downed bodyguard. A large part of his torso was completely ripped off, leaving a gristly wound as he blankly stared up at the sky. Zac sighed and bent down to close his eyes, before turning his attention to the shield that lay not too far from him.

It was a different one from the shield he saw this man wear at the auction, and it was clearly of high quality. It was slightly dented but otherwise in good condition. That was saying something because Zac had felt the power of the strikes even when he was down on the stairs. It wasn't the shield that failed, but the user's endurance was simply insufficient to bear the power of Tyrbat.

He walked over to the shield and lifted it up, and found it was extremely heavy, making it feel like he was holding a huge boulder. It was also quite large, covering everything from his head down to his knees when he held it up. He could also see that it had a string of fractals that ran all over the inside of it.

It might not be a Spiritual Tool like he wanted, but it was far superior to anything he possessed at the moment and would have no problem surviving through the quest to block 5 000 attacks. Unfortunately he'd found out that he couldn't advance the quests in his human form. Otherwise he could have finished it by running down the mountain to the beasts for a couple of hours.

It turned out that his class quests only were active while he actually had his class, so he would need to turn back into an undead before working on them. However, that posed a bit of a problem at the moment.

It was far easier to turn back to a human for Zac at the moment since Miasma was both the source of life and fighting strength for an undead. It was different for a Human though. Expending all his Cosmic Energy wouldn't have any other effect than completely exhausting him and making him a bit nauseated.

He had a theory that he might be able to turn back into an undead by bleeding himself out since that should empty him of all his vitality. But he wasn't in the mood to try that out unless at back at home with someone to watch over him. Also, there might be other restrictions in place, such as how often he could turn.

However, even though the shield would be useful to him he didn't put it in his bag. It belonged to the Marshall clan, and the man lying next to him had sacrificed his life to protect Thea from an attack. Perhaps she would be unwilling to hand it over.

"Just take it," Thea suddenly said without opening her eyes, making Zac's brows rise.

Was the woman a psychic? His eyes slightly thinned and he looked over to the girl calmly sitting ten meters away from him. In response, she opened her eyes and leveled her piercing blue stare toward him.

"You were stomping around like a rhino, I heard what you were doing," she calmly said added before closing her eyes again.

Zac didn't comment, but simply put the shield into his bag. Since he'd looted the battlefield it was time for Zac to go over the spoils, so he focused his attention on his Cosmos Sack.

When he looked inside he was shocked to see the amount of stuff inside. There was a huge tent along with all kinds of foods and delicacies, and an enormous amount of pelts and pillows. The army must each have taken a part of the camp with them to bring it all, as not even Zac himself could carry that much stuff.

"Just how did these people find each other so quickly?" Zac muttered to himself.

"They just needed to touch when they got teleported and they'd end up at the same place. The tutorial pixies told everyone that, have you forgotten?" Thea said in response without opening her eyes.

"Well, I didn't go to the tutorial, so no one told me," Zac said with a shrug.

"What? You're a mortal?" she said, her eyes opening in shock. "Then why are you so strong?"

"Lucky, I guess," Zac muttered as he gazed upon the palace at the other side of the summit.

It was both larger and in better shape compared to the palace he entered on the last mountain, which might hint that the protections in place were superior as well. He could only hope that it was somehow calibrated to a reasonable strength. Otherwise he would have to scale the mountain somehow to reach the hidden gardens.

But he had a strong feeling there were protections in place against that in place, which is why he went up the mountain the normal way in the first place. He wouldn't

do any mountain climbing unless he had to. But suddenly he was dragged out of his thoughts as he noticed Thea was glaring at him with red eyes.

“Uh, are you okay?” Zac hesitantly said, afraid that she wanted her shield back.

“Every day,” said with a hollow voice. “Every day I’ve fought with my life on the line, one battle after another. Just so that I can protect my family and humanity. But I couldn’t even save John. Instead, he had to sacrifice himself to keep me alive.”

Zac didn’t know what to say and only looked at Thea with some sadness in his eyes. He knew just how it was to feel powerless. Every day the first month on the island he’d spent sleepless nights being overcome with despair, not knowing whether he’d ever get off the island alive, or whether his family was alive.

“Meanwhile you just keep getting stronger, increasing the distance between yourself and the rest of us. We thought you might have gained a top grade cultivation manual from the tutorial, as that was the only thing that could explain it. But it turns out you’re not even a cultivator,” she said as she looked up at him with tears of frustration pooling in her eyes.

Zac coughed, a bit uncomfortable from the intensity of the stare. To avoid it he walked around to her back and placed his hand on her shoulder. She immediately tensed up and shot a glare at him in response.

“I have the Dao of Trees, and it has healing properties. It will speed up the process with absorbing the pill,” he explained as he infused the Dao into her through his hand.

After feeling that nothing was amiss with the energies she relaxed again and refocused on healing. The silence felt a bit uncomfortable after her outburst so he started to talk about what came to his mind.

“When the integration happened I was camping with my girlfriend and three others, but it turned out all four of them were cultivators. The patch of forest we were in got moved, placing me alone on a remote island together with an Incursion. That Incursion was both a curse and blessing. It made my life a living hell, but closing it also gave me a bunch of advantages,” Zac explained as he kept infusing her with the Dao of Trees.

“You singlehandedly closed an incursion?” she asked with shock and couldn’t help to glance back at him.

“Well, after their leaders were dead the rest decided to leave,” Zac said with a shrug, not bothering to explain the details.

Thea thoughtfully looked down, before once again closing her eyes to focus on recuperation. Zac helped speed up the healing process for roughly ten minutes before she opened her eyes again.

“...Thank you. For saving me,” she said with some difficulty on her face before she got to her feet with some effort. “Ok, let’s go.”

“What?” Zac said with confusion.

“I’ll have to inconvenience you for a bit while I heal,” she said as matter of fact.

Zac mutely stared at her, his eyes not able to stop darting toward the palace a couple of times. Bringing a seriously wounded person along would greatly impact his gathering speed. There was also the issue that he might have to bear the blunt of the defensive arrays activating twice.

Thea clearly understood what he was thinking about since a sharp aura started to radiate out from her.

“You’re thinking I’ll be a nuisance,” she said with some anger building. “I might be hurt but I was still able to finish off all the soldiers you missed. Besides, I have many useful skills.”

“I mean you almost died just now. Perhaps going back to recuperate might be a better idea?” Zac hesitantly said. “Earth is full of opportunities and strong enemies to fight as well. Going back like this isn’t the worst.”

“And miss out on the free levels and titles?” she said, her anger reaching a crescendo. “Fine, you don’t need to waste your precious time, just go on ahead without me.”

“All right, all right,” Zac sighed. “Let’s just go. There’s a hidden garden in the back of that palace. I think it might contain aged Spiritual Herbs. We might find something that will help heal you faster as well.”

Thea’s eyes lit up at the mention of Spiritual Herbs, and Zac could understand the reaction. Even though the System was flooding Earth with Cosmic Energy there were very few proper herbs still around. Furthermore, those that were growing were still extremely young and not too potent. It was one of the areas that Earth was lacking the most at the moment.

Since they were done here Zac started walking toward the palace, but after some hesitation he ran back and brought the identifiable corpses as well. At first he planned to leave them as a warning that this mountain was occupied in case anyone else arrived, but it might actually backfire and attract one of the stronger Medhin royals.

Since he was accompanied by Thea who was still in very bad shape even after eating a top grade pill he had to lower his speed, giving Zac the opportunity to ask some questions.

“So you know that I fight with axes. I’m not really good at things other than hitting things and getting hit,” he said, eliciting a small smile from his new companion. “What kind of class do you have?”

Thea hesitated for a bit before answering.

“I guess you could say my class is a mix of a ranger and assassin. I mainly focus on battle as well, but I have some investigative skills,” she said.

Zac nodded, not being too surprised. He and Ogras already suspected she was some sort of assassin class after she managed to cut the demon’s throat without either of the two really seeing what happened.

“Stay close to me when we enter the palace, the arrays will probably be pretty dangerous,” Zac said as he activated his defensive skill preemptively.

“I don’t need you to protect me,” she replied with a huff, but she still moved slightly closer as they approached the entrance.

As soon as Zac pushed open the door he was met with a wall of earthy smells from a wide variety of herbs and fauna. It felt as though every pore in his body was revitalized just from breathing, and his eyes lit up in excitement. There were good things in this palace for sure.

He was about to step inside to test the waters, but a hand grabbed his arm.

“What are you doing? Are you just entering?” Thea asked like she was looking at a fool.

“Well, yeah? What’s your idea?” Zac asked.

He’d already ascertained that it wasn’t possible to test the arrays with corpses, and he didn’t believe Thea was an array expert.

“Just wait for a second,” she said as her eyes closed.

The next moment a chromatic field appeared in front of them. Zac looked over to Thea with confusion and noted she had paled a bit.

“It’s a poison array. Breathing isn’t necessary to get poisoned, it will be able to enter through our pores,” she said with a frown.

Zac glanced over with surprise. It seemed she had a really handy skill for scouting things out. But since he knew it was a poison array he wasn’t too worried. He took out a vial of black pills whose smell made his nose-hair curl up.

“What the hell? Is that feces?” Thea said with wide eyes, taking a few steps away.

Zac only shook his head and swallowed one of the pills with a grimace.

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#### **Chapter 220 - Jackpot**

Thea looked at him aghast, seemingly not able to comprehend what was happening.

“It’s an antidote pill,” Zac said as he paled a bit. “Or rather a poison pill that blocks other poisons. Kind of fight fire with fire. Do you need one?”

It was something he’d gotten after Alea poisoned him. It wasn’t specifically to protect against her, but he felt he needed some precautions. He’d been poisoned without even noticing it, and there wasn’t much he could do about it after the fact.

Unfortunately, pills that gave immunity to most poisons were extremely expensive. What he swallowed instead was actually a mild poison. It gave similar effects to food poisoning, but that wasn’t why he took it.

The poison also had the effect that it blocked up his pores, essentially stopping most poison to enter through the air or touch. It was a much cheaper alternative to the antidotes and a popular addition to most wandering cultivator’s survival kits.

“I’d rather get poisoned than eat that,” Thea said with disgust, instead taking out a hazmat suit.

Zac looked upon it with interest. It looked like it was made before the integration, but someone had added rudimentary inscriptions to it. It was clear that the Marhsall Clan hadn’t been idle, but rather making inroads in all sorts of things.

“Prototype Hazmat suit,” Thea said with some pride after seeing Zac’s gaze. “The fractals protect against tears and makes the material even less porous. It stops most particles from passing through. It was made by our research department not long ago. ”

“Pretty impressive,” Zac muttered as he tried to ignore his churning stomach.

He didn’t want to stay any longer and walked right into the array after taking a deep breath. Due to whatever Thea did with her skill it was extremely clear where the array started and where it stopped. However, something unexpected happened after the two were in the middle of the array.

A tremendous pressure descended upon them, actually forcing Zac down on his knees. Thea was far worse off and immediately was pushed down prone on the ground. There was another hidden array that she had missed.

Its effect was exactly the same as his Gravity array back at the academy, but its effect was supercharged. It was so bad that Thea was barely able to breathe, only able

to take in shallow breaths. It was a simple but effective combination. A poison that could kill any trespassers, and a gravity array to keep the trespassers inside the poison until they had to breathe.

Zac arduously got back on his feet, the veins in his head almost popping from the strain. The ground cracked under his weight, and it felt like he was carrying a mountain just by standing up. He slowly walked over to the prone Thea, who helplessly looked up.

Zac bent down with a grunt, but he was actually unable to lift her. He had enough problems keeping himself up, and it was just impossible to add the weight of another to the tally. The extreme exertion from standing inside the gravity array was also quickly depleting his oxygen, and he was already feeling the need to breathe.

Zac shook his head and quickly walked back outside, all the while feeling the burning gaze of Thea. He quickly released his breath and took a new mouthful of air as he looked around before activating [**Hatchetman's Fury**].

He hadn't expected to need to use his boost skill for something like this, but there wasn't much to do about it. He would just have to lay low for a bit afterward. Violent impulses started to emerge in his mind as he gained a considerable boost in power, but he forcefully pushed them down.

He took another deep breath of air and walked inside the arrays once again. This time he had no problem to walk since he'd gained almost 100 additional strength from the activation of the skill. It even looked like the poisonous air was pushed away by the power billowing out from his body.

He soon found Thea again, who hesitantly held her token in her hand while still stuck to the ground. But when she saw Zac reappear her eyes slightly widened and she put away the token once again. Zac didn't comment, but only went down and lifted her up from the ground with a grunt.

He hurriedly walked further inside the temple, but it was clear that this array was far thicker than the one he passed on the other mountain. Some nervousness started to build as the seconds passed. If he was still inside the array when the buff ran out he might be in trouble since he wouldn't be able to move due to the period of weakness.

However, luckily his fears were unfounded as he finally felt the huge pressure lift, almost making him fall over. Zac let Thea down and she plopped down on the ground and panted heavily. Zac couldn't really see through the hazmat suit, but he couldn't imagine being put through so much pressure could be good for her wounds.

"Are you okay?" he hesitantly asked.

"I'll be fine," Thea said. "Thank you for coming back."

"It's fine, I just needed to take a new breath," Zac answered, but immediately after he paled and coughed a couple of times.

"Are you poisoned?" Thea asked with worry as she stood up.

"No, I'm fine. I just overextended myself a bit," Zac said with a sigh as he took out a normal healing pill.

The pills helped somewhat with the aftereffects from [**Hatchetman's Rage**], but in the end it was limited since he wasn't hurt, but rather expended. However, it was better than nothing, and Zac wanted to stay in as good shape as possible even if he needed to waste some resources.

Besides, it helped alleviate the effects of the poison pill, which might be equally important since he wasn't in the mood to poop his pants in front of a girl.

Thea looked at him with somewhat of a frown, but she didn't comment as she took off her Hazmat suit. Zac looked around while she was busy, and he finally noticed they had entered what looked like paradise.

It felt like they were inside one of some botanical gardens, with a wide variety of fantastical plants and flowers. The courtyard was an explosion of color and smells, almost enough to dizzy the senses. However, Zac could conclude after a brief look that these flowers weren't Spiritual Herbs, but rather mortal flora.

He'd somewhat expected an alchemist or poison master to have high-grade flowers for decorations, but perhaps it was bad for the Cosmic Energy density. In any case, it was a beautiful scene, and Zac and Thea leisurely walked along the path toward the building proper.

Zac felt it was a bit confusing why the garden looked so pristine. It was the complete opposite to the run-down temples of the first mountain. He realized he'd just assumed that there would be no native people around due to how everything looked when he first arrived, but what if that wasn't the case?

They might very well have just barged in on some poison master's private property. Zac started to get a sinking feeling as he warily looked around, trying to rouse his weakened body. A sudden rustle made Zac unhesitantly activate **[Nature's Barrier]**, startling Thea into a defensive posture as well.

A second later they saw a figure slowly approach them. However, it's appearance was a bit unexpected, making Zac slightly lower his guard. It was a run-down golem that was currently carrying a bucket of water and a pair of shears.

"Hello? Do you live here?" Zac hesitantly asked.

However, the golem completely ignored the two until it sat down some distance from them and started tending a hedge. Zac and Thea observed it for a bit longer and tried various means to communicate with it. However, the golem completely ignored them while it tended to its task with great meticulousness.

"I don't think it's sapient," Thea hesitantly said after they had observed its actions for a bit longer.

"Might be like a servant robot or something?" Zac agreed. "That would explain why the place still looks nice."

"Yeah, but that might mean there are guard robots as well," Thea said with a frown. "Are you in condition to fight?"

"Not at full force for the time being," Zac admitted. "But as long as any defenders aren't past early E-Grade I'll be able to handle it."

"Monster," Thea muttered in annoyance.

Even though there were golems working in the garden they didn't stop. The enticement of ancient Spiritual Herbs was just too big to ignore. Luckily they were completely unaccosted as they walked into the palace, with the golems actually bowing and moving out of the way as they passed.

The insides were well-tended as well, with well-oiled furniture and potted flowers creating a cozy atmosphere. Zac's fingers started to itch when he saw all the high-quality furniture and decorations. But next his eyes hesitantly switched to a golem that was currently sweeping the floor.

"Do you think the golems would care if I took the furniture?" Zac said.

"The furniture? Why would you want that?" Thea asked with confusion. "When John and I checked the last mountain they barely had any value."

"Well, I still haven't decorated my place," Zac said, drawing a raised brow from Thea. "I mean I've been busy with closing incursions and stuff."

“I don’t think it’s worth risking getting hounded by a bunch of robots so that you can get a new ottoman for your guest room,” Thea said with a shake of her head.

“I’ll just pick them up on the way out,” Zac muttered under his breath. “Rich people don’t know how to be thrifty.”

“Robbing someone’s home is being thrifty?” Thea snorted. “And last time I checked you’ve been in the first spot of the Wealth ladder since day one, no matter how much you spent at the Auction. We know for a fact that Thomas Fischer held over 100 million Nexus coins for a brief moment, but even that wasn’t enough to overtake you.”

Zac looked over surprised. One hundred million coins weren’t peanuts, and it was pretty impressive that the Government Leader managed to get a hold of that much.

“How do you know that?” Zac asked curiously.

“Spies and having people keeping constant watch of the ladders,” Thea said with a shrug as she walked through a doorway into a large dining area. “The government mapped out everyone’s wealth by increasing Thomas’ wealth incrementally a few days after the Auction. Of course, you’re an exception since they couldn’t pass your wealth.”

“That’s a pretty smart idea,” Zac said with praise.

“It doesn’t work with factions like my family or a few of the other independent established forces. We spread out our Nexus Coins, apart from Grandpa who decided to put himself at the top ten of the Wealth ladder as a show of strength,” Thea added she looked around for any hidden compartments or treasures.

“Wait, another array,” Thea suddenly said as she stopped in front of a nondescript door.

Zac curiously walked over, trying to gain any insight from what might be inside from the door, but it truly looked just like any other door in this place. They had opened a few of them and most were just guest rooms or even empty.

“Can you see what type?” Zac asked as he looked at it.

“Pure defensive shield, we need to find the weak spots in order to-“ Thea started explaining, but was interrupted by Zac punching the shield with enough force to kill an elephant, causing some tremors in the building.

The array cracked like a mirror, giving the two access to the room within.

“You fool, what if you alert all the golems?” Thea said as she agitatedly looked around, the air around her humming.

Zac noticed the odd phenomenon and remembered his and Ogras’ discussions about Thea’s weapon. There was likely some sort of daggers swiveling around her at all times, providing both offense and defense at any time. It was worth remembering, as that meant he could be attacked at moment’s notice, though Zac doubted Thea would do something like that from their interactions.

“It worked didn’t it?” Zac said with a small smile and pushed open the door.

However, he didn’t step inside, and instead only looked at the room with a gaping mouth. Thea walked up next to him and her face soon mirrored his own.

“Jackpot!”

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**Chapter 221 - Public Enemy Number One**

Zac had called the palace the Alchemist Palace in his mind, and this room was a final confirmation that he'd been right on the money. It was clear that they had found an alchemist's workshop.

Thick bundles of herbs were hanging from the roof, and they were likely the cause of the thick scent in the room. Unfortunately they looked completely dried out, and it was unclear whether there was any medicinal efficacy left in them. Along the walls were a few tables full of scrolls and crystals, perhaps containing recipes or experiment notes. There were also vials all over the place, from on shelves to strewn on the ground.

However, the clearest indicator that this truly was an alchemist's workshop was the large lidded cauldron in the middle of the room. It was half a meter high and circular, had four stout legs that lifted it a few decimeters up in the air, and there were intricate engravings covering the whole thing from top to bottom.

Cauldrons were used by an overwhelming majority of all alchemists when producing pills, and many were even more expensive than Spiritual Tools. Zac had heard of a few master alchemists who didn't need them any longer and were able to form pills by only using their Cosmic Energy and skills, but these masters were an extremely small minority. Besides, even if those people could concoct pills without a cauldron they would probably still use it for their more important crafts.

The purpose of cauldrons was to make the pill-making process easier and could contain all sorts of inscriptions for this purpose. They could improve heat control, gather Cosmic Energy to infuse into the pills, or just have all kinds of measures to stabilize the highly volatile process of extracting the useful components from herbs.

The cauldron looked quite extravagant, but Zac didn't have the knowledge to appraise it. He immediately wanted to step inside, but suddenly stopped and hesitantly looked over at Thea.

"How do we decide the split?" Zac asked.

Unless they reached an accord their cooperation would quickly crumble.

"You saved my life, so I won't take anything from this mountain," Thea said, not seeming to care the slightest about the loss of treasure. "If we find something that will help me heal I'd like it though."

"You sure?" Zac said, not being able to help to become slightly suspicious. "You really don't want anything from all this?"

"It's just the first day, there are so many mountains to loot. Losing out on one isn't the end," Thea said as she threw Zac a look of disdain. "Paranoia isn't a good look, by the way."

Zac scratched his chin a bit embarrassed. Ogras and the recent events had indeed made him a bit more paranoid. But after being stabbed by both a Janos impersonator and his ex he felt a healthy amount of paranoia was a bit warranted. You never knew when a dagger was coming for you, and he might not be lucky and turn into his Draugr form next time.

But he also knew that Thea had a stellar reputation. From what he'd gathered during his travels he learned she was known as a lone warrior who didn't play politics. She only focused on getting stronger and defeating the foreign invaders, which garnered a lot of respect in Kingsbury.

Of course, that was just the public image. There were so many hypocrites in the world who worked hard to keep a certain appearance to the public when they were snakes in reality. However, Zac didn't get that impression from the girl next to him and felt that the public perception was pretty close to reality.

He didn't have any good response to what she said and instead quickly walked inside the workshop. The room had an extremely dense smell of herbs and pills, making Zac wonder just how many pills had been created in this small room.

He wasted no time and went through the room like a hurricane. Zac left nothing behind, not even the empty vials. Even the tables and bookshelves went into the sack, making Zac smile in glee. Only when he'd swept everything apart from the Cauldron into his pouch did he stop and check his ladder position.

From looting a hundred corpses outside and the workshop Zac had jumped up all the way to the 27<sup>th</sup> spot on the gatherer ladder. It wasn't actually as high as he'd expected since this was the second summit palace he looted. It looked like many others had caught lucky breaks.

Next, he put the Cauldron into his sack, and he was shocked to see that he jumped all the way to the 5<sup>th</sup> position. It was clear that the cauldron was a true treasure in the eyes of the system, likely above anything he'd found so far. He couldn't help but look over at Thea, who only calmly looked at him wearing his money-crazed grin.

"Looks like the Cauldron was a good thing. The Marshall clan would like to buy it at a later date if you find no use for it," she said with an even voice.

"I'll keep it in mind," Zac said.

He currently didn't have anyone that focused on alchemy back home, but perhaps that was only a matter of time. People with side professions would likely pop up sooner or later on his island. From what he understood some people started to focus on other things apart from their class at higher grades.

It became increasingly arduous to level up, and gaining all the levels in the E-Grade Class was expected to take a couple of decades. And even after that there was the extremely difficult bottleneck of reaching the D-Grade Class that could keep people stuck for hundreds of years or the rest of their lives.

If one only focused on the same Daos or breaking through the bottleneck you'd go crazy over time, so people found other pursuits to relax their minds or gain new inspirations. Sometimes those hobbies became such a large part of their lives that they actually changed over from being a warrior to focusing on things such as arrays or blacksmithing instead.

The two kept looking through every nook and cranny of the house, but they couldn't find anything else of value inside. Thea even used some sort of scouting skill to look for hidden passages or arrays that might indicate spots with value, but she couldn't find anything.

Finally they went out the back, that also had a beautiful garden. Zac couldn't help but look over at the golem who was raking a path, wondering if he should try throwing them into his pouch as well. It would be great to have a couple of these things on his compound to beautify and maintain the place without him having to worry about spies or assassins among them.

Soon they reached the edge of the garden, and behind it was an almost completely vertical cliff. Zac could see the mountain he started at from this vantage, meaning that the garden he saw cut into the mountain should be right below him.

He started to scrutinize the cliff, even peering over it to find any method to get down there. But the wall was completely sheer, not providing any opportunities to get down. The only method he could think of was to use a couple of weapons to create footholds as he traversed the mountain down. But even with his monstrous attributes he was a bit leery about that idea.

"What are you doing?" Thea asked curiously after seeing his antics for a while.

“I started on that mountain over there,” Zac pointed. “I saw there was a hidden garden cut into the mountain itself. I suspect the good things are kept there. But I can’t find any way down, so I’m thinking of cutting footholds into the mountain to get down.”

“Well, there might not be any path down if the original owner was a D-Grade Alchemist. They can fly with the help of Cosmic Energy, after all,” Thea said after mulling it over.

“What, really? All of them?” Zac said looking back at Thea with excitement.

“Well, yeah, from what the Tutorial pixies inferred at least,” Thea said with a nod. “They used it as an enticement to get stronger and take the more difficult trials. Some classes might gain skills on E-Grade that could help them fly as well, but that usually expends energy very quickly.”

“That’s pretty cool,” Zac commented, before resuming scrutinizing the wall.

“Wait, over there,” Thea said, pointing at a large tree.

“What?” Zac asked with confusion after looking over.

It looked normal and was the same as a couple of similar ones they’d seen in the back yard.

“Something is odd about it, but I can’t put my finger on it,” she said after some hesitation.

Zac had some faith in Thea’s scouting abilities by now and immediately walked over to the tree. He hesitated for a second before he touched it, but he didn’t feel anything odd about it. He’d first thought that it might be an illusion array or fake tree, but he knew he was touching real bark.

“The leaves!” Thea suddenly exclaimed. “Why are the leaves already falling on this tree? The leaves on the other trees had just started to turn red. Besides, why is it so close to the edge? Shouldn’t the ground beneath us be solid stone? Otherwise, the cliff would collapse.”

Zac looked up, and it was true. The tree truly differed from the others in that sense. It was an odd mystery, but it didn’t really help him in finding a way down to the garden. Zac had an idea though and closed his eyes while keeping contact with the tree.

Only seconds later his eyes opened with surprise. It was truly a tree, but it was actually hollow. It appeared the owner had somehow grown a hidden pathway inside the tree itself, but that caused it to not be as healthy as the other trees in the mansion. He jumped up a couple of meters and looked inside, and actually found a hidden staircase leading down into the darkness.

“There are stairs leading down,” Zac said with excitement as he peered down at the waiting Thea.

This was like a real-life treasure hunt, and Zac couldn’t help but forget the cruel battles that would take place over the coming month. This was something that many kids would dream of finding while playing in the woods. A magical staircase inside a tree leading to hidden treasure.

“I’ll stay here and recuperate,” Thea said as she sat down under the tree.

Zac was a bit surprised and looked down at her, and finally noticed she was noticeably paler compared to before, and she had deep rings under her eyes. The excitement of finding treasure had made him forget she almost died an hour ago, and she was far from healed. But even then she hadn’t complained and even expended Cosmic Energy to look for hidden spaces.

“Okay, I’ll be back soon,” Zac said as he walked inside the staircase with some shame. Hopefully, he’d find something down in the gardens that could help with her condition.

The hidden path was pitch black and cramped, and Zac missed the foothold only after a couple of steps.

“SHIT!” he screamed as he tumbled down the stairs until he managed to grab hold of the wall.

“Are you okay?” He heard from above and looked up to see Thea peering inside the trunk.

“I just missed the steps, don’t worry. Talk to you later,” Zac said with some embarrassment and hurried down.

Soon he found himself at the bottom of the staircase, and it clearly led out to the hidden garden. But he hesitated whether he should just exit. In a very short time he’d grown accustomed Thea’s observational skills, and was a bit leery to just brute force it.

But soon he regained his courage as he smelled the extremely intoxicating herbal aroma coming from the garden outside. He grit his teeth and exited, his defensive skills working to their fullest. But he breathed out when nothing happened, and he could get a proper look on the garden for the first time.

He realized it would be more appropriate to call it fields rather than gardens, as the area was clearly demarked into four Zones growing three different kinds of Spiritual Herbs. There likely had once been four, but one of the fields was completely barren.

Interestingly enough the soil in all four of them differed as well, and when he walked through the fields it was as though he was transported to various topographies. The first field had pitch-black soil with a hint of blue, and it grew something that looked like bamboo.

The bamboo poles weren’t actually that tall, only reaching roughly five meters in height. But they weren’t green like those on earth, and instead had a light blue color. More importantly, they emitted an intensely cold aura, and his hand was actually getting frostbite just after touching one for a few seconds.

He pondered a bit on what to do as he looked at the trees before taking out his axe. The correct handling of Spiritual Herbs was an art, and some herbs could lose much of its efficacy by incorrect harvesting. But he didn’t really have any options apart from doing it as carefully and quickly as possible.

One by one he cut the bamboo trunks down and immediately put them into his pouch before they had the chance to leak any energy, and in just 10 minutes the whole field was harvested. He even rounded up most of the soil and threw it inside as well, since it seemed to be a big part of why the small area felt like a glacier.

Like this Zac covered the whole hidden garden like a locust, and when he was done only four pits remained. Zac looked around for any more hidden passages, but it appeared this was it. But he wasn’t dissatisfied with the returns, just the opposite.

He’d soared all the way to the first spot on the Gatherer list, and in a sense became public enemy number one.

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## Chapter 222 - Herbs and Pills

The other fields held very different types of herbs compared to the first one. The second field he harvested felt blazing hot like he stood in the middle of a desert or on the edge of a volcano. The herb growing there looked like a small bush that grew up to three intensely red fruits.

The third field had dirt that was far heavier than lead, and it took some effort to dig out the odd brown roots from within the ground. But when he managed to extract them they emitted strong energies that reminded Zac of the Divine Crystals, though they seemed more vibrant somehow.

If he had to make a comparison of the two, then the life-attuned energy in the Divine Crystals felt more synthetic, whereas the energy from the root vegetables felt like a genuine article. It was similar to his Lotus Seed, though these roots didn't seem quite as good.

The last field, and the empty one, seemed to once have been a paddy. But there was a crack in the mountain that had created an outlet for the water inside, making the paddy dry out. Perhaps when calamity struck this sect the events inadvertently ruined this field through shockwaves.

Another possibility was that the area was prone to earthquakes. He'd noticed a jagged scar in the ground from the first summit. It didn't look like something that was made from an attack, like the swing of the axe-man in his vision, but rather the movement of a tectonic plate. Perhaps an earthquake had erupted that was strong enough to crack these reinforced mountains.

For the last field, he simply took all the dried mud that lay in the bottom of the paddy, hoping that there would be some dormant seeds inside that could be used to regrow whatever once grew there. It was pretty clear to Zac that the field was based on four different elements, Fire, Ice, Earth, and water.

Why these four specifically Zac didn't know, but if he had to guess the four herbs could combine to a good pill. He didn't think the previous owner of this place would go to the trouble to create four distinct fields and grow the herbs together if they weren't supposed to get mixed into something.

That was the biggest reason he took all the dried mud. He was currently missing one of the ingredients, and whatever the alchemist of this mountain had planned probably needed all four of them.

He was no expert in Spiritual Herbs, but after sensing the energies they contained he would say that each of them was a Top Grade E-Ranked Spirit Herb. Or perhaps they were just extremely high quality Normal E-Ranked herbs that were overflowing with energy due to being left alone for so long.

It made him think of the Mystic Realm back at Port Atwood. If things could grow this spectacular over a couple of thousand of years, who knew what grew inside a pocket of space that might have been isolated for millions of years.

But while the herbs were great, in the end, they couldn't compare to things like the Lotus of Harmony. That thing was D-Graded, and it felt like it was on a completely other level compared to these things he just harvested.

The fact that he was boosted to the top of the gatherer list also was an indicator that the herbs likely weren't just F-Graded. As he walked up the cramped steps to the summit again he looked through the ladder to check what else was going on.

There were a few other notable names on the Gatherer Ladder. Emperor Nenotheop was on the third spot, and there was another of their family, Repubat Medhin, in the top ten. The second spot actually belonged to his world as well, as Starlight held that position.

The fourth position was held by the top champion who resisted the Medhin Empire, Beruv Ylvas. The last names on the top ten ladder were completely unknown to Zac, making him believe they were simply random people who had gotten lucky and gotten their hands on something great.

The Hunter ladder, in turn, was quite different compared to the gatherer list at the moment, but Zac suspected that they would harmonize soon enough.

Killing people didn't bring in a lot of loot at the moment, but that would change after a week or two after people had visited more mountains. But some clearly was actively striving to push themselves on the Hunter ladder, and unfortunately, he saw a name he recognized in the top three; Inevitability.

He had hoped that the System would limit the event to F-grade people, barring the Dominators from entering. That would likely have made him the strongest person inside. But seeing both the Emperor and Inevitability on their respective ladders showed that was just a pipe dream.

Apart from Inevitability, he recognized another of the three strongest Dominators in the top five amongst the hunters, an Anointed who called himself Harbinger. Fortunately, the top name amongst the Dominators, Void's Disciple, wasn't on the list. Perhaps that meant only two of the top 3 names were present at the hunt, which would be a small blessing.

In fact, he two suspected Dominators weren't the only Zhix on the Hunter list, as Zac saw that a good half of the top ten were Zhix going by their names. Of course, a few of them could be Medhin Empire champions, since their names were slightly similar.

That the Zhix would be more interested in killing things than looking through various old ruins for things they considered to be corrupted wasn't much of a surprise to Zac. The problem was how to figure out who were Dominators and who were just battle-crazed insectoids.

Besides, it made sense that the Dominators were more interested in the Hunter ladder compared to the Gatherer ladder at the moment. They were probably the strongest fighters around, and could simply rob others of their treasures later.

But gaining ten levels for the two Dominators was a huge perk. The only good news about the dominators was that they didn't gain any levels while Zac kept improving. Inevitability had only gained one level since the ladders were made public, and the other two hadn't moved at all.

Gaining ten levels in one move would save them years of cultivation.

Another familiar name on the Hunter list was Salvation, clocking in on the 7<sup>th</sup> spot. Salvation was still shrouded in mystery, and apart from the rumors that Salvation was the one who controlled The Cradle of God nothing was known about him or her.

"Congratulations on reaching the top placement," Thea succinctly said when Zac finally emerged from the tree. "Quite a few people will probably target you now."

"Nothing new," Zac said with a shrug as he took out one of the hard root-like vegetables. "This was the only thing I found that might help against wounds."

Thea caught the hard vegetable and scrutinized it for a bit.

"It looks a bit like ginseng. It isn't poisonous, but I don't know how to eat it. It's even harder than a rock," she mumbled.

"Perhaps boil it?" Zac ventured.

"Take a break for dinner?" Thea agreed.

"This place is as good as any. Shouldn't be too many who can pass that combination of arrays to get here," Zac said.

Thea nodded as she took out a couple of crystals and a pot. The crystals were the same ones he'd seen the Imp Herald use to create a fire, but it wasn't something Zac himself used very often. He was a bit lazy so he usually ate dried meat instead to save time.

"Wait," Zac said as he took out the cauldron he snagged earlier. "Perhaps we can cook the root in this instead? Don't most cauldrons contain inscriptions that stop the energies from escaping?"

"You want to use an expensive cauldron to boil a magical root?" Thea said, mouth curving slightly upwards. "If an alchemist hears about it he will be enraged."

"Hey, as long as it works," Zac said and opened the lid to the cauldron to pour some water inside.

But to his surprise, an enormous gust of energies blasted him right in his face, and Zac absorbed a huge amount of energies in an instant, to the point that it felt like his body would explode. The energies not only canceled out the tired state from using **[Hatchetman's Rage]** but even made him gain a level.

Zac almost blanked out from being drowned in the medicinal gust, but he noticed a quick movement of something escaping from the cauldron and snatched it up with lightning-quick movement. It was a small purple pill that tried to fly away by itself somehow, making Zac gape in surprise.

"It's a Pill with spirituality," Thea said with shock. "It might actually be the pill that increased your ranking rather than the Cauldron."

"Spiritual Pill?" Zac curiously asked as he put the feisty pill into one of the best vials he found in the workshop.

"The same pill can have multiple grades. For example, in the tutorial we would be given **[Constitution Pills]** that would push us toward race evolutions. But depending on how hard missions we undertook there were different ranks, from Low Grade to Peak grade. The better ones held fewer contaminants and stronger effects," Thea explained.

"As for Spiritual Pills, they're a tier above Peak Grade Pills. They're the equivalent of a Blacksmith creating a Spiritual Tool. Its efficacy is far better than normal pills, but Alchemists can only concoct them when the stars align so to speak," she continued.

Zac looked at the pill that seemed to have calmed down inside the vial. The cloud from earlier was likely just a small taste of the real effect. The fact that just some run-off not only healed him but made him level up was astounding, and he was tempted to swallow the actual pill.

But he forcefully stopped himself, instead deciding to wait for Calrin to take a look at it. The shop keeper had multiple compendiums detailing all kinds of treasures, both natural and man-made, to never miss out on treasures. Perhaps the Sky Gnome could find out what it was.

"How do you know all these things?" Zac suddenly asked as he looked up from the pill. "From what I know I should be the only one with direct access to people with direct knowledge of the multiverse, like the shop owner I brought with me to the Auction."

Thea hesitated a bit before she explained.

"I received a Library as a quest reward not long ago. It contains thousands and thousands of crystals detailing all kinds of things. Unfortunately, it doesn't have cultivation manuals or skills, only knowledge. It does have a few interesting expositions about the fundamentals of Dao from various strong people of the multiverse though," Thea said.

Her explanation was a good reminder that he wasn't the only one who had gained limited structures on earth. If he could get a Creator Shipyard and a Dao Repository it wasn't too surprising that other powerhouses could get other things.

It wouldn't be surprising if the world government and Salvation also had obtained hidden structures that empowered their factions. The fact she got that building might also be an indicator she had either closed an incursion or become a Lord recently, as those were the ways that Zac got his buildings. But he didn't want to dig into those things at the moment.

"Sounds like a good thing to have," Zac simply said as he prepared the Cauldron to be used as a pot.

Soon a fire was burning beneath it with a boiling root inside, but the cauldron didn't release the slightest heat or Cosmic Energy from above. It showed that all the energies from the ginseng were contained inside, not able to escape.

"Do you have any opinions on where to go next?" Zac said as he observed the cauldron.

Thea unhesitantly pointed at a certain mountain to the east in response.

"That one," she said.

"How did you decide that quickly?" Zac asked surprised.

"I removed the two mountains we came from and chose the remaining close one with the largest castle," Thea explained as she kept her eyes on the cauldron as hell. "This residence was much bigger than the one on the mountain I started at, and the rewards were far greater as well."

Zac nodded in agreement, as he had experienced the same thing.

"Others will quickly realize the same thing," Zac said. "We might be in for pretty tough battles at those places."

"Well, we're both top rankers, there are not many who would be a threat," Thea said.

"The dominators are here though," Zac said with a shake of his head and told her what he'd learned from Ibtep since the Auction.

"Both are around level 100 and at the top of the Hunter ladder?" Thea said with a frown. "Do you think they are hunting beasts or people?"

"Anything that moves, but I think they should probably stay down between the mountains, there are fewer things to kill up at the summits. Only a few will have a bunch of people at the same time," Zac guessed. "Besides, everyone needs to go down to change mountains, so the prey would come to them."

"Well, the risk of running into them is pretty slim," Thea said. "And we should be able to stay alive long enough to crush our tokens if it comes down to it."

"Fair enough," Zac said as he lifted the lid of the cauldron.

To the surprise to the both of them the root that once looked like a grubby rock had disappeared, but the water it was cooked in had turned into something that would fit right home at a gourmet dinner. It was a clear soup that smelled absolutely delectable, and Zac couldn't help but swallow after smelling the aroma.

"Well, go ahead," Zac said, trying to ignore his mouth watering even as he spoke.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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## Chapter 223 - Darkness

“What’s with that face,” Thea said with a small smile as she scooped the soup with a ladle. “Don’t you still have the cauldron and a bunch of these things?”

“I guess,” Zac said as he took out a piece of meat from the E Grade Tiger and tore into it.

The cloud of energy from the trapped pill had completely refilled his reserves, but he was still a bit hungry. The two were content to switch to small talk as they ate their dinner, neither seeming really interested in talking about things like their respective factions or plans for the hunt.

It was a simple dinner, but Zac felt it was a welcome respite from all the responsibilities back at his island. He also sensed that Thea was feeling the same way, and she never made any attempts to gain any knowledge about his faction or personal power.

Thea said that the vegetable had a greatly nourishing effect, and Zac could see that she had regained color to her face. Since they’d had their dinner and Thea was feeling better they immediately packed up afterward and got ready to head out. The mountain was completely sheer on this side, stopping them from any plans of making a descent here, so they had to go back from where they came.

Besides, Zac wasn’t completely done with the palace. As soon as they entered the garden again Zac immediately flashed over to one of the gardener automatons and picked it up by its neck. It actually went completely still, not struggling or resisting in the slightest.

The next moment it simply disappeared, entering Zac’s Cosmos Sack. He breathed out in relief since he wasn’t sure it would be possible to store those things. He already knew that it wasn’t possible to store Sapient golems, such as the Creators, but these things were basically just machines that ran on Cosmic Energy.

They spent the next five minutes scouring over the whole place, and in the end Zac found 14 golems. They also found a couple of them that were broken down and didn’t move, and Zac snatched those as well. Perhaps he could find someone that could repair them in the future, so leaving them would be a waste.

Of course, Zac also snatched everything that wasn’t nailed down in the house, leaving an empty husk of a mansion. Thea wasn’t idle either, plucking all kinds of flowers and seeds.

“Those aren’t Spiritual Herbs, you know?” Zac said as he saw her take a flower that stood in a window sill.

“I know, but they are beautiful. Haven’t you realized most of these flowers don’t exist on earth? I might be able to transplant a couple if they survive the sack,” she explained with some anticipation in her eyes.

It felt reasonable, so Zac did the same and gathered a couple of types he thought that Kenzie might enjoy having in her garden. It might also help the golems acclimatize if they recognized some of the flowers.

After that, they were finally done and exited through the same path as they entered. Just like with the other mansions they weren’t accosted by the array on the way out, saving Zac the effort of having to carry her again through the gravity array.

The mountain was still completely desolate when they exited, and no warning bells went off in Zac’s mind from hidden threats. Perhaps someone had come, but seeing the crater full of human remains and the other sings of an intense battle chose to retreat.

The two quickly oriented themselves and descended in the direction of the mountain Thea chose. After discussing it they decided to skip the buildings lower down on the mountain. It simply wasn't worth it to go over the servant's quarters with their limited time. Their efforts were better spent on scaling as many summits as possible.

While there were magnificent mountains as far as they could see there were almost a hundred thousand treasure takers. If all scaled a couple of mountains a day it was possible that all treasure would be snatched up well before the month was up. The more of the top tier treasures that went into their pouches immediately the better, since people could leave with their loot at any moment.

Zac was at first afraid Thea wouldn't be able to keep up with him barreling down the mountain at breakneck speed, but she clearly had no problem on that front. It was also evident that her Dexterity was well above his own, as it conversely was Zac that was forced to struggle to keep up.

While he rushed down like a bull she nimbly jumped down using anything from a branch to an outcropping as a foothold, not being restricted at all by the winding path. Zac wondered if that kind of footwork was a skill since he was completely unable to move like that even with his impressive amount of Dexterity.

Sometimes it looked like she would plummet to her death, but she simply landed at some almost indiscernible ledge and kept going down alongside him. With their pace, it didn't take long for them to reach the foot of the mountain and they stopped their mad dash.

"That palace we saw was two mountains over. Should we stay down here, or go over the mountain ahead?" Zac asked.

"Up to you," Thea said.

"Let's take the passage. It's a bit longer but there are so many beasts here to help grind the ladder," Zac said and eagerly took out his axe.

Thea had no objections and simply nodded. Zac immediately set off, rushing through the dense forest covering the valleys between the mountains. The shade was almost perpetual at the forest floor, as the little sun that got past the mountain tops was blocked by the canopies.

The trees themselves were quite tall and had almost all their branches far up in the sky. As for vegetation on the forest floor, there wasn't too much of it. There were quite a number of boulders that might have fallen down from the mountains though, and also rubble of broken-down buildings.

It looked like there had been towns that went all along the mountains, forming pockets of populations between the towering mountains. These buildings, or rather the remains of them, were far shoddier and mundane compared to the glistening palaces on the mountain tops.

It made Zac wonder if these were the towns of normal mortals, living close to the mountains for protection by the cultivators. Had people living down here once looked up at the magnificent palaces and dreamed of becoming a powerful warrior as well?

The travels through the forest went just like Zac expected. It only took a couple of seconds before he was accosted by a bunch of rats. He made short work of them with his axe, not even bothering to summon a fractal edge for these vermin.

Thea clearly had a competitive bone as she immediately started slaughtering beasts as well, even running off in the wrong direction to find additional prey to kill. Beasts fell by the wayside, most of them with a large tear in their throat bleeding them out in seconds.

Her speed of clearing out animals was slightly faster than his own, even after he started using [Loamwalker] to shorten the time between the packs. However, Zac didn't see it as a discrepancy in power, but rather that her skillset seemed more suited for their situation.

Zac could improve his speed of killing as well if he summoned a couple of fractal edges and shot them at beast packs in the distance, but he would create a spectacle if he did so, mowing down trees and destroying ruins.

He wouldn't alert any potential threats just to kill a couple of additional rats, which allowed Thea to gain an edge on him for the moment. She flittered through the woods slight a silent reaper, and anything within thirty meters of her died.

The scene allowed Zac to form a more educated opinion about her skillset. First of all, it was obvious that there were numerous invisible weapons around her, not just one. He'd seen well over ten beasts die simultaneously by getting their throats slit individually. He absently wondered just how she controlled so many blades at the same time. Was she able to split her focus in so many directions at once?

Secondly, her range of attacks seemed to be around 50 meters at the most, as no beast further than that died from her blades. However, Zac didn't discount the possibility that she was holding back, not showing her maximum range. Taking things for granted was how one got killed after all.

From there on out it was pretty straight forward. The two kept a rapid pace until they reach their destination, and without taking a break climbed it as well.

When they reached the peak they saw a couple of corpses and a group of 8 people standing outside the palace, and it seemed they were discussing methods to get in. They all wore individual gear, making Zac unsure whether they were from earth or the other planet. But they likely weren't from the Medhin Empire, since they all seemed to be wearing the same thing.

They were of middling rank for both the hunter and gatherer ladder, and all seemed decently strong. One of them spotted the two of them immediately, even though they had taken care to make no sound as they approached. The moment the two were discovered the whole group of men looked over.

"Flee!" one of them screamed, and the group unhesitantly threw out large balls at the ground between themselves and Zac, which each exploded into a firestorm.

Zac only gawked in surprise at the inferno that reached almost ten meters in the air in front of them.

"Pretty smart, creating a firewall while they flee. Your ladder rankings will make it hard to rob most people unless we catch them unaware," Thea commented, not bothering with hunting down the group.

"Well, I don't think those guys had much of value in any case, they couldn't even get past the array," Zac said as he swung a huge fractal edge at the flames, the force of his swing dousing the fire immediately.

With the help of Thea's skills, they didn't have much trouble entering the palace, and both had respectable gains from it, and it even helped Thea reach the 53<sup>rd</sup> spot on the ladder from her earlier spot in the thousands. Since the cooperation worked well they kept going for the rest of the day, going from one mountain to another until it was pitch black outside.

By this point they had scoured four mountains in total, encountering almost no resistance. They had seen a few people who either fled or crushed their tokens the moment they saw them and also caught a couple of people unaware.

Thea had a pretty straightforward tactic where she robbed everyone whose hunter position was higher than their gatherer position, and depending on how evil they seemed either killed them or crushed their tokens. The others she simply ignored.

Zac robbed only people that had a decent placement on the ladder, but he kept increasing his requirements since his Cosmos Sack was quickly filling up with junk.

It was currently pitch black outside, and the two stood inside one of the summit palaces deciding whether they should keep going or call it a day. The sky was almost completely devoid of stars, and the world they found themselves in didn't even have any moon to reflect some light down on them during the night.

Zac's increased attributes didn't give him night vision so he couldn't even see his hand in front of him with how dark it had gotten. It felt a bit suffocating so he took out a lantern that ran on Nexus Crystals that lit up the immediate surroundings.

But oddly enough it was as though the darkness was pushing back the light, making the lantern unable to light up anything apart from the immediate vicinity.

"That's pretty odd," Thea said with some worry in her voice, seeing the weird phenomenon as well. "There is something wrong with the darkness."

"Perhaps we should stay inside these arrays for the night," Zac hesitantly said.

Honestly, the situation was a bit spooky. Something had completely destroyed this place once upon a time, leaving not a soul behind. And now the darkness was acting up. Zac was about to ask for Thea's opinion, but a screen appeared in front of him.

**[Darkness descends. Tokens deactivated. Survive.]**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 224 - Salvation**

"Uh, did you get that prompt at well?" Zac said and turned over to Thea who had paled a bit.

"Yes..." was all she said as she vigilantly looked around, trying to pierce the darkness with her gaze. She also moved a bit closer to Zac and his lantern.

It looked like the System had something planned after all. People killing each other for treasure wasn't enough it appeared, the System also felt the need to remove their safety net at an inopportune time. If he knew the system it had orchestrated some sort of trial that would either kill them or help them get stronger.

"Feels like we're in some horror movie," Zac muttered as he kept looking around for anything to pop out from the darkness.

Nothing happened as the minutes passed, but that did nothing to calm Zac's fraying nerves. It still felt like something was brewing, and the Darkness kept going stronger. Soon the lantern only reached half the distance compared to before, creating a small circle of light with just him and Thea inside.

The few stars in the sky had long winked out of existence, and it felt like it was only the two of them set adrift in the void. At first it almost felt like the odd space he found himself when he rolled for survival, but this darkness was different.

There was something sinister and oppressive about the gloom that surrounded them, whereas that odd space was completely sterile. If Zac turned off the lantern in his hand they would be completely swallowed by the dark, whereas the other space had some odd unseen source of light.

Any idea of heading to the next mountain to look for treasure was completely forgotten, and now Zac was only focused on survival. He was extremely happy he'd decided to keep going with Thea, as sitting alone in this environment would have been way more nerve-wracking.

He quickly glanced over at his companion, and she returned a look that told that she felt the same way. Neither of them spoke though, afraid of drawing the attention of whatever was lurking out in the dark.

Suddenly Zac thought he heard something, and he hesitantly glanced over to his right. But of course, only darkness met his gaze. However, the sound kept growing clearer, and soon Zac could make out some incessant whispering.

Zac's neck hair stood right on edge, and he couldn't help but speak up.

"Do you hear those whispers?" Zac said with as low a voice he could.

A nod from a deathly pale Thea was all the confirmation he needed.

When he saw the prompt he had assumed that the system would unleash a horde of beasts upon him, just like with the beast hordes. But perhaps that wasn't exactly the case. He nervously fiddled with the bangle on his arm as he took active control of his mental defense skill.

The minutes passed as the whispers grew more intense, and Zac was starting to feel the strain. He couldn't tell exactly what the voices were, but he assumed it was something like evil spirits. Their whispers were a pervasive mental attack, and it almost felt like they tried to burrow themselves into his head.

"Some sort of wraiths," Thea said, seeming to be under an equal amount of pressure. "They are trying to possess us."

Zac grunted in affirmation as he kept rebuffing the insidious murmurs. A few minutes later it seemed the whispers had reached a peak, and thankfully the intensity didn't keep increasing. Zac felt a bit relieved since he felt confident that he would be able to bear the mental burden through the night if needed.

A glance over at Thea showed that she seemed to be mostly fine as well, and she was currently holding on to an inscribed rock that looked like an ostrich egg. It probably was some mental protection tool she had attained somewhere.

Suddenly a piercing wail with enough force to cause undulations in the air hit Zac with enough force to make him completely blank out for a brief moment, losing control over **[Mental Fortress]**. Instantly he felt a chill in his mind, followed by a chaotic jumble of disorienting thoughts.

Hatred.

Thea had leeches off him for a whole day, stealing the treasures that were rightfully his. Using him as a shield to brave the dangers of the arrays, laughing behind his back. Insidious, treacherous.

Something needed to be done.

An all-consuming killing intent as he turned his murky eyes toward her lithe neck, his fingers itching. He could just reach out, and with a snap he would be vindicated.

Suddenly a tomahawk was in his hand, taken out from his Cosmos Sack. Thea looked over with surprise, only to see him swing it down to gore his own thigh. The next moment a thick vibrant aura of life exuded from Zac, after having activated his Dao Field for his Dao of Trees.

"What are you doing?" Thea asked as she cautiously looked at Zac like he had become a lunatic.

Zac panted for a few seconds, his forehead covered in a sheen of perspiration before he looked up with clear eyes once again.

“I think I got possessed, but the pain woke me up enough to release my Dao Field. The Dao of trees had been effective against ghosts before so I thought it might help,” Zac said.

That was a close one. It had been extremely disconcerting to feel a bunch of consciousness in his mind, urging him to perform unspeakable acts. It was like he had been afflicted with schizophrenia, unable to discern what was real and not.

Luckily Zac had some experience of his mind being flooded with violent impulses thanks to his **[Hatchetman's Rage]** skill, and it allowed him to perform two last-ditch efforts. Wounding himself wasn't optimal, but the pain cut through the chaotic jumble in his mind and allowed him to unleash his Dao.

For a split second his mind had been flooded with pained wails as the Dao purged the specters or whatever the whispering things were, and they unhesitatingly fled out of his head, away from the vibrant Dao.

He also noticed that the effect of the Dao of Trees was great, silencing the penetrating whispers to a low murmur. However, the response was almost immediate as a claw stretched out of the darkness, heading straight for his throat.

Zac immediately swung his tomahawk, but it went straight through the incoming attack. Zac frowned as he gathered some Cosmic energy while he took out **[Verun's Bite]**, swinging it before the claw managed to reach him.

Luckily the hand was cut, and to Zac's surprise something that looked like black ichor dripped down the edge of his axe before it turned into a black haze that drifted away. These things perhaps weren't actual ghosts, but some nefarious creation that just looked similar. But before Zac had time to sigh in relief tens of claws reached out of the darkness, and a few ghastly faces emerged as well.

They were humanoid but without any facial features, apart from a huge maw that seemed to contain a black hole. The hair was standing straight out on Zack's whole body by now, but there was nothing to do except start swinging like a madman.

He summoned a huge fractal edge and with a growl let it rip through the crowd of humanoids, shredding them to pieces. However, he wasn't happy with the result. The things were clearly destroyed into motes of darkness, but he didn't gain a smidgeon of Cosmic Energy from the kills.

That kills rewarded Cosmic Energy was one of the most fundamental aspects of the multiverse, and not gaining anything should mean that these things didn't die when they were destroyed.

They did not reform though, at least not immediately, which gave Zac a brief respite until he once again was thronged with wraiths.

“I can't kill them,” Thea said with some franticness in her voice.

“Me neither,” Zac said. “Perhaps we just need to keep them at bay until sunrise.”

Thea didn't have any better idea, so they placed themselves back to back with the lantern glowing in between them.

The assault of the beings wrought from darkness kept increasing in intensity. In the beginning they were just fodder and were instantly disintegrated with a swing by Zac. But after a couple of hours, they were almost as strong as the demon warriors back on the island.

One by one they still wouldn't be a problem, but they were endless. Worse yet, they were completely unheeding of their own safety since apparently they couldn't die. They were content in sacrificing themselves just so long as they managed to deal any kind of damage.

Small wounds started to accumulate on Zac's body, but these levels of wounds were nothing to Zac who kept stoically swinging his axe. However, Thea didn't possess the same endurance as Zac did, and started to wane after four hours. That left Zac to cover two-thirds of the circle of light. Still, it was better than being alone and getting accosted from all around, so Zac didn't complain as he kept swinging.

The night finally passed and Zac slumped down, completely exhausted. The assault had thankfully ended the moment the night was broken by the first rays of dawn. Thea was already holding an E-Grade crystal in her hand, absorbing it while rotating her Cultivation Technique.

She had a few wounds on various parts of her body, and it appeared a few of her old ones had reopened. Zac soon did the same and took out an E-Grade crystal as well. He was almost completely spent, and what was worse he had barely made any gains from the desperate struggle.

What a horrible night.

-----

What a glorious night.

Gabriel couldn't help smiling as he stood barefoot at the summit, the ragged bedsheets he had fashioned into a robe fluttering in the wind from the residual shockwaves from the battle. He closed his auburn eyes for a moment and swept his long oily hair back as he sighed in contentment.

The voices of the lost had clamored for relief as they gathered around him for redemption all through the night. He was the light bringing the wayward sailors back toward shore, the divine shepherd. The whispers begged for passage into his mind, and he had gladly obliged.

Gabriel couldn't help licking his mouth at the memory, ignoring the horrified whimper from below. The sustenance he gained from delivering salvation to the wretched specters during the night was as effective as weeks of hard work.

The universe had even awarded him with two levels due to his hard work to emancipate those lost in the darkness. It would have been more if the voices hadn't shied away after their brethren entered his mind and were granted salvation.

Gabriel could only pray to The Great Redeemer that the lost children of the dark would come back tonight as well so that he could continue his mission from God. In the meantime, there was much work to be done.

He finally looked down at the man who had been the cause of unrest this morning. The man was somewhere in his forties and looked foreign to Gabriel. The man was decked in an elaborate golden robe, and it appeared that he was a ruler of the other world that had joined him in this so-called hunt.

When he had seen Gabriel he had immediately tried to leave, but Gabriel wouldn't have it. Almost a hundred men that were cursed by their freedom, how could he ignore such a plight? He had immediately attacked, unhesitantly sacrificing almost half of his Silver Guards.

These apostates had fought hard against salvation, damned by their ignorance. Their leader had even been infused with the power of the soldiers, reaching powers beyond anything Gabriel had ever seen before, apart from The Great Redeemer himself of course.

But how could a mundane ruler stop a messiah on a mission? The soldiers who fought alongside this royal had already joined the crusade, silently standing behind him with their new brethren.

“Through pain comes clarity,” Gabriel said with equanimity. “Through clarity comes salvation. Join the crusade.”

“No, please let me go. I’ve already given you all my treasure and you’ve taken my army,” the golden robed man said with utter terror in his eyes as he looked upon his former subordinates. “You have taken everything, no need to make the Medhin Empire an enemy. I am the 18th son, Supratej Medhin, and I can help you in various ways.”

“Neither King nor Pauper can avoid the reckoning. Bask in The Great Redeemer’s glory,” Gabriel said, his eyes burning with an inexorable conviction.

“The Great...?” the Medhin royal said, his brows rising. “Wait! I am-“

But he didn’t get any further as Gabriel ignored him and started the purification.

He bent down and gently tapped Supratej’s head, just like he had done with tens of thousands of others. A silver fractal appeared on the head of the recruit’s forehead, and the Medhin princeling stopped struggling, his eyes turning blank.

The two silver guards stopped holding him down and instead bowed toward Gabriel and returned to the ranks of the Silver Crusaders.

Gabriel didn’t give the two a second glance and instead reverently looked down at his new parishioner. Even after seeing the transformation innumerable times over the past months hadn’t killed off the surge of euphoria he felt when bringing another lost lamb into the fold.

The silver glow of the Redeemer’s Light quickly flowed through the whole body of the man, the fractal in his forehead absorbing a great amount of Cosmic Energy from the atmosphere. Gabriel suddenly received a large amount of Cosmic Energy as well, showing that the purification was a success.

The cosmos sack at the parishioner’s waist turned into lights that entered Gabriel’s own, but he couldn’t care less for some material possessions. He still hadn’t deigned to use the thing since he arrived, as The Great Redeemer had already provided him with all he needed.

A small translucent copy of the man appeared out of the fractal on the man’s forehead, and it appeared to be howling in pain and fear. Gabriel knew the lost soul just didn’t understand the great gift that it was being given, and didn’t get angry by it.

The soul soon entered the golden fractal on Gabriel’s own forehead, and soon it had joined the others in unity. The body of the new parishioner slowly stood up, its skin tone now a divine silver, and wordlessly joining the rest of the army. The Army of God in this temporary hunt was now over three hundred strong.

Gabriel couldn’t help feel some jealousy as he glanced at the stoic back of his new Silver Guard. He was now unburdened by things such as a soul and discordant thoughts, and instead became a part of the unity. He knew his own deliverance would come sooner or later, but not until his work was complete.

Existence is pain, sapience a curse. But he was Salvation.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 225 - Diplomacy**

Zac and Thea decided to stay inside the protective enclosure of the summit array in order to rest up before starting the day. Both were completely exhausted, neither

having slept a wink the whole night. They simply sat down a few meters from each other as they restored their reserves.

It was normally no problem for them to go a few days without sleep, but with threats both known and unknown all over this trial they didn't want to take any chances. A mistake by tiredness could quickly have dire consequences.

Oddly enough the area was completely devoid of any Cosmic Energy after the Darkness receded, forcing them to only rely on crystals. Thea was still far quicker to restore herself back to fighting condition due to speeding up the absorption with her cultivation manual, and after roughly an hour walked over to Zac who opened his eyes.

"I will sleep a bit, can you guard me for two hours before we swap?" she said, looking over at Zac.

"No problem. I still need some more time to refill my batteries," Zac nodded.

That was the first time he saw a Cultivator restore themselves, and he couldn't help but become a bit jealous of the speed. He estimated her to be able to absorb Cosmic Energy around three times quicker than he himself, and that was one of the side-benefits of being a cultivator.

It was even more frustrating when he felt that his body would be able to handle far larger streams of Cosmic Energy than what he currently was able to drag out of his crystal. This was nothing compared to the massive energies that had coursed through his body before. But he simply had no method to speed up the process.

Thea walked a few meters away and took out a small but high-end tent from her Cosmos Sack. It was clear it was another creation of the craftsmen of the Marshall clan, since the nylon tent was covered with low-grade runes.

They were so basic that even Zac could tell that their purpose was simply to make the material sturdier, but it was better than nothing. Thea crawled inside and closed the flap behind her, and in just seconds he could hear the even breaths of someone asleep.

Zac kept absorbing the energy from his nexus crystal as he kept watch, going over the events of the night. It was extremely frustrating that he fought so hard, yet there was not a single Nexus Coin or any energy as a reward.

He tried using all his Daos and skills, but nothing managed to kill the weird specters. The Dao of Trees was far superior to anything else in destroying the things, but it wasn't able to actually kill them. For all he knew he was actually fighting the same things over and over after they reformed.

However, the night wasn't completely without its rewards. His skill **[Mental Fortress]** had actually advanced to late-stage from Zac using it constantly to prevent himself from getting possessed again.

The upgrade didn't bring any changes to the skill apart from making it sturdier. Even the cost of using it was the same as before. While it wasn't very exciting Zac still felt that it was just what he needed in his current situation.

If this would become a nightly event the upgraded skill would be a godsend.

Next he up his ladder, and what he saw was extremely surprising. The first thing he noticed was that Salvation had actually sailed all the way up to the first spot on the Hunter ladder. Zac frowned and opened up his normal Power Ladder from Earth.

To his shock he saw that Salvation had gained two full levels during the night, something that felt almost incomprehensible. He was now level 55, only 7 levels behind Zac. Of course, those levels were a great chasm, but Zac worried that they might actually be bridged faster than he'd hoped.

Either Salvation was met with a very different trial during the night, one that gave a lot of Cosmic Energy, or he was able to slay the specters. Zac actually hoped more for the first scenario. If salvation could massacre the endless ghosts during the night he might actually pass Zac in levels if he kept going for the whole month.

Zac wasn't so petty that he didn't want others to pass him, but this situation was a bit problematic. The rumors surrounding Salvation and his Cradle of God weren't great. If he managed to attain E-Rank and the titles Zac assumed would come with the evolution it might spell trouble.

The second shock to Zac was the sheer number of remaining participants. While Zac desperately fought within the darkness he thought that there might only be a handful of surviving participants after that insane assault, but he was proven wrong by the ladders.

There were still a full 80 thousand participants in the trial, which completely baffled Zac. How could others fight through that kind of assault and survive? He personally would have barely made it if he was alone, and he actually guessed that not even Thea would survive alone unless she had some aces up her sleeve.

That thousands and thousands of people of middling power were still running about was extremely surprising. Zac could only guess that the assault was somehow adjusted to the power of the participants, and others wouldn't have to withstand such a strong assault.

Another possibility was that it was related to the palaces. The atmosphere was still a bit glum, and while the cosmic energy was gradually restoring itself it was still extremely sparse. It was a stark contrast to the extremely dense energy that covered the top tier palaces they visited yesterday.

The mountains clearly had some sort of arrays that gathered the energy of the atmosphere to create cultivator havens up on the summits. If the ghosts fed on Cosmic Energy it would make sense that they would gather at the top tier palaces, where the density was the highest.

Perhaps Zac and Thea simply found themselves at the ghost's feeding ground, which resulted in their frenzied assault.

The weaker participants would likely not be at the summit during the night since the risk of meeting powerhouses up there was higher. And they should have learned by now that the summit arrays were extremely strong, and not something they could break through.

Another indicator that this might be the case was that another of the Medhin Royals had fallen during the night since his name was removed from the list. Perhaps he did the same as the two of them, staying within one of the palace arrays for safety.

Thea got out of her tent two hours later on the dot, and the two swapped places. Zac didn't bring a tent for himself since he was used to sleeping outside, so he simply rested his back against a tree and closed his eyes. But he kept his axe in his hand in case something happened.

Later the morning the two descended the mountain, heading for another palace three mountains over. They had decided to keep going like yesterday since the events during the night shouldn't affect their treasure hunting.

They didn't encounter anyone for most of the descent, but they actually spotted a woman blankly staring at a man who seemed to have died recently. Zac and Thea shared a silent nod, and Zac disappeared the next moment.

A split second later he reappeared holding the woman by the scruff of her shirt. She looked to be in her thirties and had quite a few scars. She was also covered in a few bandages, and judging by how wet they were the wounds were recent.

Both her ladder positions were in the last quartile and it wasn't really worth to either rob or kill her. Zac was simply after information. Since she was within arm's reach he let her go, knowing that he could stop her before she could take out her token and crush it.

The woman fearfully looked at Zac and Thea, and suddenly her eyes widened further in horror. She had likely checked their ladder positions, learning that she was caught by some of the most powerful people in the hunt.

"We are not interested in your life or your treasures. We want to ask you about what happened to you during the night," Zac simply said.

The woman breathed out in relief, before glancing at the corpse.

"My husband and I got a prompt that darkness descends, and it got very scary," she started explaining without any preamble. "Suddenly we heard an extremely loud wail. That's when it got crazy."

"Crazy?" Thea probed.

"My husband went mad. He actually tried to bite my throat. These wounds are from him biting and scratching me. It got so chaotic I had to kill him in self-defense," she said, her eyes reddening. "We knew that we might not survive this hunt, but not like this..."

"I'm sorry, it seems your husband was possessed," Zac said with a sigh. "What happened next?"

"There were a few ghosts that attacked me later, but the rest of the time I stayed huddled with my back against a rock," she said.

Zac frowned and looked over at Thea, who only shrugged. They asked a few more questions after that, but it was clear that she was barely attacked during the night. She had somewhat discerned some whispers, but it was only at the start of the night.

They let her go afterward, and they saw her store her husband's body before she crushed her token. It seemed the events of the night had crushed her spirit, making her unwilling to stay in the hunt. Zac felt leaving was the right choice, it was meaningless to die for treasure.

As the two kept proceeding toward their targeted mountain they caught a few more treasure-hunters, and their stories were similar. In the groups with multiple members at least one had turned insane, and were either killed or subdued.

However, they encountered another interesting case when they caught a solo hunter. He had admitted that after hearing that penetrating wail at the start of the night he completely blanked out and didn't remember anything before waking up on top of a corpse, drenched in blood.

It was the same with those who got subdued in the groups. When morning arrived they came to again, not remembering a single thing. It appeared that getting possessed might not necessarily result in death. It would rather turn one into a bloodthirsty beast, and whether you survived depended on whether you encountered weaker prey or stronger predators.

The piercing wail was also something everyone mentioned, even after they had traveled over ten mountains in the afternoon. Everyone had clearly heard it, and it felt like a mental attack. Zac initially thought the wail originated from their own mountain, but that wasn't the case.

Just what kind of ghost could scream so loudly that everyone heard it across the whole mountain range? It seemed that there was a big boss ghost somewhere that was the originator of the wail. Were there perhaps some hidden rewards for killing that thing? What other secrets did this place hold?

Zac knew he wouldn't attempt killing the thing even if it rewarded some great rewards. He couldn't even kill the small buggers, just how would he kill the leader ghost that was strong enough to attack everyone on multiple mountains simultaneously?

A sudden heavy thumping of feet on the ground dragged Zac out of his musings, and he turned around to see what kind of beast was running toward them this time. However, what he saw was no beast. The moment Zac turned he spotted the largest Zhix that he had ever seen, almost half a meter taller than the Anointed of his own hive, Nonet.

Zac immediately opened up the ladder and breathed out in relief when he saw that it wasn't one of the two E-Grade Dominators. Since that was the case he didn't feel they were in trouble. Still, this Anointed radiated immense power, and it clearly didn't care about Zac and Thea's ranks since it emitted unbridled killing intent.

Thea readied herself for battle with a determined glare, but Zac waved at her to stand back.

"Let me handle this. I trained in Zhix diplomacy before coming here," Zac said while taking out the ceremonial dagger he received from Ibtep.

He took a few steps toward the Anointed barreling toward him and held up the dagger. He said nothing, instead only cutting his palm before stabbing the dagger into the ground.

The Zhix actually stopped in his tracks in surprise, but soon after took out a dagger of its own. It also silently cut its wrist, stabbing it down as well, which made Zac internally sigh in relief.

The next moment the two veritably disappeared, before they clashed with tremendous force. The Zhix's huge fist slammed straight into his gut, but Zac didn't try to dodge. He only took it head-on and was pushed back ten meters with a grunt.

But the next moment he flashed forward once again and returned a punch in kind. The attack created a huge shockwave, and it looked like the Zhix was blasted out of a cannon as it crashed into a large tree, turning it into splinters.

Zac didn't follow up, and instead retrieved a large rug and the medallion Ibtep also gave him. Next he took out a table and placed a large spit of grilled meat from the E-Grade tiger on it, and sat down as he looked over in the direction of the Anointed.

It looked like it had passed out from the punch, and didn't move at all.

"What's going on?" Thea said with confusion after she walked over to Zac's side. "Didn't you say you would try diplomacy?"

"Well, the Zhix customs place a large focus on strength," Zac said as he noted that the Zhix started twitching.

Soon after it arduously got to its feet and started walking toward Zac, who held up the medallion. The Anointed hesitated for a bit before it sat down on the opposite side of the table with a thump.

"You know the rites and have the tools, but you are no Anointed, human. What is going on?"

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**Chapter 226 - Alliances**

“I send greetings from Nonet of Hive Kundevi,” Zac said. “The Anointed heard of me attending this hunt and lent me these two treasures.”

“For what purpose?” the Anointed simply said.

“The Dominators,” Zac said, making the Anointed immediately tense up.

“What about them?”

“We believe them to be the largest threat to our survival, but we haven’t heard anything about them since our worlds got merged. We seek both allies and information,” Zac explained.

“Why is Nonet not representing itself for these matters? This is highly irregular, even if you were Zhix,” the Anointed said as it ripped off a large piece of the meat.

“Strength above all,” Zac simply said. “I am stronger than Nonet, much like I am stronger than most of the Anointed. I have earned the right to represent Hive Kundevi. My name is Zachary Atwood, and I am currently placed highest on the power ladder among us humans.”

The enormous Zhix leader gave a start when he realized who Zac was, and looked it Zac over once again.

“It is true, strength above all. I am Herat, eighth Anointed of Hive Urbot. Almost getting knocked unconscious by the strongest is not a dishonor,” the large Zhix said, even looking a bit pleased. “What do you wish to know?”

“The Dominators such as Inevitability and Void’s Disciple are likely the strongest beings on our planets, yet us humans haven’t heard anything of them fighting the foreign invaders who threaten Zhix and Humans alike,” Zac began. “We worry about what they are planning instead. They tried to enslave all Zhix before from what I understand, and we believe they might try something similar again.”

Herat slowly tapped a large finger on the table for a few seconds before it sighed, seemingly having come to a decision.

“They are gathering our kind,” it began. “Our ancestors died by the millions to stop their expansion thousands of years ago, but their sacrifice is becoming forgotten. One hive after another has aligned with the Dominators.”

“Why?” Zac couldn’t help ask with a frown.

“The corruption is everywhere. Both you and I reek of it, and that one behind you does as well. If all is corrupted, nothing is. This Cosmic Power enables us to evolve our hives and ascend. Some voices have started questioning our attempts to exterminate the Dominators back then, saying we shunned the gift of the universe” Herat explained.

“The lure of power is right in front of them, but the tales of enslavement are distant. They willingly follow to learn the secrets of power from the Dominators, in turn giving up their freedom,” Herat said with some hopelessness.

“What about the hives who don’t follow?” Zac asked.

“For now we are being ignored, but we know that is just temporary. We worry just like you what they are planning, and seep ourselves in corruption to stand ready when the fight comes,” Herat said.

Zac frowned. He had held some small hope that the Dominators didn’t care about the state of the planet since they simply were more interested in cultivating. They had stayed their whole life on a planet with barely any Cosmic Energy at all, but now had almost endless resources to keep improving. That might make them forget about domination, and instead focus on pushing toward D-Grade and increased longevity.

But it was clear that they hadn’t changed their ways and were already starting to amass the Zhix, and it was understandable that some chose to follow them. Their

core belief was centered around rooting out Corruption, but when everything was corrupted they needed to make huge changes.

“I understand. My force and a few others are preparing for that battle as well. You understand them better than we do, and I think we should work together, just like how your hives banded together against the Dominators all that time ago,” Zac said.

“I cannot make that decision, human. Your strength is great, but you still are not Zhix. But I will relay your message to the leaders of our war council. They will contact you about their decision,” the Zhix said as it got to its feet. “Now I must go hunt. Strength to your hive.”

“Wait, how will we get in contact?” Zac said with confusion. “If we ally right now we will be able to stay in touch through the System.”

He lived on an isolated island, and he was afraid he’d lose contact with them if he let Herat go. It might end up like the same as with Billyville, where they were technically allies but unable to contact each other until they met up in person again.

“I am just the Eighth Anointed, I cannot enter such a pact. A few of the High Anointed have miraculous means to communicate great distances, but if we cannot reach you that is also fate,” Herat said as it lumbered away. “Do not worry, the Zhix always keep their word. Also, avoid the Dominators for now. You are strong, but they are stronger.”

Zac frowned at that last remark. This Herat wasn’t telling him everything, but then again he didn’t expect it to. At least it seemed he had achieved one of his goals for now, which was to open up channels with the Zhix on the mainland.

As for these magical abilities, he could only hope they would work. Otherwise, he’d have to visit a hive personally in the future. He was hoping that he’d meet a few more powerful people during the hunt, setting up his private network, and if that worked out it shouldn’t be too troublesome to find one of the larger hives.

“What are you planning?” Thea suddenly asked as she sat down at the same spot where Herat sat before.

“After this hunt, I will start closing Incursions in earnest,” Zac said. “I believe very few of them can match my power at the moment.”

Thea snorted at the somewhat boastful comment, but she didn’t contradict him. And what he said was true. Abby already told him right at the beginning of the integration that one person snatching pretty much all the good titles in the start was extremely rare.

And from there he had kept accumulating one advantage after another that put him far above what was expected of a newly integrated world. And with how strength worked there was limited use of large numbers in trying to stop people such as himself, so unless the invaders had leaders who could match him they were in trouble.

But then again, that simple fact worked the other way around as well. The existence of beings even stronger than any humans on earth was a huge potential risk, since if Zac wasn’t able to handle them, perhaps no one could. That was one reason he wanted to find the methods for the War Arrays the Medhin used but he, unfortunately, couldn’t find anything of the kind after rummaging through the possessions of Tyrbat.

“But I believe the Dominators are the real threat, apart from the few top tier Incursions like the Undead Empire. I’m not sure you’ve met other Anointed apart from this one, but they are extremely strong even without levels or titles.”

“The Marshall Clan is situated somewhat close to a large hive. But we haven’t made any headway with them. After a few intense battles we have formed some sort

of unspoken truce where we stay at our own land,” Thea said. “But one of these giants never emerged during the battles.”

“The Anointed are both their spiritual and actual leaders. I still don’t know if they’re another species or some equivalent of a queen ant, but they are far stronger than the normal ones,” Zac said. “I am trying to forge an alliance with the Zhix to prepare ourselves for the clash with the Dominators. It doesn’t seem they are content to stay hidden forever if they are amassing forces.”

“Since we’re on the subject we should discuss a few other things,” Thea said with some reluctance. “You’ve already spoken with my grandfather before about an alliance. It has already been formed, and we have been looking for you to join it.”

“Oh?” Zac only said.

“Since you’re planning on closing the Incursions anyway, you should join us. Indeed, we do not possess your raw power, at the moment at least. But I believe you lack a proper support system for things such as information gathering and logistics,” Thea pushed, obviously uncomfortable with presenting a sales pitch.

She had likely been urged by her grandpa to seek allies during the hunt, but Zac had learned the past day she might be even more introvert than himself. His mouth couldn’t help curve upward at seeing her forcing herself to advertise the alliance, and Thea immediately caught on to his glee.

She immediately closed her mouth and shot him a glare.

“What’s so funny?” she spat out.

“Nothing, nothing,” Zac laughed as he sent her a prompt for becoming an ally, finally connecting Port Atwood and the Marshall Clan.

Since they had dealt with the Zhix the two kept going toward their mountain, and the evening was pretty uneventful. One thing that was worth noting was that Salvation was kicked off from the top position after a couple of hours, the two Dominators once again passing him or her.

Salvation seemed to have gained a good boost that was somewhat unique to himself during the night, but he couldn’t keep up with the carnage of the two E-Graded monsters during the day. That hopefully proved that he wasn’t as strong as Zac just yet.

Night soon came and the two decided to stay by the foot of a mountain, hiding in a small courtyard of what should have once been a disciple’s cultivation cave. They vigilantly looked into the darkness, but this night they didn’t sense the insidious oppression from yesterday, which was a huge relief.

Around three a.m. they could pretty much confirm that the darkness wouldn’t descend today and were finally able to somewhat relax. They still decided to stay for the night though, and only resumed their journey in the morning.

It was only two days later that the Darkness once again descended, but its arrival proved that it wasn’t a one-time thing. Zac and Thea were barely attacked this time, though their minds were still a bit scrambled by the penetrating wail that seemed to spread through the whole zone.

The trick of staying at the foot of the mountain was extremely effective, and it seemed that most people still around had learned their lesson since only roughly 800 people left the trial during the night.

It was nothing compared to what happened the day before. It was the Arena battle. In just an hour over four thousand names were removed from the ladder, proving that there were quite a few who had tried to stay under the radar as they searched for treasure.

Neither Thea nor Zac were called of course, since both had both battled and killed a fair amount since the start. Zac also breathed out in relief when he saw that Salvation didn't gain any levels this time, meaning that it might have been a one-time event that happened during the last darkness.

The hunt was starting to become a routine as the two went from mountain to mountain, cleaning the summits from all its valuables. Thea had fully healed after three days thanks to the ginseng and her healing pills, but they chose to stay together both for safety and company.

There were a lot of things in Zac's pouch by now that he couldn't understand, but excluding these odd treasures he estimated his gain to be well over a hundred million Nexus Coins. Thea's gain wasn't small either, and she was currently in the fourth position.

Zac himself lost the lead of the Gatherer ladder after the second day, getting surpassed by Emperor Nenotheop. Thea had a theory that the emperor utilized his large army to gather treasure from multiple mountains simultaneously, and Zac wouldn't be surprised if that was the case.

The two could only increase their efforts, and every night they only slept for around an hour, and after a week of hunting, it was starting to take its toll. However, something odd changed the normal flow of the hunt, as they saw a group of three humans and two Ishiate desperately fleeing down the mountains.

And right on their heels was what at first glance looked like very life-like robots.

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#### **Chapter 227 - Silver Rivers**

For a second Zac imagined robots running rampant through the hunt, but he soon realized he wasn't looking at some advanced automatons. Instead he noticed that those in pursuit might actually be humans who had painted themselves silver for some reason.

But something was extremely off about them. Their gazes were extremely lifeless, and they didn't show a single expression as they hounded the group in front. Zac looked over to Thea who frowned as she observed the pursuit.

"Did you notice? Those silver people do not have ladder positions. I think they are corpses or puppets," Thea hesitantly said.

Zac's brows rose in surprise as he looked over at the metallic men again, and it was true. None of the silver humans had any ladder positions, meaning that they either weren't part of the hunt or transformed dead. Zac wasn't sure whether he wanted to be involved with this strange event, but after a brief hesitation he shook his head and flashed over with **[Loamwalker]**.

The next moment he had caught one of the fleeing men, just like he had with so many others during the hunt. The Ishiate and other humans gawked when they saw Zac appear out of nowhere, but they didn't even stop for a fraction of a second. They just kept running as fast as their legs allowed, completely leaving their companion to his fate.

"Please let me go, they'll catch us. They are too strong!" the man desperately shouted as struggled to get free, and when he noticed Zac's arm was tougher than steel he tried to take out his token.

However, Zac snatched the token from his captive with practiced ease before he took out [Verun's Bite]. A second later a huge fractal edge sailed toward the silver cultivators, who now were less than a hundred meters away from him.

There was still no sign of reaction from the silver cultivators and their faces looked completely unperturbed by the incoming attack. But two of the pursuers jumped forward to block the fractal edge with their bodies. Zac could only snort when he saw their tactic, scoffing at the hubris of thinking only two people could stop his attacks.

But the next moment his brows rose in surprise.

The two guards actually self-detonated, and them exploding was barely enough to destroy Zac's fractal edge. Zac could only stupidly stare at the display, and he was now pretty sure that Thea was correct in her assertion that these things were dead. That two people would voluntarily use their bodies as fodder to stop an attack without a care in the world was pretty unlikely.

The others pushed through the cloud of dust that the explosion kicked up in the air, still trying to catch their prey. But it wasn't an even fight just because the silver cultivators managed to intercept the first edge, and soon all the odd puppets were destroyed.

Strangely enough they didn't leave any corpses when they died, but instead just turned into silver clouds that drifted up into the air. Zac was afraid it was some sort of last-ditch poison attack and stayed clear of the silver gases as they slowly dissipated.

However, his captive didn't seem relieved at all that Zac had made short work of the attackers, and still fearfully looked back up toward the summit. It was the same with the others in his party. None of them came back after Zac destroyed the silver puppets, and they were quickly running further and further away.

"Thank you, friend, but please let me go before their leader arrives with the real army. We must get as far away from this mountain as possible," the man said with his eyes fretfully looking up at the summit.

"Army? Is it one of the Medhin Royals?" Zac asked. "Are they wearing golden robes?"

"No, it's not one of them. This is much worse! Please, we must flee before he turns us into puppets as well!"

Zac frowned and looked over at Thea, who shrugged in response. She hadn't heard of anyone like that either.

"Puppets? How many has he turned into puppets?" Zac asked.

"Hundreds and hundreds, perhaps a thousand. He has a whole army of silver corpses like these ones," the man hurriedly said as he gestured at the things Zac killed. "We barely got away since he was busy turning another group into puppets as well, but he was raving about turning everyone into silver guards."

Zac had no reason to keep the man, and simply let him go after asking a few more questions. It truly didn't seem like it was a Medhin royal, but someone else. The captive only said that the leader looked like a hobo but his army was insanely powerful. As for the army, the only thing in common was that they were all silver.

The moment the man was freed by Zac he bolted so quickly that it almost looked like he would take flight. His mad dash was so frantic that he stumbled on a root after only fifty meters and slammed straight into the ground. But he apparently was so afraid that he didn't care about the blood flowing from his nose and only scrambled to his feet to keep running.

Zac frowned as he looked at the fleeing back of the man, before turning back to Thea.

“What do you think?” Zac asked.

“Not sure. But it is clearly someone powerful to have been able to capture hundreds of people. Hypnotist? Necromancer?” she guessed. “In any case, he should fight with numbers, which might make him similar to the Medhin royals.”

“Should we avoid him?”

“No,” Thea said resolutely. “He’s turning humans into puppets, killing indiscriminately. He needs to be stopped.”

“Fine, let’s go,” Zac said as he took out his axe as he looked up toward the summit.

He agreed with Thea’s decision. Someone like this couldn’t be left to their own devices. Besides, he’d already decided that he should improve his returns in this hunt by hunting the powerhouses, and now was as good a time to start as any. He didn’t want to let the Medhin emperor get the best rewards from the hunt, and if this lunatic had found and killed almost a thousand people he should be extremely rich as well by the sheer quantity of treasure.

The two didn’t encounter any more parties as they ascended the mountain. Perhaps it meant that this leader up ahead was confident that the small squad of silver men would be able to capture their prey.

But that also raised the question of just how those things functioned. The man that Zac captured said that the silver puppets were dead, but they seemed somewhat intelligent from how they responded to Zac’s attack. One possibility was that the leader could control them remotely, and even see what they saw through their eyes.

Zac guessed they would learn which was the case depending on whether there was a trap waiting for them at the top of the mountain. Luckily everything was calm when they reached the summit, and they slowly made their way forward until they found a hidden vantage behind some windswept bushes to scout the summit.

Zac immediately saw the man earlier had been telling the truth. There were almost a thousand of the silver corpses lined up at the square in front of the summit’s palace. Furthermore, Zac realized that all kinds of people were represented among the army, increasing the likelihood that these were people that had been caught and turned into puppets.

There were humans from both worlds judging by their attire, and there were also quite a few Ishiate and Zhix, though no Anointed stood among the silver ranks. Curiously enough there were also a few extremely pale humanoids that reached roughly to Zac’s chest.

His best guess was that these things were Ratmen or Molemen going by their hunched over posture and long tails, but they didn’t exactly match the descriptions he heard from the Valkyries about their battles at the Ratmen Incursion. They had more human-like features, and they seemed to be completely hairless. The real Ratmen were essentially enormous bipedal rats.

It wasn’t a species that Zac had ever heard of before, and he guessed these things were either from the other world or something local that lived in these mountains. But even these odd things weren’t what truly drew Zac’s attention. It was the supposed leader sitting in front of them on the ground with his eyes closed.

At first look one might think that the man was a captive, going by how he looked. He was even worse than Zac’s appearance back when he used a disgusting snake-skin for armor and was always caked in blood. It was to the point that Zac even couldn’t make out the man’s ethnicity or features since he was just way too dirty, and the only reason Zac knew it was a man was that he had a large grimy beard.

The man had black shoulder-long hair that was so oily that it looked wet, and the only thing he was dressed in was a large piece of cloth that Zac assumed might have been white once upon a time. However, Zac didn't relax when he saw the pathetic appearance of the leader but instead secured the grip of his axe with a somber expression.

The man emitted a chaotic power that even made Zac slightly apprehensive. The freely released aura around the hobo was clearly weaker than his own, but it was something very off about it, almost feeling like a sickness.

Zac also realized that there would be no option for a sneak attack, as the man soon opened his eyes and looked straight at the two of them in their hiding spot with a smile. There was undisguised insanity in his eyes, and Zac couldn't help but shudder when he met the crazed gaze.

"Welcome, lost lambs," the man said, slowly getting up on his feet. "I saw you stop my silver guards. Are you here to make amends by joining the unity?"

"Who are you, and what have you done with all these people?" Zac asked as left his hiding spot and walked onto the large square on the summit, Thea soon following behind him.

"I am Salvation, prophet of the Great Redeemer," the man proclaimed with a grand voice, the madness in his eyes burning even brighter. "These ones have been freed from the curse of sapience, and have joined the eternal unity."

"So you are Salvation," Zac said, and without another word unleashed a fractal edge straight at the man, hoping to cut the head of the snake.

However, a hundred of the silver people behind him wordlessly slapped their hands together and an extremely thick shield appeared in front of their leader, effortlessly stopping his attack.

"Oh, you are quite powerful," the grimy man said while looking at Zac with a burning gaze. "Have the Great Redeemer provided me with the first Golden Guard?"

Zac didn't comment on Salvation's rambling and instead spoke to Thea with a low voice, without taking his eye off his target.

"I'll clash head-on, see if you can find any opportunities from the flank."

Thea nodded and actually disappeared by turning translucent. It was the first time Zac had seen her use this skill, and he had to admit it suited herself and her weapon quite well. But there was no time for admiration as part of the army suddenly stretched their hands into the air like they were trying to grasp something above them.

The next moment they literally melted into a silver river that started floating around Salvation, making his robes flutter in the wind. The liquid metal that the soldiers turned into emitted the chaotic energies that he sensed from Salvation himself, though it was even stronger.

"Those cursed by their clamoring souls are always led astray. But all will be brought to the fold," Salvation said as he pointed at Zac, and part of the silver river shot toward him with shocking speed, transforming into a huge lance heading straight toward him.

Zac summoned another fractal edge with **[Chop]** and swung it head-on to meet the incoming the attack. But the moment the two forces clashed Zac's brows rose in alarm from the pure force contained in Salvation's silver lance.

The power pushed Zac back over fifty meters, and the shockwave from the clash causing widespread destruction of the square on the summit. Zac's hands were even shaking from the strain of holding the attack at bay, but it was also clear that there was a limit to the power of the river.

Zac noted that the river had shrunk by around ten percent after the clash, with some silver steam dissipating into the air just like when he destroyed the puppets at the foot of the mountain. But the next moment the river was reinforced by more silver men liquefying and joining the river.

From there on Zac didn't have much time to analyze the situation as the silver river was trying to attack him from all angles like a rabid beast.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 228 - Descent**

Zac furiously defended with both his axe and his swirling leaves from the onslaught that came at him from all angles. It was as though he was caught in the middle of an agitated hornet swam where a thousand attacks kept angling for him.

Wounds started to accumulate over his body, and he was spending cosmic energy at a tremendous pace. However, the furious defense wasn't for nothing as a thick mist was rising above him from the expended silver river.

After having fought a bit Zac started to get a decent idea of what was going on. Salvation turned people into these silver things and then used the stored energy inside their bodies to launch extremely powerful attacks.

However, each attack would deplete Salvation's storage of soldiers, as the attack spent the stored energy and the corpses dissipated. Zac estimated that a couple of Silver Guards were destroyed by each and every clash judging by how much the silver river shrank afterward.

In just a short bout Zac had destroyed at least fifty corpses, and he felt a bit nauseated at the thought of destroying innocent people. It was an extremely wicked method to fight, and Zac wondered just what kind of evil Salvation had committed to gain access to a class that could do something this messed up.

"Despicable," Zac couldn't help but growl at Salvation who controlled the silver liquid from the distance.

"All crusades require sacrifice for the greater good. They will forever stay part of the Cosmos, all overseen by The Great Redeemer," Salvation said with a calm smile, no remorse or guilt on his face at all.

Zac realized there was no point to keep talking with this madman, and tried to decide on a plan. The thought of destroying people every time he clashed with Salvation was revolting, and he wasn't sure that his endurance would last through destroying the whole army in any case.

A better method would be to bring the fight to Salvation himself. **[Inquisitive Eye]** didn't work on the man, but Zac felt his attributes should be more aligned with a mage judging by how he fought. That meant high Intelligence but low Endurance.

Killing him directly would be more efficient than grinding down the army of silver corpses, and it would also feel a lot better. Perhaps there was even a way to save these poor people and turn them back. The ground cracked under his legs as Zac used **[Loamwalker]** the moment he saw an opening in the silver river swirling around him and he flashed toward Salvation. But he was ready for the assault, simply putting hands in a praying position.

"Sanctuary," Salvation said, and the next moment he was completely enclosed in the silver liquid, creating a huge ball five meters across.

Zac wouldn't stop from just that though and with a determined face summoned a five-meter fractal edge and imbued it with the Dao of Sharpness. The last clashes he didn't utilize any Dao, and the difference it made was clear as he cut through the ball like butter.

However, Salvation was nowhere to be seen inside the ball, until he Suddenly appeared back behind Zac, reaching for his head. Alarm bells went off in Zac's mind, telling him he would die if Salvation reached him. He desperately pushed away, while simultaneously trying to cut off Salvation's arm.

At the same moment a huge whirlwind erupted in the middle of the silver army, where Thea suddenly appeared. Everything within fifty meters from here was shredded into ribbons, and over a hundred silver corpses dissipated in an instant.

However, she wasn't done there and immediately moved toward a thick group of guards to keep whittling down the defenses. While Zac had felt a bit hesitant about this tactic she clearly had no such compunctions.

For the first time since the start of the battle Salvation's calm face changed, turning into one of unbridled rage.

"Apostasy!" he screamed as he pointed at Thea.

The next moment another hundred silver corpses liquefied and turned into a hundred swords that all tried to stab Thea, who had to use all of her agility to escape the encirclement unscathed. Her plan to keep destroying corpses had to be abandoned since she was busy just dodging the innumerable blades gunning for her life.

It was clear that Thea had found a solution to reduce the power of Salvation. It was starting to become more and more apparent that Salvation was needed to control these things. She was able to destroy a tenth of the army without any resistance due to Salvation being preoccupied with his battle with Zac.

It was far more efficient than trying to destroy the silver river, as it was clearly more resilient when it was actively controlled by Salvation. Perhaps he infused some of his own Cosmic Energy into the metallic liquid that floated about in the air, whereas the Silver Soldiers were just energy on standby.

Zac could only grit his teeth and follow the same plan as Thea, even though he felt it was a bit distasteful. But the man was simply too elusive. It looked like he could somehow freely move within the silver liquid, making it nigh impossible to strike him down.

He immediately summoned five huge fractal edges as he frantically dodged or bore the damage from the innumerable attacks from the silver rivers all around him. But he didn't use them to harass Salvation who had emerged from his protective bubble.

Instead, Zac shot them at various clumps of silver guards who were still just mutely standing in the distance, and each blade was imbued with the Dao of Sharpness. His goal was to continue Thea's work while she was keeping the hundred silver swords busy.

The next moment Zac heedlessly charged Salvation, hoping to occupy his attention.

A storm of lightning-quick swings blanketed Salvation, who had to desperately create barrier after barrier of silver shields to protect himself from Zac's onslaught. The silver river around him was shrinking at a noticeable pace from Zac's frenzied swings, with each Dao-infused strike destroying a noticeable part of it.

It looked like his plan might actually work as the silver guards were still standing completely immobile, not making any attempts to defend against the incoming blades.

But it appeared that Salvation wouldn't take it lying down as his eyes lit up with an almost blinding light, and the chaotic aura inside him increased manifold.

"DESCENT!" Salvation roared, and before the fractal edges could reach the army over six hundred Silver Corpses liquefied, causing a silver storm that covered the whole summit and rose fifty meters into the air.

The swords that were harassing Thea also stopped their chase and instead joined the other energies to infuse the storm with even more power. Zac immediately got an extremely bad feeling as he sensed the rampant energies that were gathering in the air, and he tried to quickly kill off Salvation before it got any worse.

He even activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**] while he started gathering energy for his ultimate strike, [**Nature's Punishment**]. But Salvation was suddenly swallowed by the silver storm, and Zac had no chance to unleash his ultimate attack since he was unable to locate his real form any longer.

The danger sense in Zac's mind was going haywire, and Zac heedlessly flooded the fractal in his arm with cosmic energy while he looked up at what was happening. The silver storm had created a huge cloud up in the air, and something nefarious was brewing inside.

Suddenly two enormous eyes that seemed want to judge the world opened from within the silver clouds. They held the same silver luster that Salvation's eyes shone with before he disappeared, but Zac didn't feel that the huge eyes were an avatar of Salvation.

Salvation's eyes shone with madness, but the huge globes up in the sky looked down at the mountain peak like a god staring down at a pitiful ant. There was a boundless arrogance and disdain within it as well, but Zac wasn't sure if it was an actual person since the eyes were completely unmoving and unblinking.

The pressure from just the gaze was enormous, and the next moment a gigantic face emerged from the cloud, increasing the pressure even further. The face was at least fifty meters across, a huge monstrosity that covered most of Zac's field of vision.

The face was of a young human man, and not someone Zac recognized. His face was extremely handsome, apart from the condescending eyes. There was also an extremely intricate fractal in his forehead that radiated an immense power, and just by looking at it Zac felt like his soul was going to get sucked out of his body.

The face didn't stay up in the clouds, but soon it started to descend toward the summit at a measured pace. Zac's brows rose in alarm as he looked over at a pale-faced Thea who stood some distance away.

"Get away from the summit, I can handle this," he shouted as he kept infusing his arm with Cosmic Energy.

The pressure upon Zac was mounting as the enormous descended, and his instincts told him to get down on knees in subservience. But ignored those voices as he grit his teeth while he pushed his right hand upward. The space above him cracked and the familiar enormous hand rose to meet the incoming face.

The wrath of god clashed with nature's punishment, and the two forces meeting caused such a shockwave that the barrier protecting the palace was completely destroyed, and the shockwaves caused the palace to get ripped to shreds as it was pushed down the mountain.

Zac felt as though his whole body was breaking apart from the collision, but he staunchly kept pushing forward while allocating some energy to summon [**Nature's Barrier**] to blanket him from at least some of the errant energies that were ripping the whole summit apart.

The hand was barely five meters across and it almost looked like a child that was trying to push away an adult as it pressed on the enormous fractal that adorned the forehead of the enormous head.

However, inside that seemingly small hand, a boundless force was contained. It possessed everything Zac was able to utilize, from his Dao of Trees to the infusion of **[Hatchetman's Rage]**, its power was unmatched even by what most E-Grade evolved could muster.

For a few seconds the two forces were at an impasse, with neither face nor hand giving in, but soon a jarring crack echoed across the mountain. A large scar could suddenly be seen across the fractal on the huge head as the fingers from the wooden hand dug inside the forehead.

The moment the fractal cracked it was as though the force that held the hundreds of silver corpses together came undone. The head started to ooze torrential amounts of silver clouds, and it almost looked as though it was burning from the enormous plume that was rising from it.

Normally Zac would have deactivated the hand by now, but he staunchly kept feeding the hand with everything he possessed, even his lifeforce. He wouldn't relent until the face was completely destroyed so that he could crush Salvation.

Zac wasn't the only one who was running out of energy as the face was almost translucent by now with silver clouds spreading far enough to even reach the neighboring mountains. Finally the head cracked into innumerable pieces, the last energies coming undone.

A mangled body fell down from the skies with a wail and caused a large crater when he slammed into the ground on the other side of the summit. But Zac knew he was alive, as some remaining droplets of the liquid river blanketed the fall at the last moment. Zac's whole body felt like it was on fire but he wouldn't let this opportunity go.

He was already out of Cosmic Energy, but he squeezed his body to activate **[Loamwalker]** once more, speeding toward the mangled body of Salvation. But he frowned when he saw Salvation crush his token with a shaking hand. Still, all was not lost since there was still a window of opportunity to kill this raving lunatic before he was sent away.

They had already confirmed that the power of someone dictated how long the delay was before they were sent back, and someone like Salvation should take at least ten seconds. He couldn't let this man get back to the Cradle of God. Who knew how many Silver Guards he had there to empower himself.

He immediately moved to close the last distance, his axe already falling down with finality.

"Lord Redeemer, please save me!" he shouted in desperation, and in the next moment a man actually appeared next to him.

Zac first planned to ignore him to strike the finishing blow, but a terrifying aura suddenly exploded out from the man, eclipsing anything Zac had ever felt before.

Every cell in his body told him that if he moved just one step closer he would die without a doubt, and he unhesitantly stopped his assault as he jumped back a few steps. Zac's couldn't help looking over at the figure silently standing next to the crater with Salvation still inside.

And the man who looked back at him was none other than the owner of the face in the clouds.

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### **Chapter 229 - The Great Redeemer**

The man standing next to the crater was clearly the same as the one in the sky earlier, though there were some minute differences. The normal-sized one felt more lifelike, whereas the huge avatar that tried to crush the whole summit might as well have been a mask or statue.

The mysterious briefly man scrutinized the surroundings until his eyes met Zac's. It was as though a lightning bolt went through Zac's mind when he met the stare, and it truly felt like he would perish if he held eye contact.

He quickly looked away, and thoughts of fleeing were quickly filling his mind. But something stopped him. The aura this man emitted was on the same tier as that of Greatest, and if he truly was here there was nothing he could do. His life and death weren't in his hands any longer.

But at the same time, they were in an enclosed space for a system-organized treasure hunt. He didn't believe people even of that level of power would be able to break into a place like this. The rules of a System-sanctioned mystic realm were inviolable.

If there were attribute- or grade-limiters in place then there was nothing that could be done. Not even an A-ranked old monster could break in as far as Zac understood. That meant that the man in front of him might just be a powerless illusion and that the towering aura was just empty blustering. That would also explain why he only stood there. Zac grit his teeth with determination.

A huge fractal edge fell straight toward Salvation, who fearfully looked up at the edge as he hastily gathered the last remnants of his silver energies to produce a feeble defense. But Zac knew that small defense wouldn't stop his assault as his attack was powered by the Dao of Sharpness and his very lifeforce.

But suddenly the man simply pointed a finger at the incoming attack, and it felt as though all life was drained out of his body as the fractal edge disintegrated from some unseen force.

"Insolence," the man said with a melodic voice, and Zac couldn't help but cough up blood as he fell back, unable to stand up again.

"It's true. I am not here in person, I am just an imprint. But my very existence is enough to ward off some baby cultivators," the man continued as he looked down at Zac with disdain in his eyes.

It was clear though that the man was not truly there, since whatever the man did to stop Zac's approach had drained the imprint enough to make him transparent. Zac knew that he would perhaps only be able to stop one more attack, but his body wouldn't listen when he tried to command it to move.

"Are you my inheritor? Disappointing. This is my only intervention," the man sighed as he looked down at the crumpled form of Salvation, but the next moment he looked over at the space on the opposite of the crater.

He didn't say anything, only disdainfully snorted, but immediately after a pale-faced Thea emerged from nowhere coughing out blood, a slender sword in her hand. It looked like she had tried to assassinate Salvation unseen, but she couldn't escape the gaze of Salvation's protector.

“This unworthy one thanks you, Great Lord!” Salvation feebly coughed as he grasped his Cosmos Sack in his hand. “I will continue your bidding.”

The next moment he started fading away, but Zac was unwilling to give in to the imprint. He summoned strength he didn't know he had, and with a roar threw **[Verun's Bite]** at Salvation. He had no energy left to summon any skill, and could only pin his hopes to non-magical means.

Unfortunately, Zac was completely spent, and his aim was slightly off. The axe had quite a bit of force as it hurtled toward Salvation, but it was flying too low to hit anything lethal. But it was still a throw from someone possessing over three hundred Strength, and Salvation desperately swirled to avoid the incoming edge.

A muffled groan escaped Salvation's mouth as the axe tore through the man's wrist and cut off his right hand along with the Cosmic Sack that fell down on the ground. Zac could only shake his head in disappointment, and the next moment Salvation winked out of existence.

The last thing Zac saw of Salvation was two eyes that burned with madness and vengeance. The pouch that had just fallen turned into motes of light and flew into Zac's Cosmos Sack.

The whole thing had happened in an instant, and The Redeemer was unable or unwilling to lend any further assistance to Salvation, and he instead only gazed up into the sky with some anticipation in his face. Zac knew the imprint was running out of time and hoped to gain at least some information before it disappeared.

“Who are you? Are you from the Church of Everlasting Dao?” Zac coughed.

Zac's words brought back the attention of the quickly fading form.

“I am not one of those filthy body-peddlers. Their path toward immortality is a dead end, an empty pit of despair. I sense that my true body is still alive, which means that eons of planning are soon coming to fruition. We will meet again, little defier,” he said with a small smile as he finally was reduced to just motes of light.

Zac didn't dare move for a few seconds even after the man disappeared, but soon he ardously tried to get over to Thea. His vision was swimming, but he knew they couldn't stay here. But his body was completely spent, and he helplessly was lying down on the ground. It was Thea instead who got up to her feet, fearfully looking over at the spot where the man once stood as she walked over to Zac.

“Who the hell was that?” she muttered, perhaps to herself or perhaps as a question to Zac.

“Definitely not someone from Earth,” Zac said with a frown. “He was at least a D-Grade powerhouse, likely higher.”

“I've read that powerful people could imprint treasures with their very essence. Somehow Salvation must have gotten his hands on such a treasure. But I don't understand how. It's extremely arduous to make such an imprint because you need to cut off a piece of your soul to leave the imprint. It's rarely done,” Thea explained.

“They are usually only awarded to direct disciples and are extremely rare treasures. It's not something the system awards either,” she continued.

“Salvation kept talking about some Great Redeemer,” Zac said, trying to keep his scattered mind focused. “Perhaps that was him. He might have gotten his hands on an inheritance or something. That kind of treasure sounds like something that might be left to an inheritor.”

“That's impossible. This is a new world, there are no inheritances here,” Thea said with a shake of her head.

Zac scratched his face for a couple of seconds before he coughed.

“Well, it’s not completely impossible. I have a couple of them as well, got them as a reward,” he explained, his voice getting lower and lower as the intensity from Thea’s glare increased. “And more importantly that man called Salvation his inheritor.”

She didn’t say anything only gave an annoyed huff as she surveyed the area before pulling Zac to his feet.

“I think we need to go,” she said. “The palace is destroyed, and people from all surrounding mountains should have seen the battle. None of us is in any condition to fight another battle.”

Zac was about to agree, but suddenly his vision turned slanted. It took a bit for his muddled mind to realize that he had fallen over, which made him finally realize just how bad his condition was. That last strike had used up most of his remaining life force, and when it was destroyed it got even worse.

“Don’t put my body into a Cosmos Sack,” was all that Zac could say before his vision turned black.

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An unknown amount of time later that Zac woke up with a cough, his eyes straining to adjust as he slowly opened them. He saw that he had been moved after all as he was inside what looked to be the ruins of some of the structures closer to the foot of a mountain.

However, he realized that his fears had been true, as his vision had once again turned into that of his Draugr-form. His feeling only worsened when he realized that he was tied up to the point that he was barely able to move, and the bindings were actually strong enough to keep him secured.

“So you’re up,” Thea’s voice sounded from behind, but Zac wasn’t even able to turn over.

“Thanks for carrying me away. So, uh, why have you tied me up?” Zac asked, trying to make his voice sound as warm and alive as possible.

There was no response for a few seconds until a light shuffle could be heard as Thea entered his field of vision. She looked to be mostly fine apart from being slightly pale, but she had a frown on her face as she scrutinized Zac from some distance.

Zac knew very well just how different he looked at this current form, particularly his pitch-black eyes that looked like portals to the abyss.

“I am not an undead, I am still Zac,” Zac said.

“You sure look like an undead, and you’re deathly cold to the touch,” she said with an unconvinced face.

“Well, it’s a long story, but through a few deadly encounters, I found a way to get two lives. I can somewhat freely swap between my two forms, but sometimes the change is forced upon me,” Zac said.

“Like dying,” Thea said with a blank face.

“Well, yes, that would do the trick,” Zac coughed.

“So you are immortal?” she probed.

“I don’t think so?” Zac hesitantly said. “It’s not like I’d survive getting my head cut off.”

The moment the words left his mouth he regretted it, as Thea’s eyes thinned as she pointedly stared at his exposed throat. However, nothing happened as the seconds passed, and Zac could finally breathe easy again.

But soon Thea spoke up, and he couldn’t help but get a bit antsy again.

“You should understand my position. It is already clear that Salvation is under the thumb of some alien influence, bringing a great threat to Earth. Now I find out that the top ranker is an undead when there’s an undead Incursion on earth that has ravaged a good deal of Asia,” she said with an even stare.

“What you said might be true, but I need to ask some questions to ascertain the veracity of your claim,” she continued.

From there on she kept asking him various questions that only he would know, such as the content of their explorations during the hunt, or their shared experiences at the Auction earlier. However, after a while the nature of the questions started to change.

“How old were you when you stopped wetting the bed?” she suddenly asked.

“What? No Idea, three perhaps?” Zac answered with a perplexed face.

“How many girlfriends do you have, and how do you rank them?” she continued without missing a beat.

“Rank them? What are you talking about? I am single,” Zac answered with an exasperated voice.

“That’s not what our intelligence indicates,” Thea retorted.

“Are you talking about Hannah? We broke up some time ago,” Zac said but frowned when he saw her mouth quirking slightly upward. “Wait, are you messing with me?”

The next moment the ropes around him were released, and he was free again. However, he shot a glare at Thea who innocuously looked back at him as he stretched his sore body.

“We need to get going, we’re still somewhat close to the scene of the battle,” Thea said without commenting the earlier line of questioning.

Zac only snorted but he was quick to follow behind her. He sensed that his Core wasn’t filled at the moment, making it a risky venture to turn back again. Instead, he simply donned a cloak that covered his head that would hide his identity until he could turn back again.

The two kept moving as soon as Zac was freed by Thea since they were still pretty close to the scene of the battle. They weren’t worried about the average cultivators, but rather the top names on the ladders, such as the Dominators and the Medhin Emperor.

Their battle with Salvation might as well have been a blaring sign showing half the mountainous region where top powerhouses were, and if the E-Ranked evolved had done any sort of reconnaissance they should know that there were only three E-Rankers present at the hunt.

However, it didn’t mean they stopped their treasure hunt just because they wanted to avoid any further battle for the time being. However, they decided to avoid the top tier palaces in favor of looting the high tier sites that were not quite as conspicuous.

But they soon learned that the competition for these mountains was much harsher compared to the top-tiered ones that were guarded by extremely powerful arrays. Two out of the three mountains they visited during the day had already been looted, and it was only thanks to Thea’s observation skills that they managed to find any treasures at all.

She had managed to at least find a few hidden stashes that contained decent returns, but it was far worse than the usual haul they had during the day. Thea had

already lost two positions, but Zac had soared up to the first position on the Gatherer ladder, thanks to looting Salvation.

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#### **Chapter 230 - Out of the Frying Pan**

Zac started absorbing energy for his core the moment that they settled in for the night, holding a divine crystal in one hand and a miasma crystal in the other. As soon as the core was filled up he began the process of turning back to a human again.

Since he had already turned he first thought about staying that way for a while. He could take the opportunity to both gain a couple of levels and work on his quests. However, in the end he decided against it, which was why he was currently emptying himself of miasma from all his pores.

There were a few reasons to this. The most important was the safety issue. There were dangers both known and unknown prowling the mountains, and his combat prowess was far higher in his human form. Perhaps that would change in the future, but for now it was safer to have access to his Hatchetman class. He only had one skill at the moment, and Zac believed that the best use for **[Deathwish]** was to handle large groups of weaker enemies.

Secondly, there was the issue of Thea. He had already explained that he had gained the ability to gain a second life by turning to an undead, but he never mentioned anything about a second class. He was therefore a bit leery about grinding his class while traveling with her.

She had proven herself to be a solid ally through thick and thin during the hunt, but she had also realized that family was extremely important to her, even if she was a bit of a loner. If he for some reason came at odds against the Marshall Clan she would stand with them, and he was unwilling to show all his cards at this juncture. He knew he'd already slipped up a couple of times by now, but he could only channel his inner Ogras and strive to do better from now on.

A cloud of miasma was slowly gathering above Zac as he expelled everything in his body until his vision once again began swimming and he lost consciousness. When he woke up again he was relieved to find that he wasn't bound like the last time, but Thea was still sitting close-by observing him.

"Pretty impressive," she commented when she noticed that Zac was back to being a bonafide human. "Are you able to turn into anything else as well?"

"I'm not some shapeshifter," Zac muttered as he cracked his neck.

He truly needed to find a better method for the change. Having to die just to turn was a huge pain in the ass, and it felt extremely uncomfortable as well. Every cell in his body screamed for sustenance, but he had to repress those basic impulses and let his body slowly get drained.

"So what's next?" Thea said as she started setting up her tent.

They were inside a small house at the foot of a mountain, but she still chose to erect her one-man tent. She had done the same every night since they started traveling together, and Zac guessed she wanted some privacy as she slept. He knew it wasn't an issue of not wanting to get dirtied by the floor beneath since he'd seen her caked in both blood and grime the last days without as much as lifting an eyebrow.

"Nothing's really changed. We should start hitting the top tier palaces again if you're up for it," Zac said after mulling it over for a bit.

Thea nodded before she got into her tent, leaving Zac to take the first watch.

Zac sat down next to the doorway of the structure as he looked out into the darkness. The darkness this night didn't seem very oppressive and he could spot the weak stars in the sky, meaning that there probably wouldn't be a nightly assault this day.

Since he had some time to spare he decided to go over his gains from the past day, and first opened his status screen.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**62**

**Class**

**[F-Rare] Hatchetman**

**Race**

**[E] Human**

**Alignment**

**[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen**

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - Middle, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Early Core**

**[F] Duplicity**

**Strength**

**370 [Efficiency: 116%]**

**Dexterity**

**221 [Efficiency: 116%]**

**Endurance**

**375 [Efficiency: 116%]**

**Vitality**

**239 [Efficiency: 116%]**

**Intelligence**

**90 [Efficiency: 116%]**

**Wisdom**

**85 [Efficiency: 116%]**

**Luck**

**93 [Efficiency: 116%]**

**Free Points**

**1**

**Nexus Coins**

## [F] 26 743 653

The day's activities had slightly improved his attributes once again, with him gaining a level in his undead form from killing beasts when they changed mountains. He looked at his Free Point for a bit before he put it into Strength.

He had gone back and forth on this, eventually he chose to increase his Strength. With the help of the Dao of Sharpness, he actually had far more Dexterity than he needed to keep a decent ratio. He felt that he could afford a couple of more points into Strength since it was still his main attribute during fights.

Another idea he had was to boost his Wisdom and Intelligence to 100 each before he got ready to evolve, in case any future Class Upgrade had restrictions on either those attributes or that there was a minimum of 100 in all attributes.

But he felt that putting points there was a bit premature. He was leaning toward instant power-ups during this hunt, rather than something that could benefit him down the line. Besides, it wasn't impossible he'd gain some more attributes through new titles or treasures before he reached level 75. The fewer points he needed to put himself into those attributes the better.

Another welcome surprise was that **[Nature's Punishment]** and **[Nature's Barrier]** both had evolved from the last battle. He hadn't noticed until now since he had been in his Undead form during the whole day.

That Nature's Punishment had upgraded was the most critical. It had been his final card in every tough fight since he gained the skill, and the power of the wooden hand essentially dictated how strong enemies he could defeat.

He had no idea just what kind of effect the upgraded skill would have since there were no clues, but he sensed that the fractal on his forearm could take in far more energy compared to before, which could only be seen as a good sign.

Each point in attribute also increased the amount of Cosmic Energy he could hold, meaning that he had far more to go around today compared when he first gained the skill. At that time using the skill just once took pretty much all his energy, but by now he used less than half his energy to launch it.

As for **[Nature's Barrier]**, he simply summoned the swirling leaves after throwing a glance at the tent at the opposite side of the building. The continuous consumption of his defensive skill was higher since the upgrade. But the leaves were also far more resplendent, almost lighting up the building with their green luster.

He also saw that the veins on the leaves had changed a bit. They slightly looked like fractals before as well, but it was much clearer now. He still couldn't make anything out from the fractals due to his lacking insight into that field, but he knew that each leaf could block far more force compared to before.

Satisfied with the result he deactivated the skill, his eyes turning to his Cosmos Sack next.

He hadn't properly gone through it since they had been on the move the whole day, but now there was time to properly look it over. He had briefly peeked into it during the day, and he was shocked by the number of things inside since he looted Salvation.

There was no way he would be able to store everything inside if he had only his own sacks, as the sheer quantity of items was just enormous. If he decided to empty the Sack he would be able to create a small hill of healing pills alone for example, and there were thousands and thousands of weapons.

Salvation had been at the 8th place on the Gatherer ladder when he fled the hunt, but his way of getting that high up had been vastly different from himself and

Thea. The two of them had only hit top palaces, occasionally lining their pockets with the possessions of other trial takers while traveling between the summits.

Salvation had simply killed and robbed almost a thousand people as a way to increase his Silver Guard, and it was obvious that he'd kept everything they owned as well. But it was also clear that most of the guards were of pretty low power on average, as the quality of the loot was pretty lackluster. Zac sat and went through item after item, but he only found a total of six items that seemed valuable.

He placed them together with the 22 other items he had looted during the hunt, the first of them being the extremely heavy metal ball that was covered in intricate fractals. His plan for them was simply to hand them over to Calrin when he got back for identification and potentially selling off.

Some of them might be a good weapon against the Dominators or the Medhin Emperor, but he was just unable to figure anything out about their method of usage. He'd rather just stash them than accidentally blowing himself up. As for the mountain of other treasures, they were just low-value items that would fill his contribution system back in Port Atwood. Things such as healing- and fasting pills were always in high demand.

The night passed uneventfully, and the two set out at the break of dawn. They once again settled into their usual routine, and the following days they hit one high-value target after another. However, on the second day, something odd happened.

In the distance, the mountains were simply replaced with the blackness of space, and the once endless field of view got abruptly cut short. It came suddenly and without warning, and made Zac and Thea stop in their tracks. D

"It's a battle royale," Zac suddenly muttered as he looked on the newly erected wall.

"A what?" Thea asked with confusion.

"I think the System is reducing the size of the hunt, and it might keep shrinking it over time. We're pretty spread out at the moment, and we haven't really fought anyone in two days. The system wants more struggle, and it forces us into closer proximity," Zac said.

"Figures," Thea only commented with a sigh.

"Well, there's still quite a huge field to search. Even if we walked in a straight line it would take us over a month to pass the whole thing. But I think we should maintain a large distance from the black wall, the System might not give a warning if it decides to reduce the area again," Zac added as he started looking for a new target.

Zac was proven right three days later, as the black wall swallowed up a large group of mountains again. And if the System was looking for more fights the plan worked spectacularly. Both Zac and Thea had been forced to kill a bunch of cultivators each during the past days.

Furthermore, the valleys were flooded with innumerable beasts that seemed to have been pushed out of the black enclosure. It had gotten to the point that he'd even seen a pack of huge rats getting pushed down the large cracks in the ground that ran alongside the mountains due to overcrowding.

There were also constant sounds of battles from the various mountains, and the impacts they caused were getting larger as well as most of the weaker people were quickly getting rooted out. In just three days over ten thousand had been eliminated from the hunt either through leaving voluntarily or getting killed, which was a way faster pace than before.

Zac and Thea were mostly unaccosted by this though. There were very few who could threaten them at the moment, and the mountain peaks there were usually very few people on the mountains they chose. They only picked the summits with the most spectacular palaces that would have the harshest arrays protecting them.

They had a few close calls during the past days, particularly in a palace that had an extremely insidious mix of arrays. Initially, they had just thought it was a combination of a battle array that spawned a bunch of golems and a gravity array, but they were wrong.

There had also been an imperceptible illusion array that only slightly messed with their senses, and Zac only found out when his danger sense blared to life. However, it was too late and he was gored by a sharp spike by one of the golems. Thankfully the warning had allowed him to avoid any lethal damage, and the immense pain helped him break out of the array.

However, the two had generally had a smooth sailing so far. But something was different about the mountain in front of them, making Zac stop in his tracks with a frown. They were just standing at the foot as they had with so many other mountains.

But this time his Luck was in no uncertain terms telling him that he was in danger.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 231 - Rooting out Problems**

“This had better work,” Ogras grunted in annoyance. “This god damn array almost cleaned me bare.”

“Well, it was you who decided to buy through the mercantile system rather than wait for Lord Atwood to return,” Calrin responded, not able to hide his glee.

In front of them was a huge table wrought some crystal, and its surface was covered in dense fractals. Oddly enough each of the legs had sharpened ends, and all four of them were currently embedded into the ground. They were in a secluded cave right in the middle of the island, and this place had also become the headquarters of their operation.

Ogras only glared at the little twerp for a bit bit, thinking of methods he could have revenge without getting caught. He just knew that the little shit had added a substantial premium to the tools required when he saw the hurry that Ogras was in. But he could only swallow his ire for now, and he instead took out a crystal from his sleeve and put it to his mouth.

“Are you ready?” Ogras asked into the crystal.

“... Ready,” a sullen voice responded from the other side.

“Come now, don’t be like that. I’m sure that Zac will warm up if he heard you protected his sister,” Ogras snorted.

Alea had been a complete drag the past weeks, drifting about like a brooding ghost. That man kept throwing annoying problems at him just to go on exciting adventures. Now Ogras was supposed to be some sort of marriage counselor as well? Well, at least he would get an adventure of his own if this all worked out, and he could leave all this crap behind.

The plan had taken a week of intense research and another week of putting everything together. The whole island now had over fifty minor teleportation arrays

hidden all over. He would be able to appear almost anywhere on the island at moment's notice, they only needed to start up the main array in front of them to start the operation.

He had racked his brain for days to come up with another way to spot the shapeshifters. Those bastards were the only thing that blocked him from being able to enter the Mystic Realm now, and he couldn't wait to rip them apart. Ogras had even bought over twenty information missives from Calrin until he finally found a plan that had a decent chance to work.

Thoughts of just sneaking inside the Mystic Realm had crossed his mind tens of times, but in the end he forcibly pushed down those impulses. If Zac found out he shirked his duties while he was away he could forget about getting his hand on the inheritance, which was a surefire power-up for him compared to the unknown of the Mystic Realm.

Besides, he knew who would be the main targets of an assassination in case that both he and Zac were gone from the island simultaneously, and he didn't want to see the sister get herself killed. He had spent most of his time shadowing MacKenzie Atwood since Zac left on the hunt, and he had to admit she was an interesting person.

She was a contradiction personified. He had never met someone with such precise control of Cosmic Energy, her precision and reaction time were unparalleled. With such god-given talents she would be welcomed as an elite at almost any sect.

Attributes could be solved by various means, but supreme talent was far harder to come by. But at the same time he had seen her fall over while standing still twice, and he'd lost count of how many times she'd dropped things by just fumbling them. How could such a skilled person be so clumsy?

He had even gone so far as to ask around about her past, and it turned out that while the clumsiness was something she'd always had, the stellar control seemed to be something new. Perhaps her talent was always latent, just waiting to explode when this world got integrated. But he had bigger fish to fry than to figure out that mystery.

The solution to his problems that he finally found was an array called **[E-Grade Origin Array]**. It was an array that showed unique energy signatures of all people within its reach, and the signature depended on the origin of the person.

That meant that the demons would have pretty similar signatures, just like the humans and ishiate would have similar signatures within their cohorts. He had already silently escorted the few Zhix that were stationed in Port Atwood away so that they wouldn't add confusion to the results. That left the shapeshifters who should have their own unique signatures.

Normally this plan wouldn't work since the capitals of the multi-verse were melting pots of people with all kinds of origins. Besides, higher grade concealment skills would be able to change even the signatures they emitted, rendering the array useless. Even worse, everyone would notice it being activated since it shot out a not-so-discrete pulse.

Using such an array was akin to using inspection skills on everyone in a town, and was considered to be extremely rude and overbearing. If you were unlucky some hidden powerhouse might stay in the city, and he or she might take offense to being exposed like that. All this made the Origin Array mostly useless, and it wasn't one of the better-known arrays.

But the current situation of Port Atwood created the possibility of his plan working. First of all the population was extremely homogenous. Secondly, the shapeshifters were only F-Grade, meaning that they didn't possess access to skills strong enough to hide from the array.

Ogras placed ten E-Grade crystals in the core of the array, and it was with great relief he saw it hum into life. The tabletop in front of them changed, and soon it displayed the whole island. The next moment a pulse was emitted from the core beneath the table, and it quickly spread out to cover the whole island.

Azh'Rodum was the first town to get covered, and the map was quickly getting filled with similar red lights. A few blue lights also started shimmering, and Ogras guessed those were the humans that lived in Azh'Rodum as miners. The pulse kept expanding outward until they reached the array flags that were planted in the ocean roughly a hundred meters away from the shore. It had been a pain in the ass to put all those things into place.

Ogras had been forced to grapple with everything from enormous fish to oversized lizard-things that lived on the western shores of the island. MacKenzie had called them crocodiles, though they apparently weren't as large before this world got integrated.

Finally, they spotted lights that seemed out of place - three golden dots huddled together a few hours travel away from Port Atwood. They might be Ishiate that might have wandered off, but Ogras' guts told him otherwise.

"This thing consumes huge amounts of money, we can't keep it activated forever. Tell me if you see them move or if new ones crop up," Ogras said, and the next second stepped on the teleporter.

The next moment he appeared in the array closest to the signatures, and he immediately melded with the shadows as he rushed toward the shapeshifters with all speed he could muster.

"Two more at number 23, not moving," the voice of the Sky Gnome reached him through the crystal.

Ogras only grunted in confirmation as he kept moving forward. He had hoped there would only be the one, but there were already five signatures on the map. With the help of his late-stage Seed he was like a ghost as he pushed through the forest.

This was also the first real battle since he was freed from the restrictions of the system, and his Dexterity was completely unlocked, now sitting at over 400. His Wisdom and Intelligence weren't as high as he would have liked still, but he hoped that he would be able to bridge those gaps with his three trials before attempting to evolve again.

He finally reached the spot the map indicated, and immediately activated his ocular skill. For a while, he couldn't notice anything out of place, but he suddenly looked at a tree that had a suspicious lack of cosmic energy. He immediately took out his spear, and with one swift move crushed the tree into splinters.

A small hole made itself shown, and Ogras unhesitantly turned into shadows again as he dropped down inside. Three extremely startled humans sat huddled in a room of roughly thirty square meters. The floors and walls were pressed mud, and it was clear that they had dug the room out of the ground itself.

"Hey, what are you-" one of the men said, but he didn't get further before his throat was pierced with a stab from Ogras' spear.

The other two men realized there would be no subterfuge and immediately unleashed waves of golden flames in the cramped room. A ring on Ogras' finger lit up and a shield blocked out all the flames as he stabbed outward with this spear twice more.

A few seconds later the flames had died down, leaving only three somewhat charred corpses. Ogras gathered anything that had survived the fire into his Cosmos

Sack before he opened the town shop menu and bought another small teleportation array.

“3 Down, any updates?”

“23 targets,” a slightly helpless voice echoed back from the other side, and Ogras groaned in exasperation.

“Who are closest to the settlements?”

“Teleporter 33, twenty-five miles to the west,” Calrin quickly responded.

Ogras kept moving from hideout to hideout, and it was as though the god of death had descended upon the island. There was no talk, no negotiation, no prisoners. Every cultist he found was ripped to shreds the moment he found them since he didn't want to risk one of them escaping again like the slippery one he failed to kill last time.

“A target is moving toward the academy,” Calrin suddenly said with some worry through the crystal.

Some worry filled Ogras' heart upon hearing that. That was where Alea and MacKenzie were currently staying. He unhesitatingly bought another array and jumped into it the moment it was stabilized. He immediately rushed toward the house where the two were hiding and found the Poison Mistress sitting outside keeping an eye of the surroundings.

She seemed surprised to see him and immediately ran over toward him as she kept looking around for any hidden threats.

“Are they coming?” Alea asked with some worry as her brows furrowed.

Ogras didn't answer, and instead immediately skewered her heart with his lance. At the same time, dozens of shadowy spears gored her body from every angle. Blood flowed like a fountain, and she slumped over with shocked eyes.

“How..?” she coughed, but the next moment she lifelessly fell over.

The next moment the door opened and both Alea and MacKenzie looked out of the house. The moment they saw Ogras they immediately swallowed a piece of Springroot. Ogras looked down at the copy of his general with a sneer.

“You're years too early to try a trick like that on me,” Ogras muttered in disdain.

He searched the body and found another of those ghastly knives that even were enough to kill that human cockroach of a teammate. Ogras' heart couldn't help tightening upon seeing it since it showed just how close to death he had been.

The last shapeshifter had likely tried to lure him over and quickly kill him with the dagger. If he also managed to kill Alea afterward he would be able to run essentially rampant in the town. Ilvere was the strongest fighter apart from them, but his skill-set was not suited to deal with assassins.

“Good work,” a voice said, and Ogras turned over to see MacKenzie walk over with a water bottle.

“Do you have anything stronger?” he muttered, but in the end accepted the bottle anyway.

“That stuff is not good for you,” Kenzie said with the voice of someone having repeated herself innumerable times.

Alea looked at the two with a slight frown, before snorting and walking away, pointedly ignoring the mauled copy of herself on the ground. Ogras shot her a glance and shook his head with a sigh. She was likely leaving to keep watching that tree up in the mountains. That left himself and MacKenzie alone in the small courtyard, silently watching over the sunset.

“So when are you leaving?” Kenzie suddenly asked.

"We'll do a sweep again tomorrow, and if all is clear I will leave immediately after," Ogras answered. "I don't know how long it will take inside, but I want to be back before your brother returns."

"I've heard those places can be pretty crazy," Kenzie muttered, looking over at him with a steady stare. "Stay safe."

"I will."

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#### **Chapter 232 - Into the Fire**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Thea noticed Zac's hesitation and stopped as well.

"What's going on?" she asked with vigilance while her eyes flashed with shimmering light, indicating she was using her observation skills. "I can't sense anything wrong."

"My danger-sense is acting up," Zac admitted as he took active control of his mental defense skill.

"Danger-sense, a skill?" Thea asked skeptically.

"Not really, just high Luck," Zac admitted.

"The more I learn about your situation the more pissed off I get," Thea muttered under her breath.

"You and Ogras could start a club about it," Zac snorted, though not relaxing his vigilance as he looked around.

"Is it the mountain?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," Zac said, his frown only deepening.

It was an extremely disconcerting feeling to have his danger sense constantly warn him about something that he couldn't pinpoint, and it felt like doom was constantly hanging over him. After a brief discussion, they decided to change the mountain. But the feeling didn't disappear for over two hours, making him almost believe his sense was on the fritz.

But the feeling suddenly intensified by a large degree, and he whirled around without hesitation, his axe ready. Facing them just ten meters away was a small unassuming Zhix warrior releasing no aura at all, to the point that it might as well be a level 1 mortal. The moment Zac saw the insectoid he immediately took out his dagger, but he soon gave up the idea when he saw the ladder position of the insectoid in front of them.

"Inevitability," Zac said with a stoic face, though his heart started beating like a drum.

It truly was the first place holder on the Hunter-ladder and one of the beings that stood at the peak of their world. Their plans and objectives were a mystery, and the fact that he had somehow appeared right in front of them couldn't spell anything but trouble.

"That's me," the Zhix said, a small smile on its face. "I have looked forward to meeting the Super-Brother Man."

"I thought you'd be an Anointed," Zac said, trying to buy some time while he figured out what to do.

"Don't compare us to those poor miscreations. Do you know what the Anointed are? It's forced mutation through Alchemy. They call it the Rite of Anointment, but they only stuff themselves full of natural treasures, hoping the surge of energy won't explode them," the Zhix scoffed.

Zac didn't relax just because the Zhix seemed happy to talk, but rather the opposite. It looked like Inevitability felt everything was in his control, even after knowing who he was. His hand stayed close to his pouch, ready to take out his token at moment's notice.

He finally understood how the cultivators had felt when they were trapped by Zac and Thea. The Zhix in front of him didn't emit any aura, but Zac knew that it was above his own level by a large margin. The insectoid seemed content to speak at the moment, but Zac couldn't figure out his real goal.

He now understood that the sense of danger came from Inevitability stalking them, and it was a proof of its ability that it could follow them for hours without them finding the slightest clue of its presence. He could only pray that it was due to Inevitability possessing some class with stealth-capabilities, rather than it simply being so far above them in power that it could easily hide from their senses.

"They invented it to combat us back in the day, you know?" Inevitability continued. "The unenlightened needed quick boosts in power to combat our superior strength during the Great War. But that path to power has a price, they will never ascend to the E-Grade. Soon they will be irrelevant, left behind as symbols of a misguided struggle."

"So what is your goal? Our new world is getting ravaged from foreign invaders, but I've yet heard of you closing any incursions," Zac probed.

"That battle is not for us, but we are rooting for your victory," the Zhix said with a teasing smile.

"Why?" Zac asked skeptically.

"Void chose you as a fulcrum, but I remain unconvinced, so I searched you out while that bore is busy. Why should I hold myself back if you can't even fulfill your designated fate?" the Zhix muttered.

"A fulcrum?" Zac asked with a frown. It wasn't a great feeling to be part of some scheme of Void's Disciple, the strongest being on the planet.

Unfortunately, the Zhix didn't seem interested in divulging any more intelligence. The next moment a terrifying aura was unleashed from the seemingly unassuming Zhix, and Zac couldn't help but take a step back in shock.

Zac had recently made huge improvements to his combat power with his second Class and new round of titles. That had made him feel almost invincible on earth. He had thought that even if he wasn't an even match against the Dominators he would at least be able to put up a decent fight. Perhaps he would even be able to kill them if needed with a surprising burst of power through **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

However, only now did he truly understand the folly of his inflated ego. The aura that was being emitted was just monstrous, and not something that would come from some random cultivator. Inevitability clearly had his own sets of lucky encounters to power him as well, and with this high level, the result felt almost impossible to overcome.

Of course, the aura was nothing compared to what he sensed from his meeting with Greatest or the imprint of the Great Redeemer. But their auras felt so far beyond his own that making an accurate measure of their strength was impossible.

Inevitability's aura was within his scope of understanding, but it was far beyond what he could unleash by himself. Furthermore, it was powered by an immense killing intent that could only come from killing hundreds of thousands of beings.

The Zhix warrior barely reached Zac's chin, but it felt like Zac was staring at an enormous beast when he was inundated in Inevitability's aura. He quickly released his own to combat the oppressive feeling, getting ready for battle. It was clear that the Dominator had come for a fight after all.

Zac didn't dare to hold anything back, and Thea was clearly of the same opinion. But their goal wasn't to defeat the Zhix.

"Flee," Zac only said through grit teeth as before he disappeared, appearing over a hundred meters away the next moment with an attack ready.

He sent five huge edges empowered by the Dao of Heaviness toward Inevitability, hoping to push him back.

"Not bad," the Zhix said, a smile still adorning his face.

The huge edges ripped through the air with enormous power, destroying trees and boulders as they flew straight toward Inevitability. The Zhix lifted his hand, and two odd chains emerged from his back and almost floated in the air in front of him.

It was truly odd, as one moment Zac thought he saw two silver snakes floating in the air, but the next moment they were chains again. They kept swapping back and forth making it impossible to understand which was their true state. When Zac's attacks closed in the two chains formed a circle, and a huge fractal suddenly appeared in the middle of them, shining with a silver luster.

The fractal edges slammed into the erected defense one by one with enough force to decimate a city block, but it was to no avail as the fractal didn't even budge from the onslaught. The next moment tens of daggers descended from the skies, each glistening with a cold sharpness.

It was the work of Thea, and another attack Zac hadn't seen her use before. He could also sense that the falling daggers were imbued with something similar to his Dao of Sharpness, perhaps the Dao of Penetration.

The knives whistled as they ripped through the air, falling down at Inevitability with the force of small meteors. But the Dominator suddenly disappeared and reappeared outside the attack range of the daggers who rained death unto an empty patch of grass.

The next moment the two silver chains shot out from Inevitability, and they both flew toward Zac and Thea like bloodhounds having gained the scent of their prey. The power contained in the chains was terrifying, and neither wanted to clash with the weird things head-on.

Since the moment Zac launched his attacks he also utilized their movement skills to the maximum, desperately running away from the battle. But the chains were closing in on them, and Zac started to feel intense mental pressure as they approached. It felt like the chains emitted some sort of binding power, and moving was getting harder the closer they got.

He could only take active control of **[Mental Fortress]** to protect himself from whatever effect the fractals were bringing, and he summoned two more fractal edges with **[Chop]** as he ran. When he saw that the stretch ahead was clear he jumped up in the air and launched the two strikes at the incoming chains before he landed again.

The maneuver didn't cost him any speed, but even though he felt the shockwaves from his attacks hitting the pursuing attacks he sensed that they weren't destroyed. However, he did sense that the pressure lessened somewhat, so he kept at it as he fled.

They kept running for thirty minutes, constantly using their movement skills to try to shake off the chains. But it appeared they were able to grow impossibly long and kept with them as they fled. Both Zac and Thea were also forced to keep attacking them as they ran to keep them at bay.

At least it was somewhat effective, and they finally managed to destroy the two pursuing snake-chains just before reaching one of the cracks in the earth. It stretched over a hundred meters across, much too far for them to jump with their current power.

They were just about to run toward the north alongside the crack but suddenly they heard a crack from a twig snapping.

"I am impressed," the familiar voice said from just next to them, making Zac jump away by surprise. "The power was split between two chains, but the fact that F-Graded warriors managed to destroy them is very impressive."

Zac was breathing heavily from his desperate flight, but Inevitability stood just fifty meters away from them as though he had been there from the very beginning. Zac looked back at the large chasms that seemed to reach toward the core of the earth, a bottomless pit.

They had their backs toward the wall, and Zac knew it wasn't the time to hold anything back anymore. There was simply no way for them to escape from Inevitability, his speed was far above their own.

The only reason they were still alive seemed to be that he was only toying with them, but for what reason he couldn't fathom. But that didn't mean that he would let them go, and Zac prepared his last gambit.

The energy in the surroundings started to enter him with torrential force as he activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**] as his forearm was being flooded with Cosmic Energy. Thea was doing the same, and the air around her left arm shimmered with extremely condensed power.

"Your final cards?" the Zhix said as it curiously looked at them with an excited grin.

The next moment an enormous hand once again emerged from the crack in space above him. The hand hadn't grown larger from the upgrade, but it emitted a force condensed enough that it could rival the Dominator's aura. It almost looked like it was tattooed with a dense print of fractals as well, creating clearly demarcated rings on the fingers.

The Zhix frowned when he saw the incoming hand, and tens of chains emerged from behind him, combining into a huge snake that moved to intercept [**Nature's Punishment**]. But the rings on the fingers of the hand suddenly lit up with green luster, and the silver snake was briefly unable to move.

Zac was surprised by the added effect of his attack, but he wouldn't let it go to waste as he used all power he could bring to bear to slam the hand down on Inevitability. The insectoid roared in anger, and the air around it started twisting from the power it emitted.

The hand slammed into the ground with enough force that cracks were starting to form for over a hundred meters, making Zac worried that the whole stretch of land they stood on would fall into the chasm behind them.

But Zac didn't have time to think about that as intense pain consumed him as the enormous wooden hand was ripped in two, and a bloodied Inevitability emerged.

He wasn't unscathed from the attack though, with his right arm limply hanging at an odd angle, and blood was dripping from his mouth from internal injuries.

"Void Piercer," Thea muttered with a low voice, and the next moment it was as though a tube of the void itself stretched toward the Zhix with lightning speed.

Unfortunately, it looked like Tha had trouble controlling the skill, and she faltered almost as soon as she unleashed the attack, making it hit slightly off-mark. The spear wrought out of grey energies hit the dominator in its gut, but there was no shockwave or huge explosion.

But a perfect hole appeared in the body of the Zhix, and the hole also kept going for another twenty meters, cutting straight through a boulder and a couple of trees. It was like she had used a supremely powerful railgun that disintegrated everything in its path, and Zac could only sigh in regret that it hadn't hit a more lethal spot.

Inevitably coughed he held his broken arm, blood streaming down from its wounded side. But Zac was disappointed to see that the Zhix was still in fighting condition, and the wound was closing itself with speed discernible to the naked eye.

Even worse, the lackadaisical manner of the Dominator was gone, replaced with burning fury.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 233 - Falling**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New month, new drive! Want to read the whole arc in one go? Join my !

Zac sighed and looked over at Thea who already held her Token ready in hand. Their gambit had failed, and now it looked like they had thoroughly pissed off their enemy. Leaving seemed to be their only solution.

However, inside Zac's heart there was a staunch unwillingness to crush the token, even if things looked extremely bleak. It was as though he felt that something would change inside him if he fled like this. He was trying to gain enough power to protect Port Atwood and all his family, and the title from the hunt was one of the few available upgrades for him at the moment.

"Shit, it hurts," Inevitably growled as torrential amounts of energy gathered above it. "I wasn't going to kill you, but I'll just have to apologize to that guy. Fulcrums can be changed."

The next moment they were beset by hundreds of chains shooting toward them like homing missiles, each of them carrying enough power to seriously wound them. Zac quickly erected his upgraded [**Nature's Barrier**] and placed them as far from his body as possible to intercept the incoming attacks as he placed himself in front of Thea.

"I'll figure something out, I'll help delay if you want to crush the token," Zac quickly muttered as he faced Inevitably.

But he was shaken when he saw the first chain simply rip straight through the emerald leaf without being impeded overly much. It contained a new force that the chains didn't have before, and it felt extremely powerful.

Zac couldn't be sure, but he had a feeling that it was an upgraded or fused Dao Seed that empowered the chains to this degree. He had only been thinking of the huge

attribute bonuses such a thing would bring, but the battle power it provided was nothing short of horrifying as well.

The closest chain flew straight toward Zac who only had time to lift his arm in defense. A loud crack could be heard and Zac felt a blinding pain as his arm was broken from the tremendous impact.

Zac felt some hopelessness when he saw the innumerable chains following close behind. There was no way he could survive long enough for him to crush the token and last the seconds until he was teleported. He didn't even have any way to help Thea out for long enough for her to escape.

But the next moment he was lifted from his feet, and his eyes widened as he was suddenly falling down the chasm. Thea was right next to him, holding his robe by the neck with a determined expression.

However, Inevitability's attack didn't stop there as the incoming chains followed them down the chasm, descending even faster than they were falling. Zac prayed this gambit would be enough as he took out his Token.

But the next moment an intense mental shock slammed into his mind, and **[Mental Fortress]** wasn't enough to completely stop it. It felt like his soul was getting shredded to pieces, making him spasm and drop the token.

"No reprieve for you," he heard echoing down from above, and Zac looked up to see the sneering face of Inevitability standing up at the ledge.

He did what he could with his defenses, but his desperation grew as he was getting pelted by one attack after another as they kept falling. His vision started to get blurry, but suddenly a blinding light lit up next to him as a similarly wounded Thea shone like a goddess.

But Zac didn't have a chance to see what she did as a fractal chain slammed straight into his head knocking him unconscious.

-----

Zac woke up with a cough, and it took quite a while to orient himself. At first, he thought Darkness had descended once again while he was out, but to his relief he found that wasn't the case as he saw the sun far up in the sky.

He was at the bottom of the chasm in a crater he suspected was of his own making. The area was almost completely shrouded in darkness because even if the Sun shone up in the sky, most of the light didn't reach the bottom of the extremely deep crack he found himself in.

Every part of him hurt, and he even had a couple of broken bones. But the clearest indicator he'd barely survived the fall was that he'd turned into his Draugr form.

He guessed that the fall had essentially killed him, and his Core turned him into an undead once again. The first thing he did after orienting himself, even before taking a pill, was to open up the ladders. He scoured them over and to his relief saw that Thea's name was still there.

He knew she hadn't tried to kill him when she had grabbed him and jumped down the cliff. He knew he was all out of options in that battle. He had already used everything he got but it wasn't enough.

That thing was truly a monster. Zac couldn't even kill it when it went easy on them, but after it imbued its attack with an evolved Dao he was almost helpless against it. Perhaps he would need such a Dao of his own before he could compete with it.

Jumping down was a last-ditch attempt to survive, but he didn't really understand what happened afterward. That final attack had knocked him unconscious, and the last thing he remembered was Thea lighting up like a beacon.

At first, he thought she had used some defensive treasure to survive, but after looking around he couldn't find her anywhere, not even any hint of her having fallen down. The fact that she was still on the ladder meant that she hadn't teleported out though, leaving him even more confused.

Since he couldn't find her he sat down and took out one of the top tier healing pills and a couple of miasma stones to absorb. He didn't move for a full hour, fully focusing on recuperating his body. The fall wasn't the only thing that had hurt him, the fight that preceded it had taken a toll as well.

Meeting one of the true Dominators had been a sobering wake-up call. With his dual classes and plethora of titles he thought that even if he might not be quite as strong, the difference shouldn't be too large.

But reality had proven different. He had a feeling that the only reason that he still was still alive was that the Dominator wasn't trying to kill him in the beginning for some reason. It rather felt that he was being toyed with. He had even tried to take advantage of that fact to mount a sneak attack with the help of Hatchetman's Rage, but even that had failed spectacularly. The power of that monstrous Dominator was just insurmountable for the current him.

That begged the question as to why there hadn't been a single report of their activities thus far. If they wanted to they should have no problem destroying any incursion, reaping the benefits. Since they didn't shy away from Cosmic Energy like their brethren they shouldn't have an aversion to collect titles that could help them get even stronger.

The only clue that he gained from the fight was the mention of a plan, and his being a fulcrum of it somehow. His guess was that they were biding their time for whatever Void's Disciple had planned.

Zac couldn't help but release a tired sigh as he went over his hurt body. Strong enemies just kept popping up. First, it was the mysterious Redeemer, then the Dominators who were stronger than expected and who were also working on some grand plan that appeared to impact the whole world.

In any case, there wasn't much he could do about it where he was currently stuck. Perhaps Ibtep could be of assistance in figuring out the situation when he got back. He wouldn't waste his time with this in the middle of the hunt, and since he was mostly healed after an hour he stood up with a groan.

That thought brought up a new question. Zac got an ominous feeling as he checked his Cosmos Sack. But his fears were true; he had lost his token. The mental attack from Inevitability had made him lose his grip on the token as he fell down, and even after looking around for close to an hour he couldn't find it anywhere.

That meant he had lost his opportunity to escape this hunt early. He would either stay the whole duration or die. A few of his ribs were still cracked, but he didn't want to stay here. However, the question was where the hell he should go. He could either try to climb up the cliff again or keep exploring this hidden rift.

But after a few more minutes he realized he didn't actually have much of an option. The walls were just insanely hard, and he couldn't cut footholds even with the help of **[Verun's Bite]**. And since he didn't possess Thea's skills of finding a purchase from the smallest space he just had no way to get back up to the mountains.

Worse yet he realized he might be in trouble. The reason that the stones were hard was likely that they had been infused with the odd darkness that spanned this fallen sect. There was an unmistakable aura in the very rocks itself all around him.

He was starting to form a hypothesis as he looked around. There were small cracks at various places along the stone, and these cracks had a far higher amount of the sinister aura. Whatever the darkness was it might originate from this very ravine and other ones like it all along the area, and the true source of the darkness seeped out from those cracks during the night.

He still had no idea just what the darkness was. It could be described as a mental poison that made both beasts and people turn insane. The last times he wasn't in any danger, staying hidden far from the specters feeding ground. But what would happen if darkness descended while he stood right at the source?

The prospect was enough to make Zac's hair stand on end, and his urgency to escape the chasm increased many times over. At least it was still mid-day, and he had ample time to get out of here before the night came.

It seemed random which days the darkness descended, but it invariably happened in the deep of the night. That meant Zac had almost 12 hours to get out before he was in any danger of getting caught in the middle of an endless onslaught of endless specters.

So Zac started to walk along the rift in order to find any way to get back up in the end. At first, he planned on randomly choosing his path, but he soon changed his mind and headed north.

The reason was that he felt a small gust of wind coming from that direction, which might mean that there was a passage in that direction that could let him leave this creepy place. Urgency pushed his tired body forward, and he ignored his body's protests as he kept a rapid pace.

However, the ravine felt almost endless as he walked for hours. The gust of wind he felt was clearly just some wayward wind from the ground floor. The only thing of note he'd found during his walk was a couple of corpses.

He was no expert in judging the cause of death, especially when a couple of the corpses were just meat paste, but he believed that not all bodies had died due to the fall. Some were cleanly beheaded or had other wounds, making Zac believe that the bodies had been dumped by their killers.

There was no evidence though that anyone had been alive down in the crevasse, and Zac wasn't surprised. The height of the fall was over a thousand meters, and even he with close to 400 Endurance would have died from the fall if it wasn't for his Core giving him another go at life.

Suddenly it got darker and Zac frowned as he looked up. He was relieved to see that it actually didn't suddenly become night, but rather that the ravine closed up by the ground floor. However, the subterranean level continued on, and Zac's eyes widened when he saw what was up ahead.

There were actually signs of there being human activity in front of him.

Not now in regards to the hunt, but once upon a time. There was a square made with pitch-black cobblestones that spanned roughly two hundred meters across.

Even though Zac initially felt elated that he might find a way out of here, he quickly got a sinking feeling as he looked at the place. He had thought that since there was development down here there might also be a path up, but he started to believe that might not be the case.

The only thing on the square was a huge cracked obelisk that was completely covered in fractals. The obelisk reached over fifty meters in height, and each side was over five meters across. At the foot of the obelisk in the direction of Zac there were two chains attached that radiated an otherworldly suppression and weight.

But the chains were cracked and held nothing at their other end. This was some sort of prison, but the prisoner was nowhere in sight.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 234 - Square Up**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New month, new drive! [Head into 2020 the right way by supporting this Defier](#), and as a reward you will be able to read up to 30 chapters ahead of the RR releases.

Also, please remember to vote on [occasionally](#), it helps a lot of new readers find DotF, which in turn helps me a lot as well!

There was an unmistakable aura of the suffocating darkness permeating the cracked ends of the chains which gave some hints about whatever was once trapped in the middle of the square. Zac could only guess that the inscriptions on the obelisk were meant to keep it suppressed, but that obviously didn't work out in the end.

He couldn't tell whether the prisoner was able to destroy the obelisk, or whether the obelisk cracked for some other reason, which allowed the captive to escape. But then again it didn't really matter. What mattered was how long ago the prisoner escaped.

If it was something that happened thousands of years ago, then it was fine. But if it was something that was set in motion the moment the trial started he might be in grave danger. It was a real possibility that whatever was once held here might be the source of the darkness, and perhaps even the thing that released the harrowing wail during the attacks.

Another possibility was that the thing captured here had gotten thoroughly corrupted by the darkness, which gave it enough power to escape from its shackles. Then it might mean that it had gone crazed the same way as the cultivators who got possessed, and was currently roaming the chasm.

In either case, it was bad news for Zac. Something this powerful wasn't something he could contend with even if he got back to perfect health. He once again internally swore at Inevitability for making him lose his token, putting him in this dire situation.

Still, he didn't want to give in to despair just yet. Even if the source of the darkness was once imprisoned here it didn't make sense for it to stay on after it made its escape. He slowly made his way toward the square, maintaining an extreme vigil all the while.

There was an unmistakable aura of power still radiating from the towering obelisk even if there was a large crack that destroyed a good amount of the fractals. The obelisk might even protect from the Darkness if it Descended once again, making this one of the safer places around.

Before he stepped onto the square he carefully looked down at the stones to see if there was anything out of place. Perhaps there were other arrays active at a place like this that might spell trouble for him in the end. But when he looked down he saw that there were extremely intricate inscriptions on all the small cobblestones. However, each and every stone had a crack running over it, ruining the fractals that covered them.

Zac was actually slightly relieved to see that the fractals were ruined since it lessened the risk of him getting trapped inside whatever this square originally did. But before he stepped on to the square he took one last hesitant look back.

If he was to turn back, then this was the time. It was getting late by now, but if he pushed himself he might make it back to the spot where he first fell down into the chasm before darkness could descend. But the problem was that he didn't have any idea what to do after that.

The chasms ran across the whole mountain range, and he'd seen many that passed over ten mountains. There was no guarantee that there would be any exit waiting for him if he went the other way, but only more dark passageways.

So it was with grim determination he placed his right foot upon the square, leaving the natural stone floor of the chasm. When he stepped on the cobblestone he immediately felt a suffocating pressure, almost bringing him down to his knees.

The pressure didn't only bear down on his body, but also his very being. It was a mental suppression as well, making his mind feel muddled and his thoughts scattered. However, Zac growled and kept going, activating his Dao of Heaviness to counteract the suppression around him somewhat.

But after just two more steps he realized that the pressure had multiplied, and a with few more meters and he would reach the limits of what he could bear. It seemed that the suppression got stronger the closer to the center of the square he was, and even if he activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**] he wouldn't even get close to the obelisk before succumbing to the pressure.

He quickly backed away right to the edge of the square once again, the broken ribs screaming in protest from being subjected to this added pressure. It felt like someone was digging around his side with a hot poker, and if Zac wasn't already deathly pale in his undead form he would have definitely paled from the pain.

The weight came from an array that was essentially broken, with both the cobblestones and the obelisk ruined beyond repair. Zac's attributes were already higher than most people at early E-Grade, but he only managed to take a few steps in this prison.

Just how strong was the thing that once was trapped here in these chains, to not only survive but even break out?

It was as though the Obelisk was the source of a local gravity zone, and the closer he was the worse it would get. This relative heaviness gave Zac an idea for his Dao Seed, but now wasn't the time to ponder on it any further. He needed to leave the square and find safety before night fell.

At least it wasn't all bad news. After having walked a few steps along the edge of the square something that was once hidden behind the obelisk came into view. It was a doorway, and he was hoping that it would take him up toward the ground.

Since something had been trapped down here Zac figured there would be guards, and they needed a way to access this place from the surface. The door might give him access to the path that would let him leave.

Since he couldn't simply cross the square he needed to tread along the edges which barely allowed him to pass through. Still, after only fifty meters sweat was streaming down his face from the strain, and every wound on his body had reopened.

But he couldn't rush out of the array either since every step was a struggle. In the end, he was submerged in the intense pressure for half an hour before he pushed open the doors on the opposite side of the square with great relief.

The insides were actually lit up by crystals in the wall, showing that the inscriptions that kept this place running were still operational. There was no way that the crystals would last for thousands of years by themselves, meaning there was a gathering array supplying the place with energy.

Other than that it was completely empty, just a long hallway that seemed to stretch into eternity. Zac hesitated a bit, but eventually he decided to hold off on heading down the hallway. Now that he had found a secluded spot that seemed pretty safe he sat down and closed his eyes, though still gripping his axe just in case.

The main reason he dared to relax like this was that the moment he entered this hidden pathway the ominous aura from the darkness was completely gone. It was unlikely that any of the ghastly specters had ever walked these halls.

He couldn't be completely sure, but he felt that he would be safe in here even if darkness descended once again. But then again he didn't have a lot of options apart from staying here during the night. With the intense aura that the cracks out in in the canyon emitted he didn't dare stay there during the night.

But the reason he stopped before exploring any further was that he had found a great clue from the suppressive formations outside to upgrade his Dao, and he didn't want to waste any time in going over it. It actually felt extremely clear in his mind, perhaps since he had been steeped in the suppression.

He was imagining heaviness as it worked with a gravity source, such as a sun or a black hole. The heaviness came from a source, and the closer one came the more the pressure increased. This wasn't really something that was possible to encounter normally on earth, but the arrays outside had created that very phenomenon outside.

He imagined himself a black hole, and the closer one came the heavier the pressure of his aura would be, to the point of crushing everything that got too close. Upgrading his Dao came with surprising ease, bringing his Dao of Heaviness to High grade, just like his Dao of Trees. It was a great relief because this was something that had troubled him since he got here.

He'd been caught in four very intense fights and many minor scuffles since he had arrived here. The battles against Salvation and Inevitability were particularly taxing. Yet he hadn't gained barely any insight into his Dao seeds since he had arrived. It was as though this place somehow blocked the Dao from him, preventing him from progressing further. But the immense arrays on the square had finally allowed him to push through.

He was also happy to see that this particular upgrade only gave him strength.

Heaviness (High): Strength +45, Endurance +10, Wisdom +5

He was already planning on putting points into Strength to boost his fighting prowess and this was a great step in the right direction. He only wished there were some enemies down here as well so that he could finish grinding his two Class Quests as well. He was pretty sure that at least one of them would give him a new vision, adding to his steadily growing Dao Repertoire.

The whole process had taken him roughly two hours, and since he was finally done with everything he got to his feet with a grunt. Staying still for this long also

helped his body recuperate from both the wounds and passing the square, and he felt a lot better by now.

Zac started to head down the endless hallway, already wishing that Thea was there to use her scouting abilities to find any hidden dangers. Since he was back on his own he could only rely on his default method, brute force.

He held **[Verun's Bite]** in a firm grip as he kept a brisk pace, eyeing the vicinity for anything that might be out of place. But the hallway was created with expert craftsmanship with clean surfaces floor to ceiling, and the illuminating crystals were placed with exactly measured distances from each other.

But after pushing forward for thirty minutes he knew something was amiss. There was no reason to build such an insanely long hallway, as it would probably be both easier and cheaper to place down two low-grade teleportation arrays for transportation.

He took out a high-quality dagger he'd looted the past days and carved a '1' under the next illuminating crystal he encountered. From there on he kept increasing the count by one as he carved a number under each and every stone he passed.

Suddenly when he was about to carve the 82<sup>nd</sup> marker he saw that the spot was already occupied by the very same '1' that he first carved. Zac sighed and sat down.

It was as he thought, he was inside some sort of array that tricked his mind somehow. It either made him walk in circles without noticing, or it somehow connected two spaces so that when he walked past the 81<sup>st</sup> mark he arrived back at the start.

However, he had no idea where the start and the end were. He just marked down number 1 when he started counting, but it might just as well be the middle of the hallway. But at least he knew the length of the hallway by now, and it wasn't actually that long, just a couple hundred meters.

He walked the full length three times over, trying to discern any way to get out by any means possible. He used **[Inquisitive Eyes]** as well, but nothing happened. Next, he tried to sense any disturbances in the cosmic energy in the air, but it gave no clue either.

Finally, he sat down and took out the formation crystal that was the first thing he found inside this hunt. He had been extremely busy over the past two weeks hunting and fighting, but he finally had time to go over it.

He browsed through the contents page by page, arduously going over each and every detail. A vast majority of the information was above his understanding at the moment, but he was quickly getting a deeper understanding of formations.

Thus far he had only used arrays provided by the system, and they even came with guidance systems that helped him set it up. But this crystal was meant to teach him about the foundations and the basic workings of the knowledge of formations.

Zac didn't even understand the difference between an array and a formation in the beginning, but he soon realized the difference. Arrays were just man-made formations, creating various types of effects with array flags or array disks. All the arrays he had encountered so far were these types of formations.

But formations didn't necessarily need to be created by placing down an array. They could naturally form in nature, and the most powerful formations in the multiverse had naturally formed over billions of years, almost like a solar system.

There was one passage in the beginning that Zac found particularly interesting, and it was imprinted by a grand elder of the Eastern Trigam Sect, someone who was a pure Array Master.

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## Chapter 235 - Dao of Formations

### A note from TheFirstDefier

New month, new drive! [Head into 2020 the right way by supporting this Defier](#), and as a reward you will be able to read up to 30 chapters ahead of the RR releases.

*It is folly to believe the study of formations to be differentiated from other pursuits such as Alchemy or even fighting. All are children to the same parent, the boundless Dao.*

Zac was quickly getting engrossed as he kept reading the introduction by the array master, almost even forgetting his current predicament of being stuck inside what he assumed was an entrapment array.

*The Alchemist gives form to Dao through concoctions of pills, and the warrior gives form to Dao through unleashing devastating attacks. Even the farmer gives form to Dao through plowing the fields. But none is as multifaceted as the study of formations. It is not bound through medium or execution, but is boundless just like the Dao itself.*

*Through learning the fundamentals of constructing arrays, any Dao can be given shape. Furthermore, even if the Dao concepts behind a formation eludes your grasp one can still bring out 80% of its power through sheer knowledge of proper placements.*

*To understand the role of array flags one only needs to look inside themselves. The body consists of crossroads, the major ones being the Spirit Gate and the Cosmic Core. But these two alone are not enough to sustain a warrior.*

*Minor nodes can be found at every intersection inside the body as anyone who has reached E-Grade knows. These can both store and direct power so that magnificent effects can be brought to bear.*

*Placing an array flag is akin to breaking open one of the nodes, letting the energies of heavens and earth flow through it. Placement dictates the flow of power, the fractals dictate the nature of power. When a complete system has been created through the flags, a pathway for cultivation is born.*

There were a few parts he didn't understand but he got the general gist of it. An array was essentially a closed system of energy in circulation, just like the pathways inside his body. That explained why the easiest way to destroy an array in its entirety was to destroy one of the array flags since that would interrupt or at least weaken the energy circulation.

Of course, more robust arrays would survive one or a few array flags getting destroyed, but they would always lose some of their effectiveness. While he believed the Array Master was a bit partial in his introduction, Zac couldn't help but keep reading and deepen his knowledge.

However, soon something happened that made him lose his patience. After roughly three hours trying to gain insight into arrays he was passed on the gatherer ladder, pushing him down to the second spot. It was a clear reminder that this was no time to just sit around and read. Others weren't so relaxed and kept hunting for opportunities.

Since he couldn't find any path out he would simply have to make his own path. The reason the walls outside were so sturdy was that they were infused with the

mysterious energy from the darkness, but the same couldn't be said for the tunnels around him.

Zac took out his axe and with a mighty swing slammed it straight into the wall next to him. Unfortunately, his plan didn't work out, and a shimmering light appeared over the wall when he hit it, protecting the wall completely. Not even the slightest scar could be seen after his strike.

Zac frowned in displeasure, and once again hefted his axe, this time imbuing it with the improved Dao of Heaviness. He slammed it into the wall with all force he could muster. But the result was the same, and the shimmering shield once again nullified the force in his strike.

It was only with some helplessness he could sit down again and continue reading the crystal. Zac didn't think that swapping over to his Hatchetman class would have any effect on the results, as even with his newly improved Dao he couldn't make a small crack on the wall.

The powers that were protecting these walls were far beyond what he could destroy. Perhaps he'd manage to do something with [Nature's Punishment], but Zac would rather just sit and wait out the time of the hunt than do something that risky.

He was under a kilometer of rock, and there was just no way to know what would happen if he unleashed everything he got. The most likely scenario was him getting buried alive with no token to help him escape if he let the huge wooden hand slam into the wall.

The hours passed and suddenly Zac got the familiar prompt that darkness was once again descending. But even after twenty minutes nothing happened, proving that the ghastly specters truly didn't come to this secluded passage. Since he didn't have to defend himself against an onslaught of ghosts he kept scouring the crystal for anything that could help him get out of here.

While it was true that he was pretty safe while ensconced in the middle of the mountain he wasn't happy with it. He had already lost his first spot on the Gatherer Ladder, and his placements would keep dropping the following weeks if he didn't get out.

Not even half the duration of the hunt had passed, and the others would keep accumulating points while he was stuck here. If he didn't get out and start grinding again he might actually leave the hunt without rewards from either ladder.

So Zac put all his efforts into devising an escape, putting the matter of the ladders out of his mind as to not get distracted. The hours turned to days while Zac tried to learn more about array breaking until Zac suddenly got a prompt.

**[Teleporting to Arena in 1 minute. Tokens Disabled]**

Zac wasn't surprised since he hadn't done anything for three days, and he quickly put on a hood to hide the fact that he was undead as he readied his axe.

He wasn't worried about meeting anyone dangerous in this bout since only those who had shied away from battle would get sent here. In fact, Zac was a bit surprised that there were people who remained that avoided battle for three full days.

He was more disgusted about being forced to kill someone far weaker than him just because the System deemed him a coward. But he knew there wasn't any other option for him. Zac had been shocked to find out what happened when neither party chose to fight since it was all too familiar to him.

He and Thea had caught someone like that, and he confessed what had occurred. Thea didn't believe the man, but Zac was much more prone to believe him. If neither

party had won within 10 minutes The System would perform a draw just like it did when Zac first got integrated. The winner would survive and the loser would cease to exist.

Even though his luck was through the roof he wouldn't take his chances with a gamble on his life. He had people to protect, and if he was forced to kill someone to survive he would do it, even if it wasn't fair.

The next moment he found himself standing on a stage that floated in space. There was no sign of the mountains or valleys from the hunt, dashing his idea of getting back to the surface through leaving the arena.

He wasn't alone on the stage, as another man had been teleported here the same moment he did. Zac frowned when he saw his opponent. To get sent here one would have to have avoided battles for three days, but the man in front of him looked like he had just barely survived a rough bout.

He was covered in bandages that had turned red with dried blood, and some wounds seemed to have reopened recently. He looked like he had one foot in the grave, and gave off a wheezing cough the moment he appeared. Zac couldn't believe this man chose to stay inside the hunt with these kinds of wounds rather than just crushing his token.

"Forgot the time," the man said with a weak voice after looking over at Zac with a sardonic smile. He clearly understood what was going through Zac's mind. "I can't believe a monster like you got sent here as well."

Zac silently looked at the man as he stood up with some effort.

"Can I make a last request from you?"

"What is it?" Zac said after some hesitation.

He wasn't worried that there was some hidden agenda from the man. He'd already used [**Inquisitive Eye**], and together with the somewhat low ladder placements he already knew that there was no way this man could muster up a fight against him even if he was in perfect condition.

"I don't want my body to be left in space or those god-forsaken mountains to be possessed by those ghosts again. Please bury me after you return to your homeland," he said.

"... Fine," Zac said.

The man gave a weak smile, and the next moment he slit his own throat, bleeding out in seconds.

Zac silently looked at the body of the man in front of him until he silently walked over and put the body into his Cosmos Sack. This brief meeting was a stark reminder that this hunt wasn't meant to help people apart from a few select individuals. The System wanted to create powerhouses, but for that it needed fodder.

It lured thousands of the strong to duke it out by dangling some treasures and titles in front of them, all in the hopes of creating a few powerhouses. If the others all died to achieve that goal it was acceptable to the System.

The next moment he found himself back in the tunnel, dashing the last hope he had of the System lending him a helping hand by teleporting him back to the surface. He ate one of his fasting pills before once again sitting down to scour the crystal for any help.

The days passed but Zac was making steady headway, and he started to believe that he would actually be able to get out soon. It all came down to the power of the array. It was no way for him to learn enough about arrays so that he could get out by technique, but he believed he would learn enough about arrays to spot weaker spots to attack with brute force.

Those kinds of weak spots were usually quite hard to spot, but this was a passive array that didn't have an owner. If an array master was in control of it he could keep moving the weak spots to impede escape, and there would be no way for Zac to slowly be able to analyze it from within without getting attacked.

But who knew how long this place was abandoned, leaving this array to run passively. Besides, Zac suspected that the System had modified the power of all the arrays in this hunt. He believed that this sect was once At least a High E-Grade or low E-Grade sect, and there was no way that he should be able to break the protective arrays of top tier E-Grade Array masters with brute force.

But Zac was once again summoned to the arena before he could make any final breakthrough in his research on the arrays. The second person he met wasn't quite as in peace with his fate as the first one. It was someone who was placed in the top 300 on the hunter ladder, so no weakling by any means.

But it was also clear that he wasn't any good person. He had adorned a cruel smile until he saw Zac's far higher rankings. After some questioning and arm-twisting, Zac realized that the man had avoided battle just to kill and rob a weakling in the arena. He had hoped that the people who avoided battles would spend their time finding valuable loot instead.

The man was summarily executed by Zac, who only needed to imbue a strike with his Dao of Heaviness to crush any resistance. At first, he thought about grinding his class quest with the help of this man, but in the end he decided against it.

The reason was that he felt that he was getting closer to finding a solution to his situation. The more he read about the formations the better he could discern, and to a certain extent understand, the minute fluctuations in Cosmic Energy that permeated the tunnel.

At first, he hadn't noticed anything amiss in the air around him, as Cosmic Energy was always swirling around, almost like a wind that you could sense with your sixth sense. Its movements were chaotic and unpredictable, and Zac hadn't felt anything out of the ordinary the first times he had walked through the corridor.

But now he felt that there was a method to the madness, but it was only one day later that he felt ready to try out his theories. He had already found out what type of array this was. It was a common type of Entrapment Array that was mentioned in the crystal.

The normal way to pass this type of hurdle was to know a specific set of steps. Walking through the corridor correctly would result in the array staying inactive, but stepping out of the predetermined path would spring the trap.

Essentially it was like a password, and Zac had no way to figure out the correct one. However, he had started to gain a slight understanding of the pathways of the entrapment array, and he was planning something else. He spent the next hours to slowly observe the whole pathway until he finally found what he was looking for.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 236 - Anzonil**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> marks that he carved there was a convergence of energy flows that could be somewhat discerned if you watched it for about 20 minutes. That meant there hopefully was a weak spot in the array there, and Zac's best bet in getting out.

Swapping over to his human form would increase his attack power, but Zac still chose to try it out in his undead form first. He wanted to grind his Undead class a bit and it was far harder to transform into a Draugr than it was to turn back into a human.

Zac took a few steady breaths before he infused his arm with as much miasmic energy it could bear, and with a roar slammed his Dao-infused axe right into the floor right at the intersection of energies he had spotted.

Suddenly it almost felt like he was drunk as he was seeing double. Two realities were superimposed on each other, and the endless hallway he'd been stuck in for a week was just one of them. The other one stopped just ten meters away from him with an intricately carved door.

Zac didn't hesitate and pushed more miasma into his legs as he leaped toward the gate before the entrapment array could stabilize again. He slammed into the gate with enough force to knock the breath out of him, but he wasn't angry in the slightest.

He had finally escaped his entrapment. Zac looked back toward the other end of the hallway, and he spotted the door leading out to the square with the obelisk a few hundred meters away. But just a second later the door disappeared, being replaced once more with the endless hallway.

His swing hadn't been enough to destroy the array, but it had been enough cause some chaos at the endpoint, allowing him to exit it. Zac was already itching with impatience from a week of inactivity, and he couldn't help opening the ladder in to check the status, and he couldn't help being shocked by what he saw.

He had been kicked down all the way to the 11<sup>th</sup> spot on the Gatherer ladder, which was somewhat of a surprise to him. While it was true he'd lost a whole week down in this tunnel, he still only really had Emperor Nenotheop to compete with earlier. That ten people had managed to pass the huge amount of wealth he'd accumulated was quite shocking.

A few of the names weren't surprising, such as Starlight, Beruv Ylvas and another of the Medhin powerhouses. But he was somewhat happy to see that Thea had kept going as well, being at the 6<sup>th</sup> spot. Even more surprising was the appearance of Thomas Fisher in the 8<sup>th</sup> position.

Zac had only kept his eye on the top positions of the ladder, and he was sure that he hadn't seen Thomas in the top 100 of either list before. For him to suddenly spring up to the 8<sup>th</sup> position could only be explained with him getting the help of the whole organization.

It also proved that Thomas was more than just one of the many leaders of the New World Government. Between the fact that he was chosen to experiment with holding on to massive amounts of wealth, he was also the one they chose to hold onto the wealth of the hunt.

Zac had a generally positive opinion of Thomas, though it was marred by the various insidious things he had found out about the government. It was also somewhat a relief that the man was still human since the shapeshifters shouldn't be able to get here.

But the truly shocking change was on the Hunter ladder, with him being relegated down to the 443<sup>rd</sup> position. Before he got fell down into the chasm he was at the 8<sup>th</sup> position, with the Emperor, the Dominators and a few more above him.

That loss in positions was huge, and it made Zac realize that something must have changed on the surface. He suspected that there must have been something like beast hordes completely flooding the mountains as a result of the System making the area of the hunt smaller over time.

There was no way to gain that many points by only hunting cultivators since there were simply not enough of them to go around. It would also explain why he only lost 10 spots in one ladder, but over four hundred in the other. The huge loss in positions only served to make him even more impatient, and it was without hesitation he pushed open the door.

This was already the 20<sup>th</sup> day of the hunt, and Zac only had ten days to catch up to those above. However, he did take out the thick shield he got from Thea's bodyguard before stepping inside. He didn't have access to the swirling leaves of **[Nature's Barrier]**, so he would have to make do with a normal tool for protection.

The room he entered was massive, and it almost felt like he entered a grand cathedral carved into the mountain. The roof was over fifty meters above him and held up by massive pillars covered in both reliefs and fractals. Even the walls and the ceiling was the same, both being covered with marvelous pieces of art

It the grandeur felt a bit reminiscent of the Towers of Myriad Dao back on his island, but there was more substance to this place. Zac couldn't help being awed as he slowly walked inside, his eyes drifting to the beautiful engravings.

Zac immediately started formulating ideas of how to somehow swipe this whole place clean. Everything from the small statues placed in various alcoves to the huge pillars supporting the vaulted ceiling felt like a treasure, and Zac didn't want to leave it behind.

But he suddenly stopped in his tracks when his eyes moved to a podium on the other end of the room because he finally realized that he wasn't alone. There was a humanoid sitting in a meditating position on the podium as four braziers lazily burned around him.

The looked mostly human, though he had a third eye in his forehead forming a vertical slit. He had a long white beard, and it was clear that he was elderly from his appearance. Worse yet, he had already spotted Zac and was looking at him with steady eyes.

"Welcome young... Draugr? Huh? An undead?" the man slowly said with a powerful voice that felt full of wisdom.

Zac sensed no malice from the old man, and it wasn't like he had many other places to go, so he walked closer to the old man. As Zac got closer he realized that there was not a single ripple of power coming from him, making him wonder just who he was and how he got here.

It was even odder that there was simply no vitality around the old man. When he was in his undead form he could even see the life in a stalk of grass, but the man in front of him might as well not exist going by the metric of lifeforce.

There were two possibilities as Zac saw it. The old man might be a spectral being such as the things in the darkness since they shouldn't possess any vitality either. The other possibility was that the old man was just an illusion or a projection without any power.

"Hello, I am Zac. Are you a part of the hunt as well?" Zac hesitantly asked after he stopped ten meters away from the platform on which the old man sat.

He wouldn't get any closer than that though since there was no telling what sorts of protection was placed around the podium. He couldn't sense anything odd about it, but then again he had only gained the slightest of insight into discerning oddities in the energy flow.

"What hunt?" the man asked curiously.

Zac wasn't surprised by the answer, and him asking that was only a test. He had already seen that the man in front of him didn't possess a ladder position, meaning he wasn't part of the hunt. The fact that the old man didn't pretend to be one of the cultivators from earth was hopefully a good sign.

He hesitated for a bit before he explained the circumstances of the hunt, and of the fact that the people participating weren't from this world. The old man looked saddened by the news, and after Zac finished his explanation gave a deep sigh.

"Such is fate. Over fifty thousand years of struggle, only to be undone by one mistake. To think that we became a trial ground for young aspiring cultivators. At least our legacy will live on that way I suppose," the man said looking up at the ceiling.

"We? Are you part of the Eastern Trigram Sect?" Zac asked.

"I am Anzonil. I, or rather my original body, was once the supreme elder of the Eastern Trigram Sect. Of course, I am long dead along with my fellow sect members," the old man said with a slight shake of his head.

Zac's brows rose at that explanation.

"Um, sorry, how are you still here then? I know you are not undead," Zac couldn't help ask.

"I couldn't help being a bit selfish in the end. I cut off part of my soul and imbued it into the arrays of these hidden chambers. I did not want my eight thousand years of cultivation amount to nothing, so I left my imprint and my heritage here," Anzonil said as he looked down at Zac. "But who would have guessed that the one who came was an undead warrior rather than an Array Master. The Boundless Heavens truly have a sense of humor. I am not sure if what I've left behind would be of much use to you."

If Zac had a heartbeat in his undead form it would have sped up at the mention of a heritage. It indicated that he'd somehow found himself at the location of the inheritance of the supreme elder of the Eastern Trigram Sect. Whatever treasures were hidden here should be among the greatest of the whole Eastern Trigram Sect.

Supreme elders were usually the main powerhouses of a Sect. Zac initially thought that the Sect Leader was the strongest guy around, but that apparently wasn't the case. Being a Sect Leader was a highly administrative position, leaving little time for personal cultivation.

But the grand and supreme elders were the hidden forces of a sect, and they were generally in perpetual seclusion or traveling in disguise, working on breaking through their limits. They would only come out when the sect was facing extreme danger that the normal elders couldn't handle, and they were the main deterrence against attacks.

Most of the multiverse wasn't like earth. There were no ladders that showed who was alive and who died. A particularly strong elder might even be able to protect a sect thousands of years after their passing, since the outside world couldn't be sure whether they were dead or if they had made a breakthrough, becoming even more monstrous.

There was no way that such a person didn't have a few supreme treasures stowed away. But Zac frowned after realizing he might not get his hands on those treasures since he wasn't an Array Master. But Anzonil snorted when he saw the downcast face of Zac.

“Who would have thought that a lofty Draugr would be so hungry for this old man’s small trinkets,” he said with a smile. “Not to worry, there is a path to my treasure even for those who are not fated to walk the same path as me.”

The next moment two doorways rose from the ground some distance away from them, and both teemed with power. The next moment the right of the two doorways shuddered and a shimmering screen appeared in it.

“Two pathways to my inheritance,” Anzonil said after throwing a glance at the archways. “The left is a trial of Arrays. The trial taker must break through 10 increasingly difficult arrays to reach my treasures, and that is the path that is not fated with you.”

Zac frowned at that explanation, but he slowly nodded.

“Don’t worry, that is best for you as well. Your method of getting out of the entrapment array outside was admirable, but there is no way you’d pass further than the second array with that kind of brute force. You’d be stuck forever inside,” the old man said.

“What about the second path?” Zac probed.

“The second path is a path of carnage. To reach my treasure you need to fight your way through a sea of monsters. This path is far more dangerous, but if you want my treasures without being proficient in arrays you’ll have to take some risks,” Anzonil explained.

Zac’s eyes lit up since this was exactly what he was looking for; treasures and things to kill. But he still hesitated whether he should take on the trial rather than asking to be sent outside. If the enemies were the specters he would be in trouble since he wasn’t able to kill them. And they were far beneath the mountains now, who knew how many of them were prowling these depths.

There was a limit of how long he could resist their onslaught if it was the same as during the first time darkness descended. But Zac didn’t have the opportunity to voice his concerns as an unseen force suddenly lifted him into the air and threw him into the shimmering portal.

“Good luck young Draugr, prevail in the depths for this old man. Show me why they call yours the royal bloodline,” the elderly voice reached Zac’s ears before his vision turned black.

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#### **Chapter 237 - Mystic Garden**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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“Remember, this array will only keep the entrance stable temporarily. You need to get out of there within a week, or you’ll be stuck until Lord Atwood can get you out,” Alea said as she looked down at the array that kept the spatial tears in check.

“I know,” Ogras muttered. “Your boyfriend better have collected a war hoard’s worth of loot. I’m becoming destitute over here.”

Alea only glared angrily at Ogras in response, making him snicker in glee.

“Well, I’m off,” he said as he stepped into the transportation array leading into the Mystic Realm.

Ogras’ sight was blocked by darkness for a minute until he suddenly was in a shrouded area. His feet barely had time to land on the ground before he melded into the darkness, disappearing from sight.

After he hid himself he took a quick look around, trying to discern what type of realm he had entered. There were many types of Mystic Realms, but they were generally split into two categories; Wild and Cultivated Realms.

Wild realms were pocket dimensions untouched by man. Sometimes they were just large deserts devoid of anything of value, but other times they were like primordial forests teeming with life. If it was the latter there was a high possibility of finding natural treasures. Of course, where there were treasures there were often beasts as well.

Cultivated Realms were pockets of space that had either been cut off from the main dimension or turned into residences by powerful warriors. These were generally extra sought after since ruins of high-grade civilizations could contain tremendous amounts of treasure without the high risk of the Wild Realms.

But unfortunately, he saw that he found himself in a cavern rather than some ancient ruins, and when he discreetly exited to the mouth he only saw a forest in the distance. However, Ogras didn’t exit the cavern since there were a few things odd with the view.

The first odd thing was the silver lines up in the sky. The sky was like a mix of his own homeworld’s red and Earth’s blue, having a deep purple color. But where there should have been clouds or stars there were instead long crisscrossing silver lines stretching all along the horizon.

Ogras couldn’t make heads or tails of the things, but judging by how it looked the lines must be enormous, spanning tens of kilometers. He had also never heard of anything like that forming naturally, which indicated this place might actually be a cultivated land even though its lack of structures.

The second odd things about the outside were the trees. They were large and had an abundance of branches, each being veritably filled with leaves. Ogras could barely see the trunk due to the thick growth on them.

But something was wrong about the trees. He could barely see any movement, and his senses just told him something was off. At first, he thought they were illusions, but he soon realized that wasn’t it. The reason the trees felt odd was that they were *huge*. He couldn’t be sure from this distance but he was sure that they were all at least hundreds of meters tall, perhaps even larger.

His heartbeat sped up in anticipation when he saw the titanic trees. The silver streaks in the sky were troubling, but the trees gave him high hopes. The atmosphere was teeming with Cosmic Energy, and vegetation seldom grew so big without Nexus Veins in the ground beneath. Both were indicators of there being a lot of natural treasures around.

However, when there was this much energy there was also seldom just flora. Judging by the intensity of the energy it was a real possibility of there being top tier E-Grade beasts around, perhaps even a D-grade alpha at the top.

Greed was battling with fear in his heart as he hid in the shadows looking for anything that might pose a threat to him. Ogras knew that he had led a pretty cushy existence for most of his life. All his cultivation resources had been given to him or bought at auction, and he hadn’t ever really risked his life apart from the all-out battle with that cultist that cost him his hand.

Exploring a Mystic Realm was to risk everything, and it wasn't something he was used to. But soon he grit his teeth and moved forward, quickly descending the small hill his cave was hidden inside. He already knew that he needed to earn some achievements if he ever wanted to push through his bottleneck.

After he'd descended the mountain he found himself in a vast field, though it might as well be called a forest. The blades of grass reached over three meters into the air, almost completely obscuring his vision. Ogras' spear was already in his hand as he walked toward the forest, his eyes darting every which way to avoid an ambush.

It was as times like these he wished that he had the monstrous luck that Zac must possess. His 37 Luck wasn't bad, but it clearly wasn't enough to get those warnings signals that Zac seemed to get during battles. He was forced to rely on his senses and his mind instead.

He therefore immediately melded into shadows the second he heard a slight rustle from his left, and the next moment a black shape flew straight past him with enough speed to be a blur. The attacker landed ten meters away, and Ogras saw it was a completely unknown being.

It had six long and thin legs that were roughly a meter long. Each had three joints and like the rest of the thing they were covered in short brown fur. The body was extremely elongated, and it was almost four meters long, with its torso being extremely thin. It was almost like a snake had gotten insect legs.

Its head was extremely odd as well, with just a large hole in its face with rows and rows of small fangs. There were also six small black beads that Ogras assumed were the eyes. The thing was built for speed, but the rest was so odd that he couldn't place the thing at all, so Ogras quickly used [Omniscient Eye] on it.

**Ocodon Worm.**

**Level: 73**

**Most used skill: Wind walk**

**Highest Attribute: Dexterity**

Ogras was shocked that the thing was neither some mammal or even a legged snake. Instead, it was some sort of worm. For a second Ogras wondered if The Ruthless Heavens had gotten drunk and misnamed the thing in front of him. But then again, the isolated nature of Mystic Realms sometimes made beasts evolve in unconventional directions over the eons.

Knowing the thing was only level 73 he didn't hesitate anymore, and multiple shadow spears struck out at it. It clearly wasn't prepared to be attacked by its own shadow, but its speed was spectacular. It displaced itself in an instant, causing air to swirl around its legs.

But if there was one thing that Ogras excelled at it was his speed, and soon the running worm was lying dead on the ground filled with puncture wounds. Ogras quickly dissected it to look for any poison sacks or other hidden threats or valuables, but there seemed to be no such things. He quickly threw the odd corpse in his Cosmos Sack and hurried toward the forest.

As he traveled through the field of overgrown grass he also kept his eyes peeled for any hidden herbs, but as he ran he had to admit that the flora was unusually coherent. There was only a single type of plant; the high swaying grass. There were no flowers, no roots, no vegetables, not even any weeds.

He encountered a few more of the worms as well, but since he understood them better he had no problems in making short work of them. He was also curious to note that they still seemed to live underground even though they had grown legs. One of

them managed came straight out of the ground to attack him, it's legs folded around its thin body.

Yet there were no other beasts Ogras encountered as he finally entered the forest. The trees were truly humongous, as he walked below their crowns he knew they were around three hundred meters tall. Their trunks were also extremely thick, and Ogras judged they had a diameter of twenty meters or so.

Ogras had never seen trees like these before. Usually, trees of this size only had leaves and branches far up in the sky, but these ones had branches starting just a few meters up in the air. Ogras could even easily jump up to the branches if he wanted, though he was more interested in walking the forest floor in search of valuable herbs.

But he was soon disappointed because there was simply no undergrowth in this forest. What was even odder was that there seemed to be a precise distance between the trees, making them form long even lines. It truly looked like this forest had been planted by someone, but why would someone want to grow these things?

Finally, Ogras climbed all the way to the top of one of the trees in search of answers. As he climbed he looked for anything of note that would make these humongous trees worth planting. But no fruits or flowers were growing on the tree, and nothing was living in the trees that might be worth money either.

He did, however, see something that he hadn't noticed when he stood in the cavern earlier. There was a wall. A huge silver wall that stood beyond the forest, stretching almost as far as his eyes could see.

As he gazed around him Ogras started to understand that he might actually be in an enclosed space rather than a wild forest. The vantage of the tree allowed him to get a better understanding of the area than what he could see earlier from his starting point.

He was in a circular space that was mostly occupied by the evenly planted forests, with a large field in the middle filled with grass. The only oddity was the dirt hill roughly in the middle of the field, and Ogras guessed it was caused by the spatial distortions of the weakened dimensional membrane.

Perhaps the whole field had been filled with trees once upon a time, but spatial tears had destroyed everything and caused the forest in the middle to be replaced by the grassy plains instead. Ogras also guessed that the silver wall stretched all around the forest, but unfortunately he couldn't see what lay beyond since the walls and the trees were roughly the same height.

He could also finally see that the odd silver lines in the sky were connected to the wall and formed somewhat of a dome that covered the whole space. Ogras truly couldn't make heads or tails of the situation, which was a bit disconcerting. Since he couldn't understand the purpose of this place or the lines, he also couldn't assess the amount of danger he was in.

It started to feel like he stood in an enormous garden, but why was nothing of value planted? These trees were huge and their wood might make decent timber, but that was about it. The density of Cosmic Energy would be able to support far more valuable things, so it felt like a waste of an effort to create something like this.

Ogras quickly started to climb down the tree before he set out toward the wall in the distance. It took him thirty minutes to get through the rest of the forest before he finally saw the end of the tree line, so he hesitantly stopped by one of the trees.

There were no signs of life around the wall, and there were no roads or gates either. The surface of the wall was completely smooth and it seemed it was made out of some metal. There also were a row of fractals running along the middle of the wall, and fractals seemed to stretch along the whole thing.

Ogras tried to discern the function of the fractals for thirty minutes, but they were completely unknown to him. But as far as he could tell they weren't part of a slaughter array. Besides, few people would leave the fractals for a defensive or offensive array visible, since it would make them far easier to break.

Finally, he took a deep breath and flashed forward, blending with the shadows until he reached the wall. There were no alarms or incoming attacks, only the eerie silence of the forest. The wall was cold to the touch, and after testing it out Ogras realized it was shockingly durable.

He couldn't identify the type of metal but judging by the hardness it was a material or alloy that should be at least E-Graded just judging by its strength. His eyes glanced sideways and watched the wall stretch into the distance.

The enclosed forest was so large that he could barely discern the curvature of the wall. The scale of it all was mindboggling. Even if the wall was only a sheet a few centimeters thick the amount of E-Grade material required to build the wall was staggering. He couldn't even calculate the cost of such a thing.

Both Port Atwood and Clan Azh'Rezak would turn destitute after only erecting a portion of this wall, and its only function was to enclose this seemingly unimportant forest. Just dismantling the wall would make him a fortune. But more importantly, who could afford this sort of extravagant spending, and what was there outside the wall?

Just what kind of place was this?

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#### **Chapter 238 - Mystic Structure**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Ogras hesitantly looked around for a bit, unsure what to do next. This wasn't the direction of the Mystic Realm he'd expected. He had imagined either a wild environment where his skills were put to the test against an onslaught of beasts or an ancient ruin containing a Title-Awarding trial or something equally valuable.

But there was no danger and nothing to explore, only a forest and a wall. He tried climbing the wall to pass it, but he simply couldn't get up. It was completely sheer, giving him no purchase. He tried stabbing the wall with knives in order to climb, but they only left a scratch-mark that immediately disappeared.

He did manage to use his spear to impale the wall, but his weapon was almost immediately pushed out and the wall repaired itself in an instant. Ogras looked up at the shimmering fractals above, realizing that at least part of their purpose was to maintain the enclosure. Out of better options, he started walking along the wall, hoping to find anything different about it.

Ogras wasn't ready to head back just yet. He'd paid almost 50 million Nexus Coins to stabilize the rift for a week, and he refused to return empty-handed. He would rather spend a week to cut down these humongous trees and at least sell them as timber.

They didn't seem to be E-Grade trees, but at least they didn't seem to be mortal-graded since there was some spirituality in the huge things. And even if they were only F-Grade there was an enormous quantity, which would hopefully allow him to make a return on his investment.

But before he resigned to becoming a lumberjack he wanted to see if there was any exit in the wall. If someone created this area there should be a way to get in and out. Since he'd only spent an hour or so inside the Mystic Realm he had all the time in the world to check things out before he needed to get back.

The minutes passed as Ogras slogged along the wall, and his surroundings were so uniform that he started to wonder if he was stuck inside a loop of some illusion array. Half his field of view was the blank silver of the wall, and the other half was the lush green of the towering trees. The purple sky was barely visible through the thick canopy of the trees that stretched toward the wall.

But finally his stubbornness was rewarded, as he spotted a change in the wall in the distance. Ogras sped up with excitement, turning into a hazy blur as he melded with the shadows. Two minutes later he stood in front of a gate reaching roughly 6 meters into the air.

It was wrought of the same material as the wall itself and consisted of two doors. But there was no handle and no matter how hard he pushed or tried to separate the two doors he couldn't budge them even the slightest. Ogras even jammed his spear into the slit between the doors to use as a crowbar, but it was for nothing.

He clearly had no way to brute force this thing open, which left only one more thing to try. To the right side of the door roughly three meters up was something that looked a bit like the so-called Tablets that the humans of Earth had invented. Either that or a small TV, since it was somewhere in between the two in size.

Ogras stabbed his spear into the ground and leaped up to stand on top of the hilt to get a better view of the thing. The square tablet was roughly as large as his torso, but there were no lights or inscriptions on it, making it almost seem like a non-functional decoration.

But there was nothing else sticking out around the gate, so Ogras hesitantly touched the screen to 'wake it up' in case it worked like the human tablets. To his shock, it worked, and a row of unfamiliar scripts appeared on the screen. Ogras was elated, but next a voice appeared out of nowhere, making Ogras quickly look around.

**[Signature not recognized.]**

Ogras brows rose in alarm, and he immediately pushed away from the door, gripping his spear as he looked around. Was there a tool spirit controlling this place? If so he might just have made a huge blunder and drawn its attention. It seemed he had been recognized as an intruder.

**[Caretaker Signature added. Tier-3 Access Added.]**

"Caretaker?" Ogras muttered in confusion. "Hello, who's there?"

However, there was no response to his question, only silence. The screen up in the air had also dimmed down, returning to its passive state. Ogras hesitated what to do. Go back and get reinforcements or keep trying to open the door? Since this seemed like something technological in nature it was perhaps a better idea to go and get a few humans and a couple of craftsmen.

But curiosity pushed him forward, and he once again approached the door. But this time the doors soundlessly slid open, giving access to a large room on the other side. Ogras brows furrowed in confusion, and he hesitated whether he should go inside.

The voice said that his signature first wasn't recognized, then it added a caretaker. Had the Tool Spirit for the door mistaken him for someone in charge of tending the trees? And what was Tier-3 Access? Would it let him return again if he walked inside the doorway and it closed shut?

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," Ogras muttered as he tightened his grip on his spear, heading inside the door. "Worst case scenario I will have to wait for Zac to come and smash through this thing."

The other side of the wall didn't lead to the outdoors, but he rather found himself inside a large room that seemed to be used for storage. Both the walls and roof were made of the silver metal as well, and there wasn't much else of note inside. The same type of fractals also ran all across the upper walls as well, making a loop around the room.

The room itself was lit with crystals, indicating energy arrays were running through the walls. The crystals wouldn't be able to work by themselves since there were clear signs no one had been here for a very long time. There were also a few crates that were falling apart in one corner, shrunken nuts having spilled out of them across the floor.

Ogras guessed the nuts were used to plant those huge trees outside, but the seeds seemed to have dried out long ago, and he doubted whether they would be able to be planted any more. Still, he had ample space in his Cosmos Sack so he put the crates inside as he looked around.

There was also a table and a chair, both made out of metal. The size of them were much too large for Ogras, just like the gate. Judging by how that tablet was placed and the size of the furniture Ogras estimated the creators of this place to reach roughly 4 to 5 meters into the air.

Not many species were that large, at least not amongst the more populous races. There were a few golem, demon, and beastmen species that were this tall, but Ogras saw nothing that indicated any specific species inside this thing.

On the other side of the room was another gate much like the one he just passed through. But before he headed over he first went back to the original gate, and he was relieved to see that it noiselessly slid open upon his approach.

Ogras headed over to the other side, and this one also opened without having to touch the tablet up in the air. An enormous corridor stood on the other side, and Ogras hesitantly walked outside. The corridor was made from the same material as well, and Ogras started to feel they must have dismantled a whole mountain to get this much material.

A few tubes ran along the roof in the corridor, and the whole thing reminded Ogras of those Technomancer movies that he had watched when he was free. They had taken place in societies where there was no Cosmic Energy, but technology had reached far beyond Earth's current capabilities, and they even explored the multiverse.

But there were also signs that this was not a technocrat stronghold. The corridor was illuminated with crystals rather than electrical lamps, and Ogras was pretty sure that the Technomancers did not use fractals for their bases. They relied on the so-called Dao of Technology, and that concept did not use fractals or inscriptions.

The design made him rather veer toward some sort of artificial beings, such as the Creators or another golemoid race. They often liked this type of lifeless interior, whereas Demons or Beastkin favored more nature in their surroundings.

Ogras was once again shocked by the sheer size of the complex he found himself inside. Had the whole mystic realm been turned into some sort of base? He found

himself walking for hours, and he had found six more gardens, each of them planted with the same trees.

It was also quickly becoming clear that the Cosmic Energy had somehow been concentrated into these gardens since the energy outside could at best be the equivalent of a Low-Tiered E-Grade planet. But why use all the energy in the Mystic realm for some trees?

But apart from that, there was nothing of note. Most of the corridors were empty, creating a network that spanned around these huge circular areas with the trees. He had found a few rooms that seemed to be barracks, with rows of huge bunk beds lined up.

But there were no sign of them having been inhabited since there was no remains or signs of use. There was just a thick layer of dust on the mattresses, while the walls and floor were spotless. Ogras had a feeling it had something to do with the inscriptions running along the walls. They seemed to perform a variety of maintenance functions, from repairs to self-cleaning, much like the arrays on equipment.

But finally, he reached a gate that was different from the others. It looked the same, but it did not automatically open like those he'd passed before. Ogras leaped up and grabbed hold of the tablet, and with a buzz it lit up.

**[Tier-3 Access Signature. Access granted]**

It was the same voice as before, and the next moment the gate slowly slid open. Ogras noted with some interest that this one was far thicker than the others, reaching almost a meter in thickness. But his attention was quickly drawn to the outside because it almost felt like he'd entered a different world.

There was the same type of corridors as before, but these ones were caked in grime and what Ogras could only assume was dried blood. There were signs of battle everywhere, with ruined pipes and scarred walls. Only a few illuminating crystals still worked, and the light they gave off was far weaker compared to the corridors earlier.

Ogras eyes quickly turned to the fractals up in the air, but he noted that they didn't give off any light or energy as they did in the corridors he had passed earlier. Were the Cosmic Energy network ruined in this part of the structure? And what kind of battle had taken place here? And why was the earlier section unaffected by whatever had happened here?

The signs of battle was a clear indicator that this place was inhabited, or at least had been not too long ago. Ogras quickly shrouded himself in shadows as he started proceeding along the wall after making sure he could enter the thicker gate again.

As he walked there were signs of disrepair everywhere, and there were even signs of someone having stripped parts of the walls for materials. His eyes darted back and forth as he kept walking through the oppressive paths. They were as large as those before, but somehow they felt far more claustrophobic.

A sudden sound of metal striking metal echoed out in the distance, and Ogras pushed himself to the wall, completely blending with the darkness under a broken illumination crystal. As he kept listening he heard the sounds repeating, and he immediately realized it was the sound of battle. His heartbeat sped up in fear-mixed anticipation; he wasn't alone.

Since he couldn't sense any too strong energies from the direction of the ruckus he slowly crept forward, and he finally reached a shrouded corner that gave him a vantage of what was going on around the corner where the sounds came from.

Two warriors of different species were in a desperate fight for their lives. One of them was a human, and the other was of a beastkin origin, looking a bit like a werewolf. The sounds Ogras heard earlier had come from the clash between the

wolfman's claws and the human's sword. Since they were stuck in the tunnel they couldn't completely maneuver as they wished, but they were clearly used to battle in this type of confined space.

They used both the walls and the roof as a foothold as they clashed over and over, each clash resulting in a shockwave that told Ogras that they were in either weak E-grade warriors or somewhat strong F-Grade warriors. Ogras was considering whether he should throw his hat into the ring when the wolf suddenly disappeared after being pushed back from a clash with the human's sword.

The next moment the beastkin was right in front of Ogras, and a searing pain erupted in his face. Ogras' face contorted in pain and anger, and the next moment the metallic mold on his arms cracked as a pitch-black hand reached for the werewolf. The werewolf quickly reacted and pushed away, but the hand extended beyond what was normal and gripped the throat of the wolf.

The sinister claws of the werewolf tried to cut the hand right off, but they powerlessly went straight through and the next moment a crunch echoed out through the tunnels as Ogras crushed the neck of his attacker. The eyes of the human who had stood by in the distance lit up when he saw his enemy die, but before he could speak up he puked a mouthful of blood.

A large shadow spear had impaled him from behind, and the human fearfully looked at Ogras as he walked over, his eyes glowing in the darkness. The black arm had lost its form, now only forming a shadowy haze that drifted by his side.

"I have some questions."

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

**Chapter 239 - Through the Tunnels**

Zac glared in the direction of where he was thrown from, but there was nothing there apart from a rough rock wall. There wasn't any sign of the portal or the elaborate chambers of Anzonil, and he might as well be in any random caverns of a mountain.

Zac sighed in disappointment as he got to his feet. There were a lot of topics that he wanted to broach with the old man, even if he decided to undergo the trial. But perhaps staying in corporeal form as an Array Spirit required a lot of energy or something, forcing the old man to send Zac away quickly.

He really wanted to know just what the darkness was, and if Anzonil knew of the method to kill the specters. After speaking with the old man he had a feeling that the darkness was directly linked with the demise of the Eastern Trigram Sect back in the day.

That the old man knew of the Draugr also piqued his interest, though that wasn't as important at the moment. But it looked like he needed to know more about his undead race since having what was called a royal bloodline might both be a blessing and a curse.

In any case, there wasn't much to do here. He was currently in a dead-end of a subterranean tunnel, and there was only one way to go. The instructions were pretty clear as well; reach the end of the road and you'll get the treasure.

Zac kept the shield fastened to his left arm, hefting [Verun's Bite] in the other as he started to walk down the winding path. There were no crystals giving off light in this place, but the tunnel was thankfully not completely shrouded in darkness.

There was quite a high density of Cosmic Energy in the tunnel, which sustained some of the glowing moss that also grew in his own mountain. It was amazing to Zac how plants learned to live only off of Cosmic Energy and could survive even in the most desolate places with only that as a source of sustenance. But in Zac's undead form the high density of energy wasn't a blessing, but rather a curse.

The more Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere the worse it felt, and here it was like the very air around him was trying to destroy him. Usually the ambient energy in the air wasn't a problem for him, but he guessed that he was either inside a gathering array or close to a Nexus Vein.

It finally got to the point that he took out a couple of his Miasma Crystals and stuffed them inside his robe to feel the cold energies within against his skin. It helped a bit, and it was with relief he sensed that the density of energy around him was quickly decreasing as he walked further along the path.

However, it wasn't all good news since he once again started to sense the insidious energy of the darkness, though it still was minute. But Zac still kept going forward. He wouldn't give up his chance at supreme treasure just by a hint of the malicious energy, and he strode forward with purpose until he finally reached the end of the tunnel.

Zac soundlessly advanced the last 50 meters to the exit, and peeked out the tunnel. The first thing he noticed was that there was over a drop of over fifteen meters down to the floor from his egress. The second thing he saw was the sea of rats.

He immediately realized there must be some sort of array that hid his passage and blocked out any sound as he looked down. He gazed upon a chaotic swarm of rats that fought, mated, and scuttled about without him hearing a single sound.

Most of the rats he saw were the very same type that he had already killed throngs of on the surface, but he realized that he had likely only fought the weakest of the brood so far. There were far larger rats lumbering about as well, a few of which emanated enough power that they might be E-grade, though barely.

Zac's eyes lit up at the veritable feast of prey, but he slowly observed everything for another full fifteen minutes before moving. He wanted to see if there was something like a rat king that could be a threat, but if there was it didn't live in this large cavern.

He mouthed a silent prayer before jumping down, but he didn't try to conceal his presence. On the contrary, he entered the huge cavern with a roar, slamming down tens of meters away from the exit with a huge crash.

He had imbued himself with the Dao of Heaviness, and he was like a ten-ton hammer when he landed, killing every rat within over ten meters and creating a large crater. The moment he had exited the passage he had been inundated by a cacophony of screeches and hisses, and it got a lot worse after he made his entrance.

Zac didn't even have time to get to his feet before he received a surge of energy into his forehead, and he immediately understood that he had accomplished his goal. The quest for his second skill, **[Fields of Despair]** was finished. It required him to draw the ire of over a thousand enemies simultaneously, and he had likely passed that goal ten times over with his flashy entrance.

He didn't really know whether to be happy or angry that there wasn't an accompanying Dao Vision to go along with his newly acquired skill. He remembered very well the feeling when he killed the thousand barghest required to complete his quest for **[Axe Mastery]**.

Completing the quest had formed the Axe fractal in his chest, but it was missing in his undead form just like the normal skills. When he had focused on it he had been

brought to the desolate world with the enormous axe. Meanwhile, his new skill only added a pure skill-fractal on his forehead.

But it was a welcome boost to his very limited repertoire in his Draugr form, and he had just the perfect stage to test his new ability. But he was beset by frenzied rats before he even had time to even form a battle plan.

However, while most of the rats down in the cave were larger than their brethren on the surface they were of no threat to Zac. After a few quick swings with his axe thirty corpses lay strewn around him. But Zac frowned as he looked down at his axe, and after a brief pause decided to stash the axe into his Sack.

He didn't want to rely on combat skills he gained with his other class too much since that might negatively impact the growth of his Undying Bulwark class. Instead, he decided to fight using the means his class provided for as long as possible, only relying on his axe and his Daos if needed.

The first thing he did was to unleash [**Fields of Despair**], and the space around him actually changed a bit. It was as though the world had gone monochrome within fifty meters from his position, and it reminded him of how it looked when he fought the Corpse Lord.

In fact, he noticed that the Cosmic Energy around him was actually turning into Miasma at a visible rate, and a mist of the deathly energy swirled around him. However, the production came at a cost of his own energy, so the skill wouldn't be very useful for cultivation.

But that wasn't the point of the skill, and Zac was elated after having figured out the workings of the skill. It was a debuffing skill with a large area, and its effect was pretty great.

It lowered the attributes of his enemies by a certain degree across the board. After turning it off and on again while fighting with the rats for a minute he estimated the number to be around 10%.

Taking away 10% of the fighting power of all close-by enemies wasn't a huge amount, but it wasn't bad. Besides, the skill was only at early stage and it already had many uses.

For example, it could negate almost half of the effect of skills like his [**Hatchetman's Rage**] without having any of the other skill's disadvantages. It could also lower the power of an ultimate attack from his enemies by a decent degree, increasing his survivability.

But there was a pretty big drawback to this skill. [**Fields of Despair**] didn't have a great synergy with his other skill, [**Deathwish**]. To kill his enemies he needed to get hit, and the harder he got hit the more damage he returned. If he restricted the power of his enemies he would also restrict his offensive power.

Then again, the two skills were used in different ways, and he wasn't surprised that Undying Bulwark's skills sacrificed offensive power in favor of more defense. It was a tank-class after all. But these many defensive measures weren't needed against rats, even if there was a seemingly endless horde of them.

But before he deactivated [**Fields of Despair**] he noticed another huge advantage of the skill. As he had experimented for a bit with the skill there lay a new slew of rat carcasses around him, and those that died first were starting to emit a turquoise mist.

Zac immediately realized it was miasma, and he didn't shy away when the mists were drawn toward him as though they were guided. The energy effortlessly merged with his existing stores of miasma, giving him back even more energy than he used when killing the rats.

This clearly differed from how it worked when he fought the beasts on Mystic Island. Back then it worked the same as in his human form. When he killed something he received a boost of energy that went toward improving his levels, but the effect on his expended storage of miasma was minuscule.

But this was different. The energy that streamed toward him from more and more corpses didn't help him with his levels, but they restored the miasma he was continuously expending to power his two skills.

He finally understood the full effect of his new skill, and it truly was a field of despair for his enemies. Not only did it weaken those who came too close, it even restored his energies to allow him to keep fighting for an indefinite time.

He quickly changed his mind about turning the skill off, and instead he kept both his skills going. Both of them were continuously drawing from his miasma reserves, but with new rat corpses being added all the time he quickly restored the energy he expended.

In the end he lost slightly more energy than he gained from the corpses, but he would fall from lack of sleep before lack of miasma at this rate. Then again he was only fighting weak beasts at the moment, as the larger rats hadn't entered the fray yet.

Since he'd already gained one of the skills he decided to grind out his second one as well, but he soon found out it wasn't as easy as he had hoped. Not all the rats were strong enough to attack him with enough force to progress his quest.

But he quickly found a solution as he took out his axe once again. There was a pretty clear correlation between the power and size of these rats, and he soon found that the rats needed to be at least three meters long to be able to bite or swipe with enough force to award a point of progress in his class.

Everything smaller than that approached him was quickly culled with a swipe of his axe, while he kept blocking the attacks of the larger ones with his shield. Some wounds were starting to accumulate on his body since he wasn't able to block all the strikes, but he didn't care since his high Endurance and Vitality had no problem in keeping him alive.

It didn't take long for him to gain a level since the rats were almost as strong as the beasts on Mystic Island. But the beasts back there had been spread out, each occupying its own territory. Here they were everywhere, and no matter where Zac looked he saw a sea of experience points approaching him.

It was also clear that these beasts had no intention of backing down, even after hundreds of their kin lay lifeless on the floor. Zac soon realized that it might be because they were affected by the darkness.

He didn't believe all these animals were possessed like what happened to some cultivators up on the surface. The energies of the darkness had rather slowly seeped into their minds while they lived underground, increasing their aggression.

But Zac didn't mind, and he soon settled into a familiar routine ingrained into his bones from the beast waves. He was already quickly climbing on the Hunter ladder again, even though he mainly focused on progressing the quest for **[Bulwark Mastery]**.

The moment he blocked the final attack with his shield he felt a huge surge of energy in his heart. It didn't kick-start it to start beating even in his undead form, but it was rather that something occupied its empty chambers. Zac couldn't stop a wide smile from spreading on his face when he realized what it was.

It was another Dao Fractal, just like the tree or the axe in his Hatchetman form. But he didn't dare to check the form or nature of the fractal any closer since he was afraid he'd get sucked inside a vision while there was a sea of rats still rampaging around him.

But he got extremely impatient to end the fight so that he could gain his fourth Dao Seed, so he no longer held anything back or cared about fighting with his shield only. He became a whirlwind of carnage as he rampaged across the enormous den, and soon the elated growls from **[Verun's Bite]** overpowered the screeches of the frenzied rats.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 240 - Evolution**

No matter where Zac looked he was met with a frenzied onslaught of sharp teeth and claws, and he didn't even need to aim as he methodically swung his axe. He was long since drenched in gore and viscera, his two black orbs of eyes glimmering with finality as he kept killing rats by the scores.

The area around him was like another world, with turquoise mists wafting about, and an enduring desolation had taken hold of the den of the rats. A slow whirlwind of miasma had formed around Zac by now, continuously imbuing him with energy.

But the rats were truly relentless and had no disregard for their own lives, and kept desperately trying to tear Zac apart. As the sizes of the rats surrounding him grew, the wounds on his body got worse as well.

Zac blocked one strike after another, and even his sturdy shield was starting to show signs of tear from innumerable claws slamming into it. But he couldn't put it away. Zac could not clear a large number of critters at once since he didn't have access to **[Chop]**, so he needed something to stave off some of the rats while he cut others down.

But Zac had no plans to switch his class to Hatchetman. First of all, he didn't have the luxury to pass out for a couple of minutes mid-battle, but even if he did he didn't want to let go of this opportunity. He hadn't encountered this great a leveling-experience even during the beast waves, and after another two hours of fighting he gained another level.

Besides, **[Verun's Bite]** wasn't the only thing doing work. All around him, particularly behind him, ghastly specters of rats kept popping out from nowhere, maiming and killing their living twins. It was **[Deathwish]** with its damage reflection that was dishing back far more than he got hurt.

It was only three hours and one level later that only six rats and Zac remained. The rest of the burrow was covered with thousands of rat corpses, and it was impossible to take a single step without stepping in a pool of blood.

The remaining rats were the six largest specimens in the cave, and the ones that Zac suspected might be E-Grade earlier. Now that they were right in front of him he realized that it likely only was true for two of them, whereas the other four were very close to that stage.

However, it was clear to Zac that even the four lesser rats in front of him were different from the mindless hordes that had swarmed him the past hours. They had silently observed Zac from the distance, making no move to approach him. Each of them was enormous, the smallest of them at least as large as an elephant. The largest rats, one of the two that Zac suspected to be E-Grade, was at least 8 meters long, with its tail adding just as much length.

Zac was panting as he stood and observed the last remaining rats as well, welcoming the opportunity to take a breather. He was completely caked in blood from the fight, and he thanked the stars he was in his undead form.

His sense of smell was a bit different, mainly smelling life rather than other scents, and he could only imagine that the stench of thousands of dead rats was beyond putrid to a human. Apart from the blood and gore, he was also marred with tens of wounds that dripped some of the black ichor that sat in his veins instead of blood.

It was from this fight that he understood the function of the black substance. He had thought it was just a remnant of the blood in his human form, but after having lost a pint of the stuff he realized that wasn't the case.

The black ichor wasn't just putrified blood, but it was also needed for the storage of miasma somehow. The more of the stuff he lost during the fight, the less miasma he was able to store in his body.

That meant if he was bled completely dry of the ichor he would probably turn back into his human form, whereas a real undead would die. Of course, simply expelling all miasma was a far simpler method than draining himself of his blood.

Suddenly two of the rats started to move, clearly trying to flank him. With rats this powerful Zac wasn't comfortable to let them attack him from behind, so he instantly hurled his axe with a grunt, imbuing it with the Dao of Sharpness.

The axe ripped through the air and slammed straight into the head of one of the rats, instantly killing it. A huge surge of energy entered Zac, far higher than he had got from anything before, immediately giving him another level.

These things were clearly superior compared to their brethren judging by how much energy they rewarded, and Zac was relieved he managed to down one with a surprise attack. He had held back on using his Daos apart from his initial entrance since he wanted to keep some cards for this fight.

He immediately pushed forward, aiming to retrieve his weapon, but one of the rats moved to intercept with a screech. But Zac held nothing back as he imbued his fist with the Dao of Heaviness, slamming it straight into the temple of the rat before it managed to bite into his torso.

A loud crack could be heard and another surge of energy entered him, but he didn't stop as he ran toward his axe and ripped it out of the head of the rat. Suddenly a sense of danger erupted in his mind, and he unhesitatingly threw himself forward.

A sharp swish could be heard right behind him, and he looked to see one of the E-Grade rats having appeared right behind him somehow. It had attacked with its claws, but Zac also sensed the familiar feeling of the Dao of Sharpness.

The corpse of the rat he killed with his axe was cleanly split into four parts from the swipe of the rat, and even the ground the following ten meters had four deep gouges from the attack. Zac frowned at the large scars from the claws since it showed that its attack was a bit similar to those of the fiend wolf.

But he didn't have time to formulate a plan as he was suddenly shrouded in darkness. His brows rose in alarm, but he didn't have time to do anything but turn around as he was met with the huge maw of the other E-Grade rat.

But it didn't try to bite him, but instead Zac was drowned in a deluge of bile. Zac was disgusted by it, but some puke wasn't enough to do him in. He immediately moved out of the stream of the putrid liquid, and with a roar swung **[Verun's Bite]** straight at the stretched-out throat of the rat.

The puking rat seemed surprised to be attacked for some reason, and it barely had time to register the incoming swing before it was almost fully decapitated by the

powerful strike of the axe. Zac's axe hummed in glee as large amounts of Blood flowed into it as the huge corpse fell into the ground with a thump.

The next moment the familiar Tool Spirit emerged from the axe, and it immediately leaped at one of the rats who had jumped at Zac from behind. It was clearly an uneven fight since the rat wasn't able to target the spectral being, and in just a few seconds it lay dead at the ground.

Zac couldn't help staring down at the E-grade beast with some confusion. Its attack had been truly perplexing. But a sizzling sound quickly told him what was going on. A dozen rat carcasses had also been inundated by the huge torrent of puke, and they had turned into nothing but pools of goop in just seconds.

Even the floor was melting at a visible rate, and Zac's brows rose in alarm as he looked down at himself. To his surprise, he saw that he was completely fine, even though his robe was slowly disintegrating. The liquid simply sloughed off his pale skin without leaving as much as a mark.

Zac apparently was immune to the attack, which the rat didn't expect. That gave him the opportunity for an easy kill while it tried to register what was going on. But Zac didn't have time to ponder on why the poisonous bile didn't affect him as the other E-Grade rat was already upon him with an enraged screech.

It frenziedly swiped at him in an all-out effort to rip him to shred, forcing him on the defensive for the time being. He had already infused his axe with the Dao of Sharpness as he tried to cut off its arms, but the rat was extremely quick to intercept his axe with its claws.

The claws were truly sturdy, and even after tens of clashes there wasn't a single mark on them. Zac was at a standstill since he didn't have any stronger attacks to use. He didn't dare use **[Deathwish]** against this opponent since he wasn't sure whether he could actually take that much damage.

But the stalemate soon changed as Verun, the tool spirit of his axe, was in a rare form today. Three rats were remaining after Zac killed the first E-Graded one, but Verun pounced upon the remaining two smaller ones with gleeful abandon.

Less than half a minute later only Zac's opponent remained, and a great growl echoed through the caverns as the prehistoric beast finally joined Zac in his battle. Zac suddenly changed his Dao Seed to the Dao of Heaviness, and with a growl he swung with all the force he could bear.

The strike wasn't able to get through the quick defense of the rat, but the enormous weight behind the strike was enough to throw the thing off-balance. Verun knew exactly what to do, and bit straight through the throat of rat, instantly killing it before it had a chance to react. Yet another huge stream of energy entered Zac as well, pushing him forward at least one level.

However, his Tool Spirit wasn't done there, as it kept ripping the corpse into shreds with frenzied glee. The blood from the beast started to float around the spirit as though it wasn't affected by gravity any longer, creating a macabre spectacle.

The axe in Zac's hand was suddenly vibrating in his hands, and he was barely able to hold on as it tried to fly away and join the spirit. Zac's eyes glistened with anticipation as he let go of the axe, and it quickly flew to the side of the projection of Verun.

An ocean of blood suddenly gushed out of the axe, creating a crimson flood that swirled around the spirit. Zac guessed it was all the blood from the various beasts he had killed that was getting released all at once, forming a small sea of the stuff.

Verun howled with exultation, its roars echoing through the cave with such power that Zac couldn't help worriedly look around. He had already spotted the path out of here, and he was afraid that the howls would attract even more beasts.

Then again, if nothing had come from hours of screeching and slaughter, then some howls shouldn't bring any calamity to his doorstep either. But Zac grabbed the tail of one of the largest rats and started to drag it toward the only pathway out of here just in case. Soon he'd formed a wall of flesh that completely blocked the entrance.

While he was busy moving the bodies the storm of blood around his axe had calmed down, and the large sphere of blood kept shrinking as it encased **[Verun's Bite]** within. When the sphere had shrunk from a diameter of ten meters down to three it started to look like the blood was congealing into a solid.

The transformed blood even turned translucent, and within a few minutes it looked like his axe was encased in a ruby almost as large as he was. Zac walked over to the crystal with anticipation since he had long realized that his weapon was finally evolving.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

#### **Chapter 241 - Eternal and Unbroken**

Zac's axe had already been on the verge of taking the next step, and the blood of the largest rats was enough to push it to the next level. But evolutions of this kind were very diverse, and after asking around back in Port Atwood he learned that there was no cohesive method of the process.

That left him wondering what he should do now. He had no idea how long it would take for the axe to finish its evolution. He also had no idea whether he could put the crystal into his Cosmos Sack, or whether that would interrupt the process.

In the end, he chose to move the crystal to a corner of the large den, hiding it in an alcove behind a couple of more carcasses. Luckily the axe didn't give off any energy emanations during the process, so hiding it didn't require any arrays.

He surveyed the scene for a while, and after some alterations, it was impossible to notice anything was hidden there. Next, he created a second hiding spot and sat down inside. Initially, he hadn't planned on staying in this den, but the evolution of his axe had forced him to change his plans.

But it was just as well. His miasma wasn't spent from the long battle, but his body was wounded all over and he had lost quite a bit of ichor. He popped a pill into his mouth and closed his eyes to focus on recuperation, and it was only two hours later he opened them.

He wasn't completely back to top shape, but his Endurance and Vitality had improved him to fighting condition at least. But he still couldn't leave since he had no idea what lay past this cave. There was no guarantee that this was the only thing blocking his path to the treasure, and he wasn't confident in fighting anything too strong without his axe.

But he wasn't just sitting around while he waited for his axe to get done. He was itching to check out his Dao fractal, but he held off on that in favor of a few other things first. The intense fight had brought him all the way to level 39, giving a huge boost to his attributes.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**39**

**Class**

**[F-Epic] Undying Bulwark**

**Race**

**[E] Draugr**

**Alignment**

**[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen**

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - High, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Middle Core**

**[F] Duplicity**

**Strength**

**420 [Base: 271. Increase: 55%. Efficiency: 16%]**

**Dexterity**

**221 [Base: 158. Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 16%]**

**Endurance**

**430 [Base: 268. Increase: 60,5%. Efficiency: 16%]**

**Vitality**

**251 [Base: 167. Increase: 50,5%. Efficiency: 16%]**

**Intelligence**

**90 [Base: 64. Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 16%]**

**Wisdom**

**85 [Base: 61. Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 16%]**

**Luck**

**93 [Base: 58. Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 16%]**

**Free Points**

**6**

**Nexus Coins**

**[F] 53 625 943**

Gaining this many levels in just a few hours would have been unthinkable back when he was around this level the first time around, but then again he was far weaker at that time. He had another 6 free points to allocate, but he held off on that until he saw what he gained from his new Dao Seed.

Next, he opened his quest menu, and as he suspected there was a new quest waiting for him there. At level 35 Hatchetman he gained the quest for [Loamwalker], and this time around he got another skill quest as well.

**Immutable Bulwark (Class): Survive the strike of three evolved beings.  
Reward: Immutable Bulwark (2/3)**

Zac believed 'evolved beings' was referring to an E-Grade Class beasts or cultivators, and he felt this quest wasn't very hard since it didn't specify how he should survive it. With the help of Fields of Despair and a shield he would have no problem blocking a strike from something like the E-Grade rat, let alone surviving it, which was proven by two thirds of the quest already being completed.

As for the skill itself, Zac guessed it was a pure defensive skill going by the name. He felt it was about time since none of the three initial skills were purely defensive skills like his [Nature's Barrier]. In any case, he didn't think it would take long to find out since there clearly were E-Grade beasts down here in the tunnels.

Zac got to his feet and walked over to his axe once again, but there was still no response from it. Since he was finally done with what he needed to do, he properly concealed himself and turned his sight inward toward his heart. Just like he expected a large pocket space had formed inside his heart, and Zac wasn't very surprised to see that the fractal looked like a large shield. But he didn't have time to inspect it any further, as his vision quickly changed.

The place he was sent to was quite different from the desolation of the dead world of the axe-man. He found himself standing in a beautiful park that was meticulously tended to, and Zac almost forgot why he was here from the soothing atmosphere.

It truly felt like he was in paradise from the array of beautiful plants and trees forming a harmony that could only be said to be perfect. Even the sky shone in a warm golden luster, and looking up at it Zac almost felt like he was being caressed by the heavens themselves.

Surprisingly enough people were walking past him, but it was as though he was a ghost. No one noticed him as they kept going forward. Some even walked straight through him, which was a pretty weird experience.

The people were of varying races, some of them humans, but many were things that Zac had never heard of. They were also of extremely varying power, ranging from weak mortals to great powerhouses clearly stronger than the E-Grade. But one thing was the same for each and every one of them. They were all orderly walking in a line, and everyone was holding what looked like a small gift in their hands as they streamed in the same direction.

Curious, Zac followed the train of people, and soon found himself in the middle of the garden that held an enormous square made of marble. But the moment he entered there he realized he wasn't in a park, but rather a gravesite.

In the middle of the square was a mausoleum, and all the people he had followed walked toward it as though they were on a pilgrimage. Zac walked over as well and soon he stood just twenty meters away from the golden inlaid arch leading inside.

However, no one entered the building, instead simply bowed before placing down whatever they had brought in front of the building, before turning away and leaving the square.

There were already large mounds of offerings, and interestingly enough they ranged from simple things like a small wood carving to Nexus Crystals that emitted such immense power that Zac was afraid his soul would shatter just by standing close to them.

He instinctually knew those things were at least C-Graded crystals, but possibly even higher. He knew that only one of them would be enough to live like a king for thousands of years, yet no one even gave the treasures a second glance before leaving.

Zac's curiosity only grew as he turned his eyes toward the mausoleum. He already knew that his visions came from supreme existences, and he guessed that the one he was about to receive was based on whoever was interred inside.

Zac gave a small bow just like the pilgrims before resolutely walking toward the entrance. As he got closer he noticed that two old men sat in front of the gate with closed eyes, likely guarding the place. However, the moment he turned his eyes toward them it was as though his soul was about to be crushed by immense pressure, and he had to quickly look away.

Even though he was just a wisp of consciousness he had to stop and take a few deep breaths, his hands shaking from the experience. He was shocked to realize that both the old men sitting in front of the mausoleum were far more powerful than Greatest, the strongest person he'd met so far.

Their auras were as immense as a galaxy, and Zac couldn't even get close to the door due to the passive aura that they emitted. But suddenly the weight disappeared, and Zac was shocked to see that both the old monsters were looking straight at him.

"Enter, inheritor," one of the old men said, each of his words echoing with the Dao itself.

Zac was starting to be unsure whether this was actually a vision, or if the system had sent his consciousness to this place. Was it the same with the desolate world only housing the enormous axe back then?

But he felt this wasn't the place to ask, so after bowing once more he passed by the two old men who once again closed their eyes. Anticipation was rising as Zac entered the structure. Just how powerful would one have to have been to have cultivators that were at least C-Grade sit in vigil over one's gravesite?

Zac reverentially held his breath as he looked around the mausoleum, but it was surprisingly simple. The insides were lit up by six braziers that burned along the sides, though interestingly enough they didn't emit any smoke. Apart from the sources of light only two more things were housed in the building. The first was a tomb wrought out of the same type of marble the square was made off.

The second was a shield that emitted an immense aura. It was almost shaped like a coffin, and it was mostly unadorned apart from a blue fractal that was the source of the aura. It felt like the shield would be able to protect him even if the sky collapsed, and Zac immediately understood it was a supreme treasure at least at the level of the axe he saw in the other vision.

In front of the tomb was a simple plaque that only said three words.

*Eternal and Unbroken.*

There was no mention of whose resting place this was, or what sort of thing he or she had accomplished. Then again it didn't seem it was necessary, going by the constant stream of pilgrims that found their way here.

After silently looking at the plaque for a minute Zac finally walked over toward the shield.

Death loomed as he roused himself with some effort. Murky eyes that hadn't opened for tens of thousands of years gazed at the richly decked man kneeling in front of him with a face marred by worries.

"Shield," he said with a raspy voice, and soon after five men entered from a passage.

Every one of them emitted auras powerful enough to subdue the heavens, but their faces were red with strain as they had to cooperate to carry an object covered in dusty cloth. They finally arrived in front of him, and when they placed down the item the would building shook from the weight.

His decrepit hand slowly reached forward, and the cloth disintegrated as his old companion rose toward him. As he looked at the blue fractal on the shield he felt as though he was back on the battlefield those millions of years ago, but this time he didn't he didn't fasten it to his arm.

"This is goodbye, old friend," he said with a sigh.

A smile adorned his face as he slowly caressed the edge of his shield, and it hummed with sorrow as he rose to his feet. He walked outside his small palace and rose into the skies, the six hegemony silently following behind.

Outside the town, a sea of people silently stood waiting, millions upon millions of them.

"Grand Protector," they immediately shouted, kneeling in reverence.

He never had any family, but he saw all these people as his children. He had watched over this world for innumerable years, seeing it grow to the beacon of freedom and enlightenment it was today. He had staved off countless attacks from those who had wanted to take their land and wealth.

But he knew he was needed one final time as he looked up at the skies. The beautiful blue sky was replaced by a dizzying blur of all colors of the spectrum as rampant energies clashed. Most of the smaller worlds had already been destroyed, ripped into nothingness by the primordial chaos.

The death of a universe.

The next moment his old and hunched-over body released enough power to blot out the skies as he rose to meet the incoming chaos. Space itself was cracking, but he didn't even notice the void edges that pelted his body. They were simply pushed away by the force of his latent will.

In just a second he left the atmosphere, and he looked down on the massive continent beneath. There had once been tens of thousands of worlds circulating around it, but now only a scant few survived, protected by immense arrays.

"Eternal and unbroken," he said, his voice carrying across the countless miles.

The next moment his body started to shine brighter and brighter, and soon it far eclipsed any star in the universe. The golden shine quickly expanded and formed a shield that encapsulated the whole continent and its trillions of inhabitants.

The next moment the chaotic energies and spatial tears slammed into the shield with enough power to rip even the Dao to shreds, but the shield didn't even shudder. His consciousness slowly faded as he became one with the shield.

Countless years passed as the universe faded, the continent set adrift in the chaotic spatial folds between realities. But the shield held true, protecting its inhabitant from the endless void. Forever.

For he was Immutable.

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### **Chapter 242 - Chains of Fate**

Zac sat completely immobile for hours even after the vision ended. He thought that he had gotten accustomed to the new reality by now, but he was once again completely awed by the power some individuals held. Seeing the death of a universe was also something that he would never forget.

The prowess in that golden shield was mind-bending, to the point that Zac felt the Grand Protector was a being that was a notch above both the unnamed ax-man and The Lifebringer. The ax-man held monstrous power and was able to kill a whole planet with a swing, but that was still a lesser feat compared to what the Grand Protector did.

The old man managed to shield a land-mass of unfathomable size against the very fabric of reality ripping to shreds. Furthermore, the shield he erected stood strong for who knows how long, protecting the continent from the void outside.

The power of the protagonist wasn't the only superior thing from the vision, making Zac wonder if it was the benefit of having an Epic Class. When he occupied the ax-man he was only a spectator, but he became the Grand Protector for a bit. He still remembered scenes from the ancient man's earlier life, though there were only small snippets.

He had felt how the old man's very body was tempered with the Dao itself, impregnable and immutable. While Zac was grasping at thin strands of a larger fabric the old man forced the Dao to follow his will.

Zac could only imagine that such a being was at least A-rank, perhaps even higher. The demons believed there were cultivators higher than A-Grade, but they barely had any information about C-Grade warriors, let alone lofty beings above that. If those beings existed or not was shrouded in mystery.

The extremely clear vision he had also given him an unprecedented harvest, and he was elated as he looked at the Dao Screen in front of him.

**Hardness (Middle): Endurance +25, Wisdom +5.**

**Sanctuary (Early): Endurance +5, Wisdom +10.**

He had not gained one new seed, but two of them, from the vision. Even more impressively he had even gained two stages to the first of them, Hardness. This time he wasn't disappointed that he didn't attain the same Dao as the old man since he understood that he was millennia away from grasping those concepts.

He guessed that the Grand Protector possessed something that could be called the Dao of Immutability. The vision ended after he had integrated with the golden shield, but Zac had some time to feel its marvelous effects, and it truly contained myriad concepts.

Two notable additions were the Daos of both Time and Space, two extremely high-tiered concepts that were out of reach for warriors at his class as far as he knew. The Dao of Immutability forced space itself to bend to its will, and the protection it provided lasted over the eons.

It was truly a top tier Dao, and the Dao of Hardness was just one small part of it. His insights were based around two things; the massive aura of the shield itself and the hardness the old man's will that forced even the tears in space to be unable to reach his body.

The shield held the weight of a planet which resonated with Zac's earlier insights into heaviness, so gaining a snippet of the Dao of Hardness felt pretty natural. The second piece was a mental component of hardness, and it reminded Zac of the upgrade he got of the Dao of Heaviness back at the auction.

In fact, Zac believed gaining his second Dao Seed, the Dao of Sanctuary, was closely related to that insight back then. He had gained a mental component of heaviness due to the immense weight of responsibilities pressing down on him at that time.

He had been in the middle of the beast hordes and his sister was still unaccounted for. The Dao insight could be seen as a result of being overwhelmed, but by now he had found his bearings in life. Over the past weeks, he had seen just how much his town had grown, from a small dented camper into a flourishing kingdom.

That's why the old man in the vision had resonated with him. The Grand Protector had watched over his continent for countless years, seeing the rise of civilization. With his power he could have easily become a supreme emperor, but he was content to simply watch from the shadows and protect the place from unseen threats.

Zac very well understood that sense of wanting to protect those around him. It was the very reason he desperately tried to get stronger. Initially, it was just for himself and his sister, but the circle of people he wanted to protect had slowly expanded as he saw his island come to life.

Both of the Dao Seeds he gained were on the defensive side, but Zac knew that they were meant for different things. The Dao of Hardness was mostly for personal defense. He could imbue himself or his shield with it, and from there endure stronger strikes.

But the Dao of Sanctuary was based on protection. He currently wasn't sure if he had any skills that could benefit from it, but he felt its purpose was to help protect others rather than himself. **[Nature's Barrier]** might be a possible candidate, though that skill already benefitted from infusing it with Dao of Trees.

In any case, he knew his survivability had increased by a notch, both from a huge influx of points into Endurance, but also being able to empower himself further with new Dao Seeds. He had used Dao of Trees as a defensive skill until now, but it wasn't a purely defensive Dao like the Dao of Sharpness was purely offensive.

Besides, the Dao of Trees was inconvenient for him to use for various reasons. First of all, it contained the breath of life, which essentially was poison for him in his Draugr-form. It also wasn't possible to infuse non-living things with that Dao, so strengthening his metallic shield was impossible.

However, the happy surprises didn't end there. He actually had gained another title.

**[Scion of Dao: Attain five different Dao Seeds while still at F-Grade Reward: All stats +5]**

This title wasn't listed in the booklet he got from Brazla, meaning it was likely pretty rare, and Zac could understand why. Most people had tremendous trouble attaining Dao Seeds on their own, and no classes gave five Dao Seeds as far as he knew.

It was the same with Zac himself, all five of his seeds could be linked to the three visions he had seen. The Dao of Sharpness might have come later, but it was only due to forming the foundation after seeing the Dao of Axe that he managed to attain it.

His latest gains had also pushed not only Wisdom but even Luck past one hundred points. That only left Intelligence that was still below that level, currently sitting at

97. But Zac chose to not put any of his free points into Intelligence even though he was so close.

He hadn't heard of any benefits of having all attributes over one hundred, and besides, he would likely gain a couple of more titles before reaching level 75. He didn't want to waste his precious free points into an attribute with limited benefits to his classes.

In the end, he put all his six points into Strength, pushing it 429. He was mostly done, but there was one final thing he wanted to do before checking in on his axe. It was with some anticipation he opened the Dao Ladder, but he could only wryly smile after seeing Abbot Everlasting Peace still sitting on top.

By now Zac felt pretty much certain that the old man had actually attained the Dao of Karma rather than some lower component. He had asked Alyn about it when he visited the Academy, but she knew nothing about it, apart from some rumors.

It was an extremely rare Dao, and those who grasped it were revered as great sages. It was supremely powerful since it was said that a person with a high command of the Dao of Karma could not only see into the future, but he could even tamper with fate itself. He could bring calamity onto his enemies from the other side of the universe if he wanted.

Zac felt a bit helpless, and he had a feeling that passing that old man on the Dao Ladder would be even harder than clearing out the incursions. But Zac didn't begrudge the old man his opportunities and instead focused on the things at hand.

It was time to check on his axe.

The last of the cursed rats fell, and the abyssal shriek from the escaping specter barely registered as Thea sat down with a groan. She was hurting all over, but she was determined to last the final ten days. So many were counting on her, and the very fate of her planet still hung in the balance.

Meeting that Dominator had been a true wake-up call. Her grandpa had always told her to never get complacent, there were always bigger fish to fry, and she wished that he wasn't correct for once. They couldn't even escape that monster, forcing her to use her final measures.

The side-effects of using her ultimate retreat were even worse than she had imagined, and she internally swore for the hundredth time at the Tutorial Pixies. She already knew that using that skill meant losing levels, but the pixies never said anything about losing even more levels from consecutive uses.

When she used it the first time in the mountains back home she lost a level, and while it was regrettable it was better than dying. But this time she actually lost three levels, making her wonder just how many levels she would lose the next time she was forced to activate it.

Then again, the cost of using **[Heaven's Ward]** might rather be related to the damage that was blocked than the number of uses. She had been forced to block over a dozen of those chains after Zac was knocked unconscious after all, and that should have required immense energies. Even that man was barely able to block a handful of them.

The thought of him made her once again open up the hunter ladder, and she was happy to notice that she had finally broken into the top ten of the ladder. The unceasing beast waves that had been ravaging across the mountains the past days had been a perfect opportunity for her since her **[Petal Storm]** was extremely suited for large numbers of weaker enemies.

In fact, she had even gained a full two levels the past days, a feat that would have been impossible back home. After a brief stop at her own rank, she quickly moved down to the 400-rankings to check Zac's status, but her heart tightened when his name was nowhere to be found.

She kept moving further and further down the list but he was nowhere to be seen, so she quickly opened up the Power ladder from back home. Thea breathed out in relief when she saw that Zac still held a commanding lead in the front, but she quickly returned to the hunter ladder.

Finally, she found out what was going on. He had moved all the way up to the 46<sup>th</sup> position in a few hours, once again showcasing his power. Her mouth curved upwards as she gazed up at the skies.

Nothing would stop that man.

Screams echoed across the cliffs as she slowly ripped the limbs from the human, one by one. Anytime she saw the sigil of the Medhin Empire resentment rose in her heart, and she couldn't stop herself from tormenting those people a bit.

She knew that the real family members were off-limits, even though she wasn't thrilled about it. But those rules didn't exist for their subjects. They were just fated to become fuel anyway, and a cruel smile adorned Inevitability's face as she ripped off another arm of the Medhin General.

Finally the screams abated, and the whole mountain became deathly silent. Everything in the surroundings had already been purged by her [**Chains of Fate**], leaving just herself on this mountain.

This small distraction, unfortunately, didn't lessen the frustration that had been building in Inevitability's heart over the months. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. The world had finally changed, allowing them to move into the sunlight. But it came too soon, and they weren't ready. The world welcomed the Incursions, forcing them on the passive.

Not only that, but some insane human somehow managed to go and become an in-name disciple of their master. Forget about becoming official disciples themselves, by now they could consider themselves lucky if their souls weren't ripped out from their bodies when he arrived.

Their ancestors had already failed their tasks, and they had failed as well when the integration finally arrived. Their very existences were hanging by the barest of threads, and her actions the last week had almost closed the last door of salvation.

That beastman was also a decent candidate, but he was below that human that almost managed to kill her in the end. They truly needed this Zachary Atwood to fulfill their goal. But finally, there was some good news. The human was fine, and steadily climbing the kill-ladder.

Void's plan might work out after all. She was sure he had already finished his tasks back in the real world. He never messed around, and he likely set out the minute the trial started. Inevitability once again looked up at the skies, and they didn't seem as bleary this time.

They might just survive the arrival of The Great Redeemer after all.

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## Chapter 243 - Gold and Bones

Zac was about to walk out of his hiding spot, but he suddenly realized something. He was almost completely naked. His brows rose in surprise, but as he looked at the ground he understood what had happened.

Scraps from his former robes lay around him, corroded and discolored. It almost looked like he had molted a layer of skin, and Zac couldn't help but frown in disgust. He had expected the robes to have repaired themselves while he meditated, but he was dead wrong on that point.

The rat vomit must have overtaxed the robes and destroyed the inscriptions. It was regrettable since it was a very convenient item, but Zac wasn't overly saddened by it. The clothes had lost their usefulness to a large degree already. The shields it could summon simply weren't strong enough to protect him against threats anymore.

Besides, he had gained a huge amount of Endurance since he got his second class. In fact, he had more than doubled his Endurance in just a few short weeks. It was to the point that he hadn't really acclimatized to the huge improvements and he still avoided strikes that wouldn't be unable to hurt him.

It became readily apparent during his fight with the rats. He had taken thousands of strikes from the frenzied beasts but he walked away from the battle with only surface wounds that had bled a bit. If he had taken those kinds of strikes during the beast waves he would have been out of commission in no time.

So the loss of the defensive option wasn't really an issue, but Zac would miss the fact that he never needed to change or clean the clothes. It seemed that he would have to go back to his old style of wearing whatever, and he started scouring the mountains of loot in his cosmic sack for anything serviceable.

Finally, he decked himself in the gaudy robes of Tyrbat Medhin, the royal he killed during the first day of the hunt. The robe hadn't displayed any real defensive properties during the fight, but Zac chose it for another reason.

He had decapitated the former owner, drenching the robes in blood, but when he found it in his Cosmos Sack it was completely spotless. This could only mean that it had the cleaning-feature since Zac sure as hell hadn't done a wash during the hunt. Judging by how the man fought, having multiple rings with impressive defensive properties, that also wasn't the only benefit of the robes.

A warm sensation spread through his body the moment he put it on, and he was surprised to see that grime that had set in his hair was turning into steam. In just a minute he was completely spotless like he had taken a proper bath.

The effect was amazing, and the inscriptions must have been designed by a neat-freak. But Zac still didn't like the overly gaudy design, and he felt like Brazla while wearing the clothes. He chose to don a dark brown cloak that covered most of the gold, and since he was dressed he could finally leave his hiding spot.

Zac was filled with anticipation as he walked over toward where he hid the crimson crystal containing **[Verun's Bite]**. He first scanned the vicinity, but thankfully nothing had changed while he was busy with his vision. There was only a sea of rat carcasses all around him.

He also realized that the miasmatic field that he generated with **[Fields of Despair]** was completely gone from the rat den, and not a smidgeon of miasma remained in the atmosphere. It looked like the skill's effects were temporary, meaning that he couldn't use it to terraform his surroundings to become death-attuned.

A full six hours had passed since he hid the crystal, but when he moved the carcasses blocking it not much had changed. The only difference was that the crystal

now was almost completely opaque. Zac barely managed to make out the silhouette of something inside, but he couldn't tell if anything had changed about the axe.

Zac was a bit stumped when he gazed at the huge crystal. It still emanated no energy fluctuations, and it might just as well be a large rock if he didn't know what it contained. But he had no idea what to do with it now. The time on his hands was limited, and he had no idea how long it would take for his weapon to finish its evolution.

He had hoped that it would be done by the time Zac had gained his Dao seeds, but he had no such luck. He also wasn't comfortable putting the crystal into his Cosmos Sack, since he had no idea whether that would somehow interrupt or affect the evolution.

Quite some time passed as Zac stared at the crystal, his frown deepening by the minutes. Finally, after staring intently at the crystal for almost half an hour he gave up and instead took out his shield. He didn't dare to destroy the crystal, so he would have to occupy himself with something else. He had only checked on one of the benefits from finishing his quest, and this was as good a time as any to check out the other.

The shield looked a bit worse for wear, but it wasn't beyond redemption. But it would need to be worked by a blacksmith as soon as he got back to Port Atwood. The first thing he did after equipping the shield was to imbue it with the Dao of Hardness.

He would have thought some change would take place after the infusion, like how his fractal blades changed colors by which Dao they were infused with, but the shield looked just the same. There were no extra layers of protection forming above it either, and if Zac wasn't the one pushing the energies into the shield he wouldn't know it was there.

But he still knew that the Dao worked, since he could feel how it reinforced the whole shield from within. He tried slamming the shield with his fist to test the effect, and there was a clear improvement. He couldn't even leave a dent in the shield after using over half his force, showing just how powerful the middle stage Dao Seed was. Of course, he still knew that he could break the shield if he truly exerted his full force.

But that didn't mean that the Dao of Hardness was sub-par, but rather that the shield wasn't anything special apart from being a high-quality product. It wasn't a Spiritual Treasure like **[Verun's Bite]**, but something along the lines of the robes he just lost.

He also tried to infuse the shield with the Dao of Sanctuary, but the Dao wouldn't enter it, just like how his Dao of Trees initially wouldn't enter his axe. He also tried to infuse his body and his clothes, but nothing worked.

For now, it looked like the second Dao Seed would have to be a passive attribute boost since he couldn't figure out a way to use it in battle. Then again, the power of an early-stage Seed was limited, and not something he would bring out in a battle with his current power.

Next, he started up **[Bulwark Mastery]**, and as he expected there was a guidance system showing him how to work the shield. He had already found out that this type of skill was extremely common, and most classes had a similar one. The difference was that both his mastery skills also provided Dao Visions, whereas the equivalent skills for lower-grade classes just provided the guidance system.

Interestingly enough this guidance system didn't only show him the illuminated paths on how to move his shield, but it also simulated attackers who he had to block.

With Zac's ample combat experience he had no problem to quickly learn the basic steps and movements. It also showed some offensive moves, such as bashing the shield forward, ramming, and pinning down opponents. It even showed how to punch forward and use the lower edge of the shield as a weapon.

Since the skill only was at early mastery it didn't incorporate any of his Daos, and Zac soon stopped training with the skill. He knew that he would be able to advance **[Bulwark Mastery]** with just a day or so of training since the only thing required to advance the mastery to middle was to fully learn all the moves.

But now was not the time for that. Almost a whole day had passed between the battle and his meditation, leaving just 9 more days to reclaim his placements. His position on the hunter ladder had improved quite a bit, but he knew that it would likely get harder and harder to keep gaining positions.

He returned to the side of **[Verun's Bite]**, but nothing had changed since his last check. Finally, he took out some ropes from his sack and started fastening them around the crystal. He decided that he would simply bring the thing on his back as he explored the tunnels.

However, he only managed to walk fifty meters in the direction of the exit before he could hear ominous crackling sounds from the crystal, and he hurriedly put it down. He noticed a large crack running all along the thing, and he wanted to slap himself for his impatience.

The cracks only got worse and spread all over the thing, and Zac could only look on in dismay. But the moment the whole thing shattered a massive aura exploded out from the crystal, forcing Zac a few steps back. Zac's hopes reignited as he looked at the scene from afar.

A large projection suddenly appeared where the crystal once was, reaching over five meters in height. It was Verun, but its appearance had changed a bit. The most obvious change was the increase in size, with its wither height increasing from roughly 1.5 meters to its current size.

Its maw was still an oversized vortex of gristly fangs, making its head just enormous by now. But its body was more proportional, and it rippled with sleek muscles. It felt like a true predator and was felt far more nimble than the stocky barghest, but far more powerful than the agile Gwyllgi.

A shockingly powerful roar emitted out from the specter, and suddenly all the carcasses of the largest rats burst open and blood streamed toward it from all directions. Meanwhile, the actual axe rose from the ground, but before Zac could get a proper look it was covered by the incoming blood.

Thankfully it didn't form yet another crystal though, and after just a few seconds the blood was gone. Verun slowly dissipated, turning into motes of light that entered the axe as it fell down on the ground.

As Zac walked over to the axe he still felt some power undulations from it, but it had mostly calmed down by now. There were some noticeable changes to the axe, the foremost being the head. It was made by some dark metal before, but now it looked greyish-white and seemed to be actually created from an enormous tooth.

Its edge was still curved, but it was slightly larger compared to before, almost reaching half a meter by now. Its edge was a bit uneven as well, and his thoughts still went to Orc Chieftains when he looked at **[Verun's Bite]**.

Zac hesitantly dragged his finger along the edge and he immediately felt a sharp pain as blood started to flow freely from his finger. Even after he imbued his hand with the Dao of Hardness it took a bit of strength to once again cut through his skin, which made it very telling just how sharp the edge was.

There were still a few smaller teeth fastened to the back of the head, but now there was one that was far larger than the others. It almost formed a counterweight and formed a sharp spike that pushed out from the back of the axe-head. Its

needlepoint looked extremely sharp, and Zac knew that it should have extreme piercing power if he needed it.

The handle was still wrought of some wood, though it looked a bit more greyish compared to before. But more interestingly five fractals ran all along the handle. The one closest to the end of the haft was glistening with a crimson red, whereas the others were pitch black.

Zac couldn't be sure, but he felt as though there was a meaning to the colors. He had fed the axe enormous amounts of blood to help it evolve, and the first fractal shone with that very same color. Perhaps he would need to keep feeding it even more blood to light up the other fractals as well.

However, the changed appearance was not the only thing different about it. It also emitted a brutal and unrestrained aura and looking at it felt like staring at a prehistoric beast. Zac couldn't be sure, but it felt that this aura would be even stronger in battle, and it might even possess the ability to suppress his enemies.

The final difference became apparent when he gripped the wooden handle. The moment he touched the haft he immediately sensed another presence in his mind. However, it wasn't at all like the intrusion of the specters he had felt earlier.

It was like he shared a mental connection with another being, and he immediately understood that the connection was to Verun itself. The link even allowed him to communicate in a way, though Verun wasn't sapient like Brazla, at least not yet.

The moment the link was established Zac felt a rapid stream of emotions. Exultation and pride. Recognition and kinship. Tiredness. Not long after the link weakened, and no more emotions were transmitted. However, Zac understood that the link wasn't just a temporary thing, but it was rather temporarily weakened due to Verun being tired out from the evolution.

Finally, he was done with the cave, and Zac effortlessly threw away the carcasses blocking the exit. He took one last look at the cavern that had provided him with so many benefits before entering the tunnel with newfound confidence.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 244 - Immutable Bulwark**

Zac couldn't help being in a great mood as he walked through the winding pathways of the tunnel. He had gotten a slew of power-ups, and even his main weapon had received an evolution. Even better, at the end of the road there was a mountain of treasure waiting for him. Falling into the ravine was starting to turn out all right.

But his mood was quickly getting dampened as he walked. First of all the tunnels felt almost endless, and he started to worry just how long the passages were. Perhaps he wouldn't even reach the inheritance before the time was up. But more importantly, the aura of darkness in the tunnel was slowly increasing, making the air oppressive.

He had no idea what the old Array Spirit had prepared, or whether it even had any control over the situation. But he feared the old spirit was leading him toward the source of the darkness to kill the enemies of his fallen sect. Or perhaps the truth was something completely different.

The words of the old man echoed in his mind, and he had started to form a hypothesis about what happened here. Anzonil had said that everything was ruined by one mistake. Not long ago Ogras told him that countless people in the multiverse had

turned to monsters in their pursuit of power, and Zac believed that might have been the case with this place.

They had either created or come in contact with the mysterious aura of darkness and sought to control it. It was undeniable that the darkness made people stronger, but they also turned into raving lunatics when they were infected. The specters had a humanoid form when they attacked him and Thea on the mountain peak. What if they were the former sect-members? Perhaps Anzonil wanted him to kill the specters not out of hatred, but out of mercy.

But it was a moot point since Zac had no method of killing them unless they were susceptible to the Dao of Hardness for some reason. So it was with some trepidation that he stopped when the tunnel once again exited into a large den. This time there was no ocean of rats, but instead a sea of insects that most resembled ants.

They were more uniform in size compared to the rats, and there were four types. The largest was a huge blob of an ant in the middle of the den, and it was easily over fifteen meters across. Judging by the short withered legs Zac suspected it was unable to move and relied on the smaller ones to bring it food.

Surrounding what was clearly the queen were a few elite guards that were around three meters each, each emanating powers close to that of E-Rank. Finally were the common ants, and they came in two sizes; medium and large. The whole scene reminded him of the Ayr Hive back on his island, though the ants in front of him looked far more similar compared to the extremely diverse shapes of Ayr insectoids. But there was one more difference.

These things were obviously infected by the darkness. Frenzied battles were taking place all among the smaller ants, and the large queen was currently feasting on one of the worker ants. The whole hive emitted a type of insanity and chaos that was very different from the cooperation that usually characterized ant species.

Zac briefly wondered if he would have to cut his way through all manner of creepy crawlies to get to the treasure as he prepared himself for battle. But he didn't really mind since his level was still pretty low, and he would be able to quickly gain some more levels this way.

His thirst for power was at an all-time high since his meeting with Inevitability, and he knew there was no time to waste. This time he didn't opt to stay hidden and spectate and instead jumped straight into the fray with his axe at the ready.

Clattering from thousands of agitated ants echoed through the caverns, drowning out all other sounds, but Zac simply ignored it as he started killing ants with breakneck speed with his axe. The gloomy transformation of the area from **[Fields of Despair]** had already taken place, and **[Deathwish]** was also activated.

Since he had gained the skills already he was using his axe from the start. He wanted to increase his speed as much as possible on his way to the Inheritance. The ants had thick plating to protect themselves, but the upgraded **[Verun's Bite]** cut through them like they were paper, and his speed of killing was unprecedented in his undead form.

However, he was a bit disappointed to notice that **[Deathwish]** wasn't very effective against these beasts. The defense was clearly higher than the offense of the ants, and even though the specters kept appearing around him to reflect the bites they mostly harmlessly hit the chitinous shells.

Zac soon decided to completely abandon the skill since it was just a waste of miasma. Instead, he started work his way around in a circle of the outer area of the cavern. The queen was simply sitting there in the middle, and her bodyguards hadn't

moved. Perhaps the queen wasn't even a combat class, but rather a being that solely focused on birthing more ants to protect the hive.

He wanted to kill all these ants first for the experience and ladder placements, and he was worried that if he killed the boss first the other ants would flee. This cavern was different from the last one, it contained tens of small tunnels leading god knows where, and Zac wouldn't be able to block them all to keep his prey inside.

Suddenly his danger sense rang in his mind, but no matter where he looked he couldn't see anything. But a second later an unseen force slammed into his mind, and he couldn't help himself from falling over with a groan. If he was human he would likely have emptied his stomach by now, but instead the miasma in his body was going haywire.

He couldn't see straight, and it was like his body didn't understand the commands he sent. But a few piercing stabs of pain cut straight through the confusion. It was two of the larger ants that had taken the opportunity to attack, and each had bit into his torso with their large pincers.

Black ichor was slowly dripping out of the wounds, making Zac groan in pain. But his almost five hundred Endurance wasn't just for show, and he got to his feet with a roar. The two large ants tried to distance themselves from him but they were quickly bisected by two swings empowered by the Dao of Sharpness.

They were extremely quick, and Zac held nothing back in his attacks so that they wouldn't have time to flee. He didn't have access to **[Loamwalker]** in his current form so he needed to make sure to quickly kill the speedier targets.

Zac took a few steadying breaths to calm the miasma that was still not fully under control inside his body and looked over at the queen. The air around her shuddered with power, making Zac frown. It had likely shot out some mental attack that briefly rendered him immobile.

Unfortunately, he didn't have access **[Mental Fortress]** as an undead either, and he could only try to fortify his mind with the help of the Dao of Hardness. One of the insights he got into it was a mental resilience, and it should provide some protection against psychic attacks. But the queen was an E-Grade being and Zac had a feeling that a middle stage Dao Seed wouldn't be enough to completely block its attacks.

He quickly popped a healing pill into his mouth as he kept killing the frenzied ants around him, and he was quickly forming a small hill of corpses. It looked like he couldn't ignore the fat blob as he killed its subjects. He would have to hope that the darkness in the smaller ants would make them crazed enough to keep fighting even after their queen died.

He had lost some of his power due to the four gristly puncture wounds, but it wasn't all bad news. The attack from the queen was the third and final strike he needed to endure to complete his quest for **[Immutable bulwark]**. Now was as good a time as any to test it out, and he quickly activated the skill as he rushed toward the center of the cave.

A huge Fractal shield that was over two meters tall and four meters wide appeared in front of him as he ran. It had the turquoise color of miasma, and fractals formed some sort of pattern in the center of it. But the thing that truly drew Zac's attention was the huge sinister spikes covering the shield. The skill wasn't purely defensive.

In just a few seconds he had mowed down over a hundred ants from his charge, and his killing efficiency was even better than when using his axe. The speed of killing beasts was still worse compared to the carnage he could unleash when using **[Chop]**,

but it was a clear step up from waiting for his enemies to kill themselves from **[Deathwish]**.

Zac reactivated **[Deathwish]** as a precaution as was approaching the stronger ants and the queen. Since the bodyguards could pierce his body with their pincers they should be able to hurt themselves as well, and perhaps the skill also worked against mental attacks. To his surprise, almost ten specters immediately appeared in front of the shield, and he quickly realized was going on.

There was a synergy between **[Deathwish]** and **[Immutable Bulwark]**. He had been worried before about the contradictory nature of his first offensive skill. He was a class that focused on blocking, but his skill required him to get hit to hurt his enemies.

He already knew that **[Deathwish]** didn't activate when he used his shield, but that changed the moment he activated his new skill. Any ant that tried to bite their way through the fractal shield was immediately attacked by spectral copies of themselves, proving that an attack on his bulwark was counted as an attack on himself.

The only downside was that both the power and energy consumption seemed worse compared to when he used his own body as the punching-board.

Still, this was an enormous upgrade as Zac saw it, and it would allow him to avoid any damage while simply pushing forward with his new fractal bulwark. The enemies would be gored by the spikes if they didn't dodge quick enough, and if they tried to cut their way through they would be just harming themselves.

Soon he arrived at the encirclement of the larger ants that guarded the queen, and he unhesitantly pushed forward like a runaway train. He even imbued his new defense with the Dao of Hardness as he closed in on the last distance.

But just a few moments before he would slam into the final barrier of ants between himself and the queen another wave of the mental attack hit him. He had already fortified his mind with the Dao of Hardness, but the power in that attack was just massive.

He couldn't stop himself from falling over yet again as miasma was once again going out of control. But the protection of the Dao Seed helped him at least keep his consciousness through the attack, and he quickly placed the shield right above himself for protection. Just a second later he sensed a large stream of energy entering him, proving that at least one of the larger ants had just killed himself on his improvised turtle shell.

He wondered if he would be able to stay beneath his shield while all the ants killed themselves upon it, but the queen soon made herself reminded with another mental blast that shocked Zac's system.

The time between the attacks was far shorter this time, making Zac wonder if proximity was a factor in the attack. In any case, it meant he couldn't stay beneath his shield. The three strikes had drained a large amount of his mental energy, and combined with his Dao usage his head was starting to hurt a bit.

If he kept getting blasted he might fry his brain, and he had a feeling that his Duplicity Core couldn't help him with that. His danger sense was already ringing in his mind, so Zac quickly got on his feet to make a final charge at the queen.

But the moment he got up on his feet he saw an incoming enormous ball of chaotic energies. Zac wanted to move out of the way, but he knew he didn't possess the speed with his current class. He had no choice but to brave it, so he pushed a huge amount of miasma into **[Immutable Bulwark]** as he imbued it with the Dao of Hardness.

A huge explosion rocked the whole cave and Zac couldn't stop himself from being pushed back over fifty meters. His arms shook from the force of the impact, but he was mostly fine. However, the same couldn't be said of the queen.

A large burn-mark adorned her enormous gut, and the thick shell even had some cracks that leaked blue blood. The attack had completely backfired on her, and Zac wanted to take the opportunity to finish her off.

There was only one thought running through his mind as he once again ran toward the shrieking hive queen; this new skill was right up his alley.

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#### **Chapter 245 - Indomitable**

The miasma was roiling inside his body as Zac surveyed the battleground. Broken carapaces and shells were strewn all over, and it was impossible to take a step without putting his feet in a blue puddle of ant blood.

He made a cursory check for anything of value as he walked toward the only passage that didn't seem to be created by tunneling ants. After he had managed to reflect some of the ultimate attack of the hive queen the fight was mostly over.

She seemed to be afraid to attack him again, and that hesitation allowed him to get close enough to finish the fight with his axe. A few quick chops and she was dead. Luckily killing the queen had the effect he hoped for, and the rest of the ants had turned completely insane in their anger, desperately trying to kill him.

He had made a few discoveries during this battle that helped him understand the strength and shortcomings of his new skill. The good was that the defensive properties of **[Immutable Bulwark]** were extremely high.

It also seemed to differ from how **[Chop]** worked. That skill was based on the actual weapon he used, so when he changed weapons so did the strength of the fractal edge change. But his new defensive skill was different. It didn't look anything like his shield, and his actual shield took no damage when **[Immutable Bulwark]** was attacked. He was, however, unable to summon the skill if he didn't have a shield equipped, so they were connected somehow.

Zac guessed that the power was based on his Endurance, like **[Nature's Barrier]**, since it wasn't based on his actual weapon. The miasma consumption was also based on how much the shield was attacked, just like an array.

He had also learned some new things about **[Deathwish]**. It did not appear that it worked on mental skills since the queen had no reaction after attacking him multiple times with the mental waves. This was something Zac had seen as a possibility before.

In fact, there were multiple means of attack where he suspected the skill wouldn't work. Illusions and poison were two other examples. It appeared that there needed to be a kinetic component to the attack, such as a punch or a fireball for there to be anything to reflect.

The battle had also given him three new levels, two of which came from killing the queen. It was crazy to think he had gained ten levels in just one day, but he also noted that the speed was already slowing down markedly.

He almost wished there would be a few more rooms like this before he got to the treasure. There was no real threat to him, and he could generally treat it as rooms full of experience points. However, his worry grew as the corruption in the atmosphere around him kept increasing.

Even the flora in the tunnel he was starting to become twisted and odd, even though the corruption in the tunnels was far lower compared to the caverns for some

reason. Perhaps the array screens that hid the tunnels he used also stopped some of the darkness from passing through.

But even then the effect on the plant life was noticeable. Some of them even produced an odd black substance, and Zac collected some of it in case it could be useful or valuable. However, there was clearly something wrong with the black liquid. He accidentally got a few drops on his hand while he was collecting it, and in just moments he felt rage bubbling up inside him.

It was only a few minutes later that the urge to go crazy and destroy everything around him subsided and Zac was shocked by the effect. Just what would happen if some beast ate these plants on a daily basis?

Zac's wish for more beasts to kill were soon fulfilled as he came to yet another cavern, this one occupied by things that looked like fuzzy scorpions. The battle took around two hours, and he almost got himself killed due to carelessness.

There had actually been a boss hiding beneath the ground all the time, and Zac only realized his mistake when his danger sense warned him of the incoming enormous stinger. He had barely managed to swirl around and block the strike in time.

Time started to blur and hours turned to days as Zac cleansed one cave after another. Zac started to worry that the old array spirit was taking him on a tour in a circle that spanned the whole mountain range. Or perhaps he was walking straight toward the edge that the System had imposed on the hunt.

The darkness was also ever-present around him, and it even started to affect his mood to a slight degree. He found himself constantly harboring murderous impulses that he had to forcibly push down. Only entering a tunnel after a cavern gave his mind some reprieve, as the arrays truly seemed to be darkness filters.

The critters he killed were also turning increasingly insane, and they also started to exhibit various deformities from the corruption. Zac was currently fighting against the patriarch of a cavern that was inhabited by roughly a hundred huge lizards.

Each one of them was close to the E-Grade, but they looked like they were barely alive since they were covered in grisly scars and pus-filled tumors. Some had grown odd appendages and others seemed barely coherent enough to take care of itself.

Zac finally felled the beast, and a surge of Cosmic Energy brought him to level 48. He was only twelve levels away from his main class now, and it proved just how efficient it was to hunt E-Grade beasts to level.

Just the past two days he had killed more E-Grade beings than he had during the first six months of the integration which had skyrocketed his levels. However, the things he had encountered could barely be counted as E-Grade, provided far less Cosmic Energy than the Star Ox for example.

He felt that the speed of gaining levels was slowing down, just like it had with his main class. But he still was extremely satisfied with the result. His time down in the tunnels had also proven an extremely efficient way to grind his position on the hunter ladder, and he had already back jumped up to the 6<sup>th</sup> position.

His gatherer ladder was steady dropping though, and he was down at the 9<sup>th</sup> position now. He had seen multiple names in the top 50 disappear, likely meaning desperate battles were taking place aboveground which was quickly consolidating the wealth.

There was nothing of value down here, and he could only pin his hope to Anzonil's treasure trove. Zac took a last look around the cavern for anything that might be of value, but as usual it was just disgusting carcasses.

But his brows furrowed when he saw that the leader lizard suddenly started shaking, and the next moment a ghastly specter shot out of it with a screech. It made a beeline for Zac, its claws already poised to strike.

Zac readied his axe to meet the incoming ghost, but at the last moment, he had an idea. He quickly moved his axe as he infused himself with the Dao of Hardness. The ghost unhesitatingly tried to rake his chest, but it suddenly shrieked in anger and pain when a copy of itself suddenly attacked it.

It tried to swing right back, but the moment after the spectral projection from **[Deathwish]** had attacked it turned to nothingness. The specter seemed completely enraged and tried venting its anger on Zac.

It quickly unleashed a barrage of attacks on Zac, but between his robes, his Endurance, and his Dao it only felt like someone was scratching him. But the same couldn't be said about the specter. It howled in pain with every strike, and the pain seemed to make it even more desperate as it even tried to bite Zac's head.

Zac had to force himself to stay still, and a small stream of cosmic energy the next moment told him his gambit had been a success. He already knew that **[Deathwish]** returned the same type of energy as the original attack, though it was formed by miasma, so he surmised that if specters could kill themselves then so could he with the skill.

It turned out he was correct, and it was as though a stone had lifted from his chest. If he could actually kill the ghosts by just standing still then he didn't really have much to worry about unless there were some stronger ghosts that they hadn't encountered aboveground.

The piercing wail came to mind, for example. Zac had no doubt that being was E-Graded, and he did not want to test whether his endurance or that thing's power was greater. It had managed to scramble his brains momentarily from god knows what distance, so he couldn't imagine a battle in melee range going his way.

Still, it was with newfound vigor he pushed toward the next cave, and the persistent aura of darkness didn't feel as oppressive any longer. However, more and more ghosts started to appear in the caves, all of them hiding in the stronger beasts.

Zac surmised that they perhaps were draining the energy of those they possessed, and used the powerful animals as personal feeding grounds. He already knew that they were in need of Cosmic Energy to survive going by the thousands of ghosts that had assailed him on the mountain top.

The more frequently appearing ghosts proved they weren't all harmless to him as well. One had managed to slink into his mind just like the last time, and he barely was able to force it out by madly channeling the Dao of Hardness.

It was lucky too, as the ghost had unhesitatingly tried to use Zac arm to sever his own legs with **[Verun's Bite]**. It was by the hair that he managed to stop himself from amputating his leg, and sweat was running down his forehead from the close call.

After that he no longer dared to let the ghosts freely have at him, and instead had his eyes peeled in case they tried to possess him again. The moment he suspected that was what one of the ghosts planned he immediately slashed it with his axe, briefly scattering it and enraging it.

But that also drastically slowed down his speed of killing the things, and it was quickly getting hard to keep track of all the ghosts as they grew more numerous in the caverns. So worry started to grow as the situation was growing more and more strained.

Finally it got so bad that he started wondering whether he even dared to keep going. Dozens of ghosts were wailing in the cave that once housed yet another rat den.

They were frenziedly trying to get at him, and Zac had to keep running as he sorted out which ones were attacking and which ones tried to possess him.

He already knew that putting his back against a wall had no effect, the ghosts could easily pass through them. Even his newly attained defensive skill proved useless against the spectral beings, and they simply flew right around it without being impeded.

But suddenly he gained a surge of energy as yet another ghost killed itself by clawing his chest, and Zac opened up his menu like a drowning man. The surge of power in his body told him that he had finally reached level 50, which meant that he should have gotten a new class quest.

What type of skill he attained and how easily he could complete the quest would dictate whether he would keep going or not. At this rate, he might get possessed at any moment, as there already had been a few close calls the last caverns.

**Indomitable (Class): Attain a high stage defensive Dao Seed. Reward: Indomitable (1/1)**

Zac couldn't help but get his hopes up when he saw the name, but he refocused on the ghosts and slowly whittled them down so that he could focus on the new skill uninterrupted. He still waited on a second Dao Vision, since he still had only got the one.

Alyn had told him that higher rarity classes got more Dao visions, but Zac guessed reality might not be that simple when he noted that Indomitable was yet another normal class quest. Perhaps he had gained one higher-grade vision that awarded multiple seeds rather than multiple weaker ones.

That would in a sense ensure that the seeds he gained would have a good synergy since they came from the same individual. But whether he was correct or not wasn't important at the moment, and instead he focused on the skill. Luckily the quest seemed to count Seed of Trees as a defensive Dao since the quest was already considered finished. He quickly accepted it and he felt a new fractal taking place in his mind.

Zac was elated since the placement was almost exactly identical to the one of **[Mental Fortress]**, which together with its name gave a pretty clear indication of what type of skill it was.

It seemed his luck had pulled through for him once again.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

The Creepy-Cave Boot Camp continues.

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**Chapter 246 - Core of Darkness**

It was already in the next cave that **[Indomitable]** proved it's worth. It was as though the ghosts hit a brick wall when they tried to enter his mind and were then unceremoniously thrown out. That in turn just enraged them even further, and they immediately tried to tear him to shreds in their anger.

Unfortunately **[Deathwish]** did not work in synergy with **[Indomitable]** as it did with **[Immutable Defense]**. The ghosts were rebuffed when they tried to possess him but they weren't hurt in the slightest. It was a bit of a shame, but still, the mental defense was what he was after at the moment. And it seemed to be even sturdier than to **[Mental Fortress]** even though that skill was at late mastery.

It allowed him to keep pushing through the caverns, and Zac had a feeling he was nearing the end of the subterranean system on his sixth day in the tunnels. Almost all of the beasts in the dens he visited were possessed by now, and animals were hardly more than lifeless husks that housed the spirits within.

Killing the animals barely provided any energies at all, but it at least forced the ghosts out of the bodies. But the specters were changing a bit as well, and he noticed that some were larger and emitted more chaotic energies.

A few of them also possessed a minor version of the piercing wail, but **[Indomitable]** blocked out most of the effect from those attacks as well. But the increasing strength of the ghosts also meant that his time wasn't as relaxed as he had hoped. He still needed to be careful about some of the stronger specters, since they could actually harm him with their physical attacks.

It was somewhere late on the sixth day that there finally was a change in the endlessly repetitive pattern of the cavern. It felt like Zac had walked a whole continent cross-country in the tunnels, and he missed the sight of the sun even in his undead form.

The cavern in front of him hinted at change, but he didn't heedlessly head into it and instead opted to properly check it out first. It was simply enormous, at least ten times the size of the dens he had rampaged through before this. It was also the first cave that seemed to house not a single beast.

Instead, the floor was covered with huge pillars that seemed to be made from onyx or some black crystal. Zac couldn't tell whether they were naturally formed or if they were somehow crafted. But they looked too even and sculpted to be a natural mineral, having perfectly even sides as they rose up to ten meters into the air.

There were thousands of them, and if they held value like normal Nexus Crystals then he might have a chance to jump straight to the first placement on the Gatherer ladder. However, his eyes barely glanced over the forest of crystals before they found themselves glued at the center of the cave.

Another crystal could be seen there as well, but it was completely different from all the others. It actually floated in the air, and it emitted such an enticing surge of power that he almost heedlessly ran over to it by instinct.

It felt like the stone had some sort of hypnotic power since his eyes kept returning to it after moving away. But Zac knew it wasn't actual hypnosis, but rather his body craving the power the stone contained just like when he saw the Fruit of Ascension the first time.

The power it emitted eclipsed any treasure he had ever encountered, even the lotus that Abbot Everlasting Peace used. It felt like it held untold secrets, and that if he could just possess it he would explode in power. He would be able to sweep away the Dominators and the Incursions alike, and finally make Earth a safe haven.

But there was a problem. The crystal emitted an extremely dense amount of the insidious aura, and it was to the point that the crystal itself might be the source of the darkness. He had a feeling that if he didn't have access to his new skill that protected his mental state he would have already fallen to madness just by being in this proximity.

However, he still didn't believe his body was lying to him. That thing was truly a grand treasure, and Zac had a feeling that his suspicions about the Eastern Trigram Sect to be true. If they found that thing they would likely do anything in their power to utilize the mysterious power it contained, though it had obviously backfired.

Zac wasn't foolish enough to think that he had what it took to control it if an ancient sect failed, but he was also reluctant to just leave it behind. It was no doubt a

treasure that even eclipsed the D-Grade, and even if he couldn't use it he could sell it or save it until he was powerful enough.

But if this was the source of the darkness then it was odd that there was no protection here. Not a single ghost or possessed beast could be seen, and the tall pillars were the only things around it. But Zac was still wary, and he stayed still and observed the surroundings for two hours.

It cost him quite a bit of miasma just to stay close to the cave, and he needed to keep a Miasma Crystal in his hands to counteract the loss. He was forced to continuously imbue **[Indomitable]** with more energy to counteract the lure of the Core of Darkness, which was what he decided to call the treasure in the center of the cave.

At least nothing had moved in the slightest as he observed the cave, and he had already made a few plans as he waited. He had made up his mind; he would snatch that thing. Of course, if things turned south he would have to let it go, but he refused to leave behind such a treasure without giving it a try.

He had already spotted the exit on the opposite side of the cavern, so he knew where he needed to go. But before he did anything he put on an amulet. Luckily he had brought the amulet that hid his presence from the undead that he got from Ogras, and he hoped that it would at least have some effect in case the ghosts rested inside of the crystals. He also imbued his mental skill with the Dao of Hardness to improve efficiency.

This time he didn't jump down the five meters from his vantage in the tunnel, but instead silently climbed down the wall, careful not to make a sound. The moment he exited the protective array of the mouth of the tunnel he immediately heard a low humming sound.

It wasn't from a person, but rather a sound of all the pillars vibrating. Zac had no idea what that could mean, but he was happy if that was the only sound. It could have been a bunch of ghosts wailing instead, but not a ghost was in sight even after he had climbed down the wall.

He didn't move for a few seconds, afraid he would trigger something, but the droning sound was the only thing that could be heard. So Zac started to silently move toward the Core of Darkness, careful to stay to his pre-plotted path. He was afraid that getting too close to the pillars might trigger something, so he had carefully mapped out the path that would take him to the Core of Darkness while maintaining the highest distance from the crystals as possible.

It was pretty disconcerting to walk between the towering pillars, and it almost felt like he was inside some cursed forest. The darkness both in the atmosphere and the crystal pillars were palpable, and Zac couldn't help but increase his speed somewhat.

He was loath to stay in this cursed place longer than he had to, so he was almost running as he got closer and closer to the Core. But his fears were suddenly realized as a ghost emerged from one of the crystals close to him. Zac immediately disintegrated it with a quick swing of his axe, but its appearance proved that he wasn't alone in the cavern.

Destroying the ghost that way only bought him a few seconds, so he immediately started rushing toward the Core, no longer caring about avoiding making any sounds. Two seconds later an enraged wail echoed through the chamber, and that wail brought with it pandemonium.

Innumerable ghosts rose from the pillars, and soon the whole ceiling was blotted out by the specters. There were thousands of them, many emitting even stronger auras than any specter Zac had encountered so far. The worst-case scenario was true; The pillars housed the ghosts like the possessed beasts.

Zac was full of alarm as he rushed toward the Core of Darkness as fast as his legs could take him, and he even pushed miasma into his legs to increase his speed. Luckily he had managed to pass most of the pillars already, and only a few hundred meters remained.

But a storm of ghosts was rapidly descending on him, and Zac immediately equipped his shield and summoned [**Immutable Bulwark**] and his two passive skills. He held the shield right above his head as he imbued it with the Seed of Hardness.

The ghosts could pass straight through the fractal shield normally, but they were unable to do the same when the shield was empowered by a Dao. They could still pass around it and attack him from the other sides, but it at least lessened the attacks on him a bit.

A few of the larger ghosts were almost immediately upon him, and his miasma was rapidly getting expanded to protect himself from tries to possess him. But not long after Zac started to gain streams of miasma from the ghosts who finally had killed themselves in their frenzied attempts to stop his advance.

But the miasma he gained from [**Fields of Despair**] was far below what was expended to continuously defend, and Zac knew that he wouldn't be able to slowly grind these ghosts to death with [**Deathwish**].

The large ghosts were far too strong. Not only did they manage to rend gashes on his skin that started to bleed the black ichor, but their attempts to possess him also forced him to expend a large amount of miasma. Had it only been the basic ones it would have been a different story, but this seemed to be the place where the strongest ghosts gathered.

He kept putting one leg in front of the other as he ran, and suddenly he was completely unencumbered by any attacking ghosts. Zac looked up with some confusion and found himself staring straight at the Core of Darkness. Desire to touch it almost blocked out everything else in his mind, and his hand even reached toward the shining crystal. But Zac forcibly moved his hand away and quickly averted his gaze with trepidation. That had been too close.

He quickly shot a gaze behind him to find that the ghosts were loath to approach any further. Suddenly one of the smaller ghosts wailed in rage and flew forward to bite Zac. However, it didn't even get halfway to him before it suddenly disintegrated, and its particles were sucked into the crystal.

Zac was surprised since he wasn't expecting it to feed on the ghosts. He even started to consider carrying it in his arms as he fled to the exit of the cave. It would keep even the largest ghosts at bay, providing with safe passage. But he shook his mind after a bit. He didn't dare to actually touch that thing since he had no idea what would happen.

This thing might be the source of downfall of a sect, and running around with it in his hands was tantamount to suicide. He quickly took out a chest wrought of some unknown metal instead. It was pretty large and could contain at least two cubic meters. Inscriptions covered most of the thing and it weighed almost half a ton from his approximation.

It was something he had looted from one of the summit palaces. A bunch of valuables that emitted strong energies had been stored inside it, but before he opened it he didn't sense the slightest fluctuations. So Zac hoped it would be able to contain at least some of the aura of the Core of Darkness, giving him enough time to stow it away into his Cosmos Sack. Since that place was a separate space he didn't think it would be able to cause any problems as long as he stored it.

He ignored the increasingly enraged screeches and wails of the ghosts as he lifted the chest, carefully maneuvering it to enclose the Core. The moment it was fully encapsulated Zac quickly snapped the thick lid shut, but before he could put the chest into his Cosmos Sack a wave of some unknown force cascaded out from the Core of Darkness and passed right through the chest.

Zac only sensed **[Indomitable]** activate, and immediately fail, before his vision turned black.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 247 - Heart of Oblivion**

A slow but steady heartbeat echoed out into the void, each thump vibrating with the primordial Dao. For untold ages the **[Heart of Oblivion]** grew, it's tendrils reaching further and further. But suddenly its sanctuary was encroached upon.

His eyes were the stars and his hand was the sky, and when he moved the Dao shied away. He gripped the heart and clenched with enough force to tear the fabric of reality to shreds. The shockwaves shattered the black hole that the heart hid inside, the explosion destroying innumerable planets.

Unwillingness. Desperation. Hatred. The heart shattered, its remnants fleeing to all corners of the myriad planes. One day it would return.

A tower reached toward the stars, thrumming with dark powers. It was completely black and charred, as though it had been struck by an endless number of lightning bolts, and millions upon millions of bodies hung from varying weapons that had been slammed into its rough exteriors. Darkness slowly swirled around it, a testament to the owner within.

Thousands of warriors desperately fought against a tide of frenzied and putrefied beasts, the wide plains they stood on already covered with the fallen. In the background a towering roc stood perched on a hill, its eyes radiating boundless darkness.

The ghost slumbered deep within the earth, only occasionally waking up in a bout of frenzied mania to wreak havoc upon its former home. A wail containing its self-hatred and desperation couldn't help escaping its incorporeal maw before the darkness once again shrouded its mind.

The young beggar could only look up at the floating palaces in the sky and dream of a better life. But fate had abandoned him, straddling him with a weak body unable to cultivate. He was trash, forever relegated to the lowest rungs of society. But a whispering beckon called to him, and he crawled deeper and deeper into the sewers until he found the pitch-black gemstone that would change his fate.

The scenes kept changing in a dizzying array, and Zac had almost lost all sense of reasoning by now. But one thing in the scenes was constant; the Darkness. Each vision only lasted for a few seconds, but what he had seen was enough to scar him for a lifetime.

Luckily many of the visions were not as bad as the ones filled with unrelenting carnage. Most of the visions were of hidden pockets of the multiverse, where the splinters of darkness drifted about unchecked and unencumbered. The visions kept sweeping him away, but suddenly they stopped as he found himself in front of a woman sitting in a lotus position in a vast cave.

Her skin was as white as death and she wore robes that were completely black apart from the occasional silver details. While her features were unblemished and perfect it was impossible to feel a sense of beauty, and Zac rather only got a feeling of desolation and death from her.

An ocean of miasma slowly swirled around her, its density thick enough to turn the energy into a liquid. Suddenly the woman opened her eyes, and Zac found himself staring into two pitch-black orbs of the abyss.

“Child of Draug, you have stepped on the path of Oblivion?” she sighed as she looked down at her hands. “Is it fate?”

The flurry of visions had stopped, but Zac still had no idea what was going on. Was he teleported, or was this all an illusion? He desperately tried to utilize any method he had learned during his entrapment in the corridor, but there were no clues on how to get out.

The feeling was the same as when he had his Dao visions and the fact that the woman in front of him spoke to him just like the guards indicated this all might be real. His real body was likely still back in the cavern, and god knows what was going on.

Zac was desperate since he knew just how bad the situation was. His real body might currently be exposed to the corruption of the Core of Darkness, and at such proximity, his miasma would soon be drained from the consumption to keep himself safe.

He had a strong feeling his core wouldn't be able to help him out in this type of situation. Either the specters or the mysterious crystal itself would take possession of his body long before the process could finish.

“How curious, I do not recognize your lineage,” she muttered, showing a slight change in her expression for the first time. “Karma ties us, we will meet again. But it is time for you to return.”

A crystalline hand pointed toward him, and suddenly a storm of miasma was ripped out from the ocean around them and crammed into his mind. It felt like his soul would rip to pieces until it was suddenly stabilized by some unknown force.

The next moment enough miasma to explode him a thousand times over were crammed into **[Indomitable]** and it felt like his mind had truly become unassailable. The vision shattered around him, and the last thing he saw were those two familiar pitch-black eyes.

The next moment he found himself standing in the cavern, and to his shock, he was holding the Core of Darkness, or rather the splinter from the **[Heart of Oblivion]** in his bare hands against his forehead. He quickly tried to throw the thing into his Cosmos Sack, but it was too late as it suddenly disappeared with a shockwave. Unfortunately, that wasn't the end of it as he suddenly found an alien presence in his head.

The black crystal had rushed right through the defenses of **[Indomitable]** and entered his mind, and he simply had no means of removing it. Zac was dismayed by these developments, but he had even more immediate concerns. The moment the splinter entered his mind its restrictive effect on the specters was gone.

A cacophony of wails echoed through the chambers as the specters assaulted him with enough wrath to make it seem like Zac had killed all their ancestors. He found himself in the middle of storms of rabid ghosts who completely ignored their wounds as they tried to rip him into shreds. Zac quickly oriented himself and immediately rushed toward the exit at the other end of the cavern.

Wounds were quickly accumulating on his body, and the golden robe of the Medhin Royal was completely drenched black before he had even run a third of the

way. At least he was gaining a huge amount of energy from the continuous kills since the ghosts were even angry enough to attack his Dao-empowered fractal shield.

Suddenly it was as though his whole body thumped from a heartbeat, though not his own, and he couldn't stop himself from falling over from the shock to his system. He quickly looked inward at the splinter, only to see that it had changed, and hundreds of tendrils were growing out, reaching toward his pathways from his mind.

Panic filled Zac's heart, since between the ghosts that inhabited this mountain and the hundreds of visions he was shown he knew only too well the fate that awaited those who were corrupted by the **[Heart of Oblivion]**.

He desperately erected as many defenses as he possibly could with **[Indomitable]** but the black tendrils effortlessly crushed them, and Zac groaned since every defeat felt like his soul was ripped in two. But suddenly a shocking change appeared in his mind.

Archaic fractals wrought out of pure miasma appeared, forming a defense that was infinitely stronger than the one he erected himself. He was completely befuddled for a second, but his mind quickly turned to the mysterious woman in the vision.

Judging from her appearance she should be a Draugr just like him, which might be why she helped him. She also seemed to understand what was going on far better than himself, and it felt like he only kept finding more and more questions as he trudged along.

It seemed he needed to look into the heritage of his current form as soon as possible, and how he could even become a Draugr at all. His cosmos sack back home was filled by notes from Mhal, and Zac felt that it would be a good place to start looking.

But now was no time for that. The mysterious miasmatic fractals had stopped the advance of the black tendrils, at least for the time being. The runes had even created something like a separate dimension that contained the splinter away from his mind and his pathways. But they hadn't stopped the unceasing onslaught of the ghosts. Zac forced himself up to his feet and heedlessly pushed toward the tunnels.

He already used **[Verun's Bite]** to destroy the specters in front, but the wounds were just accumulating too quickly. His vision started to get blurry as he stumbled and almost ran straight into one of the pillars.

A new presence suddenly entered his mind, and his bleary eyes couldn't help but turn toward his axe. It was his tool spirit that had finally awakened from its slumber. Apart from the initial communication after the evolution, it had been in hibernation the whole time.

The only time it showed any reaction had been when he killed E-Grade beasts, at which point some of its blood got absorbed into the crimson fractal on the handle. When he first upgraded the axe it had been a shimmering crimson, but the color had soon dimmed to a weak and watered down red shade.

However, with every kill the intensity of the colors had increased, like killing E-grade beasts were charging up the fractal. By the time he reached this cavern it was already shimmering in a crimson red once again. Zac didn't know how to communicate back, so he simply spoke aloud hoping that the beast could hear him.

"I need help, buddy," Zac said with a raspy voice.

Warmth filled his heart as a roar responded in his mind, and the next moment the huge beast materialized. Another roar echoed through the cavern, and Zac suddenly got a huge surge of energy as Verun ripped dozens of ghosts to shreds with a swipe of its claws.

Pained and even scared wails echoed through the cave as the Tool Spirit almost became unhinged in his goal to destroy everything around Zac. Pillars shattered and were broken from its rampage, and Zac quickly snatched those that he could as he resumed his flight toward the tunnel.

Even though Verun had lessened his burden by a large degree he still was extremely wounded, and the Tool Spirit couldn't block all of the thousands of ghosts. Many still managed to pass it and attacked Zac with suicidal fervor.

Zac popped his strongest healing pills as he fled, and he barely managed to reach the edge of the cavern when suddenly a terrifying sense of danger blared to life in his mind. Zac unhesitatingly hunkered down behind his bulwark as he pushed as much energy as he could into **[Indomitable]**.

The next moment an extremely piercing wail echoed through the cave, drowning out all the calls of the smaller specters. Even with his newly acquired defenses it felt like Zac was hit in the head with the sledgehammer, and he couldn't stop himself from blanking out.

Luckily the wail had also stopped the ghosts in their tracks, and they all ignored him to instead turn toward a huge figure that had appeared sometime in the cavern. A roar echoed straight back, and Verun unhesitatingly pounced on the new threat.

The indistinct figure only pointed at the tool spirit, and the next moment a deluge of darkness flooded out toward it, drowning the spectral form of the primordial beast. Zac's eyes opened in alarm, but he soon breathed out in relief as he saw a stream of light break out and enter his axe once again.

The tool spirit had been forced to flee, and Zac truly felt it was the best course of action as he started running the last few meters toward the cavern. But his surroundings were suddenly blanketed in darkness, and the next moment the form blocked the exit in front of him.

Despair filled Zac's heart since he already knew this thing was the leader of the ghosts, the very source of the wails that had shocked his mind the first time the darkness descended. He also sensed that this being was far beyond his power, being peak E grade at the minimum.

He knew that there was no way to beat this thing, but he refused to give up without a fight. So he readied himself for his final battle with a grim demeanor, but that specter suddenly started to shrink and transform. In just a second the faceless shape of the huge specter had changed, and in front of him stood a man in a black cultivator's robe.

He was mostly humanoid, apart from the same type of third eye as Anzonil. He had a handsome face and he gave off a heroic disposition. But his eyes betrayed desolation, and Zac felt like he looked at someone who had lost all hope.

Zac knew that the man in front of him wasn't alive, at least not in the same sense as himself. Even if the thing in front of him had taken a humanoid form it was still mostly translucent. It was mostly wrought from the energy from the **[Heart of Oblivion]**, but it seemed to be clashing with some force within that shone with a silver luster.

"You... Fool...." the spectral cultivator stiltedly said with a sigh after throwing a glance at the empty center of the cavern. "Tell.... Master.... Sorry...."

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### **Chapter 248 - Cursed Success**

Zac could only gape, and he mutely nodded his head in agreement. He hadn't expected the ghost to speak with him, but it was a far preferable alternative to battle.

"Go..." ghost responded before it turned away from Zac and disappeared.

Zac thanked his lucky stars that the ghost seemed to have regained his sanity, if only temporarily, and he started to run toward the tunnel. A jumbled chorus of screeches behind him forced some extra strength in his legs as he leaped the last few meters.

He sensed a decrease of Darkness in the atmosphere, proving that he once again had passed an array protecting the mouth of a tunnel. He quickly turned around to survey the cavern, and he exhaled in relief when he saw that the ghosts whirled around in confusion. They clearly couldn't see where Zac had gone and frantically flew around in the cave in search of their target.

However, the larger ones seemed slightly more intelligent as they rammed their bodies at the cave opening, making Zac take a few steps back. But the ghosts simply bounced off the unseen shield and roared in rage when they couldn't get through it.

A few of them even tried to rip the air to shreds, and even though Zac was extremely tired and wounded he felt he couldn't stay here. He wasn't sure if they were just unwilling to give up or whether they could sense the splinter lodged in his mind, but creating some distance from this place was probably for the best. He had no idea just how strong those arrays at the opening were, and it was a bad idea to risk it.

He kept walking for a few minutes, and as the rush from the battle waned it was replaced with extreme tiredness. His mind felt like it would explode at any moment. Between those tendrils breaking his mental defenses and the extreme consumption of mental energy his mind was exhausted to the point that his soul might be wounded.

His body wasn't in much better shape, and he was completely covered in wounds all over. It was a good reminder that he still wasn't invulnerable just from his high attributes. A sturdy frame wasn't enough to completely block out the damage from the stronger ghosts who were approaching, or even reaching, the E-Grade in power.

Suddenly the dark caves gave way to light, and Zac stumbled out of the tunnels with some effort. He had walked the last bit on pure will power, but now it was as though the air went out of him. His overtaxed mind barely registered the change in the surroundings as his vision started closing in on him.

There was only a smidgeon of miasma left in his body to barely keep it running, but Zac simply sat down with a grunt and closed his eyes without taking out a Miasma Crystal. It time to let the last of the miasma leave his body and return to his human form.

It was only hours later that he opened his eyes again and finally took a proper look around at his surroundings. It was a hallway that looked very much the same as the one he had arrived at from the ravine earlier. The walls were cut with the same precision, and the hallway was illuminated with the familiar crystals.

It gave such a sense of déjà vu that Zac had to open up his status screen to make sure that he hadn't been stuck in an illusion the past days.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**62**

## Class

[F-Rare] Hatchetman

## Race

[E] Human

## Alignment

[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord

## Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao

## Dao

Seed of Heaviness - High, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Middle, Seed of Hardness - Middle, Seed of Sanctuary - Early

## Core

[F] Duplicity

## Strength

451 [Increase: 55%. Efficiency: 116%]

## Dexterity

232 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]

## Endurance

621 [Increase: 60,5%. Efficiency: 116%]

## Vitality

301 [Increase: 50,5%. Efficiency: 116%]

## Intelligence

97 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]

## Wisdom

113 [Increase: 40%. Efficiency: 116%]

## Luck

101 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 116%]

## Free Points

3

## Nexus Coins

[F] 96 525 943

But the attributes and Dao Seeds remained, proving he wasn't caught in some array. It had even increased since he now once again benefitted from the boost from [Forester's Constitution] once again.

Even before he entered the last cavern he had a free point to allocate, but now there were three. That meant that the insane onslaught of the specters at least had provided him with two levels, making his grind end at level 53 this time around. His endurance was starting to look completely monstrous, though he knew that the increase wouldn't be as drastic going forward.

The final 22 levels of the class wouldn't be so easy since he knew just how many kills were behind the 9 levels to 62. And the 13 levels after that would only be worse. Zac hesitated for a bit, but he finally bit the bullet and put two points into Intelligence. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough for the system to round up to 100, so he put the third and last point inside as well, bringing the total to 101.

There was a direct effect from the addition, and he sensed his power was increased throughout his body, even though his attributes remained the same. He quickly looked at the title screen to see that there was a new addition in the mix.

**[Omnidextrous: Attain over a hundred points in all attributes during F-Grade Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%]**

It pushed his Efficiency up to 121%, and Zac felt the high tiered titles were really starting to provide a huge hidden bonus. It provided around 120 points worth of extra Endurance, and almost 100 points more in Strength, which could likely take anyone by surprise at this stage. That many points were more than many had in total, and he had that just as a hidden bonus.

He was a bit annoyed at himself for holding off on putting the points up there, but he didn't require the extra attributes down in the caverns. The title also wasn't listed in his little booklet of titles, but he realized that might be because extremely few should be able to bring their Luck all the way to 100, at least this early in cultivation.

Zac also realized just how lucrative his week down in the caverns had been when he noticed he had gained roughly 50 million Nexus Coins. It might not have been as high gain per hour as the best stretches in his Hatchetman class, but he had also spent most of the time walking the endless tunnels rather than fighting.

Finally, he was hopefully done with everything here apart from picking up the treasure. After that, he would be able to join the final few days of the hunt, and he couldn't imagine the situation up there to be anything but desperate. The new Daos and attributes would likely come in handy.

Five E-Grade powerhouses were running around up on the surface, two from his and three from the other world. There were the two Dominators, the Medhin emperor, the Medhin Crown Prince, and finally the champion of Berum, Beruv Ylvas.

One of the three Medhin Royals in the E-Grade had disappeared from the ladders three days ago, but Zac had no way to know whether he was killed or simply returned to manage the Medhin Empire. But Zac assumed he was killed since the royal was in the top ten of both ladders. Leaving just a few days before he would get both levels and a title would be crazy.

Zac was still leery about meeting any one of the remaining powerhouses after his battle with inevitability. His progress down here had given him a huge boost in survivability, but unfortunately it didn't provide the same boost in attacking power. But that was a later problem and for now he needed to deal with his banged-up body.

Even though Zac had changed form his wounds were still there, and Zac quickly swallowed a healing pill to speed up the recovery before he took out some of the high-grade meat he had brought. He ripped into it like a starving ghost, and he hadn't realized just how much he had missed the taste of food during the past days.

As he ate he turned his sight inward, and his eyes were immediately drawn to the mysterious black crystal still hovering silently inside his mind. Surrounding it was a string of fractals wrought from miasma, and Zac couldn't help but feel a twang of panic upon seeing them.

He hadn't thought about what would happen if he turned back to human, and had instinctually assumed the crystal would stay locked down behind the fractals. But those were made from miasma, and there was no guarantee they would stay in his human form. He had come very close to letting loose those dreadful tendrils by his carelessness.

But luckily no such thing happened. The miasmatic fractals had turned the area with the crystal into a separate space, and it had no bearing on him as far as he could tell. Still, it felt like having a ticking time bomb inside his mind, and as he sat in the corridor he felt extreme regret over his actions.

Both the ghost and the powerful Draugr woman had seemed to think that he had done something spectacularly stupid by taking this sinister thing. And Zac was inclined to agree after being shown all those visions of other beings that had fused with a splinter. There were no happy endings in those visions.

He had been too impulsive, and his greed had made him get stuck with something that might turn out to be far more troubling than the miasmatic wound that plagued him until his core was formed. He needed to quickly find a way to get rid of this thing since he had no idea how long those defensive runes would last.

As Zac looked back on his actions he couldn't believe it was himself who acted so foolhardy. That thing screamed danger, and he knew that it might have been the cause of D-Grade powerhouses falling. To try and take it was beyond foolish, and he would normally take the long way around such an inauspicious object.

His only conclusion was that he had been manipulated somehow. He briefly considered Anzonil, but he did not think he was the source of the manipulation, though the old man should know the crystal was there. He was more inclined that it was the splinter of oblivion that had corrupted his thoughts in order to get out of that desolate cave.

But there was one good thing that had come from this ordeal. He was suddenly in the first position of the Gatherer Ladder, having passed even the Medhin Emperor. Since he hadn't found anything else of value the past days it could only mean that the parasitic crystal was counted by the System, and it was regarded as extremely valuable.

A thought struck Zac and he got up to his feet with a grunt. Suddenly the whole hallway was filled with mounds of treasures. Zac had poured out everything that seemed to be of high value in his sack but still kept his first position. He had a feeling that even if he lost his whole pouch he would still keep his position.

The East Trigram Sect contained lots of great treasures for newly integrated worlds, but Zac estimated that it was a strong E-Grade Sect, or a weak D-Grade Sect at the best. Anzonil and perhaps a few others were the only D-Grade powerhouses.

Meanwhile, the crystal that had lodged itself in his brain seemed to be a supreme, albeit cursed, treasure that would be considered valuable even on higher-graded worlds. He became extra thankful that he possessed the bangle from Greatest. Otherwise, he might find himself in even bigger trouble from the crystal than from his Specialty Core.

Zac was still far from healed, but he didn't want to wait any longer so he quickly retrieved all the treasure he had thrown out. He looked like he had been dipped in ink from all the ichor, but at least the golden robes were slowly healing themselves.

Zac started to walk down the hallway, and it was with some relief he saw another gate not far off that looked very similar to the last one. This time he didn't equip his shield, but simply pushed open the doors with a grunt.

"Welcome young... uh, human? Were you not a Draugr?" the familiar voice echoed through the majestic chambers.

"I'm leaving for the surface soon, looking like a human is more convenient," Zac said with a shrug as he walked inside the room, not wanting to get into specifics.

Its architecture was similar to the last one, with the pillars and beautiful sculptures, but it was far smaller than the last one. The Array Spirit had already materialized in the other end of the room, roughly twenty meters away.

"How curious. If I wasn't a ghost I'd try to get to the bottom of such a mystery," the old man said as he stroked his long beard.

"Anyway, I am here," Zac said.

"It is good to see that you passed my final trial. To see such an enticing treasure but have both the intelligence to spot the dangers and the mental fortitudes to walk away," the old man said with an approving nod. "If we only made the same choices back in the day, so much would be different."

Zac blankly looked at the old man for a second before he understood what was going on. The array spirit had purposefully led him to that cavern with the intent to test his character. If he was smart enough he'd leave that cursed thing alone and walk straight through the cavern to get here.

"Well yes, it felt like something cursed, I am not strong enough to tangle with such a thing," Zac said with a straight face, but he could feel his ears heating up from embarrassment.

"If I may ask, those ghosts... Are they your former sect members?" Zac probed, eager to change the subject.

The old man sighed and looked at the exit with deep helplessness and sadness in his eyes.

"Yes, it is true. Will you listen to this old man's tale?" the Array Spirit said.

Zac was more interested in the treasures, but he also needed to know more about that crystal.

"Please, go ahead," Zac said.

"The East Trigram Sect was a small sect that could barely be considered a D-Grade force on a low-tier D-Grade world. We only had half-step D-Grade cultivators, but somewhat made up for our lack of power with our insight into arrays," the old man began.

"I am sorry, half-step?" Zac asked confused.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

**Chapter 249 - Creation and Oblivion**

"The trial to reach D-Grade is to successfully form a Cultivator's Core, also called a Cosmic Core. This is not something that happens naturally. There are various methods to do this, but they all have high requirements, and just a minuscule fraction of all E-Grade warriors manage to take that final step," Anzonil said with longing.

“If you almost succeed in forming the core but fail at the last step you have two options. You can let the core shatter and try again at a later date, but doing this will leave you seriously wounded. Even worse, every following core-forming attempt will be even harder.

“The second option is to force your failed core to stay together, which stops the core from completely breaking apart. It will maintain a small part of its original function and you will see a slight boost to your longevity. But if you do that you are still not considered as D-Grade by the System, and you will cut off your path of advancement forever,” Anzonil explained.

“I had already failed my evolution two times, and I knew the third try would be my last. Alas, I failed that time as well and took the second option to at least be able to protect my sect a bit longer,” the old man sighed.

“In any case, there were far stronger forces all around us, and we constantly were under the threat to be swallowed whole. Luckily we suddenly saw an opportunity to rise. The son of the Sect Master was the greatest talent our sect had ever seen. He grasped not only our insights into the study of formations, but he was also an extremely adept warrior with deep insight into the Dao.

“I took him as my Terminal Disciple, pooling all my efforts into turning him into a powerful pillar of the sect. We had no doubt that he would become a true D-Grade warrior in the future, and help our small sect rise given enough time. But war came to the continent, and forces like were destroyed or swallowed up one by one.”

“That’s when that man arrived at our sect,” Anzonil continued, for the first time showing smoldering anger in his eyes. “That accursed man. He appeared to be a rogue cultivator and a complete lunatic. He destroyed half our sect and caused so many deaths with his sinister spells.”

Zac nodded and remembered the sword scars that covered some of the structures up on the surface.

“Through our arrays and great sacrifices, we finally managed to kill him. But that wasn’t the end of it. Out of his body two crystals emerged, emitting boundless power. As you understand one of them was the one that I managed to move to the underground cavern, where it has rested since,” the old man continued.

Zac had a pretty good idea what happened to the other one, and Anzonil soon confirmed his guess.

“The other one was taken by Raval, my disciple.”

Zac’s thoughts turned to the spectral cultivator who blocked his path right at the end, who asked him to apologize to his master.

“After seeing the crystal with your own eyes you must think my disciple to be a brash fool. But those were desperate times. The fate of our sect was already hanging in the balance even before the arrival of that man, and we had just lost a large number of our forces and hidden cards to kill him.

“The moment the surrounding sects learned what happened to us they would immediately launch a full assault. It wasn’t greed or personal gain that drove Raval, it was his wish to protect the sect he loved. As expected the surrounding sects soon arrived with their armies, but Raval exploded with never seen before prowess. He single-handedly pushed all our enemies away, killing dozens of elders and other powerhouses.

“We were all elated, and I even thought of having someone else absorb the other crystal even though it emitted such ominous energies. After that battle, all the surrounding sects stayed away, but Raval started to change over the following years. He got aggressive, moody, and unstable,” Anzonil said with a shake of his head.

“Finally I had to confront him, and that’s when I learned what was truly going on. That’s when he showed me the large square far beneath the surface and the massive tunnel-system he had created. In fact, those tunnels you walked were not made by me, but rather by Raval himself.

“He felt himself getting corrupted by the crystal, and he had no means to remove it. It had completely fused to his very being, and it didn’t even let him kill himself. So he hatched a plan. He created an enormous circle that runs beneath the whole sect and turned that into an array whose purpose was to purify the crystal.

“He circulated the dark energies through this massive array in hopes to slowly grind out the sinister and corruptive elements of the Crystal. After I learned what was going on I spent years working with him to improve the array, and initially we thought we were on the right track. Unfortunately, the power of that cursed object was just too massive,” Anzonil said. “I think you can imagine the rest.”

“I was actually stopped by Raval in the last cavern,” Zac said, making the old man’s brows lift in surprise. “He asked me to relay that he was sorry.”

“Sorry?” the man repeated with sadness in his eyes. “It is I who should be sorry. If I was stronger he wouldn’t be forced to infuse himself with that cursed object to protect our sect.”

The two stood in uncomfortable silence for a bit until Zac finally couldn’t stop himself from trying to gather some more information about the thing in his mind.

“Did you ever learn what that crystal is?” Zac asked.

“Raval called it a piece of the **[Heart of Oblivion]**, and after expending a large portion of my wealth I learned a few things,” Anzonil nodded.

A sour feeling entered Zac’s mouth after hearing that the old ghost had actually already spent most of his money, but at this moment the knowledge might be even more important now anyway.

“My research pointed me toward an extremely old scripture that described the source of Dao and the universe itself. Those things are highly debated topics, so I do not hold much faith that the old sage who wrote it got it exactly correct.

“But when it spoke of the creation of the multi-verse it touched upon a subject of interest for my research. It said that in the beginning there was only Chaos, but from Chaos both Creation and Oblivion were born, the two highest Daos apart from Chaos itself.

“These two Daos created the multiverse, and all the lower Daos were birthed from them. I do not know if it is true since those kinds of Supreme Daos are far beyond my understanding or reach. But I managed to confirm that the Dao of Oblivion does exist, and that it is extremely powerful,” Anzonil said with a face conflicted between hate and longing.

“If what the sage said about the tiers of Daos was true, then one could say that Oblivion is the end-point of all destructive Daos. The rumors we found were that **[Heart of Oblivion]** was born from a splinter of that pure original Dao, which makes it impossibly valuable. However, it was somehow corrupted, which created the sinister energies that permeated it.

“Such power is not something that normal people can touch upon, much less control, which makes it a poison that drives men mad. That’s why great warriors sought to destroy the heart all those endless eons ago. But that thing is truly stubborn and survived, though it is now only a shadow of its former self. But just that shadow is enough to destroy all that it touches,” Anzonil sighed.

Zac thoughtfully looked inward at the trapped splinter in his mind, and a tumultuous whirlwind of emotions passed through his mind before he steadied himself. At first, he was elated that he had snatched a treasure that contained a trace of a Supreme Dao, and he couldn't even imagine how valuable something like that was.

But that also showed just how big the trouble he was in. Raval seemed to have been in late E-Grade when he absorbed the splinter, but he went mad within a decade even though he did everything in his power to stop it. He even built an array that was as large as a country to stem the corruption, but even that only slowed down the process slightly.

If the miasma fractals in his mind broke, how long would he have until he became yet another wailing ghost himself? He would have to put his mind into figuring this out as quickly as possible, but after asking a bit more there was not much else the Array Spirit knew. It was only a shadow of its former self after all, and both its memories and knowledge were limited.

It also begged the question of just who that woman in the ocean of miasma was. Just how powerful must she be if she was able to seal such a monstrous item? And she also mentioned that she didn't recognize his lineage, and he had no idea if that was a good or a bad thing. And just why did she help him? If there was something he knew it was that one couldn't count on benevolence of others. That was how you ended up robbed and dead.

"By the way, you called my race royal, earlier. Could you explain that further?" Zac asked, trying to glean some more intelligence from the old Array Spirit.

"You don't know?" Anzonil said with surprise.

"I have no connection with the Undead Empire, so my knowledge of my heritage is extremely lacking," Zac explained.

Honestly, he hadn't even given the subject any thought before. Whether it said Draugr or Undead in his status screen didn't really make any difference for him, but after the vision and Anzonil's comment he felt that he needed to know more.

"Well, I do only retain a fraction of my memories in this form, so I do not remember all the details. But simply put you are a purebred undead, uniquely suited for miasmatic cultivation," the old man explained.

"Almost all undead are turned species. For example, humans who have died and been infused with miasma. They are not pure undead since their original bodies were not meant for that sort of cultivation. Even their progeny who are born undead are afflicted with the same problem," Anzonil continued.

"Sorry, progeny? The undead can have children?" Zac asked with some surprise.

"Of course, but not until they reach late E-grade and have awakened their bodies," Anzonil nodded as matter of course, giving Zac another surprise.

During the past two weeks he had ample time to scour through his body, and he almost retained none of his bodily functions. His heart didn't beat, and the black ichor in his veins was simply sitting there.

He did breathe, but he wasn't sure if he was just going through the motions or if his body actually picked up oxygen somehow. But he did consume a small continuous amount of miasma to simply function which was different from how it was being in his human form.

"In any case, this mismatch with miasma slows down cultivation and makes it far harder to break through the bottlenecks. In return, the undead has generally higher attributes and they live longer before they turn insane. So if an undead manages to

break through its shackles it will likely be stronger than a human on average,” Anzonil explained.

“Then what about Draugr?” Zac probed.

“The Draugr is one of the five purebred undead races,” Anzonil said. “Even though they look mostly human they are not. They have no living counterparts, the same as the other four pure races. Their origin is unknown, just like the true origin of the undead in general.”

“And this makes cultivation easier for us?” Zac asked.

“As far as I’ve understood it. The five races have a natural connection with Miasma that other undead do not have, and their bloodlines are almost considered holy. If you walked into the capital of some planet in the Undead Empire many of the young lasses wouldn’t hesitate to procreate with you,” the old man added with a perverted grin.

Zac coughed in surprise since that change in demeanor from the old man was quite a shift from the image of kindly sage that he had mostly shown so far. Anzonil seemed to understand what Zac was thinking, and quickly continued with a cough.

“But I wouldn’t recommend it. From what I’ve heard the elders of the five races aren’t big fans of their genes being wantonly spread throughout the Empire. They rely on their superior lineages to that they can maintain their power. They have built up great advantages and heritages over millions of years with the help of their natural endowments, and don’t want it spread into the public,” he added.

Zac was generally happy to learn that he had actually dodged the problem of handling miasma, something he didn’t even know existed. But it only made him more confused. These five races seemed like pretty lofty existences, they wouldn’t likely deign to invade some newly integrated planet.

And why did he become a Draugr because he was stabbed by the Corpse Lord? He was pretty sure that man wasn’t a Draugr. Mhal looked completely different from both himself and the woman in the vision, and he rather felt like something that was the result of Necromancy.

It almost felt like his confusion only increased the more answers he got.

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#### **Chapter 250 - Rewards**

Even though the situation was pretty confusing to Zac he was at least right in front of someone who could help him get a better picture of what was going on.

“Do all of us Draugr look the same? Or can we have red shining eyes as well?” Zac asked just to make sure that Mhal wasn’t a Draugr as well.

“I am not sure, but from what I understand your eyes are unique, and not something other undead possesses. Red shining eyes? The Eternal Clan, another of the five races, might sometimes have red eyes from what I understand. It is part of their blood arts,” Anzonil answered after mulling it over.

“Vampires,” Zac mouthed with surprise, and he quickly asked a few follow-up questions about The Eternal Clan.

From the old man’s explanation, it really looked like they were vampires. Were the old stories from earth all true? Would he encounter dragons and werewolves as well

in the future? But Zac also knew that the red eyes might just be a coincidence. The Corpse Lord neither felt like a vampire nor used any blood arts, so he was likely of some other origin.

Zac kept asking about the Undead Empire and the Draugr, but it was clear that the Array Spirit wasn't as knowledgeable about the subject as with the Darkness. He didn't even know what the other three races of purebred undead were, though he did remember one of them was of the ghost-type.

He also had no idea what different lineages could mean when Zac asked about that in a slightly roundabout way. Anzonil said that there were many old Clans among the Draugr who were considered nobility. One ancient family, in particular, was seen as the de-facto leader of the race. But most of the Draugr were simply normal cultivators, though still elites of the undead empire.

That the woman in the vision didn't recognize his lineage might simply mean that his form wasn't related to any of the major clans. But perhaps there was more to it that Anzonil simply didn't remember or knew. The old man was an array master after all, not an expert on undead genealogy.

Zac's intuition told him that it wasn't something so simple as him not being of noble birth. The Draugr woman had seemed surprised to not recognize him, which might mean that the secret was larger than that. In the end it came back to the notebook of Mhal. He still couldn't read the undead script, but he would make learning it a priority when he came back.

For now, he had no clues of how to deal with the thing in his head, but the Path of Oblivion the Draugr woman mentioned was the first clue, and perhaps he could find more if he looked into the Draugr. Another potential source of information would be Thea's Library.

It was a gift from the System just like his shipyard and repository, which meant that it was a possibility that it contained knowledge that was out of reach from even a Half-Step D-Grade cultivator. He already knew that Brazla's creator was at least a top tier D-Grade hegemon with many powerful allies.

He also knew that the Creators was a supreme race of golems that was almost as old as the System itself. Unfortunately, it was impossible to learn things from them since they only were interested in building and selling their ships. But it proved that it wouldn't be a stretch if Thea's library was ripped from some ancient civilization that had access to all kinds of knowledge.

The only issue was how to get access to the library since knowledge was extremely valuable and Henry Marshall was a wily old man. But his rapport with Thea was pretty good, and he thought he had an idea of how to trade for access without really losing anything. So he would need to find her before the trial ended so they could make a deal.

Besides, it would be nice to see her again to make sure she was okay.

"So... Uh... You mentioned some treasures earlier?" Zac finally asked when he felt he had learned all he could from the Array spirit.

"Yes, of course. I apologize, I do not know how long I've been sitting here, so I took the opportunity to make some conversation after all these years," the old man said with a smile.

"I do not know how it works, but I could try bringing you back to my town if you want?" Zac probed.

Zac mainly asked because he felt bad about the fate of the old man and wanted to let him leave these lonely caverns. But having a sapient Array Spirit to control all his arrays would also be a huge boost for Port Atwood.

“Thank you, young man, but this old man’s work is not done. The fact that Raval managed to regain his form and communicate for a bit is proof of that,” Anzonil smiled.

Zac didn’t understand what the old man was getting at until his eyes suddenly widened in understanding.

“You’re still running the cleansing array,” Zac said with surprise.

“Tens of Thousands of years now,” the Array Spirit nodded with a smile.

After thinking it over Zac finally had a decent picture of what was going on. He had initially seen the darkness as some sort of trial by the system, but he now realized that wasn’t the case. It was Anzonil who released the accumulated darkness from the cleansing array into the atmosphere, like opening the valves of a dam. The System simply used that fact and made it part of the trial.

He wasn’t completely sure why the ghosts only appeared at that time, but perhaps opening the seals also meant that the ghosts were able to sneak out from the caverns for a bit to feed on the dense Cosmic Energy at the summits. They then had to return before the openings down to the caverns closed.

Zac was moved by the old man’s resolve. To rip out a piece of his soul and infuse it into the array just for the small hope to heal his disciple was a true show of love and dedication. He wondered how many would go so far in for someone that wasn’t even family.

But suddenly he had a troubling thought.

“But why is the other crystal inside the purification array? Wouldn’t that make things difficult for you?” Zac asked.

He was afraid that he had somehow ruined the array by taking the splinter of the **[Heart of Oblivion]**, so he asked to make sure.

“It’s truly an impediment to my efforts. Raval and I placed it inside the array to check on the effects of our changes into the cleansing array. But things went south too quickly, and I had no time to move it out when it all fell apart,” Anzonil sighed.

“I can’t get close to it in this current form, and I think that Raval avoids it. I believe the effect of gathering multiple crystals increase your power even further, but the corruption also grows worse. The fact that Raval hasn’t touched it in all these years is proof that part of his rationality remains,” Anzonil said with a smile.

Zac started to get a sour feeling after hearing the old man’s explanation. What would happen if he left without telling the old man what truly transpired in that cave? Anzonil would probably find out soon enough that something had changed in his array, and would perhaps assume that his disciple had consumed the second splinter.

“I guess I should come clean,” Zac said with a sigh and spilled the beans, only skipping over the part with the Draugr woman.

“I was wondering if you would tell me,” Anzonil said with a sad smile, and the next moment a pillar with a Cosmos Sack rose from the ground next to them. “This old man might just be an Array Spirit now, but I can still sense the changes of energies inside my array. You taking that cursed object wouldn’t escape my senses.”

Zac could only wryly smile in embarrassment. It seemed that the old man had been testing him once again.

“But you seem in far better shape than my Disciple ever did, so I didn’t stress the subject. Respecting other cultivators’ secrets is important,” Anzonil added.

“I have a few special means. I didn’t absorb it like your Disciple. The thing is currently locked away in a separate space,” Zac only said, and it was the truth as far as he could tell. “I have no confidence in meddling with such an object with my current power.”

“So you came prepared, that is good to hear. But if you would listen to this old man’s advice then I urge you to discard any thought of actually using that thing. That object might be able to bring you endless power, but also endless suffering. A moment of carelessness will lead to ruin,” Anzonil said with a serious face.

“Thank you. I will not do anything with that thing unless I have full confidence in succeeding. If I ever find a method to control it and help you two in the future I will do my best to find this place again,” Zac promised.

Anzonil nodded with a kindly smile before he indicated for Zac to take the Cosmic Sack. Zac looked over at it and knew that it was the promised inheritance. He couldn’t help but feel it was a bit anticlimactic when he walked over to pick up the small sack.

“You expected piles of crystals and treasures?” the old man laughed when he saw Zac’s blank face.

Zac scratched his cheek in embarrassment. The old man hit bullseye, and Zac had kept throwing glances around the room to find any place that could lead to a treasure trove. He had pictured the inheritance to look somewhat like a dragon’s hoard.

But he had to admit that made no sense when there were Cosmos Sacks around, though the imagery wasn’t quite as strong this way. He went over to take it after an encouraging nod from the old man, and the moment his finger touched the sack it disintegrated into motes of light that entered his Cosmos Sack.

“What a marvelous sack, I’ve never seen anything like it,” the old man muttered with interest. “The creator must have had extremely deep insight into the Dao of Space to merge separate spatial spaces like that.”

“We got it from the system at the start of the hunt. Unfortunately, I do not think we will get to keep it,” Zac explained with a smile as he checked the contents of his sack.

He didn’t have high hopes since the old man already said that he spent most of his wealth trying to find means to help his disciple, but he still was positively surprised by the things that were added. There was a large stacks of E-Grade Nexus Crystals and even a few that shone with even denser energy. There was also an assortment of crystals of various elements, likely meant as energy sources for arrays.

Apart from that there were a handful of intricate boxes, and Zac knew they were meant to house Spiritual Herbs or Fruits. Between the compounding effects of staying inside a Cosmos Sack and the protective arrays of these boxes, the contents inside would stay fresh almost indefinitely. So even if they had stayed here for thousands of years most of the efficacy of the things inside should remain.

Finally, there were ten information crystals that looked like the one that he found the first day. They were conveniently placed in a stand, and Zac quickly glanced that 8 of them contained information about arrays.

One of them was a copy of the one he owned, but the other seven broached other subjects in the study of arrays. Zac knew just how much information that first crystal contained, and with seven more of them he essentially had a full heritage to nurture powerful array masters.

The final two crystals were on another subject, inscriptions. This was knowledge that was extremely valuable to Port Atwood since inscriptions were a part of almost all craftsman classes. Not just Array Masters could benefit from these two crystals, but everything from blacksmiths to alchemists would as well.

“I would suggest not trying to use the D-Grade crystals while still in F-Grade. It might burn your pathways clean,” the old man said. “Then again I guess you rather use Miasma crystals anyway?”

“It is still a great treasure, and I can always trade it,” Zac said, not explaining his situation.

He felt the old man was trustworthy, but he wouldn't divulge his situation to anyone apart from his closest circle. You never knew how it might return to bite you in the ass. The fact that Thea knew about it couldn't be helped since he had turned in front of her due to his wounds.

“That's true. The ten information crystals contain the crystallized knowledge in the art of formations that our Eastern Trigram Sect accumulated over the millennia. I hope that you find a way to learn or give those out to someone worthy so that our knowledge lives on,” Anzonil said.

“I will make sure that this knowledge is not lost,” Zac promised.

He wasn't completely sure whether if he would have time to learn about arrays himself since there were so many things on his plate already. But he was interested in finding a side-profession when things were less hectic, and Arrays was a good option that could help him broaden his skillset.

His current fighting styles were pretty simple and straight forward in both his classes, but adding some arrays into the mix might both catch people unaware and make him more flexible. Some knowledge in arrays was also extremely beneficial while adventuring since he could turn any place into a fortress with the help of some defensive and slaughter arrays.

“Best of luck young Draugr,” Anzonil said as he pointed at Zac. “I hope we will see each other again.”

The next moment Zac was pushed backward like last time, and the next moment he found himself standing on a secluded cliff overlooking the mountains of the Eastern Trigram Sect.

He was finally back on the surface.

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#### **Chapter 251 - Family Drama**

Three men were kneeling on the ground of the large luxurious tent. They were shaking in fright, but not one of them dared to either move or speak up to break the suffocating silence.

“So none of you have found that man after three long days?” the middle-aged man on the throne said with a voice devoid of emotion as he stared down at his subjects.

He had a short beard that was perfectly trimmed, and his black hair was held back in a knot by a jade diadem that was covered in dense fractals. In fact, a casual glance would be enough to spot over ten treasures that would cause a storm of bloodshed if they were placed on the streets of Medhin. But of course no one would even dare dream of taking them from this man.

He was decked in a golden robe with large red fractals. Everything about him screamed of opulence, but no one would ever think the man was anything but a warrior. Part because of the large spear that was never further from him than arm's reach, but mostly due to the suffocating power that naturally radiated from him.

Emperor Nenotheop was nothing like some of the extended family, wastrels who lived a life of luxury while barely contributing to the Grand Undertaking. The core of

the family was a ruthless competition of resources and advantages, or at least it had been until the Grand Undertaking was finally coming to fruition.

Nenothep had killed at eight of his siblings and cousins in his quest for the throne and imprisoned another 14. He was ruthless to others but more so toward himself. He pushed his forces hard, but he had been balancing on the edge of life and death since he was a child, all in order to push himself further on the path of cultivation.

Now that the world was finally flooded with both Cosmic Energy and fortuitous encounters he had exploded in power and had ransacked the whole empire for any benefit that could be seized.

“Three days. Hundreds of men,” Nenothep continued with his even voice as he looked down on his three generals. “Yet the killer of my son eludes you. Do I need to make changes to my ranks?”

The three started shaking even worse since there was no such thing as a demotion, only decapitation, and substitution.

“Witness accounts clearly indicated that Repubat managed to grievously injure Beruv Ylvas before he fell, and we saw the direction he fled. Yet he is allowed to recuperate in peace, making us look like fools,” Nenothep continued, his massive aura causing the throne beneath him to creak from the pressure.

“Lord Emperor, please give us a bit more time,” the man in the middle pleaded without daring to raise his head. “We have found some clues and are pursuing them to the fullest. However, our resources were partly diverted to find this Zachary Atwood.”

Nenothep grunted in displeasure, but he had to admit that he was the one that gave that order just half a day ago. That otherworlder had been his greatest adversary for the treasures of this dead world, and he had once again been overtaken.

He had been shocked to find that this Zachary Atwood, or Super Brother-Man as the ladder called him, was a lone wolf without a support system. He himself had scoured summit after summit, but he also had thousands of soldiers to pick the mountains clean for him.

Yet this man had been stiff competition relying only on himself, and perhaps a handful of helpers. The only answer he could find was that Zachary Atwood possessed a supreme skillset for sniffing out grand treasures, likely combined with a very high Luck-attribute.

Less than four days remained of the hunt, and he couldn't solely rely on himself and his soldiers to accumulate more treasures. Even if he passed Zachary Atwood again he could lose his position at moment's notice. He needed to kill that man as well, even more than finding Repubat's killer.

“Perhaps I can help in that regard,” a golden robed man said as he entered the tent, dragging a shackled woman with him.

Emperor Nenothep looked over at the person who entered his tent with mixed emotions. It was his fifth son, Vasidas Medhin. On one hand he felt pride that he had birthed such a genius, and the man was such a clear successor that he didn't have to worry about the future of his lineage. If the integration hadn't happened he would be a great source of joy.

But now there was also worry, and to certain extent jealousy, in his heart as he gazed at his successor. When The Great Redeemer arrived to their planet the Medhin family would be rewarded from their millennia of efforts and then relocated to their new home.

But there was also a chance to be taken as a disciple by the Great Lord himself, and that had been the goal of Nenothep since the moment he learned his planet was

finally being integrated. But his son was simply too stellar and was quickly inching in on him even though he had five decades of a headstart on the road of cultivation.

That in of itself was a problem. Nenotheop was already closing in on 80 years old even though he barely looked to be forty, whereas his son was only 28. While Nenotheop would still be considered a child of the younger generation in the multiverse it was undeniable it was better to take in as young disciples as possible.

Would The Great Redeemer even look his way when there was another with at least the same proficiency but far younger? Some killing intent was hidden in his heart, but he still hadn't decided on his course of action.

It wasn't due to familial ties, but rather due to caution. Vasidas was no fool, but rather the opposite. He was definitely ready for a strike, and he was likely even planning an attack of his own. So they smiled and lived in harmony as they danced their dance of death.

This is why Nenotheop was a bit suspicious about the motives of the young man, and his eyes turned toward the young woman who glared back at him with her piercing blue eyes.

"I still haven't found the man who killed second brother, but I might have found a way to get to Zachary Atwood," Vasidas said. "This is Thea Marshall, an offworlder who was seen traveling with Zachary Atwood for the first two weeks. Perhaps she would be useful in luring him out."

Nenotheop's heartbeat couldn't help speed up when he understood the opportunity that was in front of him. Zachary Atwood had been simply impossible to locate during the past weeks, but he obviously kept getting treasure after treasure while also killing thousands of cultivators and beasts.

But he hesitated as he looked at the captive. Gaining the first position on the Gatherer ladder would be a great win for Nenotheop, but he held no delusions his son would help out of the goodness of his heart.

Just what was Vasidas planning this time?

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Zac stretched a bit as he got up to his feet. Since both his body and mind were still hurt from the cavern earlier he opted to rest for a few hours once he had returned to the surface. As he waited for his body to heal his mind couldn't help but going toward the Splinter of Oblivion in his mind.

It was still stuck in the separate space along with the miasmatic fractals, though that didn't do much for lowering his stress. Even after asking Anzonil there were many unanswered questions, but he was forced to put them aside for now. The space seemed completely steady, and it was even to the point that he was barely able to see what was going on inside.

But he had other pressing concerns. He needed to figure out what to do for the last days. He was already top-dog on the gatherer ladder, and the top Title was as good as his as long as he didn't get himself killed. But he still was far off his original goal for the hunter ladder.

He had only gained one more position during the past days, putting him in the 5<sup>th</sup> position. He had passed one of the E-Grade powerhouses from his final clash with the ghosts, but he was unsure how long he would be able to maintain that lead.

The two names in the lead were Inevitability and Harbinger, which wasn't too surprising. The third was Nenotheop Medhin, and the fourth spot was Vasidas Medhin. The Medhin royal who had disappeared and helped Zac gain a spot was Repubat Medhin.

Zac honestly had no confidence in being able to pass the two Dominators after having fought one of them, and outright killing them was out of the question. However, his eyes couldn't help but toward the two Medhin royals.

Almost a month had passed since he saw the other world's ladder, but at that time Nenotheop Medhin was level 89, whereas Vasidas was at level 78. He couldn't be completely sure, but he had some confidence in killing Vasidas, or at least surviving if he failed.

But at the same time he wasn't sure if it was worth it. It didn't matter if he improved his position to 4<sup>th</sup> spot on the Hunter ladder since the 4<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> positions gave the same rewards, 3 levels and 50 million nexus Coins.

He needed to either defeat pass not only the crown prince but also the emperor himself to get the 3<sup>rd</sup> reward spot and instead gain 5 levels. But he wasn't as confident against Emperor Nenotheop. He couldn't be considered recently evolved, and that wasn't the only danger with those royals.

The real problem came with the War Arrays they seemed to possess. He could only imagine that the force that the emperor himself surrounded himself with would far surpass that of Tyrbat who he killed with Thea earlier.

There was also the issue of his token. Unfortunately, there was no function where it automatically returned after a while, so he still had no option to retreat if needed. So if he decided to assault the Medhin Royals his venues of retreat would be limited.

So assaulting the royals was a high-risk gambit with limited rewards. Certainly, they both possessed huge amounts of wealth. The Emperor had even more treasure than himself if he discounted the **[Heart of Oblivion]**. But what he had gained thus far already far surpassed what he had dreamed of, and he didn't want to get greedy.

He also didn't know if Inevitability was still after his head, so any large-scale activities might get the attention of the people he least wanted to meet.

In any case, he needed more information. He was pretty sure something had changed up here during his time in the tunnels, judging by the number of points others had gathered. Perhaps there would be some way for him to move up the ladder without having to duke it out with the Medhin Emperor.

The mountain he was dropped off on was one of the decorative mountains with engravings and a large pillar at the summit. However, now he had a feeling that these things were actually disguised components of the massive array running beneath the mountains.

Since there was nothing of interest on the mountain Zac started to make his way down the mountain. He kept his eyes peeled for any signs of cultivators or fighting as he descended, but the area seemed pretty quiet at the moment.

He had quickly noted that the stage had shrunk even further during his time below, and he was a bit too close to the edge for comfort. He hastened his steps as he rounded the mountain so that he'd descend in the direction of what seemed to be the core of the remaining hunting grounds.

But at least it didn't seem that the System would force everyone into a desperate melee at the end of the hunt. The area was still plenty large, and Zac didn't think he would be able to reach the other side even if he tried. Reaching the core shouldn't be a problem though if he skipped ascending the summits.

As he descended toward the valleys between the mountains he quickly realized his assumption from before was correct. The System must have unleashed hordes of beasts into the trial since the foot of the mountain was practically teeming with animals.

There had already been a lot of them at the start of the hunt, but now it was bedlam as packs of animals were fighting no matter where he turned his eyes. The forests were filled with a deafening cacophony of calls, to the point that Zac could barely hear him think.

A new way for him to not only gain a bunch of points but also work on his levels quickly made itself apparent. Why should he risk his life to fight some E-Grade monsters when millions of beasts were waiting to be turned into Nexus Coins and experience?

The hunting grounds had truly become a paradise to grind levels and points.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 252 - Hunter's Paradise**

Zac wasn't annoyed by the ruckus in the forest. If the whole hunting ground was like this it would drown out the sounds of battle, which would allow Zac to act more freely without the risk of drawing the attention from the Dominators.

Zac took out his axe and for the first time in a while summoned the oversized edge of **[Chop]**. As he suspected the edge had changed slightly to accommodate the new form of his axe. After testing the sharpness with his finger and on a few rocks he was happy to see that the edge was far sharper compared to before.

His skill had no problem adapting to the increased quality of the axe, making him wonder if there was any limit to how strong **[Chop]** could become. The skill wasn't upgradeable unlike most of his other ones, and he had worried about what he would do about it. But perhaps there was no need to worry. He only needed to upgrade his axe and the skill would follow suit.

He did however notice that the energy consumption had drastically increased to accommodate the increased power of the fractal edge. Luckily his energy reserves had gained a huge boost lately, allowing him to use the skill even in prolonged battles.

Zac was eager to both gain points and to properly test the might of his new axe and he wasted no time to unleash a storm of violence at the wildlife in the valleys. He flashed back and forth between the packs with **[Loamwalker]**, and his fractal edges were half-moons of death as they effortlessly bisected animals by the dozen with every swing.

There was no contest, his speed of killing was far superior in his human form, and both points and Nexus Coins kept streaming in. Unfortunately, the monsters weren't very strong here and he was hit with the same reduction in rewarded energy as he got when killing Barghest nowadays.

But he wouldn't stop just because of that, and as he kept killing his way toward the next mountain he also started performing various tests with his new Daos. He found that the improved **[Chop]** was almost as lethal as when he imbued the edge with the Dao of Sharpness before his axe upgraded, and when he imbued the upgraded edge it emitted a terrifying aura, like it would almost cut space itself.

He also found that he could imbue his edge with the Dao of Hardness without a problem, though the effect seemed quite limited. Perhaps it would be good when hitting things that would harm his axe otherwise. The Dao of Sanctuary couldn't be infused though, but Zac wasn't surprised by that.

He also summoned **[Nature's Barrier]** and he was happy to see that he finally found a use for his new Dao. The skill had a pretty surprising change when it was infused

with the Dao of Sanctuary. Zac had always been able to change the size of the area the swirling leaves protected to a certain degree, but after he infused it he could almost extend the area by almost ten times compared to before.

Even better, as the size increased the number of leaves increased as well, so the actual strength of the barrier didn't decrease with the increased area protected. However, such a large sphere of protection consumed a huge amount of cosmic energy, so Zac quickly removed his Dao before he was drained.

He would only be able to keep that shield going for a minute tops before completely running out of energy. But that was more than enough if he needed to protect a large group from some incoming threat until it could be neutralized.

The Dao of Hardness worked as well, and it turned the leaves slightly wooden from their earlier glistening emerald. The defensive properties were clearly improved though, but he felt it wasn't quite up to the level of the Dao of Trees. But the skill itself had also been given a huge upgrade with the help of his massive Endurance, and he felt that he wouldn't be completely helpless against Inevitability's chains any longer.

All in all, he had a good all-round upgrade in the cavern, where even his offensive power had taken a good leap thanks to upgrading **[Verun's Bite]**, so Zac had some newfound confidence as he kept moving through the sea of beasts toward the next mountain.

He wasn't as interested in looting the summits any longer and was more interested in finding stronger beasts to fight. But even more importantly he wanted to find one of the five thousand remaining hunters so that he could get an update on what was going on.

The first mountain seemed completely deserted, and he found that the buildings close to the foot had all been looted. Since time was limited he opted to keep going toward the next one, but when he did he suddenly noticed a startling change.

It seemed that the System had somehow arranged things so that the beasts were getting stronger and provided more points when he proceeded toward the core of the hunt. Zac looked toward the core area with a frown, unsure of what to do. The density of the beasts around him was just crazy, but where he was they were pretty weak and provided very little Nexus Coins and Cosmic Energy.

He already had accepted that he wouldn't be able to get to level 75 through the hunt rewards, but he would at least be able to gain at least another level if he moved further toward the core and fought the stronger beasts instead.

He was also more likely to find stronger cultivators further in, which might help him accomplish a task that he had almost forgotten. He needed more alliances back on earth. Partly for Calrin to expand their business, but also to move across the world to close the incursions.

He didn't know how long the inheritances would take, but according to Ogras they usually took just a few hours tops. That meant that he would be out closing incursions in less than a week. There would be a need for infrastructure to be quickly put in place so that he wasted no time traveling between the incursions.

In the end, Zac chose to move further toward the core of the remaining area, creating huge swathes of deaths wherever he went. But the gaps were quickly filled with more beasts swarming to feast on the corpses.

He passed three mountains by as he headed further toward the core, doing a quick inspection for signs of any hunters. But it seemed the outer rim was pretty abandoned, and all the signs of activity were pretty old. But as he approached the fourth mountain he found a clue.

He noticed the grass on a large field to be glistening with blood thanks to the position of the sun, and even the ground was wet. However, there was not a single corpse to be found, meaning the battleground had been cleaned to hide the activity. This strongly indicated some cultivators had been grinding points and levels here recently and then tried to hide it.

Zac quickly scoured the area for any clues, but there was not much to go by. Finally, he chose to stalk the foot of the mountain, hoping to find the person's hideout. He caught a lucky break after twenty minutes as he noticed a man stealthily moving toward a building in the distance. Zac didn't approach though, instead opting to check it out from the distance.

The interiors were completely shrouded in darkness, but Zac already knew his target was inside unless there were hidden exits. However, he was hesitating whether he should enter or just shout from outside. If he entered he would need to break through the array protecting the building, which might give the person inside time to flee or crush his token.

But shouting from the outside would warn the occupant, and with Zac's ladder positions he would be a fool not to flee. In the end, Zac opted for the brute force tactic, and with a flash he slammed right into the array at the entrance with his movement skill.

He was surprised to find himself completely immobilized the moment he passed through the entrance. It was a restriction array, and he hadn't expected such a strong one to be placed down here so close to the foot of the mountain. Zac belatedly realized this was likely the reason this hunter chose this place as a hideout.

A sudden sense of danger in his mind was all the warning Zac got before a sword swung with the intent to pierce his throat with immense speed. However, while Zac was unable to move he could still rouse his Dao Seeds, and between 642 Endurance and the Dao of Hardness the stab barely drew blood.

The next moment Zac broke the array by force and gripped the shocked man by his neck with one hand as he snatched the token with his other. It had been hanging by the man's neck, easily accessible in case he needed to retreat quickly.

"I have some questions," Zac said to the horrified man.

Ten minutes later Zac descended from the mountain once again with a crude map in his hands. It was something John, the man from earlier, had drawn. It detailed the surrounding area of five mountains in each direction, mainly with markers where other cultivators resided and good hiding spots.

With the drastic increase in monsters a shift had taken place on the surface while Zac was stuck down below. There were very few battles now between cultivators, at least in the outer rim. The people here had simply staked out a small area for themselves and used the remaining time to farm the beasts below as hard as they could.

These people had no chance of gaining any rewards from the ladders, but the great density of evenly powered monsters had turned the zone to a leveling paradise. They had already gathered a decent chunk of wealth and felt no need to risk their lives to explore any further.

These people on the outer rim were mainly between levels 35 to 40, and killing beasts here was extremely beneficial as long as they didn't get overrun. And Zac was surprised to note that the levels on earth's power ladder had made a great leap.

Rank

Name

Level

1	Super Brother-Man
62	
2	Salvation
58	
3	Enigma
55	
4	Thwonkin' Billy
54	
5	Thea Marshall
54	
6	Joker
54	
7	Silverfox
53	
8	Daoist Chosui
53	
9	Guru Anaad Phakiwar
52	
10	Thomas Fischer
52	
...	

100	Edmund
46	

His lead wasn't as immense anymore, with everyone in the top twenty having passed level 50. Even though Salvation had been kicked out of the hunt pretty early he hadn't been idle, and he was now level 58, just five levels behind himself. Thea hadn't had as impressive a performance for some reason, and she was overtaken by not one but two people.

Zac was a bit surprised since he knew just how efficient in hunting beasts she was. With the conditions as they were, Zac would have thought that Thea would not only keep up with Salvation but possibly even pass him on the ladder.

His friend the Abbot had been relegated down to the 37th position, but he was surprised to see a new familiar face at the top ten. It looked like Thomas Fisher must have somehow made a huge improvement to reach so far so quickly, since he wasn't even on the ladder before the hunt.

To reach the top 100 you needed to be at least level 46 now. He hadn't thought about it before, but he was relieved to see that he wasn't listed twice. That would have raised some questions he did not want to answer.

However, according to John things were likely not as calm closer to the core of the hunt. He had occasionally heard sounds of battle carrying all the way over here, most notably a massive battle taking place three days ago. John figured it was the fight that ended with Repubat Medhin disappearing from the ladder, and Zac was inclined to agree.

There had been another large battle happening just a few hours before Zac arrived as well, though John was unsure who that was between since no one disappeared from the ladder at that time. It had only lasted for less than thirty seconds though, so John thought it was a lopsided one.

But mostly there was a desperate fight for the top hundred in the gatherer ladder since that one would give out titles. Just being able to kill one or two cultivators could increase one's gathered wealth manifold, skyrocketing them up on the ladder. It was risky, but many of those remaining were willing to take that risk.

After Zac had found everything he needed he had crushed the token of John and sent him back to Earth. He didn't feel the need to steal his treasure as well since he was almost dead last in the gatherer ladder. But Zac also wouldn't let him stay here since he had tried to kill him.

There was one danger for everyone though, not just those staying closer to the core. There were roving squads of Medhin warriors that even assaulted the outer rims in search of treasure. The Medhin Emperor was truly insatiable and had ordered his soldiers to gather everything from animal parts to looting weaker cultivators to increase his wealth.

Zac snorted when he thought about the image of the Medhin Emperor seeing himself get pushed down to 2<sup>nd</sup> spot again, being unable to regain his position. The emperor was likely even scouring the trial ground for him. But Zac had no intention of meeting that old monster.

He was simply content to hunt the stronger beasts and find cultivators from Earth.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 253 - Rats and Champions**

Zac wasn't overly worried about drawing the ire of Nenothe Medhin. Part of the strength of the Medhin Royals was their armies, and even if the Emperor might be able to keep up with him using [Loamwalker], there was no way that the normal soldiers would.

After learning more about the situation he resumed heading toward the central area. Since he wasn't climbing the mountains to loot the summit palaces this time around he was making time, and in less than half a day he passed almost as many mountains as he visited the first two weeks in the hunt.

He was staying away from the mountains altogether now that he knew the situation, instead opting to run through the middle of the valleys between. The monsters were extremely densely grouped there and he also avoided other cultivators who were more likely to stay closer to the mountains.

Beasts were constantly pouring at him, and he had unceasingly swung his arm back and forth for hours. Zac guessed that he'd already killed more beasts since returning compared to the whole week down in the caves. He wasn't even able to properly stop for dinner and instead kept swinging away while eating dried jerky with his free hand.

His guess had been correct about the strength of the animals. After he'd moved this far inland the average power of the beasts was 10 levels higher compared to the edge he started at. If this trend continued then the innermost part of the hunting ground should be filled with beasts close to the bottleneck, perhaps even with a few E-Grade alphas in the mix.

Zac really wanted to go there, but he also knew that was likely where the E-Grade cultivators were stationed. He wasn't ready for that sort of confrontation, so instead he started veering toward the mountains looking for people. However, this time he was looking for people to set up alliances with rather than to gather information.

The mountains this far inside were more populated, and he quickly found a couple of cultivators, sometimes even small groups of them who stayed together to more efficiently hunt the valley beasts. Not everyone could be a one-man army who could freely roam the forests below without any worries to his life.

However, finding people that filled all the criteria wasn't quite as easy. They needed to not only be from Earth, but they also needed to be the leader of a town, unaffiliated to the New World Government, and also have a teleportation array. It was only after finding, or rather cornering, ten individuals or groups of people that he found someone who fit the bill.

It was one of the Scandinavians Zac heard about during his first visit to the New World Government, and Jonas was surprisingly enthusiastic about entering the agreement. Zac was pleasantly surprised since he had been prepared to essentially force the alliance upon people.

But it turned out there was an Incursion close by that they had a hard time keeping in check. The invading force kept growing stronger while they couldn't improve as fast. Zac simply told him to open the Teleporter for trusted people and he would come by within a week after returning.

During the next hours he managed to find three more people who fit the bill, though two of them weren't very close to any Incursions. But at least it would increase his options and open up possible locations for new Thayer Consortia branch stores.

When everyone heard that he could provide shops with both better equipment and lower prices than the System-run stores they were extremely enthusiastic. Good gear was still hard to come by since the stores in the system only provided extremely basic stuff and it was extremely hard to gain equipment-gaining quests.

But the next target he found was pretty surprising. It was one of those rat-like things that Salvation had caught and turned into Silver Soldiers. At that time Zac had thought they were something local, but now that he spotted a living one he saw that it possessed ladder positions.

Zac grew extremely curious and hurried over to catch it. The ratman possessed a dexterity-based class, and it desperately tried to dodge Zac's pursuit. It even used its tail to change direction mid-leaps, but in the end it wasn't enough to escape from

**[Loamwalker]**. Finally, it took out its token, but Zac was prepared and threw a rock that smashed into its wrist, making it drop it.

Zac flashed over and immediately snatched the token before resuming the pursuit. A minute later he had cornered the ratman against a cliff wall, and when it saw there was no escape it looked at him with fear. It didn't say anything, but instead frantically gestured at Zac, but Zac had no idea what it was trying to convey.

"What are you doing? Can you speak?" Zac asked.

"Oh, you're one of the ones gifted with the language skills," the ratman said with a decidedly feminine voice. "Please don't kill me, your ladder position is so high, I won't make a difference. I have people relying on me back home."

"I won't kill you," Zac said. "But I am curious where home is. I haven't seen your kind before, and as far as I can tell there are only participants from two worlds."

"I am from the world with different species. Ishiate, humans, and Zhix," the ratman quickly said. "And I know who you are. You're the human champion of our world, the Super Brother-Man"

"How do you know that?" Zac asked.

"Because we met the other species in the tutorial. We also got a lot of them spawning with us afterward, but most of them are dead now..." she said. "I know about all the ladders."

Zac frowned as he looked at the fidgeting humanoid in front of him. It looked like the mystery of the missing people could be explained through this thing. But what did she mean by most being dead?

"Did your kind kill the humans?" Zac said as he let some of his aura leak out.

"No! We have lost most of our people as well! It's the Incursion! Those crazy golems fill our tunnels and towns with magma, killing us by the millions sometimes," she quickly said.

"Explain," Zac said with a frown.

"Our kinds have lived underground before the integration. We've done so for thousands of years. This hunt is the first time I see the sky," she said and quickly explained her origin.

Apparently, they truly were ratmen like Zac had initially expected. But they weren't always burrowers in their homeworld. A long time ago their sun started heating up, making life on the surface almost impossible. Decade by decade it just got worse, and it was quickly becoming a mass extinction scenario.

First, they started to move their cities into caverns so that the mountains could shield them from the heat, but soon that wasn't enough. They kept burrowing deeper and deeper into their planet to escape, to the point that they soon were tens of kilometers below the surface. Their bodies changed to accommodate this life, and they soon shed their fur and gained excellent night vision.

The integration was somewhat of a relief for them, because the heat from the sun had kept creeping further and further down through the tunnels, and they could only dig so far before heat started rising from below as well. By the point that the integration took place less than fifty million ratmen remained alive, and they had become a minority in their own cavernous cities.

Chaos had taken hold of the underworld, with the Zhix essentially going to war with the other species. But soon it was all moot due to the Incursion. It contained some sort of rockmen, though not the ones that assaulted Port Atwood it seemed. They all possess fire-related classes and were comfortable living underground.

For the first months, the rockmen passively defended their territory as they stripped the ground of its resources, turning into pretty lucrative hunting targets. They gave far better rewards than killing the various beasts that lived in the underground cave-systems. Killing and looting a rockman as it returned to deposit what it had mined would yield an enormous profit. No one had been interested in closing the incursion, and they only realized their mistake too late.

The fire-golems hadn't been just mining about, but they had also been secretly digging massive tunnels all the way down to enormous pockets of lava. One day the whole world rumbled as the golems unleashed the lava upon the underground cities, causing massive casualties.

Now all four species were desperately fighting to both close the Incursion, but the lava had somehow empowered the golems, making the battle a losing one. Even now the remaining populations underground were desperately battling the golems so that they wouldn't be able to keep building those tunnels and lead even more lava toward them.

Zac was shocked that such a thing had taken place without anyone on the surface having any idea. He was also surprised to hear that both Joker and Enigma were people from the underground, and were the leaders of the human resistance. They had been consistently at the top of the ladders since the start, but no one had known their identities until now.

But they weren't the only ones on the ladder. It turned out that the subterranean humans and ishiate were heavily overrepresented on the Wealth Ladder. Greed, Little Treasure and Smaug were all people from the underworld as well.

"Why haven't you built any Teleportation Arrays?" Zac couldn't help asking. "It would allow you to flee up to the surface."

"We have, but we've never seen any arrays apart from our own. Now that I have a better picture of the situation I think that either the distance is too long or that something is blocking us. We are surrounded by pockets of Nexus Crystals and other heavy elements we haven't seen before, perhaps that interferes somehow," she said with a shake of her head.

Zac's eyes widened and he couldn't help but feel some greed. It sounded like the underground was just a treasure trove waiting to be looted. There was also an incursion down there that needed to be closed.

"Hmm... I own a mine on the surface. I will see how far down it reaches, and place a teleportation array as far down as possible. Perhaps I will be able to reach you that way," Zac finally said. "Accept the alliance, and you will see if it works within a week after this is over."

"You're letting me go?" she hesitantly said as she quickly accepted the prompt for the alliance.

"I merely wanted to speak with you from the start, but when people see my ladder positions they try to flee or crush their tokens. So I have to be a bit forceful, but I am only looking for allies right now. The Incursions have killed enough of our people. The situation on the surface isn't much better than underground. But we will strike back as soon as this trial is over," Zac said.

She quickly nodded in agreement.

"I am Justa, I hope I will meet you again," she said as Zac started to walk away.

Zac nodded at her before he resumed his journey. He was pretty surprised there being a fourth race on Earth, but he already knew it was a possibility since Julia told him about the missing people all those months ago. In fact, the situation might be a big

opportunity for Port Atwood. If he managed to connect with the underground there was a fortune to be made.

They were clearly loaded with Crystals and precious metals underground, but they were lacking in many other things. If he could destroy the Incursion he could capitalize on the wealth, and also work as the connection between the above-ground and the underworld. He could probably make a fortune in just transportation fees.

He resumed his relentless carnage in the valleys as he moved toward the next mountain, and he soon found himself back in his routine. As he searched for allies he also encountered a few of the roving Medhin squads, but they were either quickly killed or sent back to their homeworld depending on how they acted.

Many of them had tried to quickly send off various skills into the air, and Zac guessed that the Emperor had ordered them to quickly share their location if they found him or other important targets. But every action in that direction was met with a swift and decisive swing of the axe, quickly killing them.

However, the monotony of his grind didn't last forever. Suddenly a shape barreled toward him from the forest crowns when he was in the middle of a valley. It was the first time he'd seen a cultivator this far into the woods, with most staying close to the mountains so that they had a venue of retreat.

Zac frowned the incoming man, but since his danger sense didn't give any signals he held off on attacking. However, he did activate both his physical and mental defensive skills to prepare for anything. He also activated [**Inquisitive Eye**], and while the information he received was pretty sparse it was enough to identify this stranger.

It seemed that Beruv Ylvas had some business with him.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 254 - Beruv Ylvas**

Zac didn't know what to make of the situation since the man who had stopped some distance away from him was one of the E-Grade powerhouses in the hunt, and the leader of the Resistance against the Medhin Empire. But he did not really look like a powerhouse at the moment, but rather a war-torn refugee.

"I mean you no harm," the man said with a cough.

Zac frowned and took a second look at the man in front of him. He seemed to be in his fifties, though he might be older as outward appearances weren't the best indicator of age any longer. He had long brown hair that was slightly greying in his temples, and it was held back in a leather hoop.

It was the same with his short beard that seemed to be the result of one month without shaving rather than some permanent style. He was a handsome man, but Zac was rather interested in the reason for his current state.

There were multiple dried spots of blood on his body, and even his aura was slightly erratic, signaling serious wounds. He was also pale from blood loss, and almost a sickly sheen covered his forehead. Zac had a strong suspicion that this was the result of killing Repubat Medhin a few days ago. Only a few others should be able to harm him like this.

"I am Beruv Ylvas from the planet Berum. I have been searching for you and a few others in hopes of entering an alliance against the Medhin. Judging by your clothes

you have no problem killing them,” Beruv said with a pointed glance at the golden robes Zac wore.

Zac relaxed slightly since it seemed there would be no battle for now. He remembered that Beruv Ylvas was only level 80, but he should be far stronger than the E-Grade beasts he had encountered so far. Beruv must have done something spectacular since he was the strongest person from his original planet, just like he was the strongest person on Earth.

It also meant that he likely had a handful of the frontrunner-titles such as himself, making him stronger than just his level. He would prefer to fight someone like this blind. So Zac kept his guard up in case he was planning a sneak attack for the wealth he had accumulated.

“I’m sorry, I understand that you have an irreconcilable enmity, but I do not have much to gain by risking my life against Nenotheop,” Zac warily said without turning off his defenses.

“I understand your position, you are already first on the Gatherer Ladder and you don’t have much to gain by joining me. But I am willing to not only give up all the treasure we collect from the operation, but also half of my own,” Beruv continued.

Zac’s brows rose and he had to admit he was slightly tempted. He had already made away with more treasure than he’d expected, but he was the head of a large force. Setting the foundations for a strong army and skilled craftsmen needed heavy investments, and this would be a huge help. The emperor should also hold the war arrays that he had seen everyone from Medhin use, which he really wanted to get his hands on.

“I have to admit it’s tempting Mr. Berum, but why would you go so far to enlist me? You should know by now that I have not broken through to E-Grade,” Zac said.

“I go by Ylvas. And I know you are not evolved, but I sense that you are far stronger than any other F-grade warrior I’ve met. You’re likely even stronger than the two sons of Nenotheop,” Ylvas said with a serious face. “My senses are telling me I might be in danger just by standing close to you.”

Zac surmised that Ylvas should have accumulated a decent chunk of luck by his comment, and he guessed what he said made sense. However, Ylvas did not say that he was stronger than the emperor, which was telling of how strong that man was.

“Still, giving up that much wealth will set you back quite a bit. Why not simply take your treasure and cultivate. There will be other chances to kill the emperor,” Zac probed.

“Killing Nenotheop Medhin is extremely hard since either his position is unknown due to him exploring uninhabited lands, or he’s safe within his palaces. This place is the best chance for our resistance to kill him,” the man said with another cough. “But most importantly I refuse to become the fulcrum for that old goat.”

“The fulcrum?” Zac said with a frown, an ominous feeling growing in his heart.

“I managed to gather some intelligence when I killed Repubat Medhin. We have always wondered how the whole family could possess such power when the normal citizens of Medhin were completely unable to cultivate,” Ylvas said. “It turns out that some old monster called The Great Redeemer visited their planet thousands of years ago.”

“I’m sorry, did you say The Great Redeemer?” Zac exclaimed, not able to hide his shock.

“Yes. Why, do you know anything about him?” Ylvas said, his eyes thinning.

Zac hesitated for a second before he explained the events at the end of the battle with Salvation. Ylvas frowned as he listened to the story, and sighed after Zac was finished.

“It might not be a coincidence that it was our two worlds that were put together on this trial. It seems we both face the same problem,” he said with a shake of his head.

“Could you tell me what else you found out?” Zac asked.

“The Great Redeemer set up gathering arrays and taught the Medhin cultivation. Before he left he gave them a task. They needed to completely dominate their planet before it was integrated. So the Medhin already knew about the integration and that their world would sooner or later become part of the multiverse,” Ylvas said. “For thousands of years they have waited and prepared.”

Zac, unfortunately, wasn't too surprised when he heard the story since it was all too familiar to things on his own planet. The Dominators seemed to have the same past, with the difference that their quest for world domination failed due to the rabid resistance of the Anointed and the Zhix hordes.

But he couldn't completely connect the dots. It seemed that it was Salvation who had the connection with The Great Redeemer, but the terms fulcrum and the similarities were with the Dominators. Were the Dominators working together with Salvation? But they shouldn't have had any contact before the integration.

“What does fulcrum mean?” Zac asked.

“I am not completely sure, but it has something to do with The Redeemer's plans. A few powerhouses seem necessary to use as focal points of arrays. I would be turned into an array flag essentially, and I would rather kill myself than see that happen. But if I die then they will choose someone else,” Ylvas said with fury smoldering in his eyes.

“Turned into an array flag...?” Zac muttered with disgust.

That sounded like an extremely sinister method, and it wasn't something that was mentioned in the array crystal in his possession. Worse yet, if that was how the arrays were created, then the array itself couldn't be anything good either.

But that begged the question of why The Great Redeemer put all that effort. Ogras had already told him that finding inhabited planets that yet weren't integrated was like searching for a needle in a haystack. However, The Great Redeemer had actually found at least two and initiated the same plan for both of them.

It was not a good feeling to know that some old monster might have a vested interest in his planet. But Zac couldn't figure out the reason. New planets certainly had a lot of valuable things, but there was simply not enough wealth to make an old monster traverse the cosmos and scheme for thousands of years.

“Do you know what The Great Redeemer is planning?” Zac asked.

“No idea. I don't think even Repubat himself knew. Either Nenotheop keeps that secret to himself, or perhaps none of them know what's truly going on. The only thing Repubat knew was that The Great Redeemer called the people of the world 'fuel', and that the Medhin would be taken to a cultivator's paradise for fulfilling their task,” Ylvas said with a shake of his head.

“Fuel?” Zac repeated with trepidation.

That obviously couldn't be good news.

“Have you figured out anything to stop this?” Zac asked.

“I can't be sure, but I have formed a hypothesis. Why did The Great Redeemer visit our planets thousands of years ago? Why did he give a family cultivation manuals?

I believe he has formed a Karmic Link with those who use that cultivation technique, and he now uses that link as a means to locate our planets,” Ylvas explained.

“Don’t he already know where our planets are?” Zac asked skeptically. “I mean he’s already been there before.”

“He only knows where the planets were previously. But the integration fused and moved them. We might not even be in the same part of space any longer,” Ylvas said with a shake of his head. “Our planets are shrouded by the system for a hundred years, but I think he has found the means to get around that.”

“You’re right,” Zac said, feeling a bit stupid. “You’re thinking that if you manage to kill all the members of the Medhin Clan you will sever that Karmic Link, making The Great Redeemer lose track of your planet.”

“Exactly,” Ylvas said with a nod. “I think this might be our last chance. If the Emperor is still alive when we return I will have no way to kill him. Their capital is a fortress with extremely strong arrays and legions of soldiers. That’s why I am willing to make that deal. Help me kill him and half the treasure I have accumulated is yours. I would give my points as well, but they are not transferrable,” Ylvas entreated.

Zac was pretty tempted, but he didn’t immediately reply. Beruv Ylvas was on the 5<sup>th</sup> position on the wealth ladder, so the treasures he had accumulated shouldn’t be small. But Zac needed to be alive to enjoy them. He needed to be careful. This wasn’t as simple as a 2 on 1 assault. Even discounting the Emperor’s personal guard there was also his son, another E-Grade powerhouse that had a comparable level to Beruv Ylvas.

“I can sympathize with you, but I am not sure about this. It would probably not just be us versus Nenotheop. There is also his son and their war arrays,” Zac said.

“I believe we do not need to worry about Vasidas. Our spies indicate that the two are at odds and that Vasidas might even be planning a coup. If we assault the emperor Vasidas will likely stay on the sidelines, perhaps only appearing after his father is dead to kill us if he sees there’s an opportunity,” Ylvas said.

“So we would be doing his work for him?” said with a thoughtful nod.

“Also, it would not only be the two of us. I have gathered a few hundred cultivators of Berum who are currently lying in wait. They will help lessen the pressure from the army. Unfortunately, we do not possess as good war arrays, and I therefore need the assistance of another powerhouse,” Ylvas added.

“My plan would be that you stay hidden inside my army, and before they realize who you are you need to strike at the Emyrean Guard and kill as many as possible. That’s the elite force of Nenotheop, and the source of his war array,” Ylvas said. “I will hold the focus of the emperor himself, and after the array is dealt with we will pincer him.”

Zac nodded thoughtfully. Having an army on his side would make things easier, and the plan Ylvas proposed was one where Ylvas himself did the heavy lifting. If Zac managed to get close to such an elite squad while the emperor himself was occupied he should be able to make short work of them all.

But Zac couldn’t discount the possibility that Beruv Ylvas was lying through his teeth just to enlist some help in his quest to kill his nemesis. It was worth remembering that if they managed to kill the Medhin Emperor and his son, then Beruv Ylvas would be the strongest man on their planet.

But there were two days to go, and Zac did not really have anything to do apart from grinding some beasts. He could check things out and gather intelligence to see if the plan would be viable or not.

“I do not have anything against working together,” Zac finally said. “But if I feel its too dangerous to complete I will back away. I am sorry, but I’m not ready to risk it all against Medhin Nenotheop.”

“That’s all I can ask for,” Beruv Ylvas said with a nod of relief and stretched out his hand. “To a successful cooperation.”

Zac hesitated slightly before he turned off [**Nature’s Barrier**] that had swirled around him all the while, and grasped the other man’s hand.

“To a successful cooperation.”

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#### **Chapter 255 - The E-Grade**

Since the two had agreed to work together provisionally the slightly tense situation had abated somewhat at least. Zac chose to not reactivate his defensive skill, though he still kept [**Mental Fortress**] active. However, there was one issue that was weighing on Zac as he looked at the slightly wretched form of the Berum champion.

“I am sorry, but your current condition is a bit... Will you even be able to fight like you are now?” Zac probed.

The man truly looked worse for the wear, and he didn’t inspire much confidence as a potential combat partner.

“I know my shape does not inspire much confidence at the moment. Repubat injured me in a last desperate assault, and the attack was filled with his Dao. That attack weakened me and drastically slowed my natural healing,” Ylvas said with a slightly helpless shake of his head.

Zac nodded knowingly since he had personally been on the receiving end of such an attack; the poison wound from the Corpse Lord. That wound had refused to heal no matter how many pills he ate. Dao wounds were simply far harder to heal, and if that was what ailed Beruv Ylvas their plan might be doomed before they even started.

“However, I have already pushed out the foreign Dao from my body, and my body is currently rapidly healing. My plan is for us to assault the Emperor’s mountain on the last day after I’ve completely healed. Hopefully, we would be able to thin out his forces by hunting the roving squads until then. That way we would weaken their side while gathering information,” Ylvas quickly added after seeing Zac’s troubled face.

“Sounds good,” Zac agreed.

If what Ylvas said was true about his wound then Zac would be able to observe a rapid restoration during the next day. If he still looked wretched at that point then he was lying about his condition. Waiting a few days to assault Nenotheop would also allow him to focus on his goal to hunt beasts and find more potential allies.

“But one condition. I am looking for people from my world to ally with. You can’t kill them,” Zac added.

“I have no interest in fighting them, especially not in my current condition,” Ylvas agreed without hesitation. “Do you think they would be amenable to working with us?”

“I doubt it to be honest,” Zac admitted. “I only have a few friends strong enough that they could help out. In general, our world is far more splintered than yours seem

to be. In fact, when we find people you should stay out of sight so no rumors of us working together have a chance to spread.”

“Agreed,” Ylvas nodded. “I have to say I am a bit surprised you still are looking for allies when you’re the strongest human on your planet. I would have expected them to approach you by now.”

“Well, it’s a bit complicated,” Zac said with a sigh. “For one I got randomized to an island in some remote corner of our planet. The only way for me to find other people is to use my Teleportation array, and no one keeps their arrays public when the world is in chaos. There have also been some false rumors about me floating about.”

“I pray you will be able to unify your world quickly, Mr. Atwood. I have seen the aftermath of those you call the Dominators in this hunt. They are bloodthirsty and even stronger than the Medhin Clan. You will need many allies to bring them down,” Ylvas said with a serious face as he started walking toward the central area.

Zac only nodded and followed in tow. Since Ylvas was hurt he avoided battle as much as possible, leaving the task of clearing a path to Zac. Since Zac’s goal was to grind beasts he didn’t mind, and he soon was back to his routine of clearing out beasts by the dozen.

However, since a stranger was traveling with him he held back his power to a pretty large degree. He didn’t use [Loamwalker], and the length of the fractal edge he displayed was only three meters long. He didn’t even launch it at packs, not wanting to provide the intelligence that he could use ranged attacks. Finally, he refrained from using any Dao, not that it was really needed in any case against some random beasts.

It might have been overkill, but months of listening to tales of betrayal from Ogras it was pretty much by instinct that he tried to avoid leak any critical information about himself. Ylvas did not speak much either, apart from sometimes making some random conversation.

It turned out that the planet of Berum wasn’t completely devoid of Cosmic Energy before the integration in contrast to Earth. Their world had been essentially medieval, and there had been a few people who had the ‘Gift’. It wasn’t nearly as pronounced as now that the world was integrated, but those with the Gift could be a few times stronger than normal people.

Beruv Ylvas was one of these people, and it seemed he had been some sort of general or royal protector in their old world, though it seemed he was unaffiliated now. Zac didn’t probe into that subject though since it seemed a bit delicate. Ylvas had started at level 23, and he received his class inside the Tutorial after only two days.

The reason Ylvas grew so strong was a mix of reasons. He had a headstart, and since he already was an experienced warrior he underwent very hard missions in the tutorial. He had then distinguished himself in the quickly escalating wars against the Medhin Empire, and he quickly became a symbol of the resistance.

Many had voluntarily provided him with treasures such as attribute fruits or Nexus Crystals in hopes that he would get powerful enough to defeat the Medhin Emperor. The world of Berum had celebrated in the streets when they learned that he was the first warrior to pass the bottleneck, which was the first step in resisting the monstrously powerful royals.

“So, what’s the difference between E-Grade and F-Grade?” Zac suddenly asked after a bit.

It was a subject he was pretty interested in, especially now that he was closing in on the bottleneck himself. He actually knew less about the E-Grade compared to the D-Grade, since he at least knew that you formed a Core at that stage. He had Asked

Alyn about it, but she had refused to talk about the subject, citing that one shouldn't get ahead of oneself.

"Hmm... Well, most importantly you get far more attributes per level," Ylvas said after mulling it over. "I gain almost ten times the attributes per level now."

Zac already knew that the E-Grade provided much larger gains per level, but he was still shocked by the sheer number of attributes. It was no wonder that he had such trouble with Inevitability. Even if the Dominator only had an uncommon class he would have gained over 1500 attributes between the levels 75 and 100.

He finally understood what Ogras meant when he said that the low tiered Titles that gave flat boosts would be mostly useless at the end of E-Grade. Even with his huge number of Titles, his accumulated bonus flat attributes were only worth something like 5 levels in the E-Grade.

"But leveling is harder," Ylvas added with a sigh.

"Well, hasn't that been the case since the start?" Zac asked as he dragged himself out of his musings. "Every level requires more Cosmic Energy."

"It's not only that," Ylvas said with a shake of his head. "To gain a level now it's not enough to gather up enough Cosmic Energy through kills or cultivation. You also need to break open a Node in your body."

"A node?" Zac asked, but suddenly remembered the mention in the introduction to formations.

It had said that minor nodes existed in the body, helping the two major nodes which were the Spirit Gate and the Cosmic Core. It hadn't explained exactly what they were though, only mentioning that they contained power.

"It is like a mini-bottleneck. There are spots all through your pathways that need to be awakened, and each node gives you a level. Every time that you break open a node it feels like you break a chain shackling you. Cosmic Energy flows smoother through your pathways, and your body feels lighter," Ylvas continued. "From what I've gathered there are 75 ordinary Nodes, but also a few hidden ones."

"Hidden?" Zac asked with interest, even turning over toward Ylvas while he kept swinging to mow down beasts in front of them.

"Yes, apparently it's special nodes that do not give levels but instead great increases in power. The truly gifted can sometimes open one, or even a few. But it's not needed to evolve to the next stage," Ylvas continued. "As to the method to find and open these hidden nodes I have no idea."

"So they give free attributes like titles?" Zac asked.

"No, from what I understand they give things that are harder to quantify. One might make your sight and reaction far better. Another makes you more in tune with the Dao. That's just examples I've made up myself though, the Tutorial Pixies didn't give any information, and I couldn't afford information about those things," Ylvas explained. "It also seems that different people have different hidden nodes."

"How come?" Zac asked confused.

"Bloodlines and constitution," Ylvas said. "This is something that does not apply to most people. But some clans and races have special bloodlines, and these bloodlines may contain special hidden nodes that give specific powers. Other people have somehow gained special constitutions that have special Nodes. A fire constitution might have a hidden node that helps the cultivator come in tune with flames for example, or even form it within one's body naturally."

Zac nodded thoughtfully. The talk of bloodlines made his mind turn toward his own heritage. At first look it might seem pretty normal, but in truth it was anything

but. His mother was a lofty Technocrat, and such a group might possess special bloodlines.

There was also his newly gained Draugr heritage, and such a species might very well have some hidden nodes to help with Miasmatic Cultivation. That would explain their superior handling of the death-attuned energy. Zac's heartbeat sped up in anticipation, but he quickly cooled his mind.

Even if he might possess special nodes he had no idea how to access them. He had no connection with the Technocrats, and he was afraid to even try to contact them as things were now. If they found out about the thing inside Kenzie it might lead to untold troubles for her, so he even prayed that their existence had been forgotten by their mother and her people.

It was the same with the Draugr, and he was a bit leery about that as well after hearing Ylvas speculations regarding Karmic Links. What if the Draugr woman did not act out of benevolence, but for very different reasons? Planting those runes inside his head might be a way to form a Karmic Link, which would allow her to find the splinter from the **[Heart of Oblivion]**.

She had mentioned that he walked on the path of oblivion, which indicated that she was familiar with the **[Heart of Oblivion]**. And he wouldn't be taken to her place if she had no connection to a splinter since all the other visions were connected to the **[Heart of Oblivion]**. Perhaps she was collecting splinters for herself.

But he would definitely look into these hidden Nodes when he got back since he had other avenues to find information. There were Brazla and the inheritances, both prime sources for such information. Perhaps it would be possible to buy a dossier about common hidden nodes through Calrin as well.

"So the max level for E-Grade is level 150 then?" Zac asked after he had digested the information.

"Yes, that's correct," Ylvas confirmed. "Every node is harder to open though, and from what I've understood most cultivators simply do not have the talent to open up all 75 of them. The majority get stuck on the road of breaking open the nodes even before reaching the real bottleneck of forming a Cultivator's Core."

After asking a bit more he learned that the method to open the nodes was to grind them down with the help of one's cultivation technique and Dao. This made Zac frown with worry, since he simply had no cultivation manual to utilize, and it seemed the Dao alone wouldn't work.

Of course, there were other ways as well. Some pills and treasures could be utilized. But they often came with side effects and were generally only used when you were right at the end and just needed a final push to get to 75 nodes.

Zac frowned when he learned of the different ways to level up. The pills and treasures that could open up Nodes would likely not be too easy to come by, and such treasures usually only worked once like the Fruit of Ascension. Was there truly no way for a mortal to advance without the help of treasures though? He knew that the path of progression for mortals was harder, but it shouldn't be closed-off like that.

"Is there truly no other way to open up the nodes?" Zac couldn't help asking.

"Well, there is one more way," Ylvas answered after some hesitation. "But it is a bit suicidal."

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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## Chapter 256 - Pits and Tracks

### A note from TheFirstDefier

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Spoiler: Spoiler

Suicidal wasn't really what Zac wanted to hear, but he internally sighed and indicated for Ylvas to explain what he meant.

"From what I understand you can brute-force the nodes as well. That's what some try when they are all out of options. You can see every level as an empty glass. When you cultivate or kill enemies you fill the glass with water, and you can keep doing this until it is filled," Ylvas began.

Zac nodded since the explanation was pretty much the same as how he imagined it, though he rather saw it as an experience bar from a video game. When the bar was filled up he would need to level up. Otherwise, he wouldn't gain any more experience.

"When the glass is full of water you need to open up another node, in other words get another glass to fill. Until you do the water will just spill over the edge and not stay with you. Until you break through the cosmic energy will dissipate out from your body.

"But you can also forcibly trap the energy inside your body until the accumulated energy burst the Node right open by force. However, using that method is to dance with death. The more nodes you open the more energy you need, and your body might simply not be able to handle it. The glass of water would shatter from getting too much water crammed into it. In other words, your body would explode.

"And even if you succeed your body will be severely wounded, and you will need to recuperate for a long time afterward. If you include the recovery period it's likely faster to just be patient and slowly grind the Node open with your cultivation," Ylvas added with a shake of his head. "Besides, you would need to kill an ungodly amount of beasts or waste a massive wealth on crystals to accumulate enough energy to force open the nodes, far more than just filling up the glass."

Zac shook his head when he understood how the last method worked. It seemed inferior to the others, working more or paying a fortune for worse results. It looked like the difference between a mortal and Cultivator would start to make itself truly known in E-Grade. Zac wouldn't be surprised if it only got worse on the higher grades as well. He really needed to figure out a way to become a cultivator himself.

But he also had to say that he felt he was pretty suited for such a method. Not only was his body extremely sturdy due to his high Endurance and Vitality, but he also had another important advantage. His body had been tempered by far worse conditions not once, but twice, before.

First was when he jumped into the Cosmic Water and ate the Fruit of Ascension, his body had been ripped to shreds and reformed countless times by the two energies within his body. The second time was when his Duplicity core was formed from killing far too many zombies. That time his body was instead ravaged by life- and death-attuned energy.

Hopefully, those two harrowing experiences would help him out as he brute-forced his nodes open because he did not see many alternatives for him to advance in the future.

The two kept moving through the forests toward the area where the Berum forces were stationed. Apparently, they were spread out and hidden in caves on four different mountains. The resistance leader had also luckily mapped out the areas with both the emperor and where the two Dominators had been seen recently.

The emperor had set up camp right in the core, claiming a handful of mountains as his own. The two Dominators seemed to move around a bit more haphazardly, though they stayed in the same general area. The two forces had also avoided each other until now, which Zac and Ylvas could explain now that they had a better picture of the situation. In a sense, they were part of the same force.

The only reason that Zac didn't turn away then and there was the fact that the Dominators didn't seem to be completely harmonious with the Medhin Empire. While the Dominators avoided the royals Ylvas seemed to be under the impression that they killed even more Medhin soldiers than they killed people from any other force. Perhaps things were a bit cut-throat between the various factions under the Great Redeemer.

They weren't in a hurry to head right over though since Ylvas was still hurt and they needed information, so they stayed a decent distance away from the mountain grouping that the Medhin army controlled. Zac spent most of the day hunting beasts apart from when they went looking Medhin squads.

Everything went according to plan, and Zac even made two new alliances thanks to Ylvas' map and his scouting skills. However, things took a bad turn after catching a Medhin squad.

"What did you say?" Zac said as he lifted the final living soldier by his throat in anger.

"Crown Prince Vasidas has captured the woman called Thea Marshall, and she is now held by the side of the great Emperor Nenotheop. The Emperor promises she is untouched and unspoiled, and that she will be released upon the forfeiture of your ladder position. This offer only lasts until 12 hours before the hunt ends, at which point Thea will be executed," the soldier wheezed out, clearly having been forced to memorize that exact speech.

Zac's thoughts were in chaos and he blankly stared ahead, unsure of what he should do. Suddenly a white flash went past him and the head of the captured soldier fell to the ground with a thump. Zac frowned and looked over at Ylvas who had already sheathed the thin rapier that hung by his side.

"I feared he was trying to stall for time to announce our whereabouts," Ylvas quickly explained when he saw Zac's displeasure.

Zac wasn't too sure about that motivation, but he wouldn't make a big deal about it. He understood why Ylvas wanted the captive to stop talking, and Zac honestly wasn't sure what he should do at this point.

"Is she your ally?" Ylvas said as he looked over at Zac.

"Yeah," Zac simply answered with a somber nod.

He couldn't but help sigh in defeat. This very situation was the reason why he had struggled so hard to find his sister as quickly as possible. The worst thing was that he couldn't comply even if he wanted due to the splinter hidden away in his brain. He could give his whole Cosmos Sack to the emperor and still maintain his position, and the Emperor probably wouldn't believe his excuses.

He honestly would have been happy to dump the [Heart of Oblivion] on the old emperor, especially if it helped save Thea. But now it had caused even more trouble for him instead. It truly was a cursed object.

“You cannot make any deals with the Medhin. Both the Emperor and Vasidas will turn on you the minute they have what they want,” Ylvas quickly said. “They barely consider anyone human, apart from their own family members.”

“I know,” Zac said. “But it still makes our job harder.”

“I don’t think it changes things. The emperor must keep her alive to lure you in, but we can simply pretend you don’t know about the situation. We’ll keep hunting squads and weaken their forces,” Ylvas said.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea anymore,” Zac said. “If certain squads start dropping now they might realize someone is coming for them, losing our small element of surprise. It would give our position away.”

“Fair enough,” Ylvas said.

“Thea is one of the three strongest cultivators of our world,” Zac slowly said. “Freeing her would also bolster our forces. I will quickly set her free first while you occupy the emperor. After that, I’ll hit the personal guard as planned.”

Beruv Ylvas seemed to consider the options for a bit until he slowly nodded.

“That works as well. However, you must hurry. I am not a match against Nenotheop in an even fight, and if he’s empowered by his personal guard I will not even last for thirty seconds. You quickly need to dispatch the personal guard and help me lessen the burden or I will fall,” Ylvas said.

“Agreed,” Zac said.

It truly seemed that there was no getting off this train now. The Emperor and his son had forced his hand. Anger was starting to build up inside him as he kept killing the beasts around them, but he forced himself to keep calm. He couldn’t do something hotheaded that risked both the operation and Thea’s life at this juncture.

So he tried to maintain his calm as the two went back to traveling between the mountains to look for allies and beasts. But an odd sight suddenly entered their eyes. As they traveled they spotted a huge pit in front of them. At first, Zac assumed someone had dug a trap for the beasts.

However, as soon as they walked over they could quickly discount that possibility. While the pit was over ten meters deep there was no evidence suggesting that they had found a trap. There were no spikes in the bottom, and the walls weren’t sheer so even a normal human would be able to simply walk out of the pit.

The two kept walking and after thirty more minutes they had lost count of how many pits they’d seen. Both were completely befuddled at this point, and it even started to make them a bit uncomfortable. They truly couldn’t understand what was going on, and it almost felt like they were walking into a trap somehow.

“Animals?” Zac finally ventured with an unsure voice. “Like rats or moles.”

“No, these are man-made,” Ylvas said. “They are simple holes go straight down, there’s no burrows or tunnels either so they would serve no purpose for shelter. But I do not understand why someone would dig so many holes. Burying array flags? But then the holes should be filled and hidden afterward...”

“Tracks over here,” Ylvas suddenly said as he looked at the ground. “Some huge buggler by the size of the footprints, weighing at least 150 kilos, likely more.”

Zac readied his weapons as the two silently followed the footprints for another fifteen minutes. Luckily due to the size of the one who left the prints they had no problem following them even if Ylvas whispered that they were a few hours old.

Oddly enough it didn't lead toward a mountain, but rather straight into the core of a large forest in an extra-wide valley, and weirder still was that there were no animals around. Since they had entered the zone with the pits there had been fewer and fewer beasts. Zac started to worry that one of the Dominators had moved its camp and scared away all the wildlife.

Suddenly they heard a thundering sound from the distance, and both of them quickly got ready for battle. But they soon realized the noise was actually snoring, and they speechlessly looked at each other. Zac immediately guessed who it was and he wryly smiled as they followed the tracks until they looked at a shoddily camouflaged camp.

Someone had simply broken off a few smaller trees and put them in a circle around a clearing. But the cover wasn't high enough the two of them could easily see the ramshackle structure in the middle. Two enormous feet were sticking out of a much too small cover made out of sticks, and the thundering snoring came from the man inside.

"Stay here, for now. I know who this is. He's an ally, but a bit special. He is also quite strong, so if we can get his help we will have a great array breaker on our side," Zac said as he started to approach the crudely built tent.

"Billy, are you awake?" Zac said as he poked Billy's feet with a stick he picked up. "It's me, Zachary. The Super Brother Man."

There snores continued for a while until they abruptly stopped. The next moment Billy rose from his slumber, causing the whole campsite to collapse in splinters and broken twigs.

"WHO WOKE BILLY?" Billy growled as his eyes wildly looked about.

In his hand was the huge club he'd seen him wear before, looking like a tree trunk with an enormous cranium stuck at the end.

"It's me, Billy. Zachary, the Super Brother-Man," Zac tentatively said as he threw away his poking stick.

"Oh, it's you," Billy said with a snort after he spotted Zac. "I am mad at you."

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 257 - Billy and Alien-man**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

New month, new [Drive!](#) Support the story and read up to 31 chapters ahead!

**Spoiler: Spoiler**

"What? Why?" Zac asked with some confusion as he looked up at the irate giant.

He hadn't done anything to Billy as far as he knew, and he had even gone so far as to send his forces to help him close out the Ratmen Incursion.

"Your stupid horny friend tricked Billy. Made Billy thwunk the big shield and the biggest rat. But the horny guy jumped out of the shadows and stole Billy's money and

strength,” Billy muttered and slammed his club into the ground in frustration, making the whole area shake.

Zac blankly stared at Billy for a second before he could translate what Billy meant. It appeared that old habits die hard, and Ogras had actually stolen the kill of the Incursion leader when they assaulted the Incursion together.

Zac sighed in exasperation at the demon’s antics, but he was also a bit confused. Ogras was stuck at the bottleneck as far as he knew, so killing an Incursion leader would be a waste of Cosmic Energy. It would have been far better if the energy went to Billy instead, bolstering the strength of an ally. Since it seemed both Billy and Ogras were able to kill the ratman it was unlikely it was an E-Grade powerhouse, but it would still likely have given Billy at least one level.

The only reason that Zac could come up with was that there was some hidden benefit for the demon to perform such an action. Perhaps he could receive a title if he managed to be the one to kill a competing incursion leader. But in any case, such an action could put a strain on the alliance, especially when the other side was someone like Billy.

“I’m sorry Billy. Ogras is a bit stupid, I will make him give some good things to you as an apology when we go back,” Zac said, which brightened the giant right up. “And uh, it’s called horned, not horny.”

“What are you doing here?” Zac followed up as he looked at the surroundings a bit skeptically.

He had actually almost forgotten Billy was in this hunt due to his less than stellar ladder positions. Billy was below the top 100 of the Hunter ladder, which was surprisingly low considering his strength, and his Gatherer placement was just abysmal. He wasn’t even in the top 1000.

“Billy looking for treasure while hiding,” the giant said and looked around before bending over toward Zac. “Nigel told me the big secret of the hunt. There are big evil bosses in here. If Billy manages to hide from all big bosses until he gets sent back then he gets a BIG bonus reward.”

Zac gaped at the hogwash that came out of Billy’s mouth. Nigel had obviously been worried about Billy doing something reckless, and tricked him to stay safe with the promise of rewards.

“Yes, I heard something like that as well,” Zac coughed. “You are doing a good job.”

“This hunt is so hard, Billy has looked for treasure everywhere, but there’s no treasure. Thwonking animals instead is easier, gives you money and makes you stronger,” the giant sighed. “But all animals keeps running away from Billy.”

Zac frowned in confusion when Billy told him that there were no treasures. It didn’t really matter which palace he had visited, they were all filled with a decent amount of valuables. Of course, most had likely been looted at this point, but to not find almost anything for a month was exceedingly unlucky.

As for the reason why the animal ran away from Billy, it wasn’t as big a mystery. The giant’s aura was completely unrestrained as it billowed out from him. Zac was surprised how heavy it was. He knew that Ogras had told him Billy was very strong, but the aura that emanated from him was far greater compared to when they met during the Auction. But Zac wouldn’t pry since it was rude to look into other’s fortuitous encounters.

“Did you not find anything in the palaces? On top of the mountains?” Zac probed.

“Billy did not go there. Billy went once and was attacked by ghosts, Billy ain’t going up there again,” the giant said with eyes big as saucers. “Mama told Billy that treasure is always buried, hidden by pirates. Billy has no treasure map so Billy has been digging all over the forest. But Billy has been unlucky and not looted a single treasure chest.”

Billy then gestured at a few pits not far away, and Zac was stunned silent. Zac had no idea how to speak with this simple giant. For one he didn’t know if he should even tell Billy about how the hunt worked this late into the game, but he also was unsure whether he would even be able to explain it in a way so that Billy would understand.

“Nigel didn’t come as well?” Zac asked, hoping for some help from the translator.

“Nigel is stupid. Billy even had an extra ticket, but Nigel was scared,” Billy said with a disdainful shake of his head. “Nigel said he will help make Billyville better while Billy hunts. Nigel sold the ticket instead.”

Zac nodded thoughtfully as he gazed at the giant. His initial idea when he realized it was Billy who stayed here had been to invite him to help in the fight against the Medhin, but he wasn’t sure anymore. It felt like he would trick Billy into risking his life in a feud that wasn’t really his.

“What are you doing here?” Billy suddenly asked, as if remembering that Zac had appeared out of nowhere.

After a brief hesitation, Zac decided to tell Billy the truth.

“A very strong bad guy has taken Thea Marshall a prisoner. I am going with a few friends to beat him up and help Thea,” Zac said.

“Bad guys have taken Thea?” Billy said, immediately looking angered.

“You know Thea?” Zac asked a bit curious.

“Thea gave Billy lots of tasty things after the auction, she is Billy’s friend. Billy will come with you and thwunk the bad guys,” Billy unhesitantly said. “Besides, mama always says you need to help those in need.”

Zac slowly nodded in agreement before he started hesitating again.

“The bad guy is Nenotheop Medhin, an emperor from the other world we are doing this hunt with,” Zac started to explain, but was cut off by Billy.

“Other world? What?” Billy asked with a vacant stare.

“Uh, never mind. Anyway, Nenotheop is very strong. He has evolved to E-Grade. Do you know about E-Grade?” Zac tentatively asked.

“Yes, Nigel said that after level 75 you get very strong. That is E-Grade,” Billy nodded with a serious face. “But as long as he has a head Billy can thwunk it.”

“Good. We will trick him a bit first though. You and I are smart, and we will trick the bad guys. We will work together to save Thea. Then we will all thwunk the bad guys together, ok?” Zac said.

“Good!” Billy enthusiastically nodded and even slammed the enormous club in the ground with enough power to cause cracks tens of meters long to spread out from the camp.

The two were soon joined by Ylvas, who clearly had some trouble adapting to Billy’s mannerisms. But soon enough they were back on track, heading toward the hidden camp of the Berum forces. However, Billy’s aura and fighting style proved to be somewhat of a problem since there seemed to be no moderation to his methods.

“Are you sure this is okay? Your friend is a bit... impulsive,” Ylvas said with a low voice as he watched Billy rove forward like a natural disaster, each swing of the

monstrous club causing everything from beasts to huge boulders to turn into small chunks on the ground.

“He is a bit simple, but he has the highest Strength of anyone on our planet as far as I know, apart from the Dominators perhaps,” Zac whispered back. “Every aspect of him is designed for heavy hits. He effortlessly broke an array in one swing that my number one general wouldn’t even be able to break no matter the time given. He is also good friends with the captured woman, so I wanted to let him make his own decision.”

Ylvas thoughtfully nodded as he looked at the huge club ripping through the air back and forth. It clearly was incredibly heavy, but Billy’s bulging arms didn’t even seem to strain as it tore through the air.

“Fair point. The Medhin squads always allocate at least a third of their men to erect barriers to protect those who use the War Arrays. If this man can crack open the array for the personal guard, allowing you to slip in, our chances would become far better,” Ylvas agreed. “Only one day remains until the time for our assault. I suggest we head toward the closest base by now. But first we need to teach this man to be more circumspect.”

“Agreed,” Zac nodded, and soon they stopped and called over Billy.

After some explaining, or rather bribing with large slabs of grilled meat, Zac managed to get Billy to take a break from his clobbering. Instead, he took over and dispatched the beasts in a more silent way.

“Billy don’t like that fighting way. Reminds Billy of your horny friend,” Billy muttered when he saw Zac trying to kill the animals as quietly as possible.

“Horned friend, Billy. And I agree, I don’t like fighting like this either. But remember, you told me we needed to stay hidden for the big reward. If we make a lot of noise we might be found and lose the reward,” Zac explained.

Billy’s eyes widened in realization, and he quickly nodded in agreement.

“Super Brother-Man is pretty smart. Almost as smart as Billy,” he sagely nodded in agreement as he started to walk on his toes in an effort to not make any sound.

“Indeed, the Super Brother-Man truly seems to be almost as smart as Billy,” Ylvas nodded from the side in a rare showing of humor.

“Ha ha, I like you Alien-man!” Billy laughed.

When they had explained that Ylvas came from another world Billy had immediately called them both liars, explaining that aliens were much smaller and had large black eyes. Finally, the two had been forced to give up explaining Ylvas’ origins, but Billy still chose to call Ylvas Alien-man as a joke.

“Alien-man is pretty good at hiding skills,” Zac said, ignoring the comments. “He can teach Billy to hide. Imagine tricking the bad guys you are weak when you are actually strong. This will also trick animals, making it easier for you to thwack them.”

Billy enthusiastically nodded and Ylvas started to arduously teach Billy how to control and hide his aura. Surprisingly, as soon as Billy understood what Ylvas wanted him to do his aura immediately and utterly disappeared. The change was so drastic that Zac actually stopped killing beasts and turned over, afraid that Ylvas had assassinated Billy.

But Billy was just fine, though he didn’t emit a smidgeon of energy. Unless Zac didn’t know better he would have thought that the man was a level 1 mortal from how his aura felt.

“He has magnificent control of his Cosmic Energy,” Ylvas muttered in shock. “I can’t sense a thing. I think the man might actually be a genius when it comes to energy control.”

“He didn’t get to the top ten on two of our ladders due to blind luck,” Zac said with a smile. “Billy, amazing.”

“Why surprised? Billy is the smartest, Mama always says so,” the giant said, obviously extremely pleased by Zac and Ylvas’ reactions.

“Remember how you did this,” Zac said. “See, beasts are already storming toward us.”

It was true. Only a few moments had passed since Billy took control of his aura, and the more rabid beasts were already closing in on them.

“In the future, if you want to thwunk things, always hide your aura this way. That way you don’t need to run after the animals. They will come to you,” Zac said as he resumed swinging.

Since the matter of subterfuge was somewhat dealt with they immediately started to head toward the hideout. They no longer sought out any more cultivators, and Ylvas even scouted ahead to make sure they didn’t encounter anyone. They completely rounded a few squads and stayed clear of all mountains until they finally arrived at a nondescript decorative mountain with an enormous statue at the top.

However, getting Billy to ascend the mountain wasn’t completely effortless. They finally had to say that the ghosts didn’t come to the mountains with statues on top. Of course, it was true in a sense since the decorative mountains did not have gathering arrays making the energies dense.

They walked along a hidden path almost halfway up the mountain until they reached a dead end. However, Ylvas simply walked straight through the wall, making Billy’s eyes widen in shock.

“Alien-man is magic,” Billy muttered with wide eyes.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 258 - A Singular Goal**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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“It’s an illusion array,” Zac explained but corrected himself after seeing Billy’s confused face. “A magic trick. There is actually no wall there, we can go through as well.”

Zac also passed through a few times to prove his point, and Billy finally followed suit as well with wonder in his eyes. After passing through the array they entered a cavern that reminded Zac of the underground tunnels. Billy curiously poked the luminescent moss covering the roof and even started collecting it until Ylvas explained it wasn’t worth any money.

“No guards or scouts?” Zac asked Ylvas as they walked through the empty tunnel.

“We felt it was too risky having people placed outside the illusion array since it would likely increase the chances of this place being found out. We, unfortunately, lost one of our hideouts and fifty good men that way to one of the Insectoids,” Ylvas

explained with a sigh. “Now we try to stay as nondescript as possible. However, my men know we have passed through the array,” Ylvas explained.

The tunnels weren’t endless like the ones far underground and they soon reached a large cavern where ten cultivators stood armed and ready. However, the moment they saw Ylvas they relaxed, and quickly greeted them with a smile. The next moment another 50 men appeared out of nowhere, startling both Zac and Billy.

“Alien-man’s friends are magic too,” Billy muttered with a subdued voice as he glared at the men with his club at the ready “Or are they ghosts?”

“They are not ghosts Billy, they simply hid with the help of arrays, like the one we passed,” Ylvas explained.

“How are you people able to utilize so many arrays?” Zac asked with surprise. “Did you know about arrays before the integration or something?”

“Array disks,” Ylvas explained. “We found a cache with these array disks early in the hunt and learned how to use them after some experimentation. No knowledge is needed to activate them. Unfortunately, we never found any strong ones. Perhaps it’s too hard to imprint arrays on disks.”

“I’d like to buy one of each of the disks you’ve found,” Zac quickly said.

Those things would both be convenient for himself when he traveled, and it would also be good to have a few of them to study.

“You can just take them, I have a small hill of the things,” Ylvas said and took out eight different disks. “Their effect is much weaker compared to the things you can buy from the Town Shops, and you need to supply them with Nexus Crystals. But they are not restricted by geography and are easy to use.”

Zac picked up one of the disks and looked at the extremely fine inscriptions on its surface. It seemed a pretty high skill in both inscription and arrays was needed to create these things. While Zac and Ylvas discussed the disks most of the men who had been ready to ambush the intruders walked away, making the cave seem more like a campsite. Some were playing cards, while others were cultivating or resting.

Zac threw the disks into his Cosmos Sack and opened up his ladder to check up on the squad that he would work together with. The general strength of those present wasn’t bad, though there were only four people in the top 100, and all of them were pretty far down. Then again these people had been hiding for a few days, meaning their actual strength might be higher than their positions indicated.

Most simply accepted Zac and Billy’s presence without question since they were brought by Ylvas, but not everyone went back to their seats. Many eyes turned toward the two in curiosity. But the faces of the inquisitive ones quickly changed after a few seconds, likely when they noticed Zac’s ladder positions.

Greed was apparent on the faces of many of them, and some hands even moved toward their weapons as from instinct. Zac frowned at the reaction, but he wasn’t too surprised either. He didn’t say anything and silently observed what would happen.

As for Billy, he didn’t seem to understand the mood and was instead staring at a fire that had a huge spit of meat over it that looked just about done.

Soon it seemed some couldn’t contain their greed any longer, and a large man sporting two swords on his back slowly walked over. Zac saw he had pretty decent ladder positions, holding the 64<sup>th</sup> spot on the Hunter ladder. After slightly bowing toward Ylvas he once again turned toward Zac.

“Leader, it’s good that you are back. I see you’ve brought the walking treasure trove,” he said before turning toward Zac. “That bastard emperor has almost gone mad

looking for you. It must be burdensome to carry that much treasure by yourself. Why not share a bit with your new allies?"

"We have all been in the same hunt," Zac answered with a shrug. "The wealth we have gathered depends on our abilities."

"Is that right?" the man said with a grim smile. "I can't help but think of there being an element of luck as well. But luck can quickly turn to misfortune."

"Is that a threat?" Zac said with a deadpan face.

"I wouldn't dream of it, but wealth can be a curse," the man said with a sneer. "You never know when calamity strikes. But that's what having allies is for, no? Sharing the burden. We're stuck here together after all."

"I think I'll be fine. And make no mistake - I'm not stuck here with you. You're stuck inside here with me," Zac said as his heavy aura ripe with dense killing intent rolled out from him and drowned the whole cave.

The arrogant man desperately backed away after being inundated by the killing intent, his face as pale as a sheet. It was the same with the other cultivators as they looked at Zac with a mix of shock and horror. Even Beruv Ylvas seemed slightly taken aback by the ruthless aura, and he thoughtfully looked at Zac from the side before he spoke up.

"Fools, do you think one would gain those ladder positions by luck? Now don't mess around, they are the important allies I've arduously found. They will be the key in ridding our planet of the Medhin scourge," Ylvas said with a glare at the man who had taunted Zac. "If anyone causes trouble for our new friends you will be declared a traitor of Berum."

Zac simply nodded at Ylvas in thanks. However, he did note that the champion didn't do anything to stop that man until Zac made a showing of his power. Perhaps Ylvas wanted to gauge his personality or power better. Zac suddenly noticed that Billy was looking at him with huge eyes and his mouth slightly open.

"Uh, what's wrong?" Zac asked.

"That line was very cool. Can Billy use it?" Billy entreated.

"Sure, no problem," Zac nodded with a smile.

He smiled widely at Zac before he headed over toward the meat on the spit and unhesitantly snatched it and started eating. The man who had been preparing the meat glared at Billy, but after throwing a glance at Zac he chose to not speak up and instead took out another slab of meat from his Cosmos Sack with a sigh.

Ylvas walked over to a corner of the cave, and the cultivators around quickly made ample space for him. As soon as he sat down he ate a pill and closed his eyes. Zac initially wanted to follow him, but after seeing that the man needed to focus on recuperation he went over to Billy and sat down. He looked over to the man who spun the new slab of meat, and the man nervously nodded back and introduced himself as Taran.

"Do you have any information about the situation in the Medhin camp?" Zac asked.

The man threw a glance at Ylvas before he started talking with a shrug.

"Most of their forces have started to return to their mountains. Nenotheop sent out over a hundred squads to the outer parts of the hunt a week ago, and they are returning to provide the spoils," Taran explained. "We set up as many traps as we could to kill the scouts, but most made it back alive. They are hard to kill because of their War Arrays."

Zac nodded as he took out a strip of dried meat from his sack, making Taran sigh in relief.

“Do you have any information about the class and skills of the emperor and his top men?” Zac followed up.

The man quickly nodded and took out an information crystal.

“This is the top tier information crystal from the Omniscient Eye. It’s from before the hunt, but the information should be mostly correct,” he said as he handed it over to Zac.

Zac immediately recognized the name Omniscient Eye. The cultivators from Berum he met right at the start had mentioned him or her, though they had no idea about that person’s real identity. They only suspected the person to be a someone from the Medhin planet who had defected when the integration took place.

This crystal held far more information than the brochure that those cultivators had though, making Zac quite shocked. As far as he knew there was no one on Earth able to create information crystals this elaborate yet, meaning this Omniscient Eye should be quite the genius.

The information on Nenotheop was quite extensive, though much of it was marked as speculation and most was about his history and life. However, it was known that the emperor’s weapon of choice was his spear and that he had some sort of warrior class. Both strength and speed were marked as ‘Exceptional’.

Only one skill was mentioned, and it was called [**Spearstorm**]. The emperor had used it when he had singlehandedly massacred a whole army by himself. His spear had turned into a blur, punching holes in everyone close to him. No one within 100 meters had been safe, and the only survivors were those who fled fast enough.

Not much else was said about him since he had never been forced to use his full strength so far, at least not in public. As for Vasidas, it was only mentioned he was suspected to be a mage-class, but he’d never fought in public. Finally, there were a lot of generals and captains described in the crystal, but after a brief scan Zac knew they wouldn’t pose a challenge for him.

Zac handed back the crystal to the man on the opposite side of the fire and started talking with Billy for a bit. He also considered going out to kill some beasts while Ylvas rested, but in the end he decided against it. One extra day of grinding wouldn’t make a big difference in the long run, and he didn’t want to ruin the plans by being spotted.

Zac had already gained another level while he traveled here, bringing him to level 63. He even was even halfway to level 64, so if their operation was a success he might gain another level before the hunt was over.

Instead, he rested and went over all his newly acquired power-ups. Resting also helped with his mind a bit. It had been hurting since he overextended himself down in the caverns, but the headache had finally abated. After a while, the familiar thunderous snores echoed from next to him, bringing Zac out of his reverie.

The sounds echoed through the caves, drawing angry glares from everyone. Zac could only helplessly shrug his shoulders. Before he was faced with a mutiny Zac quickly took out one of the array disks he had just received and activated it by placing a few F-Grade crystals in the sockets. He placed the disk in front of Billy, and the giant suddenly disappeared, making the cavern grow quiet again.

“Taran, how long until we start?” Zac asked.

“Between half a day and a full day, depending on Lord Ylvas. He needs to be in top condition to fight that old monster,” Taran whispered back as he carefully checked a quiver of arrows.

Zac nodded and once again closed his eyes. Since he didn’t have anything to prepare he simply pondered on the Dao while resting, especially the two new ones he had gained. The hours quickly passed until it was finally time to start the assault. There were no rousing speeches or waving of weapons in the air. Ylvas simply stood up and looked over the 50 men in the cavern.

“It is time,” was all he said with a somber face as he started to walk toward the exit.

One by one the Berum resistance fighters stood up and started to stream out behind Ylvas. Zac cracked his neck and stood up as well. He hadn’t made any real improvements during the short meditation. He didn’t know why, but it felt like the Dao had been far more elusive since he arrived at the Eastern Trigram Sect. It was much easier to ponder on the Dao back on Earth, and he couldn’t wait to get back.

He walked through the illusion array surrounding Billy, who still contentedly snored away.

“It’s time Billy. Let’s go save Thea,” Zac said after he managed to wake the giant.

Soon 67 warriors walked through the forest with a singular goal in mind - to slay an Emperor.

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#### **Chapter 259 - Insurrection**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Thea looked at the hopeless situation in front of her with a frown, her hand frozen by indecision.

“It’s just a game, dear. No need for such consternation,” her opponent smiled from the opposite side of the table as Thea reluctantly moved a piece.

She didn’t know what was more vexing; being stuck as an unwilling pawn in the machinations of the crown prince in front of her, or that she was miserably losing in a game of chess. Vasidas had found her board game after his father looted her Cosmos Sack, and had immediately been taken with the seemingly simple game.

Of course, the former predicament was far worse in reality. She had truly and utterly overestimated herself. After the mishap with Zac she had kept her head down, and looted summit after summit for two whole weeks. But no matter what she did she had been unable to get ahead in the ladder, and unlooted mountains were becoming almost impossible to find.

Thea knew that without risking one’s life one couldn’t hope to get ahead in this new cut-throat world, so she had enacted a daring plan. She would snatch the Cosmos Sack of one of the four E-Grade powerhouses apart from the two Dominators.

She already knew that apart from Emperor Nenotheop the others were in the earliest stages of the E-grade, far weaker than the monstrous Insectoid who had almost

claimed her life earlier. She believed that between planning and her specific skill-set she would be able to steal the pouch and escape without them being able to stop her.

If worse came to worst she would simply activate her ultimate escape skill once again. Losing a few levels in exchange for the accumulated wealth of one of the E-Grade powerhouses was a worthy trade. The levels could be gained back within a month, but the wealth of a fallen sect could help her and her family for decades.

But she had been naïve. She had followed Vasidas for three days, using every skill and lesson she had learned to hide from him. It was all for one specific moment. When the prince entered a summit array he completely froze due to the protective array, and Thea had exploded into action.

But the rest was only a blur. The next moment Thea remembered was when she stood in front of the smiling prince devoid of her trial-token or an ounce of Cosmic Energy. It turned out he had been aware of her presence since the start and had only played along to see what her plan was.

“Come now, you have been brooding since we decided to work together,” Vasidas said with a smile as he poured Thea a cup of tea. “Have I not been an accommodating host?”

“You did not leave me a much of a choice,” Thea muttered, though she had to admit what he said was true.

He had been a true gentleman in every sense of the word, but her instincts screamed of danger every time she saw his congenial smile. That was especially true since she knew she was a key piece in Vasidas’ master plan. She had learned a bit of it from their time together so far, and his ruthlessness truly made her blood run cold. He had even somehow manipulated Ylvas Berum into a desperate struggle where Vasidas’ own brother died.

And now he had orchestrated an even more desperate battle.

“Come now. I have no interest in the lives of you or Mr. Atwood, as I have explained. I don’t care about this little hunt at all, for that matter. It’s just some levels and a Limited Title. If it didn’t provide me with the opportunity to play my games I wouldn’t have joined in,” Vasidas said as he gripped one of his bishops.

“The treasures aren’t bad compared to my homeworld, I guess. But it’s just useless baubles compared to what The Great Lord will provide for his personal disciple,” the prince continued. “And as long as you and Mr. Atwood play my game we can be seen as allies rather than enemies. Checkmate.”

A shiver ran down Thea’s spine as she saw Vasidas pick up her king and crush it into dust with a vicious gleam in his eyes. She truly didn’t know whether she wished for Zac to come or stay far away from this summit.

Zac, Billy, and the first company were moving toward the group of mountains the Medhin Army occupied. The optimal plan would be to dismantle all four surrounding mountain defenses before hitting the main mountain in the middle. That way they would avoid any risk of being pincered from behind. Unfortunately, they did not have the manpower for that, so they needed to adopt a riskier approach.

The current plan was to quickly destroy the western mountain with their whole army, and then immediately hit the main peak. A part of their forces would impede any potential backup from the other three mountains surrounding the main mountain, but the main force would move as a spear straight toward the Emperor. That way their backs would at least be clear for a while, allowing them to focus only on the enemies in front of them.

But that didn't mean it would be an easy battle. All the remaining royals and the strongest soldiers were stationed there, and everyone present knew that just ascending the mountain might cost them their lives. But everyone here was a soldier intent on liberating their world, and their eyes were filled with determination.

Zac and Billy were in the middle of the squad, and they were hidden in large cloaks. Billy was even hunched over to somewhat hide his massive frame. It had taken some time for Zac and Ylvas, but they had finally managed to explain the plan so that Billy understood it.

Billy would be a wall-breaker of sorts. If the defending armies on the main peak erected a strong defense he would do his best to destroy or at least weaken it. Zac's job was to weaken the enemy side as much as possible in ten seconds after saving Thea. After that he had to join Ylvas in the battle against Nenotheop. A caveat was that if Vasidas joined his father they would unhesitatingly flee.

With the help of communication crystals all four of the forces arrived around the targeted mountain within a few minutes of each other. Zac couldn't see the leaders of the other three squads, but Ylvas had already told them that each was led by a powerhouse who was close to the bottleneck.

"You two stay here with the reserve force. We do not want you within eyesight of their scouts or spies. We have already ascertained that physical line of sight is needed to check someone's ladder position. Billy is okay since his ladder position is far lower than his actual strength. But try to stay out of sight as much as possible," Ylvas said to Zac.

Zac only nodded and indicated for Billy to stay with him.

"We are not going with Alien-man?" Billy asked with some confusion.

"There are some bad guys up there, but Thea is not on this mountain. We will rest for now. We are the special weapon, so we can't let the bad guys know about us," Zac explained as he looked at the forces streaming up the mountain.

It didn't take long for the whole mountain to erupt in furious fighting. It was clear, however, that the defending forces couldn't match the Berum onslaught. The battles were steadily moving toward the summit, and soon they took place on the top of the mountain, obscuring Zac's vision.

A few thundering echoes erupted on the summit, and not long after the sounds of battle subsided. Zac saw that a few hundred men started streaming down toward their position. From the energy contained in those echoes up at the top of the mountain, it seemed like the ancillary mountains were only manned by regular soldiers and a few stronger people to maintain order.

There was no rest when the warriors had descended the mountain, and they cut straight toward the main peak. A few people had died and even more were wounded, but they simply popped a healing pill and restored their energy with a Nexus Crystal as they moved.

Soon they arrived at the foot of the mountain that Nenotheop Medhin occupied, and two squads veered off to impede any enemy forces coming for backup. But the main army consisting of roughly 200 cultivators pushed toward the summit as one.

Their force was led by Ylvas and his three generals. One was a young man with a slightly feminine face who held a staff in both his hands. The second was a huge woman that Zac almost thought was a smaller female version of Billy. She sported an enormous two-handed sword on her back, and her arms bulged with huge muscles. The final general looked positively ancient, but he had no problems keeping up with the others as it almost looked like he floated.

They started ascending the mountain but there surprisingly were no signs of any resistance, with not even a single stationed to impede their approach. In fact, it looked like all the structures and obscuring features of the mountain had been demolished, giving everyone a clear line of sight toward the summit.

Zac couldn't help but get a bad feeling as he slowly walked up the mountain paths with the others, and he wasn't alone. Their progression had slowed to a crawl as the scouts in the front kept swiveling their heads back and forth in search of any traps waiting for them.

But it was instead a rumble that shook the whole mountain that warned them that the Medhin counterattack was incoming. Torrential amounts of flames were suddenly pouring down from the summit, making the mountain look like an erupting volcano.

However, Zac immediately sensed that the fire was conjured rather than a natural occurrence. Likely it was some sort of slaughter array or combination attack from the Medhin soldiers. Still, the intensity of the incoming fire wasn't anything to scoff at, and Zac hesitantly glanced at Ylvas.

While Zac would be able to protect himself, and Billy if needed, from the onslaught he wasn't so sure about the rest of the soldiers. But while Ylvas had a grim face he didn't seem overly worried.

"Defend!" he shouted, and all soldiers took out identical spheres and started to pump them full of Cosmic Energy, as the ancient man took out a far larger copy of the same item.

The huge sphere floated up in the air above the old general, and the smaller orbs were clearly imbuing it with energy, making it quickly grow to cover their whole army. Only seconds later the roiling flames slammed into the shield, but it held steady.

However, the force of the flames was clearly having an impact, and blood was streaming down the nose of the old man.

"We need to speed up. Lord Rhuvim can't keep the shield going for long!" Ylvas shouted and started to push forward.

The huge woman carefully lifted the old man and placed him on her shoulder as she ran, letting him fully focusing on maintaining the barrier. But even though the army ran at a breakneck pace the shield was quickly showing signs of collapse from the intense flames.

Worse yet, after a minute of ascending they weren't only accosted by flames any longer. Huge boulders were tumbling down the mountain, each of them slamming into the mountain with enough force to make the ground shake.

Some of them luckily had veered off course, but every time one of them hit the shield it looked like the old man was physically punched. The onslaught was also having an effect on the army, and many faces were starting to pale from the energy consumption of maintaining the shield.

"I leave the rest to you, little Vas," Rhuvim suddenly said with a wet cough that made blood stream down his robe.

The next moment he flashed forward, ignoring Ylvas' order to wait. His aura was completely unleashed and a hurricane formed around him that soon was over fifty meters wide. Power roiled in the air around the old man, and he pushed straight into the flames.

Zac sighed because he understood what fueled that tremendous burst of power. That old general was burning his remaining life-force in order to create an opening that would let the army ascend. The intense powers in the hurricane threw the incoming

boulders far up into the air, harmlessly passing the speeding army by, and even the cascading flames were forced to retreat from his advance.

The general's sacrifice had been enough to allow the Berum resistance force to reach the summit unscathed. The moment they saw the crest the old man simply looked back and smiled before he fell over. Ylvas immediately flashed over and caught the old man, cradling the body with red-rimmed eyes.

Zac mutely stared at the corpse of Rhuvim with a heavy heart. The old man might have not possessed even a fraction of the power compared to the old man in his Dao vision, but he clearly shared the same type of conviction. Zac slightly bowed toward the man as Ylvas put him into his Cosmos Sack before he drew his rapier with a grim expression.

Waiting for them at a top was hundreds of elite soldiers emitting monstrous killing intent. In the front of the soldiers stood a man in a golden robe, holding a three-meter long spear in his right hand. A towering aura was emanating from him, even making his hair flutter in the air.

"So you have come, rebel scum. It is just as well. You will join Reputat for his final journey."

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 260 - Wallbreaker**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac looked at the emperor through a crack in the ranks of soldiers in front of him. The man was nothing like the Medhin princeling he killed on the first day. Tyrbat had relied on the empowerment of his war array and his trinkets, but Nenotheop was completely different.

He gave off a similar aura as Greatest. Of course, not the same levels of power, but the air of someone who had fought countless battles. Zac had a feeling this would turn into another battle where his lacking experience would be holding him back. However, he didn't care much about Nenotheop himself, he was more worried about where Thea was being held.

"The girl is with me," a voice suddenly sounded in his head, making him look around with wide eyes. "You won't find me, Mr. Atwood. Thea Marshall will be safely released, but you must cooperate with my game. Kill Nenotheop and she will be set free. Try to find her and I will immediately execute her."

Zac's heartbeat sped up as he tried to look anywhere for the source of the transmission. He didn't recognize the voice, but after putting two and two together he had a strong suspicion it was Vasidas Medhin who spoke. He didn't know who else would be able to find him when it appeared not even the emperor had spotted him.

Zac looked around, but he couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. He also couldn't see Thea anywhere, meaning she likely was hidden away out of his reach.

He realized that his plan had been naïve. How would he free Thea in a situation like this? He didn't even know where she was. The most likely place would be within the protective arrays of the summit palace, but to get there he would have to cross the

entire Medhin army. The question was whether he should go along with the voice or if he should ignore it and try to locate Thea while the others duked it out.

Unfortunately, the rest of the world didn't wait for him to decide on his course of action. A shocking aura started seeping out of Ylvas as he aimed his sword at the emperor. Zac's brows rose in surprise from the supreme aura he emitted. Honestly, Ylvas hadn't given him a large impression so far, but it was clear that he was the real deal. Unfortunately, it was also clear that while he was very strong for an early E-Grade warrior he was still not Nenotheop's match.

"Your dynasty ends today. Berum will never become the fuel for your insane Redeemer," Ylvas said, undeterred by the fact that his aura was getting somewhat suppressed by Nenotheop.

Soldiers shared confused glances in both camps due to Ylvas' proclamation, meaning that the Medhin soldiers were unaware of the truth of their imperial family. They would likely become fuel as well if their side won, yet they exhibited a great bloodlust as they glared at the resistance army who in a sense tried to save their lives as well.

Of course, the forces of Berum would likely try to spread the news as widely as they could as soon as they got back, in hopes of fomenting insurrection within the Medhin population.

"Shields!," a general to the right Nenotheop roared, and the next moment a huge silver shield covered the whole army that stood behind Nenotheop.

"Empyrean Guard!" a second general shouted, and within seconds Nenotheop was covered in a golden glow.

The setup was similar to all the other squads that he had encountered. One part defended the footsoldiers whereas another part empowered their champion. It made sense since the foot soldiers would only become fodder if they tried to personally fight against people like Zac or Ylvas.

The dense aura of Nenotheop increased even further, and Zac felt that the Emperor would have no problems contending with Inevitability in his current condition. However, Ylvas wasn't cowed by the aura and unhesitantly pushed forward with enough force to cause huge cracks in the ground.

The power Ylvas emitted was far beyond anything he had shown during the past days, and it all seemed to be concentrated in the tip of his sword as he stabbed straight toward Nenotheop who swung his spear to intercept the strike. A shocking collision made the whole mountain shake, and that initial salvo was the start of the war. The huge general pushed forward with heavy steps and slammed her sword into the ground as she ran.

Somehow she managed to rip up a three-meter tall boulder with her sword, and with shocking precision launched it straight at Nenotheop with a grunt as she kept running. The stone was imbued with some high-level Dao as well since it started burning and caused multiple explosions in the air as it approached its target.

However, Nenotheop barely spared a glance at the incoming boulder, and with a lightning-quick stab of his spear turned it into fine sand that exploded outward. Fire and gravel flew in all directions, but Nenotheop was unfazed by the assault.

The attack might not have wounded the emperor, but at least it obscured his vision somewhat. Ylvas was ready and tried to use the fire as a distraction while he stabbed at the Nenotheop's guts with a sword shimmering with some unknown power.

At the same time, two roots pierced through the ground, aiming to stab the emperor in his back. It was the final general, and Zac only now noticed that his staff

looked like a tree planted in the ground, likely spreading its roots all the way over to the battle between Ylvas and Nenotheop.

Even the large general had caught up, and tried to decapitate the emperor with a wide swing flying straight above Ylvas' head. But it was as though the emperor had ten hands, every attack was blocked by either his spear or a bracer. He even had time to slam a knee into Ylvas face, throwing him back ten meters with a grunt. Worst off was the female general, who had a large gash in her side from a lightning-quick stab.

"Come all, you maggots!" Nenotheop roared as his bloodlust soared to the skies, and he forcibly started to suppress the trio who desperately tried to get past his defenses.

The generals weren't the only ones who had gone all out from the start, as large shields were erected above the ranged attackers while the melee warriors started a suicidal run toward the enemy ranks. There was no longer any time to hesitate, and Zac turned toward his huge ally.

"Billy, I can't find Thea," Zac whispered to the giant who balefully glared at the other side. "We will have to beat up the bad guys first. Can you break that shield? It is very strong."

"Billy will give it his biggest Thwonk," the giant nodded as he started running toward the shield along with the other melee fighters.

Zac followed suit, using Billy's enormous frame to hide out of sight from Nenotheop and his generals. The sky was starting to blot out with attacks soaring between the two camps, and there were already a few fatalities amongst the melee warriors who couldn't dodge or endure the onslaught.

The Medhin army was far better off since not one of them had stepped outside of the protective cover of their shields, and they could leisurely pick off one approaching warrior after another with ranged attacks.

Zac tried to help as much as he could by rapidly throwing out dozens of daggers to intercept the more powerful attacks, to save at least a few lives in their approach. Billy was also getting ready as he took out his club halfway to the other side. Suddenly his aura simply exploded, and he actually started to grow.

In just a second he was over ten meters tall, holding an equally monstrous club. His skin glowed with a golden luster, and Zac was shocked to sense some ancient power emanating from his friend. It was as though Billy wasn't human, but rather some ancient Titan as he took the last lumbering steps toward the shield.

Even the emperor couldn't help but look over at Billy's massive frame, and he frowned in consternation. He tried to move over to stop him, but Ylvas and his two generals desperately fought to keep him at bay.

"Intercept him," Nenotheop roared in anger, and tons of attacks flew toward Billy as he slowly lifted his club.

Billy clearly needed some time to accumulate enough power, since massive energies swirled around him as his muscles kept swelling. The attacks would arrive in a split second, and Zac didn't know whether Billy could survive such an onslaught even in his enormous form. Out of options he hurriedly activated **[Nature's Barrier]** and imbued it with the Dao of Sanctuary making a storm of leaves cover them both.

Luckily Billy's enormous leg blocked any sight of Zac himself, making it look like it was Billy himself who had erected the defenses. Zac felt a huge amount of Cosmic Energy get expended as almost a hundred attacks slammed into his leaves, but at least it lessened the damage on Billy by about 80%.

Still, the defenses couldn't block everything, and many attacks slipped past the leaves and slammed into Billy. It was clear that his Endurance wasn't too high, as multiple wounds erupted all over his body, making a rain of golden blood pour down on Zac.

Zac was surprised by the color of the blood since a transformation skill shouldn't change his blood like that. It was also clear that while Billy had been wounded he wouldn't be deterred from completing his task. A ruthless aura emitted from him as Billy ran forward the final steps until he stood right in front of the shield.

"BILLY IS NOT STUCK WITH YOU! YOU'RE STUCK INSIDE BILLY," the giant suddenly roared with enough volume to be heard across half the hunt, and he swung down the club.

An otherworldly pressure was released from the club, and Zac felt the force was easily stronger than when he used his **[Nature's Punishment]** along with the Dao of Heaviness. It contained a titanic strength as it sailed down toward the shield. Its might even forced some soldiers down on their knees before it had even landed.

"No!" Nenotheop roared in anger as he lit up in blazing power.

The next moment it was as though Nenotheop's spear turned into a laser as it elongated and aimed straight toward Billy's heart in an attempt to instantly kill him. Zac's eyes widened in alarm as he immediately jumped up and changed the Dao infusion to the Dao of Trees in his defensive skill.

There was no way that Billy would be able to dodge in his cumbersome form, and he definitely did not possess enough defense to withstand it. The swirling leaves lit up in emerald luster as they formed a tighter screen in front of him as Zac rose to over 6 meters in the air to intercept the strike.

With a growl, Zac also swung **[Verun's Bite]** with all his might to stop the attack. However, the attack far surpassed what he had expected. It looked like the emperor wasn't holding back when he tried to kill Billy.

It felt like he had been hit by a truck when Zac's axe collided with the incoming fractal spear. Luckily he barely managed to change the trajectory, and the attack gored a large wound in Billy's shoulder instead of piercing his heart. The attack went straight through Billy's body, continuing for hundreds of meters.

Zac wasn't much better off as the collision slammed him into the ground with enough force to crack a rib and push the air out of his lungs. Worse yet, he had clearly been exposed since he sensed multiple stares at him as he tried to orient himself.

"It's you!" Nenotheop exclaimed with widened eyes as he stared straight at Zac.

Billy wailed in pain from the attack, but thanks to Zac he managed to keep his attack going as it swung down at the shield with world-ending force. A huge shockwave rippled outward as the shield cracked, causing widespread damage to the cultivators who maintained it. Some of the weaker soldiers even exploded from the force, causing multiple fountains of gore to erupt around the Medhin Soldiers.

Ylvas also managed to seize the opportunity while the emperor's attention was on Billy and Zac, and managed to stab his sword deep into Nenotheop's gut. Nenotheop growled in anger and was forced to refocus his efforts at the trio who assaulted him with newfound vigor, ignoring their mounting wounds.

Zac's ears were ringing but he knew he couldn't slack off, so he ignored the pain and forced himself to his feet. The defensive shield had a few large cracks from Billy's strike, but it was rapidly repairing itself. Zac didn't hesitate as he activated **[Loamwalker]** to flash inside the array.

A few cultivators tried to stop his approach but a dozen people were instantly bisected by a huge fractal edge tearing straight through them. Zac looked back and saw a pale Billy who was rapidly shrinking.

“Billy, good job! Return to the back lines and heal up,” Zac shouted.

Billy nodded and started lugging back with slightly unsteady steps, avoiding errant attacks as best he could. Many of the melee warriors even chose to use their own bodies to protect his retreat, since Billy was clearly one of their aces. Billy’s part in this assault was over, and he had delivered far beyond what Zac could have expected.

The force behind that swing was just insane. Five enormous fractal edges appeared at the edge of Zac’s axe, and Zac’s aura was finally completely unleashed as he looked at the soldiers who instinctually stepped back from the billowing killing intent that he emitted.

Billy had held up his part of the bargain, and now it was time for him to uphold his.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 261 - Catastrophic Losses**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac sighed in relief when he saw that Billy was out of harm’s way. Billy’s attack was extremely impressive coming from someone in the F-Grade, but there were also clear drawbacks to it. He was mostly defenseless as he ran toward the shield, and if Zac hadn’t protected him with all his might the giant would have died before even getting his attack to land. It also seemed to consume all of Billy’s energy since he was completely spent after just one swing.

And while the attack was extremely strong it wasn’t very quick. Both Zac and Ogras would have no problem to avoid it with their movement skills. But it was a perfect attack to destroy an immobile object, and Zac couldn’t imagine the power Billy would be able to exhibit when he reached E-Grade. He only needed a good team that would be able to help him bring his monstrous strength to bear.

There was also the issue of his transformation and golden blood. Did Billy possess a bloodline, or had he attained a special constitution somehow? He had never heard of a skill changing the color of one’s blood, and the change in Billy’s appearance along with that immense aura seemed to be something greater than a skill.

But now was not the time to go over such things.

Waves of power radiated from Zac as he completely unleashed his aura. The five enormous fractal edges gained a silver sheen, having been infused with the Dao of Sharpness. But before he unleashed his carnage Zac threw a gaze at Nenotheop, just in case he was preparing another of those monstrous long-ranged attacks.

The emperor looked completely enraged from the turns in the battle, and was relentlessly attacking the Berum trio. He almost looked like a god of war from the huge aura he emitted, and a large fractal shone in the air behind him. It seemed to be one of his skills rather than an effect of the War Arrays, and it provided the emperor with an odd but deadly effect.

Right when Zac glanced over the emperor stabbed at Ylvas, but the fractal behind him flared and it suddenly was as though two realities were superimposed. Somehow the emperor was also attacking the large woman at the same time, with the same weapon, breaking the laws of physics.

It was obviously not an even fight, just like Ylvas had feared. Nenotheop was perhaps even more powerful than they had anticipated. In the short moment that Zac had used to get inside the shield the large woman had lost her left arm, and the mage was on his knees with blood freely flowing from his side.

Even Ylvas was barely holding on, and wounds kept appearing on him as he desperately tried to maintain the status quo until Zac could kill those who empowered Nenotheop. Zac knew that time was running out, and that they might not even last 15 more seconds. The next moment the ground beneath Zac exploded as he pushed toward the hesitant army.

He instantly moved to the thick of it with [Loamwalker], knowing he had to cause as much damage as possible before Nenotheop could intervene. He also didn't want to stay in one spot, in case Nenotheop chose to discard the lives of his soldiers to attack him while he was inside the mob.

Zac's arm was a blur as the fractal edges shot in five directions. Four of them were completely unimpeded, causing widespread death in the blink of an eye. Blood formed huge pools as bisected corpses fell by the wayside, but Zac knew he had barely made a dent in the Emperor's combat power.

The soldiers that had died were not part of the personal guard, but rather random elite soldiers who helped bolster the shields and the war array. The fifth attack had been launched toward the two generals that stood behind Nenotheop, but before it could reach them and the personal guard another shield sprung up, covering them inside.

A frown formed on Zac's face as he rushed toward them, shooting off two more edges in their direction as he ran. The soldiers inside the second shield were clearly the personal guard, and the targets he had to eliminate. The protection wobbled and flickered from the two massive attacks, but it held true. But Zac noted that the soldiers maintaining the shield had paled, and a few were even bleeding from their eyes and ears.

Zac chose the simplest means to try to break it, and he slammed into it with the force of a speeding train, his body imbued with the Dao of Heaviness. Multiple cracks appeared on the barrier, and Zac didn't relent as he swung at the cracks with brutal fervor, each strike containing enough power to kill an E-Grade beast.

It took two seconds of frenzied attacks, but he broke through and squeezed himself inside like a fox in the henhouse. A few of the surviving elite soldiers had tried to impede his progress, but Zac's attacks had made the outer shield completely break. The melee fighters from the Berum resistance had joined the battle by now, desperately fighting the remaining soldiers to stop them from adding their powers to new shields or the War Array.

Fear and hatred shone in the soldiers' eyes as Zac got inside the inner shield, leaving him standing just ten meters away from the personal guard. His aura was completely unleashed, and it actually managed to somewhat destabilize the War array that was still maintained. No one wanted to be the first to attack him since they had all seen what he had done with over a hundred soldiers outside the inner shield.

The status quo only lasted for a second before Zac rushed forward, his axe already growing another fractal edge. The personal guards did everything in their power to keep him away, shooting a wide array of attacks right at him. The salvo consisted

mainly of magical attacks, and over ten fireballs slammed right into his body. But Zac only roared and ignored the pain, confident that his enormous Endurance would pull him through.

However, in the next moment he sensed some danger, and he swung out his axe toward the left instead of at the soldiers by sheer instinct. A glowing gauntlet appeared almost as though out of nowhere, and the two collided with enough force that the closest soldiers were thrown away. Some even sporting wounds from the shockwave as they quickly got back on their feet.

The next moment a piercing pain erupted in Zac's side as a dagger was firmly lodged inside and it felt like the wound was both frozen and burned at the same time. It was the two generals who had personally moved to stop him, and both were right at the E-Grade bottleneck judging by their power.

Zac glared at the soldiers who kept imbuing the emperor with power while keeping an eye on him, and he growled in frustration as he turned his attention to the two generals. He tried to grab the dagger-wielding one, but he slunk out of his grasp like an eel, quickly moving out of reach.

The other one also distanced himself as quickly as he could, but that strategy did not come without downsides. They knew they couldn't compete head-on with him, but if they moved away they also exposed their subordinates.

A fractal edge almost instantly grew to over fifteen meters and it skewered almost as many soldiers without Zac even moving the axe. There were less than a hundred members of the personal guard, so a good chunk of them instantly died from that sneak attack.

There was no way to maintain a fractal edge that long, and it disintegrated after Zac managed to kill just a few more of them. But it did cause some chaos in the ranks, making the soldiers unsure whether they should empower their emperor or defend themselves.

Zac wouldn't relent as he pushed forward, but an enormous fist appeared above him, slamming straight down. Not only that, but it also formed an invisible restriction on him in an effort to stop his movement. The fist contained some sort of Restrictive Dao, making the attack resemble **[Nature's Punishment]** a bit.

A roar escaped from Zac's throat as he swung his axe up to intercept the incoming strike, but as he did he felt another of the stinging wounds erupt in his upper back. If he didn't have his high luck to warn him his heart would have been pierced, but he managed to tilt mid-swing enough so that the wound was mostly superficial.

An idea suddenly appeared in Zac's mind and he stopped his swing mid-motion. Next, he instantly released his Dao Field of Heaviness, making the assassin slightly stumble when he tried to move away. Zac took advantage of that brief window and grabbed him, instantly sealing his fate.

A crunching sound echoed out, and the next moment the enormous fist slammed into Zac, causing the whole mountain to shake. A second later the fist disintegrated, showing a large crater five meters deep. At the bottom was a mangled piece of flesh, crushed beyond recognition.

Next to it was Zac's bloody form, though in far better shape. Zac got up to his feet with a groan and used **[Loamwalker]** to push out of the pit. He had bet he would be able to endure the attack with his defensive layers, and he had been correct. The next moment he was once again amongst soldiers and the carnage resumed.

The general who was still alive desperately tried to impede him, but he had just spent a huge amount of energy on his final strike, and he no longer had his teammate to share the burden. Zac was like an enraged boar as he swung wildly, and the general

only barely survived due to a dozen of the personal guards switching their attention to protect their leader instead of the emperor who was clearly in control of his battle.

But even with the help of the personal guard the general only managed to delay Zac in his goal to kill those who empowered Nenotheop. Zac knew that delay might be the difference between winning and losing the war. Over ten seconds had already passed since he entered the shield, and he knew that he was almost out of time.

Energies blazed around him as Zac completely ignored his energy expenditure, aiming to completely and utterly destroy the remaining general. His large gauntlets were already bloody scrap metal from Zac's assault, and he was barely staying on his feet as it was. But his eyes burned with conviction as he glared at Zac.

"Empyrean Sacrifice!" he roared with a hoarse voice, and Zac's senses almost immediately sensed danger.

He tried to move backward, but suddenly it was as though he was stuck inside tar. The remaining 60 soldiers in the personal guard still in fighting condition all had their focus on Zac by now, and they seemed to be cooperating on some array with somber expressions.

An enormous ball of chaotic energies was quickly growing right between himself and the soldiers, and Zac knew he had to get away. Zac's danger-sense only got more and more urgent, and Zac desperately fought to move through the restriction that had been placed on him. His muscles strained as he finally managed to force himself free from the suppression.

But before he had a chance to activate [**Loamwalker**] the huge ball of energy exploded, turning the whole world white.

Zac barely had time to activate [**Nature's Barrier**] imbued with the Dao of Trees, followed up by imbuing himself with the Dao of Hardness. He even activated a defensive option of his golden robe to cover him. But even with all that, it felt like he was blasted into pieces when the explosion hit him, and he was thrown away like a ragdoll.

His mind was drifting away as he flew, but Zac barely managed to refocus his mind. As soon as he landed he immediately got himself ready to once again assault the soldiers, ignoring the pathetic state of his body. But the moment he saw the personal guard he knew there would be no need for that.

Almost nothing remained of the whole area where the personal guard once stood, apart from a crater and a few burned remains of bodyparts. One of the few corpses that wasn't completely obliterated sported two mangled gauntlets, indicating that not even the last general had survived the final blast.

Empyrean Sacrifice seemed to have been the final attack of the personal guard, sacrificing their lives to take Nenotheop's enemies with them to the grave. And as he looked down at this burned body covered in wounds he knew that perhaps only himself and the two Dominators would be able to survive a blast of that magnitude. He wasn't even sure he would have survived unless he had just gained a huge amount of Endurance down in the caverns.

The personal guard hadn't been the only ones affected by the explosion though. A large number of soldiers from both camps had been too close to the battle and became casualties as well. Even those who had maintained a healthy distance wasn't spared as their bodies were crushed by the shockwave. It was clear that both sides had sustained catastrophic losses.

His body hurt, but at least his first task was done, and the whole personal guard was eradicated. Zac victoriously looked over at the main battle, but his brows rose in alarm when he saw the scene. The situation was even worse than he'd feared. The

large woman was lying dead on the ground, and the mage was barely alive from the look of him.

Even Ylvas was in dire straits, drenched in blood and missing a leg. He somehow stood upright with the help of the Cosmic Energy, but his aura was chaotic. If Nenotheop hadn't received a backlash from his War Array getting ripped to pieces he might have already killed the Berum champion.

The fight was about to be wrapped up, and Zac didn't even dare to waste a single breath. Torrential amounts of energy gathered in his forearm while he launched a fractal edge at the emperor to buy some time. It was as though Nenotheop had eyes in the back of his head, and he immediately swung his spear in a wide arc. The swing disintegrated the fractal edge even though it was imbued with the Dao of Sharpness.

"You actually survived the Empyrean Sacrifice. You truly are a human cockroach. But I do not need a War Array to handle the two of you," Nenotheop sneered at the approaching Zac.

Zac didn't bother with an answer, but the space above him suddenly cracked, and a huge wooden hand emerged.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

#### **Chapter 262 - Spear World**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

New month, new [Drive!](#) Support the story and read up to 31 chapters ahead!

Don't worry, that was the final spam for the month ;)

Zac came out of the gates swinging, knowing that Ylvas wouldn't last much longer. He needed to finish this as quickly as possible before they completely ran out of energy because there was still the issue of Vasidas and the missing Thea.

Energy ripped around Zac as he pushed forward, activating [**Hatchetman's Rage**] in order to boost the wooden hand to the absolute limit of what he could unleash. Both the hand of [**Nature's Punishment**] and himself were rapidly approaching Nenotheop until Zac finally stopped 50 meters away while the hand kept moving.

Nenotheop's aura had noticeably weakened due to losing the effect of the War Array, but he still emitted a tremendous fighting spirit. It didn't look like he had expended much energy to whittle down Ylvas and his generals, meaning Zac would essentially be fighting him at full capacity.

The large fractal that hovered behind the emperor moved to intercept the giant hand, stopping ten meters away from Nenotheop like a shield. Surprisingly the emperor started to launch a frenzy of stabs at the fractal, his arm and spear turning into a blur.

Zac's brows rose in alarm when he saw that the fractal both multiplied and empowered the strikes, resulting in hundreds of spear-silhouettes stabbing into the approaching hand. It felt as though his whole arm was getting eviscerated by the relentless attacks, and wood chips were raining down on the ground as each spear fractal ripped away piece by piece.

A sudden burst of energy made the emperor stop in his tracks, and he quickly turned in alarm when two fractal snakes ripped toward him from behind. They weren't

very large, reaching only a few meters in length, but they emitted terrifying energy. Both were pitch black, and it appeared like they had small horns in their foreheads.

They flew toward Nenotheop in a swirling circular manner, forming almost what looked like a spring as they approached. An azure fractal sword traveled in the empty space within the spring the two snakes formed, and it was as though the snakes guarded the real attack on its way toward its target. The attack originated from Ylvas who had paled and fallen on his hands and knees after the attack.

The emperor growled in frustration as he ripped an amulet from his chest and threw it at **[Nature's Punishment]** before he focused his attention on the incoming snake-strike. Clearly, he considered an attack from an actual E-Grade warrior a higher threat than that of Zac who was only level 63. Even the fractal swapped position to instead be pointed toward Ylvas.

A torrent of spears shimmering with lethality moved to intercept Ylvas' strike, but the two snakes that protected the sword strike suddenly opened their mouths and the space in front of them started to distort. It was as though they had small black holes in their mouths as they caused a huge suction of the area in front of them, dragging everything inside.

Everything in the vicinity was sucked into the maws of the snakes, and even the spear fractals from the emperor were simply swallowed up by the two snakes as they flew closer. But there was a limit to how many attacks they could gobble up since they got more and more engorged as they kept diverting the incoming attacks.

Finally, one of the snakes couldn't take anymore and it flashed ahead of the other one and appeared almost right in front of Nenotheop who swung his spear to destroy the incoming threat. But the moment the spear touched the beast it exploded like a bomb, instantly releasing dozens of spear strikes in every direction.

Ylvas had turned the emperor's unceasing attacks against him as the snake spat out everything it had eaten at the last second with almost as much force as the attacks initially had. The emperor's fractal once again flashed and Nenotheop almost turned into a six-armed asura as he deflected attack after attack with impossible speed.

But he didn't even have time to destroy half of the attacks before the second snake flashed over, and this one exploded by itself even without being attacked. It released another barrage of attacks at him, joining the remaining strikes an effort to rip the emperor to shreds. Nenotheop was barely visible within the sea of spear strikes, but an almost blindingly strong golden glow erupted around him.

It looked as though a bomb exploded, erupting outward from the emperor and disintegrated all the fractal strikes around him in an instant. The assault wasn't over however, as the final blade strike that had been hidden within the two snakes flashed forward, stabbing straight through the golden glow and flying toward Nenotheop's heart.

Unfortunately, the emperor managed to move his spear in time, hitting the azure sword-strike, though he only managed to swing it downward without much force. He hadn't been able to gather enough energy or momentum for the defense since he had been occupied by the surprise attacks from the two snakes. Nenotheop did what he could, but he wasn't able to completely destroy the fractal that likely even consisted of Ylvas' life force.

The fractal sword tore into his side, causing blood to cascade down his golden robes, and it was the first real wound that Nenotheop had received during the whole battle. But Nenotheop had no time to react before a huge crash erupted from behind him.

Ylvas' attack had taken less than a second, and during that time the defensive amulet had tried to stave off **[Nature's Punishment]**. But some defensive tool had no

way to stop the onslaught of Zac's ultimate attack. Everything he had was loaded into that strike, and it was even empowered by **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

The hand had undergone a rebirth after Nenotheop was forced to stop attacking since it was imbued by the Dao of Trees with its concept of life from death. If one wanted to stop the hand you would need to completely destroy it, or it would just grow back.

The defensive amulet was a high-quality item, but it was no match to the compounding power of Zac's strongest attack, and its shield fractured and broke after just a split second with a huge explosion. The hand continued unencumbered straight toward Nenotheop who had just been stabbed by Ylvas.

Zac didn't hesitate and immediately slammed down his hand with as much force as he could muster. **[Nature's Punishment]** fell like a slap from the gods at Nenotheop who roared in anger. Blazing energies swirled around him as he actually threw his spear straight up at the incoming hand.

A tremendous shockwave blasted outward when the spear slammed into the hand, and an enormous crack in the mountain formed right beneath that spanned the whole summit. Zac screamed in pain as a hole was ripped open in his hand when the power in the spear managed to do the same to **[Nature's Punishment]**.

Pushing down the pain, Zac arduously formed a fist with his broken hand, and finally managed to slam it down on Nenotheop. Another tremendous shockwave erupted when a crater over ten meters deep formed. The fist was on a completely other level compared to the attack that Nenotheop's general generated earlier, and even the Star Ox would have been turned into meat paste from the attack.

However, a badly wounded but very much living Nenotheop got back to his feet at the bottom of the crater with a growl, making Zac sigh in regret. E-Grade warriors were a pain in the ass to kill. The next moment another wave of shocking energies gathered around Nenotheop and he rose into the air like a D-Grade powerhouse.

"Are you still going to hide, unfilial child?!" he shouted, and suddenly his fractal reappeared after having been destroyed by **[Nature's Punishment]**. "Spear World!"

The fractal started growing and in an instant, it spanned hundreds of meters in the air above them. Most of the summit was covered, and Zac couldn't help but get a bad feeling when he sensed the immense power that the fractal radiated. Zac was confused at first, but he soon understood the meaning of Nenotheop's words.

Vasidas was not only a restraining force upon Zac, but perhaps even more-so on Nenotheop himself. He was afraid of expending too much energy, making himself vulnerable to a coup by his own son. But it was clear Nenotheop was no longer holding back, judging by the monstrous energies that he was burning up.

Zac wanted to jump toward him before Nenotheop unleashed whatever he had planned, but a sense of impending crisis immediately made him swing his axe toward his back. To his surprise, a fractal spear had stabbed at him from nowhere, and Zac barely managed to destroy it due to his honed instincts.

Zac quickly glanced around and saw that no matter where he looked people were assaulted by innumerable spear attacks, making it seem like they were all caught in a hurricane made of fractal spears. Not even the remaining forces of Medhin weren't spared, and they desperately wailed before being struck down by their own leader.

It was as though the spears were blind while they tried to cause utter annihilation. Even the palace in the distance started to collapse as spears kept slamming into it as well. This type of attack must be the emperor's strongest attack that he had held off on using. It must cost an insane amount of Cosmic Energy judging by the widespread damage, and it also seemed to not care about friend or foe.

Zac's thoughts immediately went to Thea, and he desperately started running toward the emperor as he deflected the strikes he could stop and endured those he couldn't with his body or **[Nature's Barrier]**. Wounds were racking up at an alarming rate, and he knew he wouldn't last too long even with his Endurance and defensive measures. Ylvas was even worse off as he was completely spent from his earlier fight and the ultimate attack.

Even the final general had fallen it seemed. He had erected a wooden barrier around himself, but the consecutive attacks had quickly whittled it down and killed the man inside. And if someone of that power fell in just a few seconds there was no need to guess how the weaker people on the summit were faring.

"Flee from the summit!" Ylvas desperately shouted as he fended off spears coming from every direction while hobbling toward Nenotheop as well.

But it was to no avail. The normal resistance fighters couldn't even stop the spears from wounding them, let alone block them while they made their way off the mountains. People were falling one by one across the whole summit, and in just a few seconds less than 10 percent remained. Those who were spared were mainly the lucky ones who were at the edge of the fractal in the sky since they managed to get out quickly enough.

The emperor kept hovering in the air with his spear pointed up toward the fractal in the sky, and Zac started shooting fractal edges of his own at him as he ran. However, they were whittled down by the innumerable spears in the area and didn't even reach half-way before being destroyed.

Zac growled as he activated **[Loamwalker]** and sped toward the emperor at maximum speed. The next moment he pushed himself off the ground toward him and launched a series fractal edges in a split second. The first two held a dark metallic luster, and they were imbued with the Dao of Hardness.

The two strikes managed to withstand the innumerable fractal spears as they paved the way toward the emperor, and the following three strikes were imbued with the Dao of Sharpness. The emperor wasn't defenseless however, as tens of spears suddenly appeared below him as they ripped the first three fractal edges to shreds in an instant and descended toward Zac.

Then a shadow suddenly appeared in front of him as a blast of energies erupted, destroying all of the spears between Zac and Nenotheop. It was Ylvas who had expended even more life force to destroy the final defense.

"Go!" Ylvas coughed as he started falling toward the ground stretching out his entwined hands.

Zac grit his teeth as he used Ylvas' hands as a plateau, and Ylvas launched him up toward the emperor with all the force he could muster before slamming into the ground like a meteor. The emperor, finally forced to redirect his spear from pointing at the fractal, stabbed it straight toward Zac's heart.

Zac knew he only had one shot at this, so he completely removed any defensive measures as he slightly tilted his body, letting the spear pierce straight through his body. However, it just missed his heart, and with Zac's momentum he was within arm's reach of the emperor in an instant.

Nenotheop tried to rip out his spear but it was completely stuck since Zac had imbued himself with the Dao of Hardness while he swung his axe quick as lightning. Out of options Nenotheop finally released the grip of his spear to push himself backward, but the last second a small fractal edge grew out from **[Verun's Bite]**.

Three thumps were soon heard as Zac, Nenotheop, and Nenotheop's head fell into the ground, and Zac was immediately infused with a huge amount of Cosmic Energy. It

was far beyond anything he had ever gained before, and he knew that he hadn't just received one level from the kill.

The emperor had been too reliant on his weapon and had tried to hold on to it until the end. It was likely that no one had ever managed to disarm him since he had stood at the peak his whole life. It allowed Zac a brief window to catch the old warrior off-guard when he refused to let go, and Zac decapitated him in one swift swing. Between the E-Grade edge of **[Verun's Bite]** and the Dao of Sharpness, even an old monster couldn't keep his head after such an attack.

Zac let his axe feed on the blood of the headless emperor, and Verun screamed in exultation in his mind. Afterward he slowly dragged out the emperor's spear, a groan escaping his lips. Blood flowed like a river from the wound, but the bleeding quickly slowed down as he ate one of his best healing pills.

After that, he hastened over to Ylvas' side. His own state was pretty pathetic, but the champion of Berum was truly on his last legs. Zac quickly got down on his knee and fed him one of his top-grade healing pills while quickly creating a tourniquet for his missing leg.

"We did it!" Ylvas weakly said, his eyes filling with tears of relief. "That old monster is gone."

Zac nodded with a smile, but just as Zac started to relax his mind screamed he was in danger.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 263 - Man's Best Friend**

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

As a few comments noted Zac forgot about the big spear that was impaling him. It has now been fixed, and he removed it at the end of last chapter before walking over to Ylvas. A simple mistake that can happen to every murder hobo.

Warning bells were going off in Zac's mind and he quickly slammed his axe into the ground right next by the stump of Ylvas' leg. **[Verun's Bite]** sucked in a bit more E-Grade blood from the pool that had formed beneath it making the fractal on the handle blaze in crimson red, allowing Zac to unleash his final trump card. He squeezed some of his remaining Cosmic Energy into his axe, and the enormous form of Verun appeared.

The Tool Spirit was able to localize the threat as if by instinct, and it immediately pounced to the left and swiped its large claws seemingly into the air. A groan could be heard as a young man appeared out of nowhere, sinister energies swirling around his hands. It almost looked like stars were hovering around them, and the skill reminded Zac of Abby's large eye.

A large gash stretched across the man's whole upper body from Verun's surprise attack. He barely had time to land before the enormous beast bit at him with almost impossible speed. The primordial beast ruthlessly swung his head back and forth in an effort to rip his prey to shreds, blood cascaded all over the area. Unfortunately, Zac sensed no incoming Cosmic Energy, indicating that the man was still alive.

The assassin had been taken by surprise by the sudden appearance, but he managed to avoid any fatal injuries even when he was in the maw of the tool spirit. A

purple light suddenly shone through the teeth of Verun, and it grew in intensity until it was almost blinding in just a second.

The next moment the light quickly disappeared, before a huge explosion took place inside Verun's maw. The Tool Spirit's semi-corporeal form was completely obliterated, and Zac was forced a few steps back from the intense energies from the explosion.

Worry filled his heart when he saw Verun's shape fall apart, but he soon breathed out in relief as he sensed the spirit returning to the axe, while the red fractal dimmed down. It only sent him a sense of frustration that it had failed, and that it needed to rest again.

The assassin had managed to stave off Verun, but he was in a pitiful state. Grisly wounds covered his whole body, especially around his stomach where Verun had chomped down with its massive teeth. Zac could see his innards and a few wounds through the huge wounds, and he was surprised the assassin could even stand up from how he looked.

However, Zac wasn't completely relieved even though his body was in disrepair. The man's aura was completely unstable as it fluctuated around him, but the energy the guy emitted was no joke. His eyes were also sharp as he glared at Zac, indicating he hadn't completely lost his fighting strength. Judging by the energy fluctuations and clothes from the man in front of them Zac knew this could only be one person.

"Vasidas," Ylvas growled as he aimed his sword at him, arduously getting back on his leg.

However, Zac knew that it was just empty bluster. The old champion's body was completely wrung out from his last attacks, and he was only conscious by sheer willpower. If he squeezed out any more life-force to attack, he would either turn into a cripple or die.

The situation was the worst-case scenario. He knew there was a decent risk of Vasidas doing this, and it was one of the reasons he had tried to end the fight as quickly as possible. He had also entered the weakened state since the boost from **[Hatchetman's Rage]** had run out.

But he knew he couldn't show weakness at this juncture, and resolutely gripped his axe while his other hand moved toward his Cosmos Sack. He didn't have some secret weapon there, but his mind went to the Spiritual Pill he found on the Alchemist's Mountain.

Just a whiff from the vapors accumulated in the cauldron had not only restored his energy and given him a level, it had also revived him out of his weakened state. He wasn't sure what would happen if he ingested the pill in his current situation, but he didn't really have many other alternatives if the man in front of him tried something.

"Well played, I did not see that coming. Owning a weapon with a spiritual form, impressive," the man panted before looking down at his wretched appearance. "I guess today's game is over. But I have a feeling we will see each other again."

"Where's Thea?" Zac said with a frown while he held his axe at the ready.

It sounded like Vasidas would give up since his sneak attack failed, but Zac wouldn't take his word for it.

"Ms. Marshall is having tea over in the gazebo on the other side of the summit," Vasidas said. "I always uphold my promises."

"Today is my loss, but The Great Redeemer's machinations are unavoidable," the voice of Vasidas echoed across the summit, drawing glares from the Berum forces who stood in the distance.

Zac hesitated for a second, but in the end, he chose to not force a battle or try a sneak attack. Killing this man wasn't his main goal, and it had a high risk of back-firing. Zac knew he had made the right decision, when Vasidas just slowly faded into nothingness, both his aura and body suddenly gone.

"I don't believe that," Ylvas said with a sigh, plopping down on the ground. "Fate is everchanging."

"Are you okay by yourself?" Zac asked, eager to head in the direction that Vasidas indicated.

"Go, find your lass. My men will keep me safe," Ylvas said as he popped another healing pill.

The moment that Vasidas left, the few remaining Medhin warriors heedlessly fled down the mountain, abandoning any thought of resistance. Of the Berum warriors, only a handful remained as well, most having died by the Emperor's final attack.

Everyone sported heavy wounds, but they formed a three-layer thick shield wall around Ylvas, allowing their leader to heal up. Zac wasn't sure they would really amount to much if Vasidas came back, but he needed to get going and didn't say anything. As Zac left Ylvas side the soldiers all also wordlessly bowed in his direction, showing their thanks for his part in the war.

"Do you know if Billy okay?" Zac asked one of the guards surrounding Ylvas before he left.

"The large one? He fell asleep some ways down the mountain, a few people are guarding him," the man said. "That smash was amazing."

Zac nodded in relief before he started running over toward the ruins of the summit palace. He was about to enter it, but he stopped himself the last moment to pop one of his top-grade healing pills in his mouth. He also took out both a Divine Crystal and an E-Grade Nexus Crystal to both heal and restore himself as quickly as possible.

He was extremely wrung out, and if he wasn't careful he'd turn into his Draugr-form again, which might lead to untold problems. He also was in no condition to assault a summit array. The frenzied strikes of the emperor's spear-world had turned the palace into ruins, but Zac didn't dare bet his life that it had also destroyed the protective arrays surrounding it.

It was only twenty minutes later he felt strong enough to go ahead. During that time there hadn't been any real changes on the summit. The squads that had veered to the sides to intercept any potential backup had rushed up the mountain after hearing the results of the battle, and they had taken over the task of protecting Ylvas.

A few even stood vigil over Zac while he recuperated, though it wasn't really necessary. While he was spent, it was not to the same degree as when he fought Salvation. The emperor had been far stronger, but Zac had gained a huge upgrade in both survivability and Cosmic Energy reserves due to his frantic leveling while in his Draugr-form.

He was still far from top shape as he got back to his feet, but Zac felt it should be enough to not get blasted by the array. He took a few steps forward and was immediately inundated in scorching flames. With his high constitution however, it only stung a bit, and he made his way through in just a few seconds.

Soon enough he found the place Vasidas referred to, hidden beyond the rubble at the far end of the palace, overlooking the mountain. Standing there was a small gazebo that was undamaged from Nenotheop's crazed onslaught, likely saved by the fact that it was out of range of the enormous fractal. And sitting there was the familiar face craning her neck to look over the rubble.

“You’re okay!” Thea said with wide eyes when she spotted Zac. “I couldn’t see the battle due to the palace, apart from that huge fractal toward the end. And was that Billy’s head I spotted ten meters in the air?”

Zac smiled as he walked over, a great sense of relief filling his heart.

“Yeah it was Billy, he came to help as well. That guy can really club things,” Zac said as he gazed at Thea. “I was worried about you.”

Thea’s mouth curved upward in a smile for a second, before her eye’s turned downcast and she looked down.

“Sorry I caused so much trouble for you,” she sighed. “I got too greedy and caused all these problems.”

“It’s okay. You saved my life with that protective skill from Inevitability. This was the least I could do,” Zac answered as he walked inside the gazebo. “What’s going on, are you trapped somehow?”

It was a bit curious. The fight ended over twenty minutes ago, but Thea still sat rooted here instead of fleeing or heading over to see what was going on.

“It’s these chains,” Thea muttered as she swung her leg.

Only now did Zac notice that her right leg was cuffed, and a chain was attached to a fixture in the ground. However, the chain wasn’t very thick, and Thea should have no problem ripping it apart even though her main attribute was Dexterity.

“This thing?” Zac said with some confusion as he leaned closer. “Can’t you break it?”

“It’s some sort of treasure. It saps me of all my energy. The moment I gather any Cosmic Energy the manacle sucks it out and it gets released into the ground by the chain,” Thea sighed. “I can’t summon any of my strength, it feels like I’m back before the integration.”

Now that Zac gave it a proper look it reminded him a bit of the large chains down in the ravine, those that Anzonil once had used in an effort to suppress his disciple. However, these were a much weaker version. Zac curiously looked at it and after a brief hesitation touched the chain with his hand, but he felt nothing. It was the same with the manacle itself, and after prodding about for a minute he managed to open them up.

There wasn’t a lock holding the thing in place, but the clasp was tough to unclasp. It likely required at least 100 strength to open, which was impossible for a prisoner in a weakened state. It was a pretty ingenious design and having such a thing would perhaps be very convenient in the future.

“Can I take this?” Zac asked as he looked up, but he was startled when he saw Thea’s expression.

Her face was flushed, and she glared at him with enraged eyes.

“Had enough yet?” she wheezed out through grit teeth.

“Wha-“ Zac tried to ask but stopped himself as his eyes widened.

He finally realized that he had been too engrossed with the design of the chain, and his head had been sandwiched between her knees while he fiddled with the clasp for almost a minute. Zac immediately jumped a few steps away and coughed in embarrassment.

“You should absorb some energy, but we can’t stay long,” Zac said, completely glossing over the issue. “The emperor is dead and Vasidas is badly wounded, and who knows, the Dominators might be on their way. It seems they all serve the same person, and they might have an alliance.”

“What? Who?” Thea said with confusion, her curiosity overcoming her anger.

“The Great Redeemer,” Zac said with a sigh.

“Salvation’s master? How is that possible?” Thea said skeptically.

“I am not sure about all the details yet, but it doesn’t look good for either Berum or Earth to be honest,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “Let’s walk as we talk.”

The two started heading back toward Ylvas, and Zac explained what he learned about The Great Redeemer from the old champion, adding in his own speculations as he went. They also told each other what they had been up to since they got separated, though Zac glossed over some parts about his situation that needed to be kept secret.

He was shocked to find out about the defensive skill she used. Its effect was truly amazing. When she had lit up like a Christmas tree as they fell down the cliff, she had activated a teleportation skill. But that skill not only teleported her away, but it also gave an almost absolute defense until she was whisked away as well.

Using the skill had its clear drawbacks though. It took some time to charge up the teleportation, and the cost of the skill was something far more expensive than Cosmic Energy. It cost levels to use, which explained why she hadn’t improved much while he was stuck in the tunnels. Thea herself wasn’t sure exactly how it worked, but her current guess was that the more damage the skill blocked while the teleportation charged up, the higher the cost would be.

The two kept talking and almost forgot that they just had survived a true life-and-death situation. They were dragged out of their bubble from heavy steps quickly approaching them. Zac looked up to see an almost mummified Billy running over with a smile that reached from ear to ear.

“Thea! Billy missed you!”

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**Chapter 264 - The Final Sprint**

“Billy! It’s nice to see you,” Thea said with a smile to the incoming giant. “Zac told me you came to save me. You’re a real hero as well.”

“Ha ha, did you see Billy’s Big Thwonk?” Billy said and heroically flexed his muscles, but quickly stopped with a yelp due to his wounds.

“How are your wounds, Billy?” Zac asked.

“Billy will be okay. What happened with the scary spear-guy?” he asked and looked around.

“I beat him up with the help of Alien-man,” Zac said.

Thea threw him a questioning glance, but he only responded with a slightly helpless shrug.

“Alien-man was even worse than Billy,” the giant said as he looked over in Ylvas’ direction. “He will become a pirate with a tree-leg.”

“Actually Billy, you can regrow legs and arms,” Zac explained. “If you eat the right treasures.”

“Aliens are pretty impressive,” Billy nodded sagely, slightly missing the point.

“Uh, yeah,” Zac said and started walking toward Ylvas.

The old champion looked better, but it was still clear that the battle had noticeably aged him. There was a real cost to using life force as a fuel to one’s attacks, and Zac wouldn’t be surprised if Ylvas had lost over 200 years going by his appearance.

Then again, that still meant he had much more time remaining than humans had in total before the integration.

“You’re looking better,” Ylvas said with a slightly weak voice as he opened his eyes. “I am glad your friend is okay. Vasidas has been an enigma since our worlds got integrated. I have no idea what he is thinking.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t get him as well,” Zac sighed.

“It’s okay. Nenotheop was the spiritual pillar of the Medhin Empire. Losing him and almost half of the Medhin royals in a month should have a huge impact on their morale,” Ylvas said with a shake of his head. “Vasidas is one of the lesser-known royals, usually acting alone. He won’t have the same rallying power as Nenotheop did.”

“We also know more about the truth of the Medhin threat and can begin to spread the news the moment we get back. We might not be able to convince everyone, but a seed of doubt should be planted. Perhaps the Medhin will even become refugees, ousted from their position,” one of the soldiers next to Ylvas added.

“Sounds like you have things in hand. In any case, the three of us will leave now,” Zac said. “We don’t want to risk attracting those two Dominators. You should probably do the same.”

Ylvas nodded and arduously got to his feet.

“I would like to thank you again. Without the assistance of you and Billy, we would never have been victorious in this fight. Your strength is astounding, and I can’t imagine the power you will have when you reach the next stage. As promised, here is your reward,” Ylvas said and reached for his bag.

Zac quickly moved to stop Ylvas hand with a shake of his head.

“There’s no need for that. Everything changed when they caught Thea. I would have gone here with or without you. Besides, I’ve already taken the emperor’s pouch, that’s more than enough. We have the same enemy. Who knows, if you manage to save yourself from The Great Redeemer it might help us on Earth as well,” Zac said.

It was true. They still had no idea exactly what the Redeemer’s plans were, most were still conjecture. Perhaps losing just one of the planets would ruin the whole thing for him, saving Earth as well. It would be a worthwhile investment to leave Ylvas with his treasure so he could use it in eradicating the Medhin Royals.

Ylvas looked surprised but slowly nodded his head in agreement.

“You will be remembered as the hero of Berum,” Ylvas said and stretched his hand forward. “I hope to meet you again in the vast cosmos.”

Zac grabbed his hand in a farewell before he started walking down the mountain with Billy and Thea in tow. As they walked down the mountain, Zac opened his status screen to allocate his free points. As he expected he’d already reached level 65, and he put the free points into dexterity.

He knew he’d gain a large boost in Strength from the levels awarded from the hunt, so he needed to shore up his Dexterity a bit. Otherwise, there was nothing to note. He hadn’t made any progress in his Daos, and he also hadn’t gained any title even though Nenotheop was the first proper E-Grade cultivator he defeated.

He wasn’t too surprised by the lack of title, but the situation with the Dao was a bit surprising. He had been through an extremely intense fight with the strongest enemy he’d ever encountered. There’d also been at least twenty warriors utilizing various Dao Seeds during that battle, yet he hadn’t even gained a spark of inspiration.

It was as though something was missing in the air, or like he had blinders covering his head. If this battle had taken place on Earth, he was sure he would advance one of

his seeds. But now he knew there was no point to sit down and meditate since there was nothing to meditate on.

He closed his status screen and turned his focus on his Cosmos Sack next. The moment he touched it he was shocked to the point that he stumbled. Nenotheop was *rich*.

“You okay?” Thea asked with some concern but suddenly understood what was going on when she saw Zac’s wide grin and his hand touching his pouch.

“Just a bit surprised is all,” Zac said.

The Cosmos Sack had expanded with an entirely new section dedicated to Nenotheop’s loot, and it was far bigger than the original space. There were simply mountains of treasure inside, far eclipsing what he gained even when taking Salvation’s treasure.

It was also far more organized, with neatly arrayed sections depending on the type of valuable. There were also roughly thirty piles of random treasure, and Zac immediately realized that was the loot that Nenotheop still hadn’t organized.

One particular item in the unsorted piles suddenly drew his attention. It was a large stone statue where the whole thing was just a face that smiled in an extremely creepy manner, and the reason he recognized it was because he had seen Thea sneak it into her pouch when she thought Zac wasn’t looking when they hunted together.

When Zac had asked about the statue, she had been embarrassed about it until she admitted she liked kitsch and weird memorabilia. The statue wasn’t a treasure, but rather something she wanted to add to her private collection.

“Thea,” Zac said as he stopped, drawing the attention of Billy and Thea who had been talking about their time in the hunt.

Zac moved his hand and suddenly a mountain of treasure appeared in front of him. Thea’s eyes widened in surprise before she looked at Zac.

“My treasures? I thought Vasidas had them?” she said.

“I guess Nenotheop took them from him to pass me on the ladder, though I don’t know if everything is there,” Zac said.

Thea immediately moved toward the pile of loot before she hesitated for a second.

“What do you want in return?” she asked.

“Nothing, they’re yours,” Zac said as he beckoned for her to take it. “More importantly, I have a proposition for you.”

“Thank you, I’ll remember this,” she said with a serious face as she put her treasure into her sack. “What do you have on your mind?”

“I can lend you enough treasure to reach the second spot on the ladder. In return, I’ll come and check out your library three days after the hunt ends. There are some things I want to look into,” Zac explained.

“You’re not worried that someone will pass us on the ladder if you split your loot like that?” Thea hesitantly said.

“That’s impossible,” Zac immediately said with a shake of his head, regretting it a bit when he noticed Thea’s incisive stare. “Also, Billy, how about I give you some treasure as well?”

“Mama said handouts should be saved for those in need, Billy is fine,” Billy said with a shake of his head, completely disinterested.

“But Ogras and I owe you a bit for taking the biggest rat, right?” Zac said, changing tactics. “I’ll just pay our debt right now. It’s not good when there are debts between friends, right?”

Billy seemed to think it over for a bit before he nodded with a smile.

“Right, no debt between friends,” he agreed.

“This all sounds fine, but let’s get away from here first. I don’t want to meet the Dominators while I still only have a small amount of Cosmic Energy in my body,” Thea interjected. “What are your plans for the last day of the hunt?”

“I will hunt as many beasts as I can here in the core area,” Zac said without hesitation. “The money and Cosmic Energy they give are very good even at my level, better than any hunting ground I have at home.”

“Billy also want to thwunk,” Billy nodded. “Billy is a genius in energy control, the stupid beasts are much easier to hit now.”

“Fine, let’s find a good hunting ground a few hours away, and hunt in the same area. That way we can help each other if we run into trouble,” Thea nodded.

They left the Medhin-controlled area without any troubles and found a good hunting spot roughly two hours away. They had gone in the opposite direction from the Zones where the two Dominators stayed, which should hopefully ensure they didn’t run into each other.

As soon they arrived Zac forked over enough treasure to place Thea in the second position and Billy in the 8th. Doing so actually kicked Thomas Fischer down to the 11th spot on the ladder, but Zac didn’t really care. It was not like they were allies anyway. Zac also took the opportunity to finally establish an alliance with Billyville before they got ready to split up to hunt beasts.

Each of them was strong enough that they could freely hunt without a party, and it would likely even slow them down to go together. There were a lot of beasts in the forests, but not to the point that three powerhouses could run together without taking food out of each other’s mouths.

“If we don’t see each other again in the hunt we’ll see each other in three days,” Zac said to the other two.

When Zac had explained that he would visit Thea after the hunt Billy immediately insisted that he wanted to come and play as well, so they all agreed to meet in Westerfort, the main town that the Marshall Clan controlled.

Soon, Zac was alone in the forest, ripping through pack after pack of rabid beasts with wild abandon. He had accomplished everything he set out to do, and perhaps even more, in this hunt. It was a disappointment and a problem that the two Dominators would take the top positions in the Hunter-ladder, but there was simply nothing to do about that.

He had gained a score of levels however, and a mountain of loot, which would help Port Atwood thrive in the future. He had also managed to set up quite a few alliances and even found out about the wealthy underworld. Apart from the splinter stuck in his head, the trial had exceeded his wildest expectations.

He couldn’t wait to get back now. He had trials to take, Incursions to close, and so many unanswered questions that he needed to look into.

For now though, he had beasts to kill. Zac entered an almost Zen state where he methodically moved from pack to pack, the minutes turning to hours. In just a day, tens of thousands of beasts were ruthlessly mowed down, turning into money and Cosmic Energy for Zac.

Zac thought this would continue until the time ran out, but a shocking change took place when there were only 30 minutes left. He had passed Vasidas on the hunter ladder. The battle against the Medhin hadn't been enough, but between Verun injuring the royal and Zac's mindless grinding he had been pushed to the third spot increasing his position by one.

But just a few seconds later he was once again pushed down a position, and Zac realized that Vasidas didn't want to give up the title. But if there was one thing that Zac could do it was causing widespread damage. His reserves had long restored during the day, and the wound from the spear in his chest wasn't impeding him too much. He no longer held anything back, and fractal blades were soon destroying everything in the valley.

Zac didn't even have time to check the ladder anymore and instead gave everything he had in killing as many beasts as humanly possible until the world finally turned black.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 265 - Ladder Rewards**

The huge black walls that delimited the hunting grounds had shrunk at a rapid pace, swallowing hundreds of mountains by the second. In almost no time the darkness was upon him, and Zac only managed to take a last glance at the Eastern Trigram Sect before everything turned black.

**[Congratulations on receiving the third position on the Hunter Ladder. Awards distributed.]**

The unfeeling voice of the System suddenly echoed in his ears as an enormous surge of energy entered his body.

**[Congratulations on receiving the first position on the Gatherer Ladder. Limited Titles Unlocked. Awards distributed.]**

**[Congratulations on receiving the first position on the aggregated Ladder. Awarded +3 levels and Title Permanence.]**

The gatherer announcement wasn't a surprise to Zac, but the hunter ladder was a welcome surprise. The mad dash at the end had proven successful, and he had beat out Vasidas for the third position, which meant he gained another 2 bonus levels from the hunt. But most interesting was the final prompt, a hidden reward of the hunt.

He had hoped that there would be something like this, but he hadn't been sure. While he didn't manage to get the highest position on the Hunter ladder, his average result was the best of all participants.

Inevitability was only on the 4th spot of the Gatherer ladder, getting surpassed by himself, Thea, and Beruv Ylvas. He was a bit surprised that Ylvas managed to beat out the Dominator, but he guessed he got the help of his army to push him past the Zhix at the end.

Harbinger, the second Dominator, got the 5th position and Starlight, the Ishiate powerhouse, got the 6th. Thomas Fischer had managed to get himself back to the 10th position, while Billy remained at 8th. Neither Billy nor Thea managed to get into the top ten on the hunter ladder, unfortunately, but both were in the top 100. The days of captivity had unfortunately robbed Thea of her opportunity.

Zac guessed that Thomas had used the same tactic as the Medhin Emperor, but he was surprised that he had enough pull to get people to donate their wealth to him. Perhaps it was just a temporary loan though, like he had done with Thea.

However, he was a bit confused by the last reward. The bonus levels weren't very confusing, just what did Title Permanence Mean? The Gatherer prompt also mentioned something about Limited Titles, which might be connected to the permanence. Zac opened the screen to see the results.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**73**

**Class**

**[F-Rare] Hatchetman**

**Race**

**[E] Human**

**Alignment**

**[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st**

**Limited Titles**

**-**

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - High, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Middle, Seed of Hardness - Middle, Seed of Sanctuary - Early**

**Core**

**[F] Duplicity**

**Strength**

**533 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 121%]**

**Dexterity**

**268 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]**

**Endurance**

**698 [Increase: 71%. Efficiency: 121%]**

**Vitality**

**338 [Increase: 61%. Efficiency: 121%]**

**Intelligence**

**119 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]**

**Wisdom**

**132 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]**

Luck

120 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 121%]

Free Points

24

Nexus Coins

[F] 273 280 383

Zac couldn't stop smiling when he saw that his attributes had taken another huge leap, part from his eight bonus levels, and part from his new title. He was also surprised to see that he had gained another row in his status screen, the Limited Titles that were mentioned earlier. However, there was nothing there, and there was no explanation on how Limited Titles differed from normal ones.

He tried focusing on the new row, but no matter what command he tried he couldn't gain any additional information from the empty field. He guessed he would have to ask someone back in Port Atwood about it. Instead, he chose to check out his new title.

**[Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st: First Position in Eastern Trigram Hunt. NOTE: Title Permanence Awarded. Reward: All Stats +10, All stats +5%]**

It was a pretty huge bonus, though the 10 flat points weren't as exciting any longer after he'd learned about the attribute gain of E-Grade. But the bonus Luck it gave was extremely valuable, and the other attributes would surely help him during his upcoming trials. He wanted to check out a few more things, but he sensed he was getting moved again by the System.

His time inside the blackness was even shorter compared to when the event started, and just ten seconds later he stood in his courtyard. He took a deep breath as tranquility entered his heart for the first time in a while. He hadn't realized it, but ever since his clash with Inevitability there had been a slight dread in the back of his mind, akin to a fear that the boogeyman would suddenly show up.

He had survived however, and he was pretty much safe now on his island. He also knew he would have to change his plans to make his teleporter public. He couldn't risk letting those monsters teleport here. He would only dare to do such a thing when the dominator threat was dealt with.

Before that however, there were so many things to do. He quickly looked around for his mountain of treasure, and he was elated to see that the amazing Cosmic Sack from the hunt was still attached to his belt.

But he frowned a few seconds later when he noticed a problem. He had taken out a random weapon from the sack to make sure it still worked, but when he tried to put it back nothing happened. A few tests later showed that the sack only allowed withdrawals now.

Sighing in disappointment, Zac realized that he couldn't use the sack permanently. He still wasn't in any hurry to empty it out though. He would have to call Calrin and a couple of his best appraisers over to help him go through it first.

"You're back," a voice suddenly said from the side, and Zac looked over to see Ogras standing there.

"Shit, what happened to you?" Zac said with some surprise when he saw a large scar that went from right below his left horn down to his cheek.

"We've got a pretty exciting Mystic Realm on our hands," Ogras explained with a smile.

“Mystic Realm?” Zac repeated. “The infiltrators are dealt with?”

“It cost me most of my savings but they’re dead. There were actually a lot of them,” Ogras said with a grunt.

“How did you do it?” Zac curiously asked.

“Ordered and set up a large array that covers the whole island. We can use it in the future to find anyone with an odd origin, like invaders or other aliens. But more importantly, how was the haul? We ready to do the inheritances?” Ogras said as his eyes started to glisten with greed.

“The returns were way above what I expected, honestly. But we can’t do the inheritance just yet,” Zac answered with a smile.

“Why not?” Ogras retorted, not being able to hide some of his impatience.

Zac snickered in response, and the next second a pile of the beautiful marble tiles appeared and covered the courtyard.

“Brazla has hounded me to improve his surroundings since the start. I think it’s best we do that before we do the Inheritance. I wouldn’t be surprised if he would mess things up for us otherwise,” Zac explained.

Ogras’ eyes widened in understanding, and he nodded thoughtfully before he threw a scathing glance at the opulent towers rising above the tree line.

“Yeah, that’s probably for the best. Gotta keep that lunatic happy,” Ogras nodded.

“By the way, what is Title Permanence?” Zac asked, changing the subject.

“Title Permanence? No idea,” Ogras said with a frown. “Where did you hear that?”

“I got it as a bonus reward from the hunt,” Zac said and proceeded to explain the two temporary ladders in the hunt and their respective rewards.

“I think I understand now,” Ogras said with a thoughtful nod. “Title Permanence might be the best reward you got from that trial.”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with some curiosity.

“I’ve already explained that there are a bunch of Mystic Realms out in the multiverse that provide titles,” Ogras started, and Zac nodded in agreement. “However, most of those places only provide Limited Titles.”

“Limited Titles?” Zac asked with confusion.

He had a vague recollection of Alyn mentioning it, but that was during the month when she tried to cram a lifetime’s worth of knowledge into his head while he mined Nexus Crystals.

“You can only have three Limited Titles at a time. If you get a new one you will have to discard one of the old ones or skip on getting the new one. They are separate from the normal titles,” Ogras explained.

“What, really?” Zac asked with some disappointment.

“You should be happy it’s like that. Just imagine if some wealthy assholes from the supreme clans spent a few hundred years traveling from Mystic Realm to Mystic Realm, getting thousands of titles? They would become monsters,” Ogras snorted.

“Titles are a bonus from The Ruthless Heavens, but there is a limit to how much it can give,” Ogras said. “You can’t have the attributes of a C-Grade old monster while at F-Grade.”

“Fair enough, I guess,” Zac said with a shrug. “What’s this got to do with title permanence?”

“The hunt doesn’t sound like something that should give permanent titles,” Ogras said. “I think the Title Permanence reward given to you is The Ruthless Heavens turning your Limited Title into a normal Title. That way it does not take up one of your slots. Is it together with your other titles?”

“It is,” Zac nodded after a second.

The face of Ogras started to scrounge up in a familiar way, and Zac felt a tirade was incoming, but a thought suddenly struck Zac.

“Do the Towers of Eternity give Limited Titles as well?” Zac asked.

“No, it’s one of the rare opportunities that gives real Titles. That’s why it’s so popular. Apart from the Tower, you can almost only find places giving Permanent Titles by serendipity, like finding a rare treasure,” Ogras explained. “That your hunt awarded title permanence is likely a one-time thing.”

Zac nodded in understanding. There were a lot of things Zac wanted to ask the demon about the current situation of Port Atwood, and he was also curious about the Mystic Realm. However, there was one thing that trumped every other matter in importance, and it couldn’t wait.

“More importantly, I think we might be in deep shit,” Zac said with a somber expression.

Ogras’ eyes hardened, looking at Zac with a frown.

“What’s going on?”

From there Zac recounted the parts of the hunts containing the battle with Salvation, the appearance of Inevitability, and what he’d learned from Beruv Ylvas. He finally added his own conclusions and guesswork what he thought was going on.

Ogras had an unprecedentedly serious face after having heard what Zac said.

“We need to have a meeting, immediately. We should hold it at the Towers of Myriad Dao so that Spirit can provide input as well. I’ll gather the council,” Ogras responded.

Zac completely agreed, so in just twenty minutes people started to gather in front of the doorways leading into the Repository. Zac was already there, and he smiled when he saw his sister running toward him. Kenzie threw herself in his arms, hugging him tightly.

“I’m glad you’re okay. Lyra made the hunt seem like a real hell,” she said with red-rimmed eyes.

“It’s good to see you,” Zac said with a warm smile before his brose rose in some surprise when he realized what Kenzie said. “Lyra is actually okay?”

“Yes, but she returned after only 6 days. She said she got a token she could crush to return back home,” Kenzie nodded. “What happened to you? Did you find anything cool?”

“Let’s talk inside,” Zac smiled as he looked around at the others.

Abby floated not far away, and the council was all present apart from a few who likely were managing the other islands. Calrin was also there, his eyes glued to Zac’s Cosmos Sack. Zac had also asked Ogras to bring Julia, and she stood some distance from the others looking a bit unsure of what to do.

Zac felt that the intelligence he’d gathered during the hunt was just too important to keep to himself, so he had already decided to brief Julia and then send her back as soon as possible. Since it looked like everyone else was present Zac led the way inside the towers.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### Chapter 266 - Council

“Why have so many come to beseech The Great Sage? I am sorry, but I do not accept disciples,” an arrogant voice echoed through the huge hall as the leaders of Port Atwood entered the Towers of Myriad Dao.

The next moment Brazla appeared, this time donned in a golden cultivator’s robe. Behind him was a huge golden sword that radiated a divine might, though Zac knew it was just an illusion. However, those who entered these halls for the first time couldn’t stop themselves from gasping, much to the Tool Spirit’s Delight.

“We need to hold an extremely important meeting,” Zac explained, hurrying to add some compliments when he saw the Tool Spirit’s frown. “And I felt it would be rude to not include The Great Sage in such an important event. Who else would we turn to for wisdom?”

That seemed to placate the Tool Spirit, and it quickly took a pose trying to convey wisdom. It might have worked if it wasn’t for Brazla’s nose pointing so far up in the air that his face was almost looking straight up.

Those in the group who hadn’t had the pleasure to meet Brazla before couldn’t help but look back and forth between Zac and the Machiavellian Tool Spirit with utter confusion. Zac himself felt like he had swallowed a pile of shit, but he had to admit Brazla was far more learned than the others here.

“Very well, the great Brazla will listen in on your meeting,” he said and swung his sleeve.

The next moment an extremely opulent conference table stood in front of them. However, even Zac couldn’t stop himself from glaring at the Tool Spirit when he saw the seating arrangements. There was one massive throne wrought from crystals and gold standing at the end, and it was pretty obvious Brazla saved that one for himself.

As for the others, there were simple wooden stools that were so low that if they sat down on them, they would barely be able to see above the table. It looked like Ogras’ eyes would pop out of their sockets, but before he could explode Zac intervened.

“Is this the hospitality of The Great Brazla?” Zac said with some disappointment as he took out another inscribed tile. “I even brought these supreme tiles at great personal cost to beautify your surroundings, but if this is the reception we will receive, I should probably get some simpler things.”

He felt a bit shameless about his words, but common sense held no sway under these roofs, so he could only play along. Brazla seemed almost entranced by the beautiful tiles, and a second later the paltry stools were replaced with proper chairs for everyone.

“I have gathered you all today to brief you on my experiences inside the hunt. I have learned some extremely troubling things about our new world, and need your input on how we should proceed from here,” Zac started the meeting without any preamble.

The mood around the table quickly got serious, with even Brazla staying quiet as Zac described the events of the hunt. Of course, he glossed over some parts, such as his dual classes and his meeting with Anzonil, and anything about the **[Heart of Oblivion]**.

“So, there you have it. It is very possible that an old monster is currently heading toward us, and it does not seem it would end well if he found us. We need to figure out

some precautions against this,” Zac finally said as he looked at the faces around the table.

There was a subdued silence, and most were looking down at the table with a frown or in fear. Zac understood the feeling well. There were so many enemies to contend with as is, and suddenly there was an even stronger bad guy thrown into the mix.

“Excuse me, did you say that there were no incursions on this other planet you partook the trial with?” Abby suddenly said, her enormous eye glistening with interest.

“Yes, no incursions ever appeared,” Zac nodded. “Why, is it important?”

“It might not be important, but I think I understand why this Redeemer gave such a task to his chosen,” Abby said as she bobbed above her chair.

“A newly integrated planet without incursions is practically unprecedented. It is the standard test of the System, and there are more than enough willing parties to go around. But I believe that The Great Redeemer has found a way to stop that,” she said.

“Stop how?” Zac asked.

“I can’t be sure, but I think it has to do with the conquest. If The Great Redeemer simply needed some people with the cultivation technique to survive until the planet integrated, why didn’t he tell his chosen to move into the mountains and cultivate away from the earth? Why risk their lives to dominate their whole planet?”

“I think he has somehow managed to tag his targeted planets as his own through this conquest, and since the planet is instantly owned by an existing faction when it gets integrated, no incursions spawn.”

“But we have incursions on our planet?” Kenzie questioned.

“Yes, because the Dominators failed in their task. I heard a massive war took place where the whole Zhix population banded together against the dominators. Perhaps there would be no incursions if they had managed to dominate their planet before they arrived. Perhaps this can be a clue to their plans?” Abby continued.

“The fulcrum thing?” Zac asked.

“No, I think that is different. But we must ask ourselves, if the goal of the subjects of The Great Redeemer is to dominate planets, why haven’t we even seen their shadows since the integration took place? I think it’s exactly due to those incursions that have popped up,” Ogras interjected.

“There is another possibility. You said you believe that this guy is D, or perhaps even C-Grade? But look at our Incursions. We have the Church of Everlasting Dao here, that’s at least a B-Grade force,” Ogras added.

“Even worse, The Undead Empire is here, and they have A-Grade old monsters holding the fort, perhaps even stronger beings. Even a C-grade hegemon would think twice before offending these forces by stealing a planet from out under their noses,” the demon finished. “And that’s only two of the ones we know of, there might be more powerful factions here.”

“So, they actually want us to defeat those forces without getting their hands dirty, so their boss doesn’t get blamed?” Kenzie said with a frown.

“Exactly. And it’s not like we can’t ignore the incursions. Both those forces are lunatics who leave planets without a single living soul within a few years,” Ogras sighed.

“Damned if you do, damned if you don’t,” Zac muttered before looking up. “So, what do we do?”

“Sell yourself,” Ogras suddenly said.

“What?” Zac gaped.

“We obviously need to close those incursions, and somehow also kill those Dominators. But we have no idea if that’s enough, right? Perhaps that Redeemer can still find us. Those Dominators might have hidden some means on some remote corner of the planet already,” Ogras explained, his careful nature showing.

“So, we need another reason for The Great Redeemer to back away. And that’s where you come in. You’re a humanoid behemoth, and you might be able to join a sect strong enough for The Great Redeemer to back away.”

“Is that really possible? Would he back away just because I joined a sect?” Zac asked skeptically.

“If you become an important disciple, then attacking your home will be akin to attacking the sect itself. But it depends on how crazy the guy is,” Ogras shrugged. “If he is rational, he would back away if the force is strong enough. No need to risk his life over a baby-planet, right?”

“It’s a plan, but it’s easier said than done. We can’t even leave this world, the Nexus Hub is inactive,” Zac said. “And even if it activated, how would we even be able to get to such a Sect. From what I understand it’s extremely hard to travel to higher grade places.”

It was true. One of the first things he’d asked Ogras was why he didn’t simply teleport to an A-grade world to cultivate there instead of coming to a place like Earth. The situation for the poorest saps on an A-Grade continent would likely be better than even the kings of a D-Grade world.

But it was extremely hard to travel upward even though it was something everyone wished to do. There essentially were only two ways. First was getting your hands on a Nexus Token of high enough tier.

Nexus Tokens were tickets to a random place. If you had a C-Grade token, you would be sent to a teleporter on a C-Grade world. But you had no idea where, and you might end up at some extremely dangerous place rather than at a public teleporter in some capital.

These tickets were generally given by the System as rewards for various hard quests. You needed to prove you deserved to travel to those higher-grade cultivation paradises. Perhaps Zac would be able to get one when he reached D-grade after becoming the world leader, but that was far off.

Another way to move upward was to get an invite from a high tier force, which would allow you to teleport to them. But those tokens were extremely rare as well, and they could only be awarded to Sects or Clans from quests by the System.

Essentially you needed to earn passage one way or another, and you couldn’t just move about as you wish. The System clearly did not want free movement in the multi-verse. Ogras believed it had to do with limited resources. If wastrels could go to high-tier planets and snatch divine treasures for himself things would get crazy. No one would want to stay on the lower planes.

“Well, there is one place where you can showcase your power in front of a bunch of people from various powerful forces, and that place has always been a place where rogue cultivators find established forces to take them in,” Ogras pointedly said. “You simply need to climb high enough to prove your potential.”

Zac immediately understood what Ogras talked about. The Tower of Eternity. It made sense that the powerful factions in the multiverse would send invitation tokens with their scions there. If they could recruit some extremely powerful unaffiliated cultivators while they were still young and only at F-Grade they might form ties with a future powerhouse while they still were weak.

“We will have to try everything out,” Zac nodded. “But we still don’t know what he wants with us.”

“Origin Dao,” Brazla suddenly muttered.

“Excuse me?” Zac said and looked over at the tool spirit, who seemed quite content to be the object of everyone’s attention.

“I would bet he is after the Origin Daos of your baby planet. You should have realized that your accomplishments in the Dao are far higher compared to normal D-Grade planets. It’s much easier for you to gain Dao Seeds compared to the norm,” Brazla started lecturing. “Perhaps you think you’re very talented. But in truth, you just have a superior environment.”

“This is not unique for this planet. In fact, it’s the same with all baby worlds. Even invaders benefit from it,” the Tool Spirit continued.

Zac shot a glance at Ogras, who slightly nodded to indicate that Brazla was correct.

“Why is that? It is due to what some call the Origin Dao. The process of integrating a world is partly to gradually infuse its core with massive amounts of energy, while also imbuing it with Origin Dao,” Brazla continued.

“Most of it is lodged in the world core, but everyone who has gained a Dao Seed will also carry this Dao essence for a bit. But over time it will disintegrate and turn into normal spiritual energy. The system uses it to awaken the area to the higher truths of the cosmos so that cultivation becomes possible,” the Tool Spirit explained.

“And you think The Great Redeemer is after this?” Zac asked.

“Yes, that would explain why he went through all this trouble instead of just buying a couple of planets. He needs to get to a newly integrated world quickly if he wants to harvest the Origin Dao,” Brazla shrugged.

“What would he use this Origin Dao for?” Kenzie probed.

“No idea, but I would venture he has devised an unorthodox method that might allow him to break through whatever bottleneck he is stuck on,” Brazla said. “Sacrificing a couple of worlds to reach a higher grade wouldn’t be anything special in the multiverse.”

A subdued silence stretched across the table. Some, like Julia, seemed physically sick at the thought of some old man being ready to kill billions of people just for a chance to break through a bottleneck. It was a chilling reminder of the ruthless reality they lived in.

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#### **Chapter 267 - News**

“Is this something common?” Zac finally asked, breaking the subdued silence in the room.

“No. Finding newly integrated planets before the Origin Dao disappears is notoriously hard. It’s hard enough to make me wonder you’re even in any danger at all,” the tool spirit shrugged. “The greatest old monsters in the multiverse could probably do it, but they have no use for baby planets. They rather have their sights on whole galaxies.”

The discussion continued a bit on the topic of the Great redeemer, but it appeared that they did not have any more ideas on how to handle the situation. In the end, they decided to simply continue their original approach, closing the incursions of Earth.

Even though the Redeemer was the largest threat Earth faced, it looked like they had some time before he could arrive. The multiverse was extremely vast, and traveling to a newly integrated planet could only be done manually. When that was added to the System's protective obscuring it would at least take a few years before he could arrive, even if the Redeemer set out the moment their planet was integrated.

After the incursions were dealt with they would turn their attention to Salvation and the Dominators. Of course, if they could find Salvation earlier that would be preferable. But there was still no news of where he was physically located, and he had closed his teleporter the moment he was booted out from the hunt. Zac's relentless assault had clearly put the fear of God in him, and he seemed to want to avoid another clash for the time being.

"That's it for the time being," Zac said before he turned to Julia. "Ms. Lombard, I brought you here so that you can provide the information to Thomas Fischer and the others. All the large forces need to be made aware of the threat of Salvation and The Great Redeemer so that we can prepare."

"Provide the information how?" she hesitantly asked.

"The portal to New Washington has already been made private, but I am traveling to the Marshall Clan in three days. I thought I'd bring you since they aren't as isolated as we are here on this island," Zac explained.

Julia hesitated a bit with a slight frown.

"And you're just letting me go like that?" Julia said.

"Yes, The New World Government is not my enemy, The Great Redeemer and the Incursions are. And honestly, they aren't a threat either. If it wasn't for the Dominators lurking in the shadows I would already have made my teleporter public," Zac said.

"If... I wanted to stay here, could I?" Julia suddenly asked, making Zac remember Emily mentioning the huge fight Julia and Emma had got themselves into.

"You can. Tell me your decision before I leave in three days though so I can send a replacement to the government," Zac nodded before he turned back toward the others on the table.

"Calrin, I want you to try to buy an information package about The Great Redeemer, if that's possible," Zac said as he turned to the Sky Gnome.

"Information becomes more expensive the stronger the person. Also, while the information houses track many powerhouses there is no way to track everyone. But I will make an inquiry," Calrin said with a serious face.

Zac nodded before he addressed the whole room again.

"The rest of the meeting will only need the essential personnel," Zac said, and soon less than half of the participants remained.

"The Great Redeemer is a pretty big headache, but on more positive news I come back with a mountain of treasure. It's to the point that we now have the resources to nurture a large number of experts without feeling the pinch. I am therefore opening the craftsman Heritage. I have also found this," Zac as he took out the ten crystals he got from Anzonil.

"As I mentioned we were placed at the ruins of a sect called The Eastern Trigram Sect. It was a low-tiered D-Grade sect focusing on arrays, and this is the complete

crystallized knowledge on formations, written by their Supreme Elder. As far as I know, this is the only copy from that place,” Zac said.

Brazla snorted disdainfully, but the others looked at the ten crystals with wide eyes.

“Does anyone have an idea of how to utilize this knowledge as effectively as possible?” Zac asked as he looked around.

“It should be locked behind Merit Points, and I believe that the same should go for the Heritages,” Abby finally said. “We can portion out the knowledge it contains into packages, with the basic ones being pretty cheap, but the more in-depth and uncommon knowledge having a higher price.”

“Wouldn’t there be a risk of no one buying it? We are in need of skilled array masters,” Zac said.

“Then make sure people know that becoming an array master and helping to maintain the arrays in Port Atwood would yield a lot of Merit Points. Things given freely are not appreciated, but if they need to work hard for it they will cherish it,” Abby countered, and Ogras nodded in agreement.

“It will also lock the craftsmen to us all the way until the D-Grade, since they would have to come to us for the follow-up crystals or deeper parts of the craftsman heritage,” Abby added. “Otherwise we would risk them leaving for the highest bidder when the world gets more integrated in the future.”

Zac had to admit it was a thought out idea, and he immediately decided to go along with it.

“Talk with the Merit Exchange and make adjustments to our current merit program if needed,” Zac said. “I want people working toward these things as soon as possible.”

Abby bobbed a bit in the air, which was her way of nodding her head. Zac nodded back before he once again focused on the Sky Gnome.

“After this meeting please bring a couple of your best men to my courtyard, we have mountains of loot to go through,” Zac said.

Calrin suddenly looked at him like a maiden in love, and it made Zac’s hair stand on end.

“While we’re here, please update me on what’s happened while I was away,” Zac said.

“The shapeshifters are dealt with, as you know,” Ogras started. “Your human friend they impersonated has recovered, and he is currently farming on one of the satellite islands.”

Zac frowned a bit when he heard that, and Ogras quickly continued.

“Don’t get worked up, it was on his own request. That Shapeshifter did a number on him, and I think he just wants to live a simple life away from the struggle of the real world,” Ogras said with a shrug. “Also... We have put your former lover on that island on your sister’s insistence, and she is farming with him. Under supervision of course.”

Zac looked over at Kenzie, who seemed ready for an argument.

“It wasn’t all her fault. She was drugged, hypnotized, and manipulated. You’re a victim, but so is she. Janos has helped her stabilize her mind during the past weeks, and she feels really bad about what happened. So I sent her to the island to stay with her friend,” she quickly explained, the words tumbling out of her mouth.

Zac shot a glance over at the illusionist who was also present at the meeting, and he simply nodded slightly to indicate what Kenzie said was true. Ogras only snorted, which drew an angry glare from Kenzie.

“Fine. I’ll check in on them later. Anything else?” Zac said after hesitating a bit.

“A monk came a week ago, and warned us that things were getting bad in the Undead Incursion. Their armies are mobilizing for real now, and the monk said that the Abbot believed that they would make a huge push to expand their territory within a month,” Adran spoke up, reading from his documents.

Zac thoughtfully nodded. He had already been thinking about tackling the Undead Incursion as soon as possible, and now it seemed they did not have much of a choice. The only problem was the Lich King, and how strong he would be. Was his increase in power from the hunt enough to bring that thing down?

“The monk also spoke about odd rumors that had arrived to their mountain,” Adran said.

“What rumors?” Zac asked.

“Three Incursions have disappeared. Just vanished overnight. The human government or the beastmen have no idea what’s going on,” the administrator said.

“Infighting between incursions?” Zac ventured.

“Unlikely,” Ogras said. “They wouldn’t likely clash before they clashed for territories. And only the undead incursion has spread to that degree to my knowledge. The other ones should be a few years away from infighting. Right now they should be swallowing up the locals around them, either for enslavement or eradication.”

“So who is it?” Zac said.

“The only one I can think of are the Zhix, or rather the Dominators,” Ogras said.

“The dominators? Only Void’s Disciple was outside the hunt, he did that by himself? Also, why would they wait until now to destroy Incursions?” Zac asked.

“They might have needed to prepare the attacks. If we go by the theory that The Great Redeemer didn’t want to create trouble by having his followers destroy incursions we can make some guesses. First, they would have wanted to close the incursions as quickly as possible, before any contact with the homeworld was possible,” Ogras said.

“But as far as I know no incursions were closed in the early stage of the Integration. I have the title for the first closing,” Zac said.

“We know that the Dominators were a small group before the integration, and most thought them eradicated. We also know how the availability was for teleporters in the beginning. Perhaps they simply didn’t have the ability to do it. That left them with a far more risky Plan B,” Ogras explained.

“By now the incursions are all stabilized, and communication with the main side is possible. If they assaulted the Incursions the normal way it would be possible to record it in a crystal, allowing the elders of the force to realize who the responsible party by the energy signature,” the demon continued.

“So if they would close the incursions now they would need to immediately decimate everyone before they could send any information back home. That tracks with the rumors of incursions ‘simply disappearing,” Zac continued the line of thought. “But why wait until now?”

“With the strongest people in the hunt most settlements have turtled up, avoiding the Incursions,” Kenzie ventured. “There would be no local witnesses either.”

“Preparing such a blitz would also take time. They would both need to prepare the means to instantly kill everyone before they could send anything back home. Perhaps they also had some sort of interference that messed with the Nexus Hub,” Ogras added.

“Also, the only Incursions that disappeared were those we would categorize as low threat. The Undead Incursion wasn’t touched for example. Even the Dominators probably aren’t confident in destroying those incursions without leaving any trace,” Adran finished.

“So they’re removing the smaller obstacles, making us focus on the larger threats that they cannot deal with themselves,” Zac muttered. “But we don’t know for sure it was Void. I’ll talk with the Zhix to see how their ladders have changed. Have we heard any other rumors about what the dominators have been doing? I know that Void’s Disciple has been up to something.”

“We haven’t heard anything, but our intelligence network is beyond pathetic,” Ogras said with a shrug. “You should ask those people from the Marshall Clan, they should be more informed.”

“Fine, but keep your ears to the ground. I have opened many new alliances, so we should start getting visitors soon. Make sure we control the movement of those who arrive. I don’t want anyone wandering into my area or our hunting grounds. The barghest is a resource that should be saved for the academy unless people are willing to pay for it,” Zac said.

“All procedures should be set up to handle an inflow of visitors. If needed we can also use the Origin Array to look for things out of place occasionally,” Adran said. “On the topic of the Barghest, I do believe we should try to cordon off areas that we can use as hunting grounds for visitors. Their numbers are increasing, and the Beast Tamer we are training is not strong enough to control such a large horde.”

“Great, try to set something up, extra income is always welcome, but it’s not a top priority. Anything else that has happened while I was gone?” Zac continued.

“We finally found land,” Adran said. “In fact, we have found land in two opposite directions.”

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#### **Chapter 268 - Rescue Mission**

“Finally,” Zac said with a smile.

He had almost started believing they were stuck in some parallel world. The ships he had bought from the Creators were extremely swift, but it had taken months until they finally found the mainland. It also showed just how huge the new planet was. It felt as though their current mass was far larger than just the combination of the four integrated planets.

Perhaps the system had thrown some random landmass into the mix to make the distances larger. But suddenly he gave a start since he finally realized what Adran said.

“What do you mean two opposite directions?” he curiously asked. “Have we rounded the planet?”

“We have found the continent that you humans now refer to as Pangea to the east,” Adran explained with a shake of his head. “We have already made the first contact with a few settlements along the shoreline. If needed we will have no problem conquering a pretty large swathe of coastline. We found one government-controlled city but most are small settlements without teleportation arrays.”

“But the land in the opposite direction is something else?” Zac asked with interest.

“Yes, though it was further away compared to the main continent. The first one we found one week after you left for the hunt. The second we only found ten days ago. We didn’t find any settlements or people on that continent, though we have only begun our exploration recently,” Abby explained.

“Along the coastal edge is a lush forest, but after a few hours walk inland there is an impossibly vast desert. The heat there is scorching even to the demons, and there did not seem to be any life as far as we could tell,” Abby said. “The cosmic energy was however very dense, so if we could transform the desert it would become great unoccupied land.”

“Impossibly large desert?” Zac muttered. “That actually brings me to something else I didn’t mention from the hunt.”

Next he proceeded to explain his meeting with the molemen in the hunt and the history of their planet.

“If I’m not mistaken the other continent might be the remains of this fourth world. Since it was scorched by their sun for millennia there should have only been unlivable deserts on the surface,” Zac said. “Perhaps the System simply took their uninhabitable land and made a continent out of it. Perhaps merged it with parts of Africa and the middle-east. I haven’t really heard anything from those regions since the Integration.”

“So why did you not mention this fourth race earlier?” Ogras suddenly asked. “To protect the identity of us demons? I think that ship has sailed now. The existence of the underworld will quickly spread I think.”

“No, it’s for a different reason. I want a team to dig as far down as possible from our mine. Even below our Nexus Vein if possible. Then place a teleportation array down there.”

“You want to connect Port Atwood to the people underground?” Kenzie asked.

“Yes, there are people from the other races down there as well, though most are dead now. They’re in pretty dire straits. They’re beset by another IncurSION that I guess is top-tier. For some reason, the teleporters above the ground can’t reach down so we need to dig as well, create a relay-system of teleporters if need be,” Zac nodded.

“Why all that effort for those people?” Ogras said with disinterest.

“Not only are there fire golems that seem to be digging toward our planet’s core down there, but there’s also a huge amount of riches. Most of the top names on the wealth ladders are down there. Nexus Crystals and precious metals are littering the walls,” Zac said.

“We need to save those poor people,” Ogras said with a completely straight face and Calrin quickly gave his wholehearted support for the plan as well.

Kenzie glared at the two people who only cared about the wealth, before turning back toward Zac with a frown.

“Yes, the reason I want do dig is partly selfish. They are currently loaded with minerals and crystals down there, but they are severely lacking everything else. I want Port Atwood to be the one to reap the benefits before any others. But other forces might try the same. The ratmen are few in number, but I am sure others than I managed to find out about the situation in the underworld,” Zac said.

“So it’s a race for the wealth beneath us,” Calrin muttered.

“Exactly,” Zac nodded. “We have an advantage with the mine that is already quite deep, but we can’t be lax. I want those teleporters up as soon as possible.”

Abby quickly bobbed her head in agreement. She had been vehemently in favor of expanding the power of Port Atwood since she wasn't without ambition herself. But that worked just fine for Zac as well.

"It might be an issue of distance apart from just depth though," the stargazer interjected. "If the ratmen are situated far beneath the other continent the distance might be too far. That continent is even further away than Pangea after all. Perhaps we should also establish a frontier base on the desert continent and try to find them that way."

"That would be even better," Ogras muttered. "If the underworld only can be reached from that other continent we will be able to control every comings and goings. We are right in the middle in-between the two continents, and we would act as a bridge between them. And there wouldn't be much the other forces could do about it until we get higher-graded teleporters."

Zac's eyes lit up from the possibility presented. It was true. The E-Grade teleporters reached far, but they couldn't take Zac to the far edge of Pangea. Judging by the distance Abby and Adran mentioned the distance between the two continents was extremely vast. They would have to transit through Port Atwood.

"Abby, you oversee the project since you can map out the scope of my kingdom. Does my sphere of influence reach downward as well?" Zac asked.

"I will. There is a limit a few kilometers below us. I will find a location at that depth that is far away from energy interference. I will also set it up so that it becomes a proper relay station. Preferably there would be no way to get up to the surface without using our teleporter," the Stargazer said.

"Great, pursue both strategies. Setting up a base on the other continent is a good idea in any case," Zac nodded before turning to Ogras. "Next. Is there something we can make use of in the Mystic Realm?"

"Not sure," Ogras said with a shrug.

"Not sure?" Zac asked with some confusion. "What sort of place is it?"

"Well, It's a pretty odd Mystic Realm," Ogras hesitantly said. "First of all, it's populated."

"What?" Zac said with surprise. "Cultivators?"

Zac wasn't an expert in the subject, but he knew that inhabited Mystic Realms were very rare.

"Indeed, of multiple species, no less," Ogras said. "But that's not the odd thing. The whole Mystic Realm is one enormous construct."

"What?" Zac said with shock. He had never heard of such a thing before. "How big?"

"I can't be sure. Even the person I caught and questioned wasn't sure. But it is many times larger Port Atwood. I found a few gardens that each was at least a fifth the size of this whole island, and they just took up a small corner of the construct," Ogras explained.

Clearly this was news to everyone apart from Kenzie, and they looked over at Ogras with shock.

"The people there have been stuck inside a very long time. Tens of generations. They do not seem to know much of the outside, and they are not really in control of the functions and arrays of the large structure. They are like parasites living inside the body of a large beast," Ogras explained, the others listening in rapt attention.

"How strong are they?" Zac asked with a frown.

He had enough enemies to contend with at the moment, and if these people were too strong he might just as well close the passage and wait until he became stronger.

“I battled two peak F-Grade warriors, one human, and a werewolf. There are at least mid-tier E-Grade warriors there as well, leading the factions. However, energy is limited, and it seems the various factions are partly warring as a means of population control apart from the usual reasons,” Ogras explained.

“From what I can tell the structure was once a hidden research facility. It might have connections to technocrats, or they simply had a hand in constructing the thing. But to find out the real purpose we would have to explore further,” Ogras said. “The human I captured did not even know how they got there. My personal guess is that their ancestors were caught for experimentation.”

Zac slowly nodded, not sure what to do with the news.

“Can we gain any benefits in the short run from there?” Zac asked.

“There are enormous trees, so we would get unlimited timber. The walls are also made from some very durable alloy, perhaps we could strip the walls and take the materials for weapons manufacturing. But apart from that, not much else honestly. But with this Redeemer problem, we could use it as a last-resort escape. We just need to figure out a way to stop the Redeemer from following us,” Ogras said.

“But then we’d be stuck inside there?” Zac skeptically asked.

“Yes, but alive. The rift drops us off in a section that the current factions can’t access. It’s the area with the large gardens. Apparently they were used for plant experimentation and providing air. There are no strong beasts, only a few worms at level 70,” Ogras explained.

“The whole place runs on some technocrat technology it seems. The trapped factions have very low access, and can’t get to where we arrive. But that same technology provided me with Tier-3 access. According to the human I caught Tier-3 is maintenance access that would allow me to enter any place that maintains the various function of the structure.

“I didn’t have time to do much exploration, but it’s pretty good apparently. It allows me to visit even more places than the natives who only have limited access in their respective zones,” the demon continued. “Perhaps we can find some good things hidden in the unexplored areas of the mystic realm.

“If the Redeemer arrives we could drop off the non-combatants there and hide the passage. It would keep them out of harm’s way until the threat was dealt with. If the Redeemer wins they would avoid being harvested at least, and perhaps they can find a way to get out in the future,” Ogras said.

“Well it’s a decent last-ditch escape, though I am not a fan of getting stuck inside a mystic realm just waiting for The Great Redeemer to break through,” Zac mused. “Do you think we could set up some sort of alliance with the natives? Perhaps they possess things of value.”

Ogras hesitantly nodded.

“Perhaps. I honestly did not make a great first impression, though they attacked first. But there should be various things they lack, and they might have an abundance of things in there that may be extremely valuable on the outside. That’s usually how it goes with Mystic Realms. But as long as we don’t have anyone strong enough to counter their elites I think we should avoid them,” the demon said.

“We’ll keep it on the backburner then since we have a few things that need to be handled first. Apart from getting access to the underworld I have a few more top-

priority tasks for the town,” Zac said. “First I want the surroundings of The Towers of Myriad Dao to be brought to its proper glory. I want this done within the day. Divert all man-power to this if necessary.”

Everyone around the table apart from Ogras and Brazla looked at Zac as though he’d lost his marbles.

“Finally you’re speaking some sense,” Brazla said with a satisfied nod.

“Of course. Incidentally, in case you need to prepare anything before letting us undertake the Inheritance trials, now would be the time for that. At least two trials will be started within three days,” Zac added.

“The Great Brazla has been ready for eons, just come by and display your feeble might,” Brazla said with a snort.

“Great. Secondly, I need to index all the treasures I looted. Calrin, my place in an hour. Bring a few trustworthy and knowledgeable people,” Zac said, ending the meeting.

Roughly forty minutes later five Sky Gnomes stood eagerly waiting in his courtyard. Most seemed to be around the same age as Calrin himself, but one of them looked positively ancient.

“These are my most trusted appraisers,” Calrin said as he indicated the three gnomes roughly his own age. “And this is my great uncle Gemidir Thayer, the member of my clan with the most experience in figuring out the functions of odd treasures. I thought he would be an asset as well in case you had some hard-to-appraise items.”

“He’s also a notorious thief,” one of the other Gnomes muttered under his breath as he shielded his Cosmos Sack, drawing a glare from the old man.

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#### **Chapter 269 - Four Gates**

“You shouldn’t slander others little Acorn,” the old man sighed with disappointment. “You know those days are long behind me. And wildly exaggerated.”

“Then why is that pouch belonging to that guard earlier tied around your waist?” the younger Sky Gnome said with a scathing glare.

“You! You just want the Lord to focus on my fingers so that he won’t notice you undervaluing the goodies!” the old man angrily spat as he quickly hid the pouch in an inner pocket of his robe.

Zac’s brows rose, especially when Calrin did nothing to correct the two.

“Well, to be a successful thief you need to be able to discern what’s valuable and what to discard, no?” Calrin said with a cough after seeing Zac’s glare. “But he’s all retired now. And you have me to oversee everything so you don’t need to worry about a thing.”

Zac groaned in response, hating that he couldn’t get a second opinion anywhere as things stood. But he knew that even if Calrin skimmed a bit money it wouldn’t be too bad. Furthermore, since he owned a sizeable share of the Consortia it would still come back into his pocket in the end.

“The goal here is essentially to identify the treasures I gathered and then differentiate the loot into three categories,” Zac explained. “The first category is the

valuable and essential treasures. I'll keep those myself and personally hand them out to our elites if needed.

"The second is for items to add to our Merit Exchange. We are working against the clock so things that can help empower our forces and provide speedy gains. The final category would be things that might be valuable but aren't of use to Port Atwood. These items would be sold through the Consortia," Zac finished.

The Sky Gnomes eagerly nodded at the instructions, each of them almost looking possessed by greedy demons. Zac sighed and started taking things out. He started with the items he was the most curious about.

A glass bottle suddenly appeared in Zac's hand and the alchemist's furnace appeared on the ground in front of them. The pill was the thing he was most curious about, and the Cauldron might help give some clues to its origins. Just a waft of its residual vapors had allowed him to gain a level, so he couldn't imagine the efficacy of the pill itself.

"This is a pill with spirituality, which I found in this cauldron. When I opened the cauldron a cloud was released, and the energy it contained both gave me a level and instantly healed me," Zac said as he handed over the bottle. "Can you identify the pill?"

One of the Sky Gnomes quickly took out a huge book, and when he opened it Zac saw it was filled with pictures of pills along with descriptions alongside it. However, the old thief only took a glance at it before he spoke up.

"It's a **[Four Gates Pill]**, it's a mid-tier E-Grade pill," he said, not without some longing. "It's the first time I hear of one with spirituality though. The cauldron is just a Decent E-Grade cauldron. Perhaps worth 70 Million"

"What's the purpose of the pill?" Zac asked.

"It harnesses the four elements to break open Nodes," Gemidir succinctly explained. "It would likely have an additional effect now that it has spirituality."

"Four elements?" Zac repeated before he quickly took out the three spirit herbs he looted from the hidden garden. "Do you think these are the ingredients used?"

"**[Blistering Ice Bamboo]**, **[Phoenix Peppers]** and **[Rock Ginseng]**, and their ages are excellent," another of the Gnomes exclaimed.

"You're only missing **[Sky reed]** and you would have all four main components to create the pill," the old man added.

"I found these three growing in a secluded spot, along with a broken paddy," Zac explained. "I looted both the special soil and all the plants. Would we be able to keep growing these herbs?"

"Certainly," the Sky Gnome who recognized the herbs said without hesitation. "However, it takes over 50 years to grow these herbs to maturity without skilled farmers who can shorten that duration, and that's only to get their minimum efficacy. For the herbs to contain this much energy you would need to wait a few hundred years, even with a skilled farmer."

Zac sighed in disappointment. Fifty years might not be very long for a force in the multiverse, but it was for Zac who was strapped for time.

"See if you can buy aged **[Sky Reed]** then," Zac said. "How long would it take for us to train an alchemist that could concoct **[Four-Gate]** pills?"

"If you want those pills to use, might I suggest an alternative method?" Calrin said.

"What's that?" Zac asked.

"Trade the herbs for finished pills," Calrin said.

“People would do that?” Zac asked skeptically.

“It’s pretty common among Alchemists,” Calrin explained. “Another way for them to enrich themselves. They give ratios, for example 4 sets of herbs for 2 pills. If they manage to create the 2 pills in less than 4 sets they can pocket the difference as profit. But with the age of these herbs, we should be able to get pretty good ratios.”

Zac slowly nodded.

“Does anything else than the ratios matter?” Zac asked.

He had encountered a few pills by now, but most of them were simple healing pills that generally used life-attuned energy or roused the body’s own restorative powers. But things like cultivation pills were still not something he was very knowledgeable about.

“The skill of the alchemist,” Gemidir said. “Different grades of the pills have differing effects.”

Pills used the same grading system as Daos, depending on how well the pills concocted. So the same pill could be anything from Low-Grade to Peak-Grade, and the effect could vastly differ. It turned out that a low-grade pill wasn’t even guaranteed to open one node, whereas a Peak-grade [Four gates Pill] actually guaranteed 1 node and gave a high chance of a second.

“I’ll hold onto these for now,” Zac said.

The herbs he had possessed an extraordinary age, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to send them over to some unknown alchemist that might pocket the aged herbs and concoct using ordinary ones. He did want the pills since his people would start reaching E-Grade within a few years at most, and having these would expedite the progress of his forces. But he didn’t want to waste this treasure.

Hopefully, he could nurture or get to know a skilled Alchemist that he could trust with his herbs instead of sending them out through the mercantile system. Meanwhile, they could start growing the four herbs on the island.

Since he had decided what to do with the herbs he took out the next treasure. It was a pity the cauldron wasn’t anything special, but it would make a nice gift for the first proper Alchemist his force nurtured. Next, the huge metal ball that Zac found on his first summit appeared and he put it down on the ground with a heavy thump.

“A spiritual ship,” Calrin said with interest. “Lowest grade, but it should still be worth quite a bit.”

“What? This thing?” Zac asked with surprise.

A spiritual ship had been something he had wanted ever since he learned about their existence from Ogras. That’s why he wanted to upgrade the Shipyard so badly. Unfortunately, when he had asked Rahm about it he had simply tabled the matter until Zac had evolved.

Unfortunately, it would take the Sky Gnomes some time to figure out how to activate it from its current compressed state, so Zac would have to curb his enthusiasm and postpone any joyrides. Instead they kept going through the immense wealth in Zac’s pouch with rapid speed, and they hadn’t even gone through a tenth after an hour.

But Zac suddenly stopped and opened up a menu with a frown.

“What’s wrong?” Calrin asked.

“A new teleporter just became public,” Zac said with surprise.

“A public teleporter? With all the things that are happening on this planet?” Calrin muttered. “Are they suicidal?”

“Or desperate,” Zac ventured. “The place is called Everwood Refuge, and it’s not a place I have heard of before.”

“Are you going?” Calrin asked.

Zac hesitated for a few seconds before he shook his head.

“Not at the moment. The situation is unclear and I have so many things on my plate as it is,” Zac said, and resumed taking out treasure after treasure.

But it only took fifteen minutes until they were once again interrupted, this time by Kenzie jogging over to his courtyard. Zac had already erected multiple layers of arrays to hide the things inside, so she was forced to wave her arms to get his attention.

Zac started walking toward her, but after a brief hesitation ran back and put back all the treasures into one of his Cosmos Sacks first. He wasn't exactly confident in leaving so much wealth in front of four Sky Gnomes. They might turn crazy by greed and do something stupid, and he didn't want any trouble with his cooperation.

“What's going on?” Zac said after he exited the shield.

“We have visitors,” Kenzie said, “From Westfort.”

“Thea's people?” Zac said with surprise. “What do they want?”

He hadn't expected someone to come over already, though it was technically possible for his trusted allies to come at any time. They had already agreed that he would come to Westfort in two days to take back his batch of treasures and also peruse the Library.

“Yes, they are requesting assistance. Apparently a town is being attacked by an Incursion, and the Marshalls have some sort of agreement with them,” she explained.

“Tell Ogras and Joanna. I will meet this man at the teleporter,” Zac said as he returned back inside the arrays.

“We will have to take a break for now,” Zac said, much to the disappointment of the Sky Gnomes. “A settlement is under attack from an Incursion. I will go check things out.”

“Of course,” Calrin nodded. “But before you go. I would like to request some body-guards for my men. I want to immediately send representatives to the new towns in our network.”

“Right now?” Zac said with a frown. “We have a lot of things to do.”

“The subject wasn't brought up at the meeting, but we are currently sitting on a mountain of gear crafted from the beast waves being unused. From what I gather this world is heading for its final battles that will decide whether you will break free from the invaders or become yet another conquered baby world,” Calrin started.

“This is the optimal opportunity to make some money. But it will also help strengthen you humans while simultaneously bolstering the somewhat marred image of Port Atwood,” Calrin said.

“Fine. Take ten demons and ten Valkyries,” Zac nodded before he disappeared.

Just a minute later he arrived at the teleporter, seeing a middle-aged man curiously looking around. But the moment he saw Zac approach his eyes widened a bit and he straightened his back.

“I assume you're the representative from Westfort?” Zac asked as he appeared in front of him.

“It's an honor, Lord Atwood,” the man said with a bow. “I am Roland Marshal, and I will be the ambassador of Westfort, with your blessing of course.”

“Nice to meet you,” Zac simply said with a nod.

“I was planning on introducing myself at your arrival in two days, but time waits for no man. You should have no doubt seen the new public town on the teleportation

list. It is one of the major Ishiate towns, and they are currently being besieged by their neighboring Incursion,” Roland explained.

“The Marshall forces are currently preparing, but rearranging our forces will take some time,” the ambassador continued after checking his watch. “We sent a few scouts through the teleporter first, and there were no signs of either Dominators or Salvation as of eight minutes ago.”

Zac nodded, understanding the man’s implication. The town would perhaps fall before The Marshal Clan could muster its forces.

“I will join as well. I planned to settle a few matters before attacking the Incursions, but I guess we can’t wait for this one,” Zac said. “Is Thea coming as well?”

“Exactly, time is of the essence,” Roland said with a nod. “Unfortunately my niece was forced to put out a few fires as soon as she got back, so she will not be joining you. But she will be done with her quests by the time you arrive at Westfort.”

Zac nodded, slightly disappointed. Having a good ally by one’s side drastically increased safety.

“I am heading back for now, but with your permission, I would like to build a small embassy on your island where I and a small staff would handle any matters that require the cooperation of our two forces. I understand you had a very successful relationship with my niece during the hunt, and my wish is for that relationship to turn into a strong bond between our two families,” Roland continued.

Zac frowned a bit at the very ambiguous wording, but he had no interest in trying to correct the man. He could understand if the marshalls wanted to forge an alliance the old-school way between their two forces. With him and Thea at the helm, there would be no resisting them.

“That’s fine. You can talk with Adran later to settle those types of matters later,” he nodded. “He’s the administrator in charge of most city planning.”

“Excellent. It was a pleasure meeting you,” Roland said with another bow before he walked over to the teleporter and was gone with a flash.

Since he had already decided to fight he was eager to get going, but he still decided to wait for Ogras to have someone to watch his back. And it took less than a minute to arrive, and to his surprise he was accompanied by Calrin, who was completely decked in defensive gear.

“Strike while the iron is hot,” the gnome simply muttered as an explanation to Zac’s questioning glance.

“Fine, let’s go. Some incursion is attacking, but it shouldn’t be one of the top-grade ones. We’ll keep them at bay until reinforcements arrive. And Ogras... Don’t steal the boss kill this time, okay?” Zac said as he threw a glance at the demon.

“Oh, heard about that one, did you?” Ogras said with a smile.

“I did, Billy was very upset. But I promised you would personally go there and apologize and bring a gift,” Zac said drawing a disbelieving look from the demon.

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**Chapter 270 - Riverleaf**

Riverleaf sighed as she looked at the ravaged forest outside their town. The trees that their ancestors had tended for hundreds of years were gone, replaced with burnt-out husks, and the farms were turned into ruins and war trenches. As the shaman of their village, she sensed the pain of nature around them.

They had truly underestimated these foreign invaders. For months they had been battling for territory, neither side showing a clear advantage. The invaders might have been the strongest force in the area, but they were surrounded by over a dozen towns who worked together to keep them at bay. But something had changed a week ago.

In just a day five towns were destroyed, their populations killed to the last man apart from the lucky few who managed to escape in time. Even the elderly and the children weren't spared, and their scouts had recounted scenes straight out of a nightmare. From there those black golems had started their crusade, destroying one town after another. The invaders had clearly been holding back until now.

She couldn't help but wonder if there were traitors among them. Did the invaders know that their top hunters were unavailable or dead due to the hunt? They had worked so hard to maintain a mirage of normalcy, risking their lives to keep the pressure on the incursions. But it was all for naught as they went into a rampage while their strongest warriors were occupied with the hunt.

Everwood Refuge was only still standing because the invaders had started in the other direction, methodically working their way from city to city. Her first instinct had been to flee, but she knew that they couldn't do that. The beasts around were much too dangerous. Besides, if they fled they would give up their ancestral homes.

Using the teleporter wasn't a real option either, not to their force at least. It was just much too expensive to send someone through that miraculous gate. Even if her husband had returned with enormous gains it was far from enough for the whole city. They could afford to teleport a few hundred at the most, only a fraction of the two hundred thousand who lived in their town. They couldn't even afford to send all the children to safety.

Her eyes turned to her husband, desperately fighting against the rockmen. They were beyond sturdy. Not even the chief of the hunt managed to quickly kill those things in a one-on-one battle, which was a clear indicator of how the rest of the soldiers fared. Worse yet, they couldn't even use their fortifications to their advantage. The rockmen had made quick work of their protective shield and rampart with their huge boulders, and in less than 20 minutes it was gone.

The moment they saw that their shield wouldn't hold they had made their teleporter public in a desperate bid to enlist some help against their threat. She had been elated to see people come through their gate earlier, but most had quickly disappeared again after learning of the situation.

Only a few remained, though it was clear that they were mostly interested in fishing in the muddy waters. She had even been forced to send some soldiers to prevent looting from unscrupulous guests. But suddenly she saw one of the young hunters-in-training speed toward her with elation in his eyes. Riverleaf had stationed him by the teleporter so that he could keep an eye out for any reinforcements.

"The humans have sent reinforcements!" the youth said between pants.

"They have?" Riverleaf exclaimed, some hope finally rekindling in her heart. "How many?"

Little Leaf scratched his chin in hesitation before he muttered.

"Three people came," he said with an almost inaudible voice. "But one is a child it seems?"

“So two warriors,” Riverleaf sighed in disappointment, realizing it was just more opportunists.

She knew that she couldn’t hope for too much. That large human organization had already indicated that they were overwhelmed with similar threats, and they had gotten similar responses from their Ishiate allies. But honestly, she knew that most simply did not wish to risk their lives for no reward.

“Yes, only two... But they are *strong*,” he added with wide eyes.

Riverleaf was about to respond when her heart suddenly thumped and she looked over in the distance with alarm. Two men and a blue child approached, and Riverleaf immediately understood that these people were the trio that Little Leaf mentioned. Her second sight screamed in alarm at their approach, telling her that this party could level Everwood Refuge without much trouble.

While there were three of them her eyes couldn’t help but turn toward the human in the middle. He had short hair the color of sand, and he wore an opulent golden robe that made her think of her brethren who gave up their connection to amass material wealth.

In his hand was a ruthless axe that made her almost flinch as she imagined an ocean of blood for some reason. She knew that it was an omen from her shamanic powers, but she couldn’t guess it’s meaning. The axe felt primal, like something their hunters would fashion out of the bones of a great beast. It was an odd choice of weapon for someone dressed in something so fine; the man was a contradiction of refinement and carnage.

She knew that her gifts could be noticed by some people since their world changed, but she couldn’t help but activate her skill that the System had named [**Minor Prophetic Vision**]. She wanted to get a glimpse of whether these people were their saviors, but a soul-rending pain erupted in her mind, only allowing her a glimpse before her sight turned black.

The silver-haired man was shrouded in darkness, a black hand dragging him into an abyss of despair. The vision was extremely taxing, but it was nothing compared to the man in the golden robes. She was assaulted by tens of visions she couldn’t make sense of, completely obscuring his future. She only managed to see a glimpse of his past instead.

The man stood with his axe accompanied by a monstrous beast in a sea of blood, a storm vengeful spirits clamoring in hatred and despair. Just how many had he killed to form such a following of the dead? But while he seemed to be an apostle of death, he was also the bringer of life. A golden halo rose behind him, and it formed an equal and opposing force to the hurricane of the fallen.

Refinement and carnage; life and death.

She had no time to make sense of the visions as it felt like she was about to die, and blood flowed out of her nose and ears. She had overtaxed her soul for that brief glimpse. Her body was unable to withstand the prophetic weight of the man in front of him. Perhaps not even the Grand Shaman would be able to endure a peek into this man’s future.

The party seemed to move leisurely, but they quickly closed the distance between the teleporter and the rampart she stood on, and as they came closer primal flight-responses were screaming in Riverleaf’s mind. But she forced herself to stand still, gazing at their approach with her normal vision. Their steps echoed like the drums of war in her mind, and it felt like their forms towered to the out the sky.

The trio suddenly disappeared in a shroud of darkness, before they appeared right in front of her on top of the rampart. She made sure to not use shamanic powers

that had been a natural part of her since childhood. Using her gifts in this close proximity would likely fry her brain, turning her into a simpleton. The two adults calmly overlooked the losing battle out in the field after glancing at her.

As they were closer she got a better look at the two. It was obvious that the man with the shadow hand was neither Human nor Ishiate, but rather something she had never encountered before. He had large horns in his forehead that that looked like frozen fire, and his skin had a reddish tinge.

She was curious about his heritage, but she didn't dare to ask. In truth, she didn't even dare to speak up. The duo had obviously masked their power, but she knew the truth about this small group from her shamanic vision. They could not be insulted or angered, since they were drenched in blood.

"It's these bastards?" the horned man said with surprise as he looked at the army. "Well, that's just fine."

The man with the in the golden robes turned toward Riverleaf and nodded in greeting. She didn't trust her voice at the moment, so she could only bow in response, holding her hands nervously in front of her.

"I am Zac. You should call back your warriors. We can take it from here," he said with a calm voice, his eyes not even showing a ripple after witnessing the huge army of golems that were steadily ripping through their line of defenses.

"But..." she hesitantly said, but she had no chance to continue as they disappeared just like they appeared.

The next moment she sensed a monstrous power from the battlefield and she looked over with worry, afraid that their enemies had launched a renewed assault.

Her eyes were immediately drawn toward an enormous hand hovering in the air. The hand had appeared out of nowhere, and it radiated an earthshattering might. It clearly was made of wood and made her think of the Treefather from the legends. Had the old gods returned to save them from their plight? The hand flew toward the army with terrifying speed, and the golems scrambled to erect defenses.

But it was to naught as the hand slammed into the ground with enough force to almost throw her off the rampart. The earth shook and large cracks in the ground quickly spread from the impact. Over a hundred of the golems that had caused them so many troubles were utterly destroyed in an instant, and twice as many were lying on the ground with serious wounds.

The next moment the whole battlefield was shrouded in darkness. It was as though the darkness was alive, and it twisted and changed shapes. Spears grew out from nowhere, the golems were getting impaled by the dozens. In just a second it looked like a forest with trees wrought from shadows had grown in front of their city, and each tree held a dead or dying invader.

Two familiar silhouettes made themselves known in the middle of the battlefield, and in the next moment they rushed forward with wild abandon. Riverleaf wanted to shout out a warning, but her voice got stuck in her throat when they unleashed a mindboggling carnage upon the golems.

"Young miss, there's no need to worry. Those two will neutralize the calamity that has befallen your fair city. Better yet, I will turn calamity into opportunity," a refined voice from next to her spoke up, making Riverleaf look over with surprise.

It was the blue child who had spoken to her. She had completely forgotten about him due to the shocking presence of the other two, but he had clearly stayed behind as those two had unleashed their attacks on the invaders. She prepared to placate the child, but at a second glance she realized it was no child who had spoken with her. It was rather a man from yet another unknown race.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” the small blue being said with a bow. “I am Calrin Thayer, and I would like to provide you with the opportunity of a lifetime.”

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#### **Chapter 271 - Rockmen**

Zac surveyed the battlefield as the Ishiate warriors were walking through it, making sure that all the golems were dead as they lay on the scorched ground. Of course, most of the time there was no need to check since the bodies were separated into pieces or completely destroyed from his onslaught. Ogras stood not far from him, holding his hand around the mold where his other arm once was.

“You’ve gained a lot of power during your hunt,” Ogras commented from the side. “And your aura is far denser. It bodes well for our trip to the Towers, especially now that we need to get the protection of some larger force. Go high enough and they might not even care that you’re not a Cultivator.”

“I could say the same to you. You shouldn’t have gained any levels since we fought these things last time, but yet you are a lot stronger. Care to explain how?” Zac responded as he threw a glance over at the demon.

“Well, we all have our means,” the demon said with a noncommittal shrug.

“You have somehow broken your restrictions, haven’t you?” Zac said keeping his eyes on Ogras face for any changes.

“Sharp as a tack, this one,” Ogras said with a snort. “Yes, I got a quest that I managed to complete. So I am no longer bound by the restrictions that afflicted me. However, it still applies to my soldiers. They will have to wait it out or find their own means to release their full potential.”

Zac slowly nodded. He already had already guessed as much from the moment they started fighting. The shadow spears of Ogras were almost too many to count as he ripped through the rockman army. The demon had clearly a lot stronger compared to before. The difference in strength between the two had widened between the two compared to the hunt, but Ogras had still exploded with surprising power going by his somewhat limited opportunities.

Ogras didn’t mention it, but Zac also guessed that the demon’s Dao had also progressed since he’d last seen the demon fight as well since the aura it emitted was quite intense. The presence of the so-called Origin Dao that Brazla explained during the meeting was likely the source of the Demon’s improvement.

It gave Zac a better understanding of why so many forces wanted to risk their lives to invade newly integrated planets. The Origin Dao could save people decades of meditation, or even award Dao Seeds for people who were completely hopeless in that regard.

Of course, Zac didn’t feel threatened by the Demon’s advancements. Ogras had improved surprisingly much, but it was far less compared to his own gains. Ogras had killed less than half as many rockmen compared to Zac, but he had a slew of Progenitor-titles and a second class to bolster his power. If a normal scion of a relatively weak clan could output this much pressure it made him wonder just how strong cultivators from higher-tier planets were.

Besides, Zac had yet to gain the ultimate skills for his two classes. Normally you got two final skills at level 75, each giving you a great boost. So Zac still had a lot of

room to grow while at F-Grade, whereas any improvement for Ogras should be quite arduous by now.

“So what do you want to do now?” Ogras finally asked, perhaps to avoid any further questioning about his increased power. “Keep going or head back?”

It was a good question. They had killed a lot of the rockmen, but there were no elites in the group. The leader of the rockmen back when Port Atwood was invaded was noticeably stronger than anyone in this punitive army, meaning that they hadn't sent the true aces of the incursions to clear out these neighboring towns.

They already knew that those three Incursions that spawned simultaneously outside his town didn't send the real leaders, but rather a second-in-command. That meant that the big boss of the rockmen should still be alive. Furthermore, the restrictive shackles should have lessened even further by now.

According to the information he had gathered the restrictions usually lasted between 6 to 12 months, and it differed depending on how high-graded the planet was. The higher grade of the newly integrated planet the quicker the restrictions would be lifted so that the trial for the natives was tough enough.

Since Earth had become a D-Grade planet right off the bat the restrictions should be on the shorter side of the spectrum. Unfortunately, Zac had no idea exactly when it would happen, which is why he wanted to attack the incursions as quickly as possible. He wanted to fight the invaders before they gained another power-up.

Zac opened his mouth to answer, but before he had the chance to speak the sounds of hurried footsteps interrupted him. They both turned around to see a male Ishiate walk over, accompanied by the woman they had spoken to up at the wooden rampant.

Zac already knew that he was the lord, or rather leader of the hunt, of this town, and his wife was something like a druid or nature priestess. What surprised Zac though was that he saw the Ishiate wear a fitted armor set made out of chitin-shells that wear clearly from the Ayr ants.

Calrin had really worked quickly.

“Lord Atwood, Lord Azh'Rezak,” the Ishiate said with a bow. “I am Steelwood. My family and Everwood Refuge is ever in your debt. If there is anything we can do in return please let us know.”

“I see you're wearing the local produce of Port Atwood,” Zac answered with a smile. “Allowing the opening of a branch of the Thayer Consortia is all we ask in return.”

“We would also be grateful if you helped us make some inroads with your Ishiate allies,” Ogras quickly added. “You have seen the strength of our gear, and our supply is huge. Allowing us to open more stores would save a lot of lives and allow you to grow stronger more quickly.”

The two Ishiate gave each other a quick glance, but they soon nodded.

“What you say is true. The items the blue one showed us were far superior to the items we brought from our old world, though they were a bit expensive. But one cannot put a price on life. We will speak with our allies about your trading venture,” Steelwood said. “Though you should know that the Ishiate hero Starlight does also control a business.”

A burst of killing intent seeped out of Ogras, but he quickly quenched it after a glare from Zac. The fact that Starlight had somehow got his hands on a business venture was both surprising and unfortunate. It would impact their spread on Earth to a certain degree.

Of course, their main target was the human towns since they were far more numerous than the Ishiate. The beastmen were the second least populous species, only beating out the molemen in the underworld, and there were at least twenty times more humans on the new planet based on estimations.

“That is fine, we will not force anyone. Our wares speak for themselves,” Zac said. “More importantly, is your teleporter still public?”

“No,” Steelwood said with a shake of his head. “The moment we saw your combat prowess I closed it. I learned a bit about those that are called the Dominators during the hunt, and I feared having it open for too long.”

Zac initiated the system to set up an alliance with Steelwood, and he quickly accepted the prompt.

“Please set Port Atwood to trusted. My army is standing by,” Zac said. “Since I am already here I will close the Incursion.”

“It will take at least a day, probably two,” Ogras said from the side, showing a far calmer response to the proclamation compared to the two Ishiate.

Their eyes widened in disbelief and mutely stared at Zac until the female spoke up.

“Lord Atwood,” she hesitantly said. “closing the incursion is easier said than done. They have set up a very strong protective array. Our scouts have also found that thousands of large boulders are flouting about the core area. We believe they might be a defensive measure as well.”

“Don’t worry,” Zac said unfazed. “If you want you can join us, but if you want to stay behind it’s fine as well.”

Steelwood slowly nodded his head.

“I will accompany you, I’ve raided their incursion many times and know the paths,” he said, placing a hand on his wife’s arm.

Not long after the Valkyries and the demon army started streaming out of the teleporter, immediately securing the vicinity. When they saw that there was no threat Joanna quickly walked over to Zac and bowed.

“Lord Atwood,” she said. “We were afraid something happened when the teleporter closed.”

“Just a safety precaution,” Zac said. “You guys haven’t slacked off.”

It was true. His eyes couldn’t help widen in surprise as he glanced over the Valkyries with **[Inquisitive Eye]**. All of them were past level 35, and many were even in the early 40’s. Joanna was the strongest, having reached level 44.

It was far from enough to reach the ladder after the hunt, but it was extremely impressive considering how far behind they had been when he picked them up.

“It is thanks to the resources and hunting grounds you provide,” Joanna nodded. “After we got strong enough to venture into the forests alone our leveling speed exploded. The Barghest have grown in numbers, and it’s almost impossible for us to run out of things to kill.”

“That’s true. However, shouldn’t your gain be a bit limited now when you’ve passed level 40?” Zac asked.

“Some of us are also hunting in squads on Mystic Island. We can only hunt in the outer rim though, where the beasts are only around level 60. But it gives far more Cosmic Energy, and the battle experience is valuable as well,” Joanna agreed.

“Keep up the good work. The Incursion here is those rockmen who invaded us before. The Valkyries will join us, but be careful. These ones are pretty tough,” Zac said.

Joanna seemed to ready to argue, but Zac held up his hand.

“I have a gift for the Valkyries. During the hunt I got my hands on a few War Arrays. After you’ve learned those you will be a truly elite force. But until then you still need to be careful,” he said.

“You’ve finally got one?” she said with excitement.

“I also have another gift for you,” Zac said as he took out Nenothep’s spear. “This thing belonged to a crazy strong guy in the hunt, and it should be a real Spirit Tool. You were the first Valkyrie to join me and your level is proof of your effort. I hope it will help you keep pushing forward.”

Joanna mutely stared at the spear that Zac placed in her hand with wide eyes, looking completely frozen. Zac smiled at her before he turned toward Ilvere who was leading the Demon army.

“We set out immediately. You’ll stay in charge of the two armies,” Zac said

“No problem. I was getting bored from sitting around on the island,” the large demon said as he cracked his neck with some excitement glimmering in his eyes. “These girls need some experience as well. A real warrior is not born by fighting some dumb animals.”

Zac briefly considered waiting for the Marshall Clan to catch up, but in the end he decided against it. Closing an incursion gave a huge boost in power and wealth, and he wanted that boost to stay within his force.

Calrin had no desire to head to the incursion since there were no profits for him to be made there, so he headed back to Port Atwood. But Zac asked him to try and get his hand on language crystals that could help him read the scripts of the Undead Empire.

His language skill did not work on written texts, but it wasn’t hard to read learn to read with the help of crystals. The good ones worked just like a skill crystal, and imprinted the knowledge without the need of arduous cramming sessions.

Everything was settled, and they they left Everwood Refuge with Steelwood leading the way. In just ten minutes his army was speeding through the forests, heading in the direction of a group of mountains in the distance. The rockmen had, not surprisingly, chosen a mountain as their stronghold.

It was a pain in the ass since it would give them a topological advantage, but Zac wasn’t overly worried. Everything he knew about this invasion was that they weren’t from a too strong a force. The leader of their invasion force was nowhere as strong as the Corpse Lord, and they were essentially used as cannon fodder by the two stronger forces.

But while he wasn’t worried for himself he did worry for his soldiers. He had seen the carnage from a large-scale battle just a few days ago. The casualties had been staggering on both the sides of Berum and Medhin, and that was even though they were the elites of their respective worlds.

It took them six hours to reach their destination, allowing Zac and Ogras to restore their reserves of energy. But even then they stopped to make sure everyone was in peak condition before they let started the fight. Due to great vantage of the rockman base, a surprise blitz was already not an option, so they needed to fight the invaders head-on.

A large fort stood erect in the distance, with a grey shield enveloping it. Above the wall walk, hundreds of large boulders floated, likely ready to be launched at any incoming force. It reminded Zac of what Ogras told him a long time ago. Attacking a town was suicide unless you possessed superior force.

“I wish that brute was here now,” Ogras muttered as he looked at the shield and the fortress in the distance.

Zac agreed that it would be nice to have Billy here. But he couldn't always throw Billy to the front, risking his life to gain easier access. He knew that he would have to be the one to take the lead this time. Soon they stood just a kilometer away from the rockmen's shield, and the wall was filled with black stoic shapes.

“I'll try to break open the shield. Can you help destroy as many of the stones as possible?” Zac said to Ogras.

“No problem,” Ogras said with a shrug.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 272 - Corpsebloom Mantra**

Zac panted as he popped a healing pill while looking at the surroundings. The large fortress largely lay in ruins, and much of it was his own handiwork. The battle between himself and the Incursion leader had caused widespread destruction, especially due to the stone-thaumaturgy of the rockman.

He bent over and snatched the cosmic sack of his opponent, but he didn't join the efforts to drive the remaining rockmen toward their nexus hub. This time there were no quests rewarded or titles, just pure battle between two forces. The blitz of himself and Ogras had broken the defensive perimeter in a furious assault, and in just seconds a large part of the elite defenders was dead or dying from either his fractal blades or innumerable stabs of shadowy spears.

When the defensive line was broken Ilvere had commanded the Demons and the Valkyries forward, and Zac was shocked by their improvement. Of course, Ilvere was doing the work of ten men, though most of his efforts were spent on making sure his soldiers stayed alive.

Any time a skirmish seemed to go awry his huge metal ball flew over with the force of a truck, instantly swinging the battle in their favor. There were a few strong rockmen who had tried to do the same, but they were met by insidious attacks from Ogras.

As for the leader, Zac took care of him. He had been quite powerful, but Zac got the sense that even Ogras would have been able to defeat him in a one-on-one. Then again the demon fought without any restrictions, while the power of the Incursion leader was still limited by the System's restrictions. But Ogras kept showing new cards, and even Ilvere seemed surprised by the power of Ogras.

Zac finally learned what hid beneath that mold on his stump. It was like he had crammed thousands of shadows and forced them into the shape of his missing arm. But the arm was also able to change shape according to his will. It was very strong, but it was also clear that Ogras lacked proper control of it, and it started to fall apart after a short while in the open.

Zac hadn't even needed to go all out in his battle, and he was in much better condition after this fight compared to after his battle with Nenotheop. But unfortunately, the battle didn't give him a level, and he realized that he would need to fight quite a few people to reach the two final levels before he reached his bottleneck. He had gained the past eight levels thanks to the rewards of the hunt, and the amount of energy that was required to reach level 74 shocked him.

The moment he killed the rockman leader the rest of the soldiers immediately initiated an organized retreat through their Nexus Hub. The hub was located inside the battle, and the support staff of their incursion immediately entered while the soldiers kept Zac's forces at bay.

Of course, he didn't push the matter. There was no way for them to kill all of the rockmen before they managed to flee, so their force definitely would get a report of what transpired here. There was no need to go on a widespread rampage at this juncture, causing unnecessary enmities in the multiverse.

For for the rockmen this was likely just business. They wanted access to resources and Origin Dao, and they were willing to risk their lives for it. That they would be ousted was always a real risk, and no one would waste their resources on finding Earth again. But it might be different if Zac caused a vendetta with them.

So the soldiers were mostly pushing the forces toward the Nexus Hub, killing anyone who tried to act out. In just 15 minutes no living rockmen were remaining in the fortress, at least not that hey could find.

Interestingly enough, the moment the last rockman disappeared Zac got a prompt from the system.

**[Annex RCKV-4433?]**

Zac hesitated a bit about what to do before he agreed.

**[Appoint Mayor?]**

Zac frowned a bit before he hurried over to Ogras who looked a bit pale as he cradled the form that contained his weird shadow-hand.

"You ok?" Zac asked as he looked down at the slightly pale demon.

"Just field testing. It drains more energy than I expected. What's wrong?"

"I annexed this place. Can I elect a Mayor at a later time?" Zac asked.

"Not sure, but I don't see why not?" muttered with some uncertainty. "What do you want with this shithole?"

"It's time to build a presence on the main continent. It's good to have alternatives if our efforts at the coast doesn't work out," Zac said.

"Fair enough, it would be nice to not have to rely on some random strangers to move about the continent. Besides, Nexus Hubs are strategic resources that are worth a lot," the demon agreed.

Zac nodded and opened the town shop. Most of the options he had available at his main town were available here as well, though it was clear that his population in Port Awood did not count here toward structures that had building restrictions.

He quickly bought a new defensive array and a teleportation array, creating a defensible position for his soldiers.

"We'll leave a few people here until Adran can send someone over to sort things out," Zac said.

"I think the golems chose this place for a reason. Perhaps there are good things in the mountain," Ogras said as he looked over at the towering peaks right behind the fortress where they'd fought.

Zac nodded as he stepped through the teleporter, arriving back at Port Atwood. He didn't have time to make the arrangements for the new outpost, and he left that for others to figure out. Instead, he headed over to The Thayer Consortia, and in minutes the Sky Gnomes were back at his courtyard full of energy.

“Your language crystals,” Calrin said and handed over a box. “The Undead Empire has five official languages. I could not get all of them though. The fifth one is apparently only used by the higher-ups, and it’s not for sale.”

Zac nodded in thanks as he opened the box. Four black crystals lay inside, each one with a different insignia engraved. Zac picked up the first one and placed it against his head, and the next moment it was filled with a burst of information. The transfer continued for a few minutes until the crystal finally cracked and turned to black dust.

The crystals were unfortunately one-time use, but that made them much cheaper than the type of crystals that could be used repeatedly after allowing them to restore their energies. Zac was a bit woozy by the mental shock, but he kept going and soon he had absorbed the information of all four languages.

He knew he was pushing it by doing so. Absorbing this much knowledge with his very limited Intelligence could hurt his brain, but he didn’t have time to let his mind rest. He quickly turned back to the gnomes, who eagerly looked at his Cosmos Sack, and once again started to go through his treasures.

As they worked Abby also came by, updating Zac on the tasks he had given out. The renovation of the area around The Towers of Myriad Dao was underway, and over a hundred people were working at it to get it done in record speed. They had also teleported over hundreds of Zhix workers to dig as far down as possible in their mines. Since they lived underground they were natural diggers.

“Regarding the Zhix, Nonet wants to speak with you at your convenience,” Abby said.

“And I guess Nonet still does not want to leave its hive?” Zac asked, to which Abby simply bobbed in confirmation.

“I will try to make it, but honestly there’s a bit much on my plate at the moment,” Zac sighed.

“I think it’s in regards to the Dominators, but I cannot be sure,” Abby ventured.

“I’ll try to speed things up. Can you call over my sister?” Zac asked.

Soon Kenzie ran over and took over the job of managing the four Sky Gnomes. In a perfect world, he wouldn’t need to waste his sister’s time for this. But he had caught every single Sky Gnome trying to pilfer a few goodies for themselves multiple times. The ancient one had especially sticky fingers, making him not a small source of exasperation.

So instead he released a small hill of treasure at the time and had Kenzie watch over the proceedings as he started looking through the things that he had found in Mhal’s Cosmos Sack. The first things he took out were information missives similar to the one he got from Ogras, though they seemed to be created by some intelligence faction in the Undead Empire.

They were quite exhaustive, and Zac learned about quite a few forces that he hadn’t heard about before. There was even a pretty decent rundown of the Allbright Empire, the place where Average and Greatest resided. It was a strong C-Graded force that consisted of seven sectors, one of which was the Emyrean Sector. The Red Sector that Greatest mentioned was ranked in the middle, and it was run by low-tier C-Graded hegemony.

It was very valuable information since it gave him a pretty good gauge of the power level of not only Greatest but also The Great Redeemer. Everything pointed toward Greatest being in the top tier of the Red Zone, though not necessarily at the peak. That meant he was likely at the bottleneck of the D-Grade.

That also meant the Great Redeemer might be around that power level as well since he seemed to be pretty close in power from the aura he released. It didn't really change things since he had no way to defeat that man no matter whether he was D-Grade or C-Grade, but finding protection against a peak D-Grade warrior should be far easier than from a C-Grade old monster.

Of course, that was all conjecture. Zac also learned the shocking reality of The Church of Everlasting Dao. Who would have thought that the zealous cult was just a front for a large corporation that collected bodies and sold them to people running out of their lifespan?

It made Zac remember what The Great Redeemer had said when he asked if he was part of the Church. He had called them body-peddlers and that their path toward immortality was a dead end. Zac was shocked that it was even possible to transfer to a new body to prolong one's life, but he had a feeling there were severe limitations to such a thing.

Apparently, the Undead Empire and the cult were in constant war since they fought over the high-grade corpses wherever they met.

Apart from the information on the church and the Allbright empire, thousands of other forces were listed, which was too much for Zac to go through at the moment. He placed the information crystals to the side, and he'd hand them over to someone else that could go through it all in case there was anything of importance.

The second thing he took out was the cultivation manual that Mhal's clan used. It was called [**Corpse Bloom Mantra**], and it said that it could boost compatible attacks up to 22% at E-Grade, and it was possible to use all the way to level 150 provided the cultivator's body was proficient enough.

Zac hadn't looked too much into cultivation since he found that he was a mortal, but he knew that 22% wasn't a bad percentage. Ogras had once said that a boost of 10% per grade up to D-grade was good, but after that, he wasn't sure.

That was also why he hadn't seen cultivators as a real threat so far. Even those with good manuals were only boosted to a pretty limited degree, but that would change in E-grade. 20-30% was completely possible, which was like a permanent boost of [**Hatchetman's Rage**] without any downsides.

Besides, those numbers came from Ogras whose origin was a pretty weak D-Grade clan, so it wasn't impossible that the manuals from higher-tiered forces were even better. But that wasn't really what was on Zac's mind as he thoughtfully looked down at the manual.

He had already resigned to being a mortal until he could get his hands on one of those treasures that would enable cultivation, or reaching a high enough grade. But he hadn't considered one aspect. He now had two races, which was essentially like having two different bodies.

Was the second body truly unable to cultivate as well?

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**Chapter 273 - Guarantee Death**

Zac's heartbeat sped up in anticipation, and he almost wanted to smack himself when he realized he had forgotten about checking his cultivation talent in his Draugr

form. It felt especially likely now that he learned that the Draugr was a royal group that had extra good control over miasma compared to other undead species.

But he forcibly put away the manual again and refocused on his real task. It was not like he could try it out at the moment in any case, since he was currently in his human form. Instead, he kept looking through the documents and crystals that were written in the script of the Undead Empire.

A welcome find was that one of the crystals was actually a skill crystal that taught a miasma-based attack. It was unfortunate, but the skills in the repository were unusable in his Draugr-form since Miasma and Cosmic Energy weren't interchangeable.

So the large treasure trove of skills that he possessed was completely useless for his undead form unless there were some undead skills on the higher tiers that he still didn't have access to. That was also why he had been forced to enter the hunt without an offensive skill to complement his Undying Bulwark class.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the skill that the Corpse Lord used where he summoned two fearsome miasmatic beasts, but rather something that seemed a bit more mundane. The skill was called **[Unholy Strike]** and it was a simple skill that allowed one to force a large amount of Miasma into your arms to unleash a mighty strike.

It could either be used on its own to empower one's strike or in conjunction with another skill. For example, he could use it to strike harder with **[Verun's Bite]** against sturdy enemies. It wouldn't help much against hordes of beasts, but it would actually be even better than **[Chop]** against stronger foes. Furthermore, if he had been able to use **[Chop]** in his undead form he would have been able to empower it with **[Unholy Strike]** for a combined attack.

Zac remembered that Mhal had used it in conjunction with his bone scythe, and the effect had been pretty good. It was a skill that got stronger from physical attributes as well, and it even mentioned that the better the constitution one had, the more miasma one could push into the arms.

And if there was something that he excelled at in his Draugr-form, it was Endurance. Zac quickly put the skill together with the cultivation manual, and he couldn't help but feel eager to swap to his undead form to test his new gains.

But he pushed on through Mhal's notes, and finally his eyes turned to a ragged journal bound in some black leather. He had seen it before lying together with piles of other crystals and books, but he hadn't checked it out before after learning that all the documents in the Corpse Lord's possession were in illegible scripts. He took it out of his sack and looked over it briefly before he made to open it.

"Wait!" someone suddenly shouted, and Zac stopped himself with a start.

It was the old thief-turned-appraiser that looked over in his direction with alarm.

"What's the matter?" Zac asked with some confusion.

"Do not open that," Gemidir quickly said as he hurried over. "It has tampering-protections in place. If you open it you will destroy the contents."

"What?" Zac exclaimed with shock as he quickly moved his hand away from it.

"It's a common protection in case your things get stolen. Sometimes it's not the treasures that hold the value of a snatched bag, it's the information," the old man said as he nimbly gripped the book. "And when there are protections there are solutions."

Suddenly a small white rat popped out from nowhere on top of the old man's hand, and Zac realized it was likely a skill since the mouse was covered in small fractals. But it was extremely lifelike, making Zac believe that the old man might actually be in the E-grade even though he gave off a very feeble vibe.

But suddenly both the old man and the mouse froze, and both looked over at Zac with an odd look.

“What’s wrong? Can’t you open it?” Zac asked with some urgency.

“This old man can’t be sure,” the elderly Sky Gnome said with an exaggerated sigh. “As you know our family has hit hard times lately. My house has been repaired but the wind goes right through, freezing me to my bones. My skills aren’t what they used to be due to that.”

“Uh,” Zac said with some confusion, but some realization dawned upon him when Gemidir kept talking.

“Nothing like those fancy houses I’ve seen you humans build. With your insulation and temperature-control, with all kinds of miraculous appliances that could improve the living situation of a poor old man.”

“I’ll commission a mansion with for you if you can successfully open this thing up without harming the contents,” Zac said with some amusement.

“This old man is honored, but I don’t even have the furniture to fill such an extravagant three-story mansion,” the old man said.

*When did I say three-story?* Zac thought to himself with some resignation.

“I’ll also provide furniture,” Zac added.

“What about—”

“Don’t push it,” Zac cut him off. “I am sure there are many others who are willing and able to lift some restrictions.”

“This old man finally realized how to open this thing, rest assured young man,” Gedimir quickly said, and the next moment the mouse jumped up onto the cover of the book, sniffing around.

Zac curiously looked on as the small mouse seemed to be looking for something until it indicated a corner at the top of the book to Gemidir. When the old thief got the signal he channeled some Cosmic Energy into his finger and lightly tapped the spot the mouse found.

The old man gave off the aura of a safecracker as he and his sidekick lifted the restrictions one by one. In total, they found 9 spots at which point Gemidir nodded in affirmation as the mouse disappeared. Zac took the leather-bound book, looking over at the old man with some skepticism.

The book looked exactly the same as before, and Zac honestly couldn’t tell if he had just been scammed out of a mansion or whether the old man had been telling the truth. But it was too late to regret anything now, and Zac felt it was better to be safe than sorry.

If Mhal truly was doing some experiments with Draugr-DNA or something similar it was reasonable that he wanted to keep that secret. Doing something like that might draw the ire of the noble clans, getting both himself and his clan into trouble.

The old man nodded at him with a smile before he joined the others as they kept going through treasures under Kenzie’s direction. He noted that she had placed a few things in a small pile by herself, and he guessed she had found a few things that she needed.

Zac didn’t mind if she took some things for herself. Some might see it as nepotism, but he didn’t really care. He was the one who found everything, so he decided how things would be distributed. Instead, he focused on the journal in front of him, and just after a few sentences he was hooked.

*Little brother, I am sorry about the secrecy, but some things cannot simply be said out loud. I will explain why I gave you those odd instructions, and I hope that you can create a miracle.*

*During my travels two hundred years ago I fell through a spatial crack while I explored a mystic realm. I was sure I would perish to the vacuum of space, but instead I found myself in a tomb with a body encased in Eternal Ice. A Draugr warrior. Just digging him out took me three years.*

*In his possessions were a journal, and I realized that this man had been entombed in this odd space for billions of years. According to the archaic scrips, I quickly realized that this man came from an era from even before the Undying Empire was founded. Can you believe it, an ancestor from the dark era?*

*He was a lone warrior and had no children or other next of kin, and he had met his demise while traveling to find a way to gain a breakthrough, just like I did. I quickly put the body inside my pouch and after twenty-four years I managed to escape through the very same tear that finally reappeared for a brief window.*

*At first, I was planning to provide the body to the Mendelosa-clan in hopes of attaining their favor and perhaps some resources. After all, returning an ancestor of their kin should count for something, right?*

*But then I had an idea. In my possession I had a Draugr specimen in prime condition, and more importantly, the body seemed to have no connection to the current lineages. You know how they can crack down on experiments through threads of Karma, but there shouldn't be any Karma between this man and the current clans, no?*

*That's when I got the idea for my experiments. Imagine, gaining the superior miasmatic aptitude of the Draugr race while still having the great constitution of us Corpse Lords? The moment the thought entered my mind I couldn't let it go.*

*Unfortunately, it's hard for me to perform such experiments in my current position. There are too many eyes watching my moves since I became patriarch. If I start procuring large numbers of the living and the unevolved to experiment on I fear I might be found out.*

*That's why I spent so much money to give you this chance. Certainly, the chance to bask in the resources of a virgin world is a great opportunity. But the experiments are more important. You are young, but you have always had a clever mind with your manipulation and augmentation of the lower undead. I ask you to use that insight now.*

*Enclosed are 1000 small samples from the Draugr body. I hope you can use them to push the research further. I honestly haven't made much progress thus far, and this all might just be a pipe dream. Every subject thus far has failed due to their bodies not being able to withstand rebuilding the core composition.*

*Get strong test subjects, the longer they survive the more data you will be able to collect. I wish you the best of luck little brother, and I hope you will come back with news that can push the two of us to new heights.*

*And most importantly, remember to never tell anyone about what we're doing. None of us will survive if it gets out.*

The following pages were meticulously kept experimentation logs, where the Corpse Lord recounted various trials where he tried to infuse both undead and the living with the 'Essence of Draug' as he called it. The results were abysmal.

After a while the script slightly changed, telling Zac that Mhal had taken over the experiments at that point, whereas the earlier ones were performed by the elder brother.

The reading was a chilling experience for Zac because it showed just how close to death he had been. Hundreds of zombies and humans had been caught by Mahl and forcibly imbued with the essence, and not one had survived. The strongest had lasted less than a day before dying a true death.

It was due to this that Mhal had even started mentioning using the essence as a poison rather than a medicine, which brought Zac to a short and succinct note in-between two experimentation logs.

*Forced to use three stored essence seeds as a weapon in the fight against particularly strong native to guarantee death. Unfortunately unable to retrieve the body for study. Over three hundred samples have been used already, I need to portion out my trials from this point forward.*

Zac's eyes lingered on the two words 'guarantee death' for a full minute as he tried to comprehend what had happened. He had been injected with a large dose of the essence, which should have killed him like all others. But not only was he fine after a pretty harrowing experience, but he even got a specialty core and a second race.

What made him different from the hundreds of others that had died from the injections? A possibility that he had avoided until now couldn't help but appear in his mind. Their mother had implanted Kenzie with the AI chip that helped and protected her, but was that all she did?

Had he been experimented on as well?

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#### **Chapter 274 - Final Tally**

The more he thought about it the likelier it almost felt to Zac. He might not have an AI that guided him in his cultivation, but there had been several instances where he was fine when he should have died by all accounts.

The most notable instances were the time he jumped into the pond of cosmic water and came out unscathed with an improved race afterward. Next, there was the incident where he killed almost a hundred thousand zombies and absorbed a huge amount of miasma.

That incident should have killed him by all accounts, but instead he emerged with the duplicity core. There were also various times that almost anyone should have died, but he just passed out due to excessive wounds and woke up a bit later. He was like an unkillable tank, even though it was only just recently his Endurance started to become monstrous.

Had his mother somehow fiddled with his constitution to make his body able to endure when it would normally fail?

Zac quickly shook his head and closed the journal. There was no way for him to find out unless he met his mother again. But at least he knew the root of his undead race, and it seemed he was mostly in the clear. There was some elder brother to Mahl who also knew of the Draugr-issue, but there shouldn't be much he could do.

If he was the patriarch of his clan he should be far stronger compared to the Corpse Lord he fought and unable to come here in person. Perhaps he would order some people to find him since Zac killed his brother, but he shouldn't know anything about him becoming a Draugr.

Mahl himself had thought Zac dead until the moment they ran into each other, and just a minute later he was dead. There shouldn't be any loose ends, and if he ever ran into Draugr in the future he could just feign ignorance and say he grew up on an unintegrated world or something.

There was the issue of the missing samples though. According to the notes there should be hundreds of samples remaining, but he couldn't find anything of the sort in the Corpse Lord's cosmos sack. Perhaps he had kept it hidden at a separate spot, which might spell problem. When he assaulted the Undead Incursion he would have to look for them so that there were no loose ends.

The note left from the big brother also made a poignant point about karmic threads. It truly seemed that one needed to be careful when traversing the multi-verse. One couldn't take for granted their actions would go unpunished when doing misdeeds.

"Gemidir," Zac suddenly said as he looked up, drawing the attention of the old Sky Gnome.

"Yes?" he asked when he walked over.

"When you stole things in your youth, weren't you worried about getting tracked down by karmic threads?" Zac asked.

"Stole? This old man remembers no such things," Gemidir started, but changed his tune when Zac's eyes thinned. "Taking treasure I as much knowing which target to hit as taking the right valuables. Find someone who won't be able to find you. Or just steal things that aren't valuable enough for them to expend enough resources to track you down."

"But karma is truly a bane for most thieves, which why the higher-tiered ones all try to find ways to obscure the heavens and hide from the karmic eyes," Gemidir added.

Zac's eyes lit up since it felt like he had found another direction that was worth following up on. If they could somehow block the Karmic Link between the Dominators and The Great Redeemer they might even be able to protect their planet even without fighting those monsters.

And a quick discussion with the Sky Gnomes proved that it was actually possible. However, he was dismayed to find that arrays that could block out karmic links were prohibitively expensive, and D-Graded arrays at the lowest.

Zac could neither afford them or even set them up even if he had the money. An adept array master, preferably one with insights into Karma, would be needed to make the array worked. That was why Calrin didn't even mention the possibility during the meeting.

There were also treasures that had similar effects, though they only worked on individuals, and not a whole planet like they needed. So it seemed to Zac that he would have to stick with the current plan, at least for the moment.

Since he was done looking through the Corpse Lord's belongings he returned to Kenzie's side to find the Sky Gnomes all work with sullen expressions.

"What's going on?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Your little sister must have been an Imperial Adjudicator in a past life," the old sky gnome said with a hurt look at Kenzie, who only sweetly smiled back at him. "She must have eyes in the back of her head."

"Turns out I'm pretty good at figuring out when they try to sneak some valuables for themselves," Kenzie explained with a smile.

Zac was confused for a second before he realized that her AI might be able to help her out in more ways than one.

“Please help out with the rest as well,” Zac said with a smile.

“Fine, but I’m missing a lot of cultivation time. So I’ll take a few goodies for myself,” Kenzie said.

“No problem. Better yet, I’ll show you something good after we’re done,” Zac agreed.

It was time to take her to his cultivation cave. He needed to check up on his seed in any case. Either the seed should have germinated and stabilized by now, or it would have been absorbed by the pond. In either case, it shouldn’t hurt to allow Kenzie to cultivate there by now.

The organization of items took most of the day, and the final tally was shocking to Zac, even though he had been the one to gather everything. Of course, while the wealth that he had accumulated was vast, it was nothing compared to what a D-Grade Sect should possess.

The simple explanation was that the System had adjusted the treasures just like it likely had adjusted the danger. For example, a peak E-Grade Elder should have thousands of high-grade crystals, but he only got his hands on two D-Grade crystals.

And while Ogras never had provided a complete explanation about his Grandfather’s wealth, he knew it was far beyond what he gathered the past month. And that was even when he was considered extremely poor for a D-Grade powerhouse. But Zac knew he couldn’t get greedy, and he had received far more than he had expected.

The pile that Zac would keep for himself was the smallest, but it was also the most valuable. It’s value easily surpassed billions of Nexus Coins, and that was even when there were multiple treasures that even the four sky gnomes were unable to figure out the function of.

Zac already knew about some of the treasures since he picked them up himself during the first two weeks, but there were a lot of happy surprises as well. Most of them seemed to come from Nenothep’s pouch, but gems were also extracted from the chaotic mess that Zac snatched from Salvation.

His eyes turned to a neatly stacked pile of jade boxes. Inside them were over a hundred Attribute Fruits. Each of them was only of use at F-Grade and worse quality compared to the ones he bought in the Contribution Store, but it was a huge gain for Zac who had only gotten his hands on two of them so far.

The problem with the fruits wasn’t their price, but their scarcity. He had a standing order for them at Calrin’s since the start, but the Sky Gnome was completely unable to get his hands on them. It was truly a mountain of treasure that had fallen into his lap.

The huge pile was also proof that the System adjusted the rewards in the hunt. If he got this many there should have been at least a thousand Attribute Fruits spread throughout the hunt. It was far more than what a D-Grade sect should have lying around. Not that they couldn’t afford it, but they would use them on their disciples rather have them lying around.

But what was most curious was that he couldn’t even remember picking up these boxes. If he knew he had attribute fruits in his possession he would have immediately eaten them rather than left them in his bag.

The only explanation that he could come up with was that the System either added them at the end or made people pick them up but ignore them afterward. Perhaps the System didn’t want people who were doomed to die to waste the attribute fruits, so it only made them available after the hunt was over.

“A lot of them, but the real prize are these four,” Calrin said and pointed at a few more intricate boxes on the side. “Two Luck and two all-attribute fruits, one of each mid-grade. Unsurprisingly, the last four are worth as much as the rest combined. If you gobble them all up yourself you should reach your limit, though you would a lot of efficiency that way.”

Zac nodded, unable to hide his excitement. The limit the Sky Gnome referred to was the limit of how many attributes this type of treasures could provide. There was no strict limit that the system imposed, but the limit was generally 15 to 25 in every attribute.

Some of the differences were based on race, where some races could accommodate more bonus points. Humans were completely unremarkable in that regard, so they were on the lower end of the spectrum. But there was also a pretty large component that simply was having good genes.

Being a mortal and not someone possessing special constitutions and bloodlines, Zac suspected that he might be on the lower end of the scale. Unless his unusual sturdiness also translated into having a higher ceiling for bonus attributes as well.

Unfortunately, it usually didn't work to eat the same fruit over and over. You usually only ate one of each type since the following ones had reduced effect. Eating the same type over and over was extremely extravagant, and something only extremely wealthy scions could afford.

Quite a few of the fruits in the collection were duplicates, so Zac would likely give them to others instead of hoarding them all. He even briefly considered giving all of them to others, apart from the two special fruits. A few bonus attributes might do a lot more good for others than himself.

But in the end, he chose to be a bit greedy. A few points in each attribute might not be a huge boost, but every little bit counted when he was risking his life almost every day. It might allow him to pass the inheritance, or reach a higher floor in the Tower of Eternity.

“How do you suggest I should allocate these?” Zac asked of Calrin.

“Take what you need, and then take a decent amount for your elite. But you should leave some for the Merit Exchange or the store. People understand that some of them goes to the elites, but you need to show that hard work is also rewarded,” the Sky Gnome said.

“How do you mean?” Zac asked. “I expect the treasures here will not be leaked to the public.”

“We'll keep our word, but no secret stays that way forever, especially if you start handing out treasures to all the elites in Port Atwood. So you need to find a balance. Show the population that hard work will be rewarded and that everyone can become a powerhouse with our help if they struggle enough,” Calrin explained.

Zac slowly nodded as it made some sense. Perhaps it would be optimal to give out all the fruits to the people in his inner circle, but it might sow discontent amongst the army or his craftsmen. It might create the image that working hard was meaningless since the leadership would keep everything good to themselves.

Zac wanted a culture where people worked hard to improve themselves, and if putting a few attribute fruits in the Merit Store helped make that happen, it was worth it. These fruits only gave 1-2 attributes each, after all, and spread out over 10 elites it wouldn't make all the difference.

Soon they had split up the attribute fruits so that Zac would gain roughly 10 points in each attribute, then an even 50-50 split amongst the remainders. Zac gave half to Kenzie who would distribute them amongst the warriors.

Kenzie had spent all her time in the Academy lately, so she had a lot better understanding of who was worth nurturing and who wasn't. Zac himself had been too busy with so many things that he almost only interacted with a small group at the top.

A decent amount of them were also earmarked for Emily, who he still hadn't seen since he got back. He had already invested a Fruit of Ascension to nurture a powerhouse from the ground up, so adding a couple of attribute fruits was nothing odd. Zac had asked Kenzie about Emily's situation but she only told him she was fine.

He was curious about her progress during the past month. Her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday should have taken place roughly two weeks ago, and he wondered if she had gotten her class yet. But when Zac asked his sister about it she only smiled and said that Emily wanted to tell him about it herself.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 275 - Billions**

It allowed Zac to relax somewhat about Emily's situation since he could tell it wasn't bad news going by Kenzie's expression. She was apparently out on a hunting trip at the moment, but she should be back pretty soon. It made Zac worry a bit that she still pushed herself to such a degree, but she was always accompanied by demon guards to keep her somewhat safe.

Apart from the attribute fruits, there were also three Dao Treasures, and Zac unhesitatingly kept those for himself. He had five seeds to work on now, and he would need every bit of help he could get. Zac only needed to figure out a direction for his seeds before he ate the treasures to increase the likelihood of improving his seeds.

A much larger section of his private stock was filled with high-quality gear that the Sky Gnomes felt had too much value to directly put in the merit exchange. They would cost too many points, making it so that no one would be able to exchange for them until the war with the invaders was over.

The most interesting item for Zac was a large glistening shield that radiated weight and ruthlessness. It was a bulwark in the true sense of the word. It was made in black E-Graded metals and was roughly 160 centimeters high and a meter wide. The width was almost the same across the whole thing, apart from the top where one end reached a bit higher than the other.

It was also clear it was meant for more than simple defense since five large spikes jutted out from the front, and the bottom also had jagged spikes sticking out like teeth. No matter if he bashed someone or slammed down the lower edge he would cause gruesome wounds.

Better yet, it came with a skill. And interestingly enough it wasn't a defensive shield like the one his old robes possessed, but an offensive one. He could slam the shield down into the ground, which would unleash a barrage of steel spikes at his opponents in front of him. It was a pretty good area attack, and it only needed 5 minutes to recharge rather than a full day.

It was a great complement to Zac's somewhat disappointing offensive force in his undead form. His thorn aura was an amazing skill, but it took some time to whittle down his enemies. Smarter enemies would also figure out some workarounds after a while, like using defensive tools while attacking to neutralize **[Deathwish]**.

Unfortunately, the shield wasn't a Spirit Tool, but its quality was top E-Grade, and far sturdier than the shield he took from Thea's bodyguard. It would likely last him quite some time before he needed to swap it out.

The Sky Gnomes had also figured out the workings of the Spirit Vessel. Zac needed to use the elder token that he found at the same time as a key. When activated the large ball changed form into a large floating disk. It looked quite a bit like the array disks that he got from Ylvas, only a lot larger.

It was about four meters across, so it wouldn't be able to transport a whole army, but it would be able to fly a small strike squad with himself and a handful of others without a problem. Its speed was nothing to scoff at either. According to Calrin, it wasn't anything special, but it was far faster than Zac could run, and over twice as quick as Zac's fastest Creator Vessel.

It even had a defensive shield that both blocked out any wind and weaker attacks. But it wasn't a flying fortress, so using the shield to block out too strong attacks would ruin the disk. Kenzie had put the ball into her own pile, but it was one of the few things he took back for himself.

"You should take this to David and Hannah when you visit them," Kenzie suddenly said as she handed him another disk.

"What's this?" Zac asked as he curiously took the package of array disks.

They looked pretty similar to the array disks that he got from Ylvas, though the five disks that he held seemed to be meant to be used together.

"They are farming disks," Calrin explained. "We found a total of 16 such sets. The one you're holding is of average quality, and covers a smaller area."

"Farming disks?" Zac asked with some confusion. "What do they do?"

"Farming arrays help with farming, of course. These ones combine five different arrays. It provides energy gathering, energy infusion, irrigation, fertilization, and low-grade pest control," Calrin said. "Better ones also can also speed up maturity times, though that's usually done by the farmer's skills."

Zac looked down at the nifty arrays with surprise. Planting these on a field would truly make life a lot easier for a farmer, and it was a good gift to David if he truly had his mind set on farming in seclusion. But he wasn't ready to meet up with Hannah at the moment, even if Janos had worked on her mind. Getting stabbed by your ex wasn't something you got over in a day, not even in this new ruthless world.

Even more surprisingly there were four Spirit tools in the collection. There was a large golden bow, a seemingly unremarkable sword that possessed a dense killing intent, a mage's staff that seemed to continuously absorb the Cosmic Energy from the area, and finally a small paintbrush.

Zac was especially surprised to learn that the small brush was a Spirit Tool, but he soon understood its use after Calrin's explanation. It could both be used for inscriptions and attacks for certain classes like Calligraphers.

Kenzie had already laid claim to the staff, but since he didn't have any specific people in mind for the other three spirit tools he decided to put them in the Merit Exchange as top prizes instead of hoarding them. Hopefully, it would motivate some people to work harder if they saw they could even get Spirit Tools with merit points.

There were also dozens of pieces of gear that weren't Spirit Tools but as high-quality as his new shield. Zac would gift have Kenzie gift them just like the attribute fruits, as long as there were proper recipients. They could be of great assistance in the upcoming battle, after all.

Zac took two Defensive rings and a Defensive amulet for himself and gave the same to Kenzie who put them on. She already had the protective array on her that he bought before the hunt, but that only worked on the island. Having a few back-ups wouldn't hurt.

Apart from the gear, there were also a ton of convenient items that would be a great addition to any Cultivator's survival kit. There was a small mountain of healing pills, all of them better than the standard-grade items that the General Stores sold.

There were also quite a few one-time items in the vein of the Thunder Punishment Array that he used during the beast hordes. Most of the ones he had found were useless for himself, but they might save the lives of the soldiers.

Zac decided to make two such items a part of the standard kit for the Valkyries and demons, which would hopefully improve the survival rate in the upcoming battles. They were things such as fireball-talismans or shield beads that soaked up some damage for the user for a short duration.

There were a few stronger items as well, and Zac ended up saving two of them for himself. One was a pitch-black glass ball that the old Sky Gnome called a **[Void Ball]** with some fear in his eyes. It was a truly dangerous item that actually caused a temporary tear in space.

It was only an E-Grade ball, but it would destabilize over a hundred meters around it. If Zac himself wasn't far enough he would kill himself since he couldn't withstand spatial rifts even with his recent upgrades to his Endurance. In fact, almost nothing in the F-grade could withstand the spatial storms from the **[Void Ball]**, meaning that it could be used for anything from widespread carnage to destroying arrays.

The second item he kept for himself was a defensive item. It looked like a golden walnut, and it was simply called **[Bramble Wall]**. If he infused it with cosmic energy it would turn into an enormous dome of thick brambles that could protect against almost any attacks.

Better yet, Zac had a feeling he would be able to strengthen the item even further with the help of his Dao of Trees. It wasn't very useful for him personally, but it would make great last-ditch protection if his whole army was in danger for some wide-spread attack. The **[Bramble Wall]** could spread a lot further compared to even his Souped-Up **[Nature's Barrier]**, which wasn't designed for large area protection.

Unexpectedly the simple-looking prayer-mat he found in the first temple also ended up in his own treasure-pile. It was a very valuable item made from D-Grade materials. It was mainly used by cultivators, but it could even help a mortal to absorb Cosmic Energy faster. Sitting on the mat after a battle would allow Zac to get back to a fighting condition almost twice as fast.

Zac felt that his force would gain a huge all-around boost by the large pile he had just gone through. Some items were even upgrades for himself who already possessed some of the best gear on Earth. They would be enormous upgrades for the Valkyries and the Demon Warriors. And all this was just the smallest of the three categories of loot.

The second smallest pile of treasures was the one that Calrin would sell through the Thayer Consortia since most would be placed into the Merit Exchange. Port Atwood was simply lacking just about everything at the moment, so most items would be kept. Still, Calrin estimated the sell-off would bring Zac another 250 to 300 million nexus coins.

A large portion of the items in the sell-off pile was things like gear from the thousands of fallen that had accumulated in his pouch. Each item was only worth a

couple of thousand Nexus Coins, but Calrin believed he could sell the items in bulk to some low-grade planets. It was the same with the various pills of average efficacy.

There were also a few dozen low-grade Cultivation manuals that Calrin didn't recommend keeping in the Merit Store. It would almost be a disservice to allow his own citizens to cultivate using such shitty manuals since it could cause trouble for them down the line.

Instead, the Sky Gnome would pawn them off to hapless rogue cultivators in the multi-verse for a few million a pop. Zac felt a bit bad about it, but he needed money and the cultivators could only blame themselves if they bought such an important item without understanding it properly.

The final pile would be used to stimulate every sector of Port Atwood, and it ranged from everything from Nexus Crystals to weapons and armor to knowledge. The information crystals that Zac got from Anzonil was the best collection he got, but not the only one. There were multiple other crystals that Zac got, mainly from killing the Emperor.

Those crystals covered everything from Blacksmithing to Alchemy, though Zac knew that those were just minor paths in the Eastern Trigram Sect. Still, they would bring a great boost to the productivity and skill of the artisans of the island, especially when combined with The Celestial Artisan heritage.

The sky gnomes estimated the final pile to be valued at roughly 700 million Nexus Coins, excluding the Information Crystals. That meant that the two piles of average treasures were worth around a billion Nexus Coins, and that was only a small part of the total wealth he brought back. It was an enormous number and much more than what he possessed before.

Zac couldn't even imagine the total wealth he'd bring back if the System hadn't adjusted the trial ground and removed the real valuable items. What if the odd Mystic Realm in his possession possessed equivalent wealth as the original Eastern Trigram Sect? Ogras seemed to believe that the realm had roughly the same power levels as the sect after all.

It all depended on what the rest of the odd structure Ogras described contained, but even if they turned into salvagers and stripped the metals from the walls they would likely make billions. That meant that there might be some really valuable things further in.

Zac had thought that hunting beasts was the most efficient way for him to get richer since he was able to gain tens of millions of Nexus Coins in a Day if he pushed himself. But exploring ruins in Mystic Realms or looting enemy forces was clearly more lucrative, and Zac understood why there was so much conflict in the multiverse. War was an extremely profitable business, as long as you won.

Zac couldn't help but feel a bit morose as he thought about life in the multi-verse. He would likely never be able to just sit back and relax since there would always be other people improving while eyeing his wealth. But Zac was soon brought out of his slightly morbid musings by some movement outside his courtyard. He looked up and slightly smiled when he saw who it was.

Emily had changed quite a bit in the past month.

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## Chapter 276 - Runic Shaman

Zac put away the last of the treasures before he deactivated the arrays surrounding his courtyard. In the end, he needed over thirty Cosmos Sacks to fit everything he wasn't keeping for himself, and it would have been higher if Calrin hadn't taken care of the pile that was to be sold off. Luckily, all of the things he would keep for himself would fit in his personal Cosmos Sack without trouble.

Emily perked up the moment the shields surrounding the courtyard deactivated and rushed inside. Zac couldn't help but feel a bit amused when he saw her. For some reason, she had stylized herself as a barbaric warrior, with different wolf pelts as armor all around her. It was a pretty odd look considering how temperate the island was.

Her hair was braided backward like a Celtic warrior princess, perhaps to not get in the way during battle. She even had some paint markings on her face while the rest was covered in a veneer of dirt from days in the woods.

There were also clear indicators of her having been through harsh battles as she was bandaged in multiple spots, and Zac even noted a few scars with a frown. Still, the small wounds hadn't put a damper on the teenager as she ran over.

Unsurprisingly there were also two axes attached to a belt on her hip, meaning she had stuck to her decision to try to get a class related to the same weapon type as himself. But as she got closer Zac finally noticed one startling change. She looked younger.

Even before she had been pretty scrawny for her age, but now she almost looked like a kid. Zac couldn't put his finger on what exactly had changed, but she reminded him of when his sister was around twelve years old.

Zac's brows rose when he suddenly understood why she had changed in this peculiar manner. It must have been the Fruit of Ascension that made her look younger when she evolved. It was the same with himself when he evolved to the E-Grade race. He was already 30 but he looked like he was in his early twenties now.

Evolving seemed to remove markings of age due to things such as lifestyle and environment apart from slightly improving one's features. It just wasn't quite as pronounced with Emily due to her young age. But it still looked a bit comical to Zac, and he couldn't help snorting when he realized she might look like a brat for decades due to her improved longevity.

"It's your fault!" Emily snarled like an enraged wildcat, clearly having figured out the reason for Zac's amusement. "Your stupid fruit! Alyn told me will look like a kid for like 20 years now."

"A lot of old ladies would give anything to be in your position," Kenzie said from the side with a smile. "Besides, you will be able to slightly change your appearance when you reach peak E-Grade according to Alyn."

"Looking young is a sign of great talent in the multi-verse," Calrin added. "It means you have quickly progressed on the path of Cultivation. Sometimes you would see great powerhouses looking like children. Those are the ones you need to be extra careful around."

Zac smiled and was about to respond as well when a blazing axe suddenly materialized in Emily's hand while she looked at them with wild eyes. It looked like a small tomahawk wrought out of scorching flames. The next moment she unhesitatingly threw it straight at Zac. Had the teenager finally snapped?

His eyes widened in alarm, but he didn't feel any danger so he didn't move. He didn't think that Emily would be able to harm him even if she wanted to. The flaming axe unerringly flew at him and to his surprise it entered his body without resistance.

The next moment he felt a flash of heat spreading through his whole body, but not in a bad way. It was like he had drunk a warm beverage on a cold day. He even felt a bit invigorated by it.

“Hehe surprised? Did I scare you?” Emily said with a wide smile. “That’s what you get.”

Zac snorted and shook his head. She had clearly been waiting for a while to use this thing on him, so he would let her have this one. Rather than arguing he instead looked inward to see the effect of the warmth spreading through his body. It was beneficial, and it slightly reminded him of the energy from **[Hatchetman’s Rage]**, without the detriments.

He quickly opened up his status screen, and he quickly realized he was right. His Strength and Dexterity had both increased by a whopping 5%, meaning he had gained 40 attribute points. Zac quickly looked up at Emily to see her whole form blaze with the same types of flames the axe was made from before subsiding.

“Wow! Your attributes are crazy, no wonder you’re on the top of the ladder,” Emily exclaimed.

“What is this skill?” Zac asked. “How long can you keep it up?”

Emily didn’t immediately answer, and instead glared at the four Sky Gnomes who were still in the courtyard. Calrin rolled his eyes in response, but soon the four of them said their goodbyes leaving only Zac, Kenzie and Emily in the courtyard.

“It should boost you with 5% Strength and Dexterity, right?” Emily said, making Zac nod.

“I can keep it up for an hour right now, but I’m sure it will get longer as I level up. During that time I get the same amount of bonus attributes as you do. But even during normal times it gives me a 5% bonus. I also have an Earth Axe that gives Endurance and Vitality, and a mage axe,” Emily proudly said. “But I can only use one at the time.”

“You get the bonus as well?” Zac exclaimed with shock.

Five percent of his Strength and Dexterity was a pretty big boost for someone at her level, and her defensive axe would give even more attributes.

“Yeah, I get almost fifty bonus Attributes from this skill now. You will have to come with me when I hunt later! And you can’t leave me on the island any longer. I can protect myself and even help out now,” Emily eagerly said.

“Just what is your class?” Zac couldn’t help asking.

“It’s called Runic Shaman. I can buff one person at the time with my axes, and also fight with magically infused axes. It’s the coolest class ever, and it’s even Rare!” Emily said with pride.

Zac smiled and nodded. Clearly, the Fruit of Ascension had helped her get a great class, but the fruit alone wasn’t enough. And he had to admit it would be great to keep her around while traveling. If she could boost him this much right now, how would it look when she gained higher mastery of the skills?

But she was still not very strong on her own, and he was afraid that she would be targeted if his enemies found out she could empower him. He remembered all too well how he himself had handled the Medhin warriors who used the war arrays. Emily noted Zac’s hesitation, and a scowl started to appear on her face.

“You told me you would take me with you after I gained a class, and now I have!” she said with a glare. “You have already found your family, but I am still looking for mine!”

Zac sighed as he looked at the irate teenager. What she said was true. A big reason why she worked herself so hard was that she still hoped to find her two siblings. Zac knew that the likelihood of both of them still living was slim, even if they were both cultivators. But she had the right to look for them.

“How about this,” Zac said after mulling it over. “I am going to Westfort tomorrow, the base of operations of the Marshall Clan. They have as good an information network as The New World Government. Why don’t you come with me? Perhaps they have found the town where your siblings were dropped off”

“Great! I’ll start packing,” Emily exclaimed, her demeanor making a complete turn. “I’m going to go pack!”

The next moment she left the courtyard like a whirlwind before Zac had a chance to change his mind. He didn’t even have time to ask about her level and titles. But Kenzie apparently knew what was on his mind and explained Emily’s situation.

“She can protect herself against most warriors already, she’s stronger than you think. She has pushed herself extremely hard since she gained her level. She even managed to kill a level 51 beast as her first kill,” Kenzie explained.

“What?” Zac said, extremely surprised. “How the hell is that possible?”

He knew that the only reason that he was able to get the ‘Slayer of Leviathans’ title was that he lucked out on his roll against the Herald. For Emily to defeat such a powerful beast by herself was shocking. He remembered how he barely survived the fight against Vul, the Barghest Alpha. At that time he was almost level 20, and he had a slew of titles to empower him.

“She gained two very strong advantages before even turning 16. She both attained a Dao and upgraded her race. You know how good those titles you get from that. After that we found a very weak beast on Mystic Island,” Kenzie explained.

“She formed a Dao Seed!?” Zac exclaimed before calming down. “But still.”

“Between an offensive Dao and a high-quality weapon she almost killed the beast in one surprise strike,” Kenzie continued. “After that, she slowly killed it with the help of a fireball skill she bought from the Nexus Crystal. The beast only managed to get in one blow, but she used her defensive gear.”

Zac slowly nodded, realizing that Emily had quite a few advantages that he never had when fighting Vul. An offensive Dao added a huge spike in power, and it was such a Dao Seed that allowed him to kill an E-Grade beast in his Draugr-form. Using a Dao Seed to kill a level 50 beast made sense.

Still, he hadn’t expected Emily to even attain a Dao seed before officially embarking on the path of cultivation. According to Ogras, it was practically unheard of on his own homeworld. With all those titles Emily might actually be stronger than the Valkyries by now.

Learning about Emily’s situation was like a rock having been lifted off his shoulders. He truly felt he had made the right decision. His only regret was that she seemed to have gained a hybrid class that was part-support. Such a class would be invariably weaker in battle compared to a pure combat class.

“Has anyone else on the island managed to form a Dao Seed before turning 16?” Zac suddenly asked.

“Not that we know, but Alyn increased the amount of meditation for all children in the Academy after learning of Emily’s situation. I think it’s extremely rare, even with the help of Origin Dao,” Kenzie said hesitantly. “But perhaps we can luck out and get another one.”

Zac simply shrugged in response. He didn't hold too high hopes for that happening. Once was already a miracle without the help of a powerhouse showing the way. Besides, the Origin Dao would disperse and integrate with the world the following years, making the window of opportunity pretty brief.

"Speaking of meditation," Zac said as he started walking toward the teleporter on his compound. "Come with me for a bit."

"Wait, what about those things?" Kenzie said and pointed at the gardening golems idly standing in a corner of the courtyard.

Zac stopped with a start since he had completely forgotten about those things. When Kenzie and the gnomes had taken the golems out they were completely lifeless unlike when Zac snatched them from the Alchemist's mountain. No matter what kind of prodding they tried they were completely inert, so they simply placed them to the side before moving on.

After some hesitation, Zac put them into his private pouch. He did sort of want to leave them there to see whether they would wake up by themselves and start cleaning, but he was afraid they would freak out instead and start demolishing the whole place. He needed to be present in case that happened.

Soon the two stepped through the teleporter and appeared in Azh'Rodum. They quickly exited the town before they attracted any real attention and then entered the mines from a side-tunnel. Zac then quickly led his sister through the winding paths inside the mountain until they stood in front of the unassuming rock leading to his cultivation cavern.

"These mountains really are amazing," Kenzie said with a sigh when they stopped. "Jeeves says this place is probably among the top ten Zones on Earth for cultivation. After they have been doused in the Cosmic Energy for a few centuries they will become true Sacred Mountains."

"If you the mountains are good you'll like this," Zac said with a grin as he undid the arrays hiding the cavern before he moved the boulder out of the way.

Dense cosmic energy poured out of the cavern like a punch in the face, and Kenzie's eyes widened in shock as she took a deep breath. Zac indicated for her to go inside, and then placed the boulder back behind them to hide the entrance again. Next, he quickly activated the arrays again to prevent the energy from leaking out.

"This place... It's crazy!" Kenzie said as she looked around in wonder at the extremely dense flora growing in the cavern. "Even the mundane plants have gained spirituality from the enormous amount of energy. Did you make this place?"

However, Zac didn't answer as all his focus was on the pond with Cosmic Water. His heart quickly hammered with wild elation as he hurried over, only stopping right at the edge of the pond. His mouth curved upward as he looked at the sight.

A lotus no larger than his hand lazily bobbed on the surface.

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#### **Chapter 277 - Cultivation Cave**

Kenzie noticed Zac's preoccupation and walked over next to him in front of the Cosmic Water pond.

"What is that flower?" Kenzie said with interest after seeing Zac's stare.

“A present from Abbot Everlasting Peace,” Zac explained. “He gave me a seed from a D-Grade Lotus, I wasn’t sure it would germinate. But the effect here is even better than I anticipated. I thought it would take much longer for it to start growing.”

“What does it do?” Kenzie said.

Zac hesitated a bit, but in the end he decided to not tell Kenzie about the horrible state that the Abbot was in. He trusted his sister to not tell anyone else about it, but he felt he shouldn’t betray the old man’s confidence.

“It produces massive amounts of Life-attuned energy. So it can both heal people and prolong life. It’s small now, but it will grow a lot bigger later. Sitting on it will probably speed up your cultivation by a large degree when you cultivate later,” Zac explained instead.

It was true. The old Abbot had lost a few placements on the ladder the last month, but in the end he had pretty much kept pace with the people on the ladder even though he didn’t go to the hunt. The massive number of beasts had boosted the average levels on the ladder by a huge degree, far quicker than the average speed was on earth, yet he held on.

“Jeeves says it contains intricate signs of life,” Kenzie said as she looked down on the lotus. “But he needs to upgrade to understand it properly.”

“Upgrade?” Zac asked with confusion, finally tearing his eyes away from the small flower.

“Yeah. Jeeves is like a Spirit Tool. He needs to upgrade to keep helping me after I reach E-Grade,” Kenzie said, a small frown forming on her face. “But he doesn’t know what he needs.”

“You didn’t find anything from my treasure pile that could help?” Zac asked.

“No, nothing...” Kenzie said with a sigh before looking up at him with steady eyes. “Zac, I still think we should find mom. Especially now with the Great Redeemer.”

Zac was about to immediately reject the proposition, but his sister sped up when she saw the frown forming on his face.

“Wait, just listen. If she’s really a Technocrat she can help, right? Aren’t they some of the most powerful people around?” Kenzie hurriedly explained. “Besides, don’t you want to meet her again?”

Zac froze, not really knowing what to think about what Kenzie said. Leandra was no longer a part of his life, so he hadn’t even considered her as a solution since he learned about The Great Redeemer. But honestly, what Kenzie said made some sense.

The Technocrats were at least a B-grade force, though Zac guessed that it consisted of lower-grade families and groups as well. But taking care of someone like The Great Redeemer shouldn’t be too large a problem. If their mother had the ability to create something as miraculous as Jeeves, she should possess a lot of other terrifying means as well.

He suddenly remembered the story about the Technocrat who visited the Creators. That man had weapons that could blow up whole planets without breaking a sweat, so creating tools that could kill off a rogue D-grade cultivator shouldn’t be a problem.

However, bringing the attention of the Technocrats might bring more trouble than good. Jeeves was too big a cheat. It didn’t only fuse technology and cultivation, it even seemed to upgrade every single part about her, from her basic constitution to Class choices.

Such a thing would cause a storm the moment it became known in the multiverse. Everyone would want it for themselves, and not just the technocrats. No one would say

no to having a tool that worked like a continuous source of free improvements that made them stand out from the rest cultivators.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea, there are too many risks involved,” Zac eventually said.

Kenzie seemed to gear up for an argument, so Zac quickly started to explain his thoughts.

“Wait, you should have asked around about the technocrats by now so you know what kind of a force mom might belong to. Almost all forces in the multiverse are their enemies. If we start sending out probes through Calrin we have no idea what kind of problems we would attract. I don’t even think we have the qualifications to start looking for her or the technocrats at the moment,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“We can’t even buy low-tiered goods. Finding someone from a B-grade force? There’s no chance we can even afford a scrap of information,” Zac continued. “Besides, there are too many things we don’t know about mom.”

“But that’s why we need to start looking,” Kenzie retorted. “Don’t you want to find some answers?”

“I do, but I don’t have anywhere to start. I looked through our house, there was nothing,” Zac said. “Besides, we don’t know what she was even doing on Earth before the integration. Was she in hiding? From who? Perhaps she fled the technocrats and is no longer part of them. If we start asking around for her we might inadvertently cause her trouble.”

The two kept going back and forth for a while, not getting anywhere. Zac could only sigh and somewhat relent in the end.

“I’ll try to figure something out, I promise. But we have to be careful. I don’t want to have some angry Technocrat flashing over here and blow up Earth just to spite mom or something, alright?” Zac sighed.

“Alright, fine,” Kenzie said and sat down to cultivate some distance away.

But Zac saw that she didn’t agree, and he could only shake his head as he sat down himself a few meters away from her. He trusted his sister, but the lives of billions of people were at stake. He didn’t want to muddy the waters any further by dragging a bunch of Technocrats into the mix, so he made a mental reminder to himself to make sure Calrin didn’t do any probes for their mother.

Zac couldn’t cultivate, but just sitting in this extremely nourishing environment felt quite nice as well, and Zac was content to just relax for a bit. He hadn’t realized it until now, but he had been awake almost non-stop for three days.

He had been frenziedly hunting beasts at the end to beat out the Medhin Princeling for the 3<sup>rd</sup> position on the Hunter Ladder, and as soon as he got back there were various things to take care of for two straight days. He had even closed a whole incursion without skipping a beat.

But Zac was tired to his bones, and it only took moments until he was deep asleep. It was only 6 hours later he woke up, making it his longest nap for months. He cracked his neck and stood up, and to his surprise he saw that Kenzie was still deep in cultivation.

Energy was slowly swirling around her before it entered her body through all her pores, and Zac was shocked at the amount she was able to absorb. It was so much that he could sense it, and he couldn’t help but feel a bit jealous. In just a few seconds enough energy to match a barghest kill entered his sister’s body.

Kenzie somehow noticed that Zac had woken up.

“Don’t overwork yourself,” she said with some worry after seeing his tired state. “You’re not alone, you know? There’s a lot of people here that can share your burden.”

“I know,” Zac said with a smile. “I’ll leave this place to you. You can bring Emily as well if you think the energy is enough for the two of you, but no one else, not even your two friends. And look after the flower, please.”

“Thanks, I’ll take care of it. You know, I thought about it. You should make a miasma chamber next to this place,” Kenzie said. “Like dig a second pond and turn it into Miasma.”

Zac’s eyes lit up at her suggestion, but he was unsure about the feasibility. It would be nice to have a Miasma-zone on the island, especially so close to the flower. But he was afraid things would get out of hand in case he put up an Unholy Beacon next to the pond, so he would have to wait a bit before he tried those things out.

“It’s not a bad idea,” Zac nodded. “But I’ll wait until I can make sure I don’t ruin this place and the valley above. I’ll hopefully do the Inheritance today before heading to Westfort, are you staying here?”

“I’ll stay here for a bit more. The cultivation speed here is amazing, but unfortunately I think I would hurt the environment if I stayed here around the clock. The energy needs to be released from the pond to restock the atmosphere,” Kenzie said.

After Kenzie mentioned it Zac actually noticed the density of Cosmic Energy in the cave had decreased somewhat, but it was still far and beyond above anything else on the island.

“Well I’m sure you have a handle on it,” Zac said as he fiddled a bit with the town shop menu. “I’ve given you control of the arrays around this place as well, you should be able to come and go as you please now. And don’t jump into the water, it’ll kill you.”

“I know what Cosmic Water is,” Kenzie said with a roll of her eyes. “I’m not an idiot. Be careful in there, and tell Ogras not to overdo it. I don’t think Brazla will do anything bad, but he refuses to tell me what to expect from the trials.”

Zac only coughed, relieved he never mentioned how he jumped into the pond to escape the poison back in the day. He left Kenzie to her devices and headed back to the town. The suns were starting to rise, meaning it was close to 4 am. However, Azh’Rodum was already coming alive, with a lot of miners already heading toward the mineshafts.

Since people were paid a portion of what they mined a lot of people spent most of their time in the tunnels for a week, and then a week on cultivation with help of the crystals they had mined. Zac no longer had full insight into how much the mine yielded, but it was a substantial amount of crystals each day. His small refinement machine had gotten a dozen big brothers that were churning out over a million crystals every week.

A large part of it went to the academy to nurture his army and the young, and another chunk to power the increasingly numerous arrays that helped with everything from protecting the town from the wildlife to farming. He was also providing the whole population with a small allowance to boost everyone’s base power, for now. But a lot of it went straight into the town coffers, which essentially was his own private property.

Unfortunately, he had no use for F-grade crystals at the moment, and he didn’t possess any means to reliably convert them to higher-grade crystals. Of course, he could sell them for Nexus Coins, but he didn’t see the need for it since there wasn’t a lot he could do with money at the moment.

Earth essentially had been placed under a trading embargo for strategic resources until they had proven their strength by booting out all the invaders. Calrin

could only get a very limited quantity of high-quality goods, and that was only if there was a surplus supply.

He took the teleportation array in Azh'Rodum to the main teleporter in Port Atwood and immediately headed over to the government building. Between Adran and Abby, there was always at least one of them working, and he quickly found the Stargazer looking through a bunch of documents that hovered in front of her.

"Lord Atwood," Abby said as she looked over at him. "What brings you here so early?"

"I wanted to check in on the progress of our projects?" Zac said as he sat down in a chair in front of her.

"I have tasked Mr. Trang to send one of his vessels back to the desert continent to set up a proper base camp," Abby began without missing a beat. "As for the digging operation in the mines, we have hit a bit of a snag."

"Snag how?" Zac asked with surprise.

"There are whole biodomes of subterranean animals the further down we dig. Everything from large white lizards to thousands of vampiric bats," the Stargazer said with some annoyance. "But luckily the beasts are not too strong. I had Alyn send a few companies down the mines to clean them out. It will do them good to fight something else than barghest."

"So how long until you think we reach the bottom of my influence?" Zac said.

"It depends on what else we find in the depths. They are surprisingly full of life, perhaps because we got merged with a subterranean planet? But I would guess at least two weeks," Abby estimated.

Zac slowly nodded as he mentally planned out his next course of action. It was a bit disappointing to hear about the delay since he had somewhat wanted to head down to the underworld before he put himself against the Undead Incursion.

It felt like the undead might be his strongest enemies apart from the Dominators, and he wanted to reach level 75 before he challenged millions of zombies and the Lich King. Not because he planned to immediately evolve, but rather that he would gain his two ultimate skills upon reaching the max level. Closing the underground incursion first had been his idea to quickly reach level 75.

But there was another opportunity; The inheritance. Perhaps those old powerhouses had left something nice behind that could give him the final push of the F-Grade.

"As for the... beautification around the towers," Abby added as if reading his mind. "They're all done. Even that Tool Spirit should be happy with the result."

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 278 - Inheritance**

"Great," Zac said with some excitement.

He had been looking forward to the inheritance for quite some time now, and it was finally time to see what one of the old powerhouses had left behind for future generations. It could affect his whole future in a sense.

Inheritances weren't as narrow as a heritage, who usually showed how to attain a certain class. An Inheritance didn't pigeonhole one's progress like that, but they were

simply the treasures and insights a predecessor left behind. They could contain anything from a mountain of crystals to specific Dao insights. But the most common thing was that the things left behind were meant to nurture a possible successor from beyond the grave.

A successor didn't necessarily need to have the same class, but he would generally walk down the same path. The Umbra would no doubt be related to darkness and shadows, for example. So it would most likely be far more valuable for someone like Ogras than for Zac.

Perhaps the demon would receive a supreme Spirit Tool that would suit a certain fighting-style or some treasure that made his shadows stronger. The possibilities were endless. But before he could undergo the trial there were a few things to do.

"Keep up the good work," Zac said as he made to leave.

"One second, lord Atwood," Abby said, making Zac stop and turn back toward the Stargazer.

"I mentioned the wish of the Anointed to speak with you earlier," Abby said. "I relayed how busy your schedule was, and that you might not be able to visit in the near future due to heading to Westfort. So the Anointed came here in person."

"Nonet is here?" Zac said with some surprise.

The large Zhix had never left its hive since meeting Zac as far as he knew. That Nonet showed up now proved that it really needed to speak with him.

"Do you know what Nonet wants?" Zac asked.

"Not sure, it didn't say," Abby admitted. "But I believe the Zhix wishes to accompany you to Westfort."

Zac's brows rose in surprise, but after mulling it over for a few seconds he thought it might not be too bad an idea. There was a hive not too far from Thea's town, and considering that they had fought quite a bit without a clear winner it should be a pretty strong one.

He still wanted to come in contact with the so-called council of Anointed in order to start coordinating a response to the Dominators, and bringing Nonet himself would probably expedite that even more than even bringing Ibtep would.

"Make sure it's ready later. I plan on hitting the inheritance in a few hours, but according to Ogras it shouldn't take long," Zac said.

Abby bobbed in agreement.

"You shouldn't worry too much. The first trial of orthodox inheritances are usually largely based on suitability," Abby said.

Zac was reminded that Abby herself came from a species that excelled at information gathering, and quickly tried to fish out some more information while she was in a giving mood.

"What do you mean?" he asked with interest.

"Most who leave an inheritance are people with regret their path ended, and they want someone to pick up the mantle where they fell short. They hope that someone will reach grand heights using their Dao Vision. It's in a sense a way for them to prove to the world that their path of cultivation was correct," Abby started.

"So the first tests are usually a test of suitability and a test of talent," Abby explained. "You will need to prove you walk the same general path, and that you are talented enough that you have the potential to walk at least as far as the predecessor themselves."

"I'm a mortal," Zac said with a frown. "Will that be a problem?"

“Not sure, but I doubt they would test for that. A test for talent might be to kill something ten levels above you, or have enough points in the right attribute,” Abby said. “The spirit might be a bit disappointed that you show up as a mortal, but they can’t stop you. Inheritance sites are created with certain rulesets, and a Spirit usually isn’t able to change those rules.”

“Spirit?” Zac said with some confusion until he remembered Anzonil.

The old Supreme Elder had left behind a part of his soul to maintain the cleansing array for his disciple, so it wasn’t out of the question that the powerhouses who left the inheritances did something similar.

Zac asked a few more questions, but in the end there was no strict form to an inheritance. Each one was designed by the predecessor according to their will and preferences. The largest risk was that they encountered unorthodox inheritances.

Unorthodox inheritances could take many forms, but entering one was seldom an opportunity. They were mostly left behind by sinister cultivators, and some were simple deathtraps to kill as many as possible. Some cultivators even tried to use an inheritance to find suitable people to possess or turn into puppets.

But there was almost no chance that the system would give out unorthodox inheritances as a reward, so Zac didn’t worry too much about it as he hurried back to his courtyard. As soon as he got back he sat down and took out the jade boxes containing the attribute fruits.

He didn’t waste any time as he stuffed one odd fruit after another into his mouth. They had all kinds of tastes and textures, and the only thing they had in common was that they were extremely delicious.

At the beginning of his feast, he only felt a growing warmth in his body, but when he had eaten half of his personal collection he started to feel uncomfortable. His body was wracked with chaotic swirls of energy, and it almost felt like his body would explode.

Normally one would eat these things slowly one by one, but Zac had no time for that. Besides, he had absorbed far more chaotic energies than this before, so he knew that his body could take it. The minutes passed and he was soon proven right as all the cells in his body started to absorb the energies, and after two hours he dared to start eating more of the fruits.

It was around 10 am he had completely absorbed the 33 fruits that he had put aside for himself, and the results were pretty good.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**73**

**Class**

**[F-Rare] Hatchetman**

**Race**

**[E] Human**

**Alignment**

**[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One**

**Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st**

**Limited Titles**

-

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - High, Seed of Trees - High, Seed of Sharpness - Middle, Seed of Hardness - Middle, Seed of Sanctuary - Early**

**Core**

**[F] Duplicity**

**Strength**

**582 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 121%]**

**Dexterity**

**290 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]**

**Endurance**

**715 [Increase: 71%. Efficiency: 121%]**

**Vitality**

**353 [Increase: 61%. Efficiency: 121%]**

**Intelligence**

**131 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]**

**Wisdom**

**146 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 121%]**

**Luck**

**132 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 121%]**

**Free Points**

**0**

**Nexus Coins**

**[F] 296 516 043**

He had gained 11 points in Strength and Dexterity, 10 points in Endurance and Wisdom, 9 points in Vitality, 8 points in Intelligence and 7 points in Luck from the fruits. Together with the 20 points in Strength and 4 points in Dexterity he had allocated from his free points he had made another pretty huge leap.

He was even closing in on 2500 attribute points, something that very few people in the F-grade would ever accomplish. He remembered that was would also give him another title, perhaps even an upgraded one since he would no doubt be the first on the planet to accomplish such a thing.

Satisfied, Zac closed the status screen and stood up and turned toward a shrouded corner of the courtyard. Zac had sensed that Ogras had appeared some time ago, but he had been busy absorbing the attribute treasures.

"It's time," Zac said, looking over at Ogras.

"Finally, I was going crazy over here," Ogras muttered with an excited gleam in his eyes.

The two walked over toward the towers, and Zac had to say that he was impressed with what he saw when they arrived. The repository now stood in the middle of a large square shimmering in gold and white, giving it an almost celestial feeling. Someone had even created or found several large marble statues and had placed them at the edge of the circular square.

In each cardinal direction there was also a fountain that continuously sprouted out glistening cascades of light. Since there was no proper plumbing in the area Zac could only assume the effect was somehow powered with the help of arrays.

It was a huge contrast toward the somewhat desolate area before, and Zac felt that even Brazla had to be satisfied with the change. The only slightly odd thing was that the square was not connected to anything at the moment. The placement of the repository was within his inner wall, and there wasn't anything else close-by. So the square simply ended after a bit and gave way to the inner wall on one side and forest on the other.

Ogras was suitably impressed as well judging by his expression. The tiles that Zac had snatched from the summit palace were truly extravagant, and Zac had a feeling it would be extremely expensive if he wanted to buy something similar for his own courtyard.

"Those craftsmen you brought from New Washington are really coming in handy," the demon said.

"Those people did this?" Zac asked with surprise since he had mostly assumed that the demons would have been responsible for the construction.

With all that had been going on, he had no time to focus on the artisans that he brought with him after the auction, but he was happy he took the chance with them all that time ago. If the engineers could produce something as impressive as this in just two days, perhaps the others had made as impressive strides in their respective crafts.

It was about time that his investments started to pay dividends. He was funding everything from inscribers to all kinds of artisans at the moment. He even offered free Nexus Crystals so that everyone could get a class without risking their lives against beasts.

"Yeah, they were a bit rambunctious in the beginning, but after a few beatings and a few incentives they settled in properly," Ogras shrugged. "I think they worked especially hard now that the Heritage is getting added to the merit list. This construction probably had pretty big merit incentives since we needed it done quickly."

Zac nodded thoughtfully. He had already heard that it was as though people had been injected with adrenaline after hearing about the treasures and heritages getting added to the merit list. People were working with an almost fanatical fervor to gain access to those things.

A large reason was due to the effect of the contribution store that the System provided during the monster waves. Those who had survived and racked up a lot of contribution had made huge improvements between the contribution rewards and getting access to a skill in the Repository. Many saw the effect of gaining contribution points and wanted the same for themselves.

Some had a hard time getting accustomed to this odd new reality, but most had started to come around. There were no safety nets any longer, but hard work could conversely bring untold benefits. Who didn't want to live a few hundred years longer for example?

The two stepped into the towers, and both's faces couldn't help but scrunch up when Brazla slowly descended from the roof, shrouded in a golden light.

"Your offering is passable, though barely," Brazla said. "But do not become complacent. This is just the most rudimentary improvements for the surroundings of the Great Brazla. But I recognize that your force is poor as paupers at the moment, and I will not be unreasonable."

Zac felt his blood pressure increase, but he forcibly kept his temper in check.

“Glad you like it,” Zac tersely said. “We’re here to take two of the inheritance trials.”

“Oh? Finally,” Brazla said, looking mostly disinterested. “Which ones?”

“I’ll be taking The Umbra,” Ogras immediately said.

“Unsurprising, you are a shady type,” Brazla said with a dismissive shrug before turning to Zac. “What about you?”

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#### **Chapter 279 - Proving One’s Worth**

“The Lord of Cycles,” Zac said with resolve in his eyes.

This was the final decision that Zac had arrived at after weeks of deliberation. He did consider taking Undying Fiend in hopes it was a Defensive Inheritance that might contain a Spirit Tool shield. But in the end, he chose the one that seemed to fit best overall with his current skillset.

Zac didn’t know exactly what to expect from such an inheritance, but there might be various things that might increase the synergy between his two classes. The best would be to find a way to use both his classes at the same time. If he managed that he’d be almost invincible.

“Oh, Lord of Cycles? Interesting. It’s the first of the two C-Grade inheritances as well, well chosen,” Brazla said with a nod.

“Which is the other one?” Zac quickly asked when he saw the Tool Spirit was in a sharing mood.

“I don’t want to tell. Build something nice for me and I might become more accommodating,” Brazla snorted. “Now, enter the portals. I won’t assist you at all while you undertake the trial, and there is no exit. Final chance to change your mind.”

As he spoke two fractals lit up in front of two of the huge statues that lined the hall. One of them was a humanoid whose features were hidden in a large cowl, each of his hands gripping a dagger. It was pretty clear it was the creator of the Umbra inheritance, and the demon immediately walked over.

The other statue that lit up was of a man or woman that looked human. The face was completely androgynous so he couldn’t tell its gender at all, but since he was called a Lord, Zac guessed he was male. He wore a loose robe and held his two hands together forming a circle in front of his chest, and behind him was a large disk split in the middle.

As Zac walked over he tried to understand what type of class this person had, but he truly couldn’t tell. The disk might work as a weapon, but Zac rather leaned toward this person being some sort of magic user, which might not be what he needed. The odd circle behind was split into two, one side looking like flames, while the other was ice.

He even hesitated for a second, considering whether he should switch over to The Undying Fiend even though its grade of inheritance likely was worse. He had a feeling that the last C-Grade inheritance was the Crown of Despair, likely personified by the statue of the woman holding her head in her hands, but that one was likely an even worse fit for him.

But his eyes once again turned to the circle of fire and ice behind the Lord of Circles. It was this duality that made Zac believe that the Lord of Cycles tried to do something similar to himself; merge two opposing elements.

For better or worse Zac had already started walking the path of life and death. One of his classes veered toward nature, and the other side was an undead warrior turning the area around himself into a projection of the underworld.

He was hoping that the Lord of Cycles Inheritance could help him create a coherent system of his two opposing sides, and create something greater than the sum of its parts. Granted, each side of his two identities had its strong points, but there was currently no synergy between them apart from the extra attribute points.

He wanted to find a path that made sure both his classes were pushing toward the same goal, even though they were the opposites of each other. He had a feeling that something amazing would be created if he was able to fuse his two sides in the future, and this was the step to attain that.

Since he had already made his decision he resolutely stepped inside his own portal. The next moment he found himself in front of a huge metal plaque in an otherwise empty field, and he quickly took out his axe as he looked around for any threats.

But no matter where he looked he only saw a hazy mist, and his senses didn't warn him of any hidden dangers lurking about. So Zac put away **[Verun's Bite]** again as he looked at the large slab of metal in front of him. It was completely smooth and rectangular, apart from a large engraving in the middle.

The engraving was not a large fractal, but rather a circular pattern containing inscriptions of smaller fractals. There was an outer circle containing at least one hundred fractals, and there were multiple rings inside. For every concentric circle inside there were fewer and fewer fractals until it reached the center.

The innermost part was just a dot, and the row outside consisted of just two crudely drawn fractals. Zac was confused about why they had such shoddy workmanship compared to the others, but he barely had time to look at them before a familiar feeling entered his mind.

The splinter of oblivion became restless the moment he looked at one of the two fractals, and its tendrils started to furiously pound the miasmic runes that had locked it away. Zac quickly closed his eyes until the splinter calmed down. Luckily it seemed that the prison in his mind still held strong.

But the eruption was an uncomfortable reminder that he hadn't gotten any closer to figuring out what to do about the alien object in his head. However, now was not the time, so he once again refocused on the patterns on the monument, though he avoided looking at the innermost part.

"Creation and oblivion," Zac suddenly muttered with understanding.

The circle in front of him was a Dao Chart following the same system that Anzonil mentioned. The center was the origin of Dao, the Primordial Chaos. From that came Creation and Oblivion, and the splinter in his mind reacted to the crude fractal in the center of the chart.

That would explain why the details of the fractals got increasingly crude the further in they were placed on the chart in front of him. Creation and Oblivion were the top two Daos of the multi-verse, and even if the Lord of Cycles was a great C-Grade powerhouse he likely was far from grasping such esoteric knowledge.

Those Daos were likely reserved for the top tier powerhouses of the multiverse, those who stood at the apex of whole planes.

“As night begets day, so does oblivion beget creation,” a voice suddenly echoed across the field. “The cycle restricts and empowers. Prove your duality.”

Zac quickly looked around for the source of the voice, but no matter which direction he looked there was nothing. The source of the gentle voice was nowhere to be seen, and he was still alone in the mists with the metal plaque in front of him.

However, he wasn't worried, but rather elated. The voice had essentially confirmed that the Lord of Cycles walked the same path as himself. The problem was how he would go about to prove his own cycle, that of life and death. Did he need to first force some Dao of Trees into the inscription, then kill himself to infuse miasma next? It seemed extremely cumbersome.

Besides, did he need to know which fractal to infuse? All of them were completely inert, and it looked like someone had simply carved the fractals into the metal without empowering them with any Dao or other energies.

Zac chose to simply touch the monument in the end, and he quickly saw that he was on the right track. A deep hum erupted from the monument, and an invisible wave pushed out from it, trying to enter Zac's body.

The second that the wave came in contact with him the bracer on his arm became scorching hot, and the invading force was immediately rebuffed. Nothing happened for a while and Zac moved his hand away.

He hesitated for a bit, but he finally chose to remove the bracer that Greatest had given him before he once again touched the monument. He didn't love the idea of exposing his secrets like this, but he was inside a closed-off inheritance of a long-dead powerhouse. No one could spread his secrets from here, at least not as long as he was alive.

The wave entered his body one more time after he activated the monument, and he felt something was digging around and inspecting his whole body. The wave had turned into tendrils that poked and prodded him all over. The tendrils quickly honed in on the Duplicity core, but they also went over to the three Dao fractals in his body. 3

Even the one that was in his heart was found somehow, even though it belonged to his other class. The hidden compartment in his heart had simply appeared after the mysterious energies prodded around inside, and it was a huge clue as Zac saw it. If the Dao Fractal could be made to appear like this while he was in his human form, what about his other skills? Perhaps even his pathways?

Zac's heartbeat sped up in anticipation, and he truly hoped that the spirit of the Lord of Cycles would be as accommodating to provide information as Anzonil was. Perhaps he would be even more helpful since Zac would essentially become his in-name disciple if he passed the trials.

The moment the Dao fractal touched the tree he got from seeing the Lifegiver vision one of the fractals on one of the outermost rows lit up, emitting a strong aura of vitality. It represented one of his main paths, the one of moving toward the Dao of Creation. Of course, he was still only on the periphery with his basic Dao.

At the same time, he saw that a Dao on the opposite side lit up, but its light was far weaker. When he sensed the fractal it felt like he was prodding a dead carcass or something rotten, and after a second Zac felt that fractal might have lit up due to the nature of his Dao Seed of Trees. His major insights into that were centered around life through death, and it was what connected his Dao to his Draugr side.

To his surprise, he also noticed that the Dao of Hardness slightly lit up a rune at the rim, and it gave a sense of stability like he was looking up at a mountain. However, the Daos of Sharpness, Heaviness, and Sanctuary did nothing it seemed. After the inspection had looked at those Daos they moved on, completely disinterested.

The next moment two more fractals lit up, and both were pretty close to the core of the rings. In fact, they were only two layers outside the Daos of Creation and Oblivion. Better yet, they were almost exactly the opposites of each other, meaning they would hopefully allow him to pass this inspection with flying colors. After just a glance he knew they represented life and death, and they were the results of the two energies his Duplicity core contained.

They were by far the best combination, but he didn't know if the inheritance would accept it since the two energies were simply the representation of his two races and classes. They were not really a result of his Daos, and Zac felt the Dao was the core of this test.

Finally, the tendrils reached his head and they even found the miasmatic prison for the splinter. The crude fractal in the middle resonated for a fraction of a second in response, but it immediately grew dim again, leaving the other five fractals in various states of illumination.

As soon as the inspection hit upon the runic prison in his mind they immediately dissipated, and afterward they stayed clear of the area. Zac wasn't too surprised since the prison was created by the mysterious Draugr woman. He couldn't be sure, but he had a feeling she was one of the powerhouses of the Draugr-race, and likely more powerful than the Lord of Cycles.

The monument kept checking his body for a bit until the inspection ended, leaving Zac feeling slightly violated. It was like he had been stripped naked and every nook and cranny had been inspected. Keeping one's cards close to the chest had been ingrained into him since the integration, and this was the complete opposite of that.

But at least it was over, and Zac looked around to see what would happen next.

"Understanding the self is understanding the Cosmos," the same voice suddenly echoed out, as the two fractals that Zac believed represented life and death lit up with far more power compared to before, while the other three fractals dimmed down.

The next moment the monument started to vibrate, and it looked like it was melting as it bent and twisted. All the fractals were quickly smoothed over, leaving only the two illuminated inscriptions.

The two fractals kept growing larger and larger as the monument turned into a large hovering metallic ball that started to pulsate with the powers of life and death. Soon the two fractals had grown to over a meter in size as they moved next to each other on the sphere. Both of them radiated the power of life and death, two extremely profound concepts that Zac had only glimpsed before.

As Zac sensed the great Dao energies that coursed through the inscriptions he started to believe that this might be the first gift of the inheritance. Unfortunately, there wasn't much he could do with the Dao of Death since he had no matching Daos, but he might be able to glean some insight from the fractal representing life. That, in turn, might be the key to pushing the Dao Seed of Trees to Peak mastery.

But just as he was about to sit down to ponder on the secrets of the Dao of Life his mind suddenly screamed of danger.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 280 - Fight Fire with Fire**

Zac's mind was screaming at him to get away, and he had learned to not question his danger sense by now. He unhesitatingly pushed backward with the help of [Loamwalker] only to see a spurt of liquid metal from the sphere lash out at him like a whip.

The air cracked as the line of darkness ripped through it, and Zac sensed a horrifying finality contained inside it. He wasn't simply being attacked by some liquid metal like when he fought Salvation. He was being attacked by *death*.

Luckily he had reacted in time and was able to quickly create enough distance from the ball, allowing him to understand what was going on. The sphere made out of the metallic plaque had started to transform, not only in shape but also in composition.

It looked like the inert nature of the former monument was changing as it started to teem with both exuberant life force and desolate death. One half of it was gaining a golden sheen as the other half turned pitch-black.

It reminded Zac of his Duplicity core as it shared similar characteristics, with the difference that the sphere in front of him lacked the intricate inscriptions on the surface of his core. Another pretty obvious difference was that the ball in front of him was over five meters in diameter.

The sudden attack that had come at him had stemmed from a part of the death-attuned part of the sphere and had felt like a tentacle of death. But the whip was long gone, having returned to the main form, which now seethed with chaotic powers.

Zac had already taken out his axe and summoned a fractal edge. He still wasn't sure what was going on, but the thing had already attacked him, so he wouldn't just stand around. That ball contained extremely dangerous Daos, and he couldn't let it act as it pleased. He felt it was best to destroy it first, then ask questions.

He imbued the fractal edge with the Dao of Sharpness, and with a grunt unleashed it straight at the sphere so that he could destroy it before it managed to undergo whatever transformation it had in store. However, the moment the edge was about to slam into the floating ball the golden side flashed, and a protective glow spread to cover the whole thing.

Luckily the ball didn't retaliate, but instead it kept changing form at an extremely rapid pace. It looked like it consisted of two different colored shapes of clay that were pushed together, and currently some unseen hands were twisting and reshaping the ball.

The object elongated again into an oblong shape. It almost had the form of an enormous matryoshka doll, apart from being slightly more rectangular and having two arms. One arm was mostly golden with some black veins running through it, but instead of a hand it just had a large circle that reminded Zac of the object that was behind the statue depicting Lord of Cycles.

The other arm was mostly black and was the only part of the construct that still looked mostly liquid. It was this arm that had attacked him before it had properly formed, and it still radiated a terrifying aura. He truly didn't want to know what would happen if that thing hit him, but it felt extremely dangerous.

One thing that differed from both his Duplicity core and the sphere from before was the main part of its body. It didn't simply have one side that was golden and another side that was black, but it had created an intricate mesh of the two colors, where neither side dominated the other.

Zac couldn't be sure, but he felt that the pattern that had been formed on its body was an enormous clue that could help him immensely if he only had proper time to study it. It was as though it represented the fusion of life and death. But unfortunately, he was in no position to ponder on the mysteries hidden in the body of

the enormous doll. It floated toward him at a steady pace, and black motes of light started to rotate around the arm of death.

The moment it got within twenty meters of Zac the arm once again lashed out, and Zac was forced to reposition himself again. The attack wasn't impossibly fast, but he didn't dare to intercept it until he had a better understanding of what the effect of the arm was.

Perhaps his Draugr form would be immune to the Death-attributed arm, but he had no way to swap mid-battle. He would have to fight the thing as-is. Zac quickly used **[Inquisitive Eye]**, and to his surprise it actually worked even though the information was a bit sparse.

### **[Life-Death Construct - Dao Vessel. Level 83]**

The good news was that the thing was only level 83. The bad news was that it was clearly much stronger than some random early E-grade beast. Even worse, it possessed two very strong Daos. He wasn't sure how it worked with these particular Daos, but he suspected they were like the Dao of Time and Space - advanced Daos that had no basic seeds to attain. They were much too strong to gain as an F-Grade cultivator.

That meant that the power they imbued was also far stronger than one should encounter at this stage in cultivation. He had a feeling that he truly had been boned by this combination, and it reminded him of the desperate fight with Inevitability. Life and Death were truly the most appropriate paths to fuse of the fractals that lit up, but they were far more dangerous than any others as well.

It would have been more reasonable for him to encounter a construct that consisted of the Dao of Trees and the Dao of Rot, or whatever that murky fractal represented. It would still have been a challenge, though not as bad as this one.

But since Zac knew its level he also felt more confident. If it came down to it he should be able to brute-force the thing. The only thing that was holding him back from summoning the giant hand of **[Nature's Punishment]** and smashing the construct to bits was that he wasn't sure if there was something else to this test than just destroying the construct.

He didn't want to slip up and ruin his inheritance, so before he went the usual route he decided to test the thing out for a bit, and perhaps glean any insights from the intricate pattern on its chest. Zac kept his distance from the large construct by occasionally flashing away with his movement skill as he peppered the thing with fractal edges.

The construct had multiple ways of handling the attacks. Sometimes the golden circle on its left arm lit up and formed a shield that blocked out the attack. However, after seeing the shield a few times he realized that it wasn't a traditional mage's bubble or array defense.

The golden layer was pure life-attuned energy, and it didn't block the attacks as much as it somehow swallowed them. The attacks entered the golden shield, making it flicker a bit, but nothing exited at the other side.

Zac couldn't quite grasp what type of concept it utilized to neutralize his attacks. If it just used the Dao of Life to heal itself after getting hurt he could have understood it, but this was something else entirely.

Suddenly he sensed some danger again, and he started to reposition himself as he kept his eyes on the tentacle of death. But to his surprise it wasn't the death-attuned side that attacked him, but rather the golden arm. A bright light lit up in the middle of the golden circle at the end of the arm, and the next moment an energy ball shot straight at Zac.

Zac's brows rose in alarm as he quickly flashed away, but it didn't help one bit as the energy attack followed him like a bloodhound. It was also much faster than Zac was, even when utilizing [Loamwalker], so in the end he was forced to stop and erect his defenses.

Shimmering leaves whirled around him, each imbued with the Dao of Trees, as he took a defensive posture where he imbued his body with the Dao of Hardness. The energy ball zoomed straight toward him, and the leaves moved to intercept.

But the moment the ball touched the first layer of defense the leaves lit up in a blazing emerald luster. Since Zac was the one who summoned it and imbued it with his Dao he could sense what was going on, and he couldn't make heads or tails out of it. The leaf wasn't getting damaged, it was getting empowered.

Unceasing and vast energies of life were flooding the leaves, and they shone brighter and brighter as they actually grew larger. But in just a second the effect drastically changed, as the lights dimmed and the leaves started to wilt.

The next moment it crumbled and the light passed straight through. Zac's brows rose in alarm since he had acutely sensed what happened. The ball of life had pushed too much lifeforce into the leaf, and even though they weren't real the ball had forced the leaves to go through their natural state of life in just a second.

Zac immediately gave up his defense and tried to flash away again, but it was to avail as the ball slammed into his back. The Dao of Hardness didn't help him in the slightest as it entered his body like a burning sun.

Zac's whole body turned red in an instant, veins popping out all over his body. It felt terribly similar to when he had been in the pond of Cosmic Water. Terrifying amounts of life tried to force themselves into his cells, overtaxing them and forcing them into death. It was the opposite of his own insights; this was death through life - an attack using the natural lifecycle.

Zac felt his lifeforce getting spent at an alarming rate to exhaust the energy ball, and he was out of ideas of how to deal with the alien force in his body. It was just too strong and vast, and it felt like his Daos were children trying to push away a grown adult when he tried to utilize them to isolate the attack.

But suddenly his Duplicity core woke up and started to frenziedly absorb the energies in his body. It looked like the life-attuned energy was getting sucked in by a black hole, and the ball fractured while its energies were drawn inside. In just a moment the core had absorbed the whole attack, and it's golden half buzzed with energy.

Unfortunately, it was not all good news. There were limits to how much energy the Core could contain, at least in its current state, and the absorption of the pure Dao of Life had pushed it to its limits. Worse yet, the balance between the two sides had become lopsided due to the lack of death-attuned energy.

It felt like when the core had just been formed, and there was a massive lack of life-attuned energy inside. However, now there was nothing for the core to absorb, and Zac sensed that it was getting more and more out of control.

He didn't know what would happen if the core got damaged or cracked, but he didn't want to find out. At the very least it would cause massive damage, but it wasn't impossible it would deprive him of his second class. Or even kill him. He quickly took out one of his miasma crystals, but the rate of absorption was nowhere near what he needed.

The energy in the crystals was a lower grade compared to the real Dao of Life, and it was like he was trying to divert a river by throwing some gravel in the waters.

Perhaps it would work after a while after he had absorbed enough crystals, but he sensed his core wouldn't be able to take it until then.

Out of options Zac grit his teeth and pushed straight toward the construct. It lifted its golden hand again, but Zac growled and launched a quick succession of Dao-empowered fractal blades at it, each aimed at the same spot.

Another golden shield erupted around the hand, but the force of a dozen blades was not something that even the construct could handle. The first handful of blades were cleanly absorbed by the shield, but at the 7<sup>th</sup> one, it flickered and disappeared. The next two attacks actually landed right on the golden arm, pushing it away and causing some dents to form.

But just a second later another golden shield was formed and started to absorb the remaining strikes. Luckily Zac had already accomplished his goal at this point, and he was closing in on the thing while its golden arm was occupied. The black tentacle launched straight at him with terrifying speed, just as he had expected. Even though his mind screamed of danger Zac chose to stand fast this time, allowing it to hit him square in his chest and throw him away.

Zac spat out a mouthful of blood and unsteadily got to his feet. His face was pale as a sheet as he sensed a horrible energy rampage through his body. It felt like his whole being was quickly withering away, but he forcibly ignored his decaying state, his all attention being on the Duplicity core.

He was already in desperate straights, and his only idea was to fight fire with fire.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 281 - Life Versus Death**

A wave of relief flooded Zac as he sensed that the Duplicity Core once again woke up and finally started to absorb the sinister energies that were coursing through his body. In just a second it had absorbed it all, but Zac's body was still left in a state of disrepair.

Between the two attacks his body felt beyond feeble, and he knew that he was running out of time. His core might have stabilized, but there was no way he would be able to absorb another set of those terrifying Dao-empowered strikes. Neither his body nor his core would be able to handle it.

He couldn't worry about whether there were any hidden components to this trial any longer, and he immediately started to charge up **[Nature's Punishment]** the moment that his core stabilized. It would take a few seconds, and the construct seemed to notice that something was up.

Extremely strong energies ripped through its body as it flashed forward with more than twice the speed compared to before, it's black tentacle already hurtling toward him. Zac knew he had to stall for a bit longer, so he shot a fractal imbued with the Dao of Hardness at the tentacle as he backed away.

However, the fractal immediately withered and broke apart even though it was imbued to be more resilient and the attack kept moving toward him. When Zac saw what happened to the fractal he suddenly had an idea, and he imbued the next **[Chop]** with the Dao of Trees. The edge flew toward the arm of death, and as he hoped it didn't immediately break.

The two attacks clashed, neither gaining ground for a whole second. But soon enough the Dao of Death seemed to finally whittle down the Dao of trees, and the edge crumbled just like Zac's earlier attacks. The difference in efficacy between the two last attacks gave Zac a clue into the proper way to deal with this trial, but he also realized it wouldn't work for him.

Luckily the clash had bought enough time and the familiar wooden hand emerged out of a crack in space above him. It rippled with the Dao of Trees since Zac believed he would hopefully be able to restrain the death-attuned side of the construct that way. Besides, apart from slightly restraining the Dao of Death it also gave an all-round boost to the attack.

Zac wasted no time as he pushed the hand to slam straight down at the construct, and even though it erected a golden shield it still was slapped like a fly down into the ground. The attack didn't end there, as even though Zac's hand was burning from the golden shield he still forced it to continue its trajectory and slammed down into the downed construct with tremendous force.

The next moment the huge hand gripped the construct, though it barely managed to fit the whole thing in its hand. Zac used all his might to try to crush the golem in his hand, but the Life-Death Construct wasn't going down without a fight. Radiant flashes of both gold and black lit up the whole area, and the transmitted damage from the hand was almost enough for Zac to pass out.

The wooden hand was extremely resilient with the help of the Dao of Trees and its power was unparalleled to anything else he could throw at his enemies. However, both the Daos that the Construct possessed were extremely corrosive to the wooden hand. It was like a feedback loop was caused inside the hand where it was continuously pushed between life and death.

The pain was unbelievable, and Zac's eyes were completely bloodshot by this point, but he kept pressuring the construct with all his might. Creaking sounds of metal being torn and twisted could be heard until a wide shockwave containing concentrated Death erupted from the golem.

Luckily most of the attack was blocked and absorbed by the hand, but the sudden burst of death was too much and Zac was forced to release the attack. The hand was already disintegrating from the frantic retaliation of the construct and the speed of its dissolution rapidly sped up when Zac decided to relinquish control.

His final action before he let the hand go was to throw the distorted metal into the ground once more, causing another shockwave to spread. He hoped that the construct was already destroyed from how dismal it looked, but he wouldn't bet his life on it.

As he looked at the unmoving scrap of metal in the crater he saw that its composition had undergone one more change from Zac's massive assault. The pitch-black metal had turned ashen grey, and it looked completely devoid of energy. He had completely destroyed the death-attuned half with the combination of brute force and the Dao of Trees.

However, he still couldn't breathe easily. While the other half of the construct was twisted and deformed, it still shone with the same golden luster as before. Worse yet he could sense the Dao of Life inside it. Zac sighed in disappointment, but he readied himself for one more round.

Another hand was already emerging from a crack above him, even though such a rapid consumption of energy was pretty harmful to his body. This hand was imbued with the Dao of Heaviness though since it felt useless to fight against the Life-attuned half of the construct with a worse version of its own element.

The construct was slowly rising from the crater as it smoothed out its deformed shape. But luckily the grey area was still completely lifeless and showed no signs of regenerating. Zac felt empowered by the sight and roused the remaining energy in his body as he pushed the second hand straight at his enemy.

The wooden hand slammed into the construct like a falling meteor, the attack causing a far larger shockwave compared to the first punishment. The whole field that held the inheritance trail was cracking, making Zac wonder if the trial area would break apart from the battle.

Zac hesitantly looked at the crater to see whether his attack was effective, but some panic erupted when he sensed the familiar deluge of vitality flooding the wooden hand. The next moment an almost blinding golden glow erupted from beneath the hand, almost completely swallowing it.

Zac quickly canceled the attack as he wracked his brain for some way out. Would he have to take the Coward's Escape after all? But Zac grit his teeth in stubbornness again, feeling the same unwillingness to back down as he felt in his battle with the Dominator. His eyes followed the movement of the construct as it once again picked itself up from the ground.

He had a feeling that no matter how many attacks he launched at the thing it would keep regenerating, as long as he didn't use a proper element for an attack. He needed to use death to vanquish life.

The construct was quickly returning to its original form as Zac's mind moved a mile a minute trying to figure out a way to destroy that thing. Finally, he took out an E-Grade Miasma Crystal and launched it straight at the construct like he had done so many times with rocks to kill beasts.

The crystal ripped through the air like a bullet and slammed straight into the golden arm with enough power to push it back a few meters. The crystal itself exploded into thousands of splinters, but unfortunately, it didn't result in an explosion of death-attuned energy. Instead, the miasma stored in the crystal simply spread out like a cloud which didn't seem to particularly affect the construct.

Zac sighed in disappointment, but seeing the cloud of miasma actually gave him an idea. He barely had time to formulate it as another ball of light started to shine inside the golden circle on his enemy's eye. This was no time to second-guess himself since if that ball hit him like the last one he would likely die. He desperately moved his arm to his pouch, and the next moment an enormous monolith appeared in front of him.

It reached around ten meters into the air and was wrought from some cursed black stone. Zac had never been so close to an Unholy Beacon before, and he started to feel nauseated by the aura it emitted almost immediately. At the top of the monolith a turquoise light radiated outward, and it had immediately started to convert the Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere.

Without waiting Zac grabbed the base of the monolith. But to his dismay he realized that he barely managed to lift the thing, and worse yet he noticed that the attack by the construct was almost fully formed. Out of better options he activated **[Hatchetman's Rage]**, and with a roar properly lifted the Unholy Beacon as he started running with heavy steps toward the construct.

He didn't want to use this skill at first, afraid that there would other trials would await after this one. Undergoing another battle while weakened by the side-effects of **[Hatchetman's Rage]** might prove lethal, so he wanted to avoid using it against the construct. But it was Hail Mary-time.

Zac's muscles burned with strain, but the unnatural power and rage brought by the skill pushed him forward. An all-consuming desire for wanton destruction filled Zac's mind, and this time he didn't try to curtail it. With a bestial roar he finally jumped up in the air, causing huge cracks to spread from where he stood.

The construct lifted its arm toward Zac, but he didn't care as he heedlessly swung the enormous monolith as though it was a club. A golden ball of life flew straight at him, but it was swallowed into the turquoise haze at the top of the pillar. Putting a ball of pure life into the conversion chamber of an Unholy Beacon was clearly a pretty bad idea since extremely erratic energies immediately started to radiate from the monolith.

Zac sensed that the Unholy Beacon was highly unstable even in his muddled state, but he didn't care as he slammed the tip straight into the head of the Life-Death construct in a thwong that would make Billy proud. Life and death clashed in a blinding explosion, and Zac was thrown away like a ragdoll from the shockwave. Luckily he activated **[Nature's Barrier]** at the last second, protecting him from some of the damage at least.

As he was falling he at felt a huge surge of Cosmic Energy entering his body, pushing him to level 74. He breathed in relief since that meant the construct was truly destroyed and the gambit had worked out.

He remembered that both Ogras and Karunthel had told him that it was possible to turn the Unholy Beacons into weapons, which made him try to use it against the large life-attuned golem. They might not have meant such a direct method of utilization, but at least it worked out in the end.

Zac knew that there must be some strong death-attuned item inside the monoliths to be able to continuously turn Cosmic Energy into miasma, and his gambit was that it would cause proper damage in contrast to the Miasma Crystal.

A groan escaped his mouth as Zac slammed into the ground, every part of his body aching. But without giving himself a breather he got back on his feet and quickly ate a top tier healing pill as he scanned the surroundings for any change.

He wasn't necessarily safe just because he had destroyed the construct.

He quickly spotted that one thing had changed after he had destroyed the construct. The field the battle had taken place in was surrounded by a gray haze since he arrived, but in one direction the shroud had given way to a path that led away from this place. However, Zac ignored the path for now as he walked over to the crater with the broken monolith.

The clash between life and death had quickly snuffed out each other, but not before it had utterly destroyed the area. Zac looked into the pit and sighed in disappointment when he looked at the mangled remains of the Life-Death construct. The pattern on its chest had been a great clue to the path he wanted to walk, but it was demolished from his attacks.

In the end he put both the broken Beacon and the crumpled remains of the construct into his Cosmos Sack, but instead of heading over to the exit he instead sat down and started to absorb energy from an E-Grade Nexus Crystal. A few seconds later a huge wave of weakness hit him as the effect from **[Hatchetman's Rage]** ran out.

He realized that one more positive effect of either his improved Vitality or Endurance was that the side-effect of the berserker skill had become far more manageable compared to before, though he still wouldn't want to start another fight in his current condition.

But he wasn't completely out of it like before, so instead of heading to the next stage he instead took out one of his Dao Treasures as soon as he felt his state was

somewhat stable. Time was of the essence while the pattern and the Construct's attacks were fresh in his mind, and without hesitation swallowed it and closed his eyes.

He knew the next step he needed to take on his Dao Path.

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### **Chapter 282 - The Lord of Cycles**

Zac actually gained two insights from the past fight and he was eager to try to formalize at least one of them while the feeling was fresh. That's why he immediately went into meditation as soon as his body allowed it.

However, he did not ponder upon the Dao of Trees, even though he had a hint of the direction he wanted to take that Dao seed. Pushing a Dao Seed to the peak was no easy matter, and he felt he needed some more time to prepare before he tried to push the seed to the limit. The hints he had gained from the Dao of Life was great, but it was just a start.

Zac was instead focusing on something completely new. He was planning to attain a Dao Seed that he hadn't gained a Dao vision for. Every Dao Seed so far had been attained through his class skills, but he had realized that there was one component he was missing.

Ever since Zac gained his second class he had been thinking about creating a holistic 'build' for himself, one that focused on building both great Offense and Defense through his classes. He would empower them with both Life and Death, and while he would use the axe to launch devastating attacks containing these concepts. He had a far-off vision of combining it all into an invincible power.

There were still many question marks of how he would fit everything together, and the fight just now had proven that he had been thinking too much inside the box. He had felt that the Dao of Trees and later the Dao of life was useless for offense against anything except the undead, but that clearly wasn't the case.

That glowing ball had been terrifying, and if he didn't possess the Core to absorb the damage he would have exploded from one attack, even though he possessed over 700 Endurance. But there was one realization that was more important than any other; he was lacking a Dao Seed that could eventually evolve into the Dao of Death. He had no opposite for the Dao of Life.

He had always considered the Miasma as the part representing death, but in the end it was only the equivalent of Cosmic Energy. His Undying Bulwark class was also a class purely focused on defense, and Zac didn't believe that he would gain any more Dao visions from it. He would rather unearth more improvements to Hardness and Sanctuary through the extremely profound vision.

That meant that he needed to adjust his toolkit a bit. He needed another seed that could be the complement to the Dao of Trees. In the long run it would hopefully allow him to become truly powerful, and in the short run it would help him get through this Inheritance. He couldn't slam an unholy beacon onto everything that barred his path after all.

Luckily he believed he had gained enough clues through being undead and from his time in the inheritance to formalize another Dao Seed. He based it upon the hints that he had gotten from the monument before it turned into the construct. A second fractal had slightly lit up from the Dao of Trees that had felt rotting and decaying, and

that was exactly what he was going for. His mind focused on the feeling of life faltering, exuberant life slowly giving in to decay, and finally death.

The Dao Treasure had put him into a trance, and he felt he was on the cusp of grasping the kernel of truth that would allow him to gain a seed. Zac didn't know how much time passed as he held fast to the images of faltering life and the unstoppable decay of anything living.

But just as he felt he was about to grasp the Dao Seed the trance ended, and he opened his eyes with frustration. He knew that it never was a good idea to force the Dao, but he was so close that he could taste it. So Zac unhesitatingly swallowed a second Dao treasure and once again closed his mind.

Finally, everything clicked and he sensed a mysterious energy appearing in his body. Zac had initially thought that it would either add itself to one of the three Dao fractals in his body, or create a new one, but instead it simply formed a small seed in a separate space located in Zac's mind.

Zac could only guess that it was because this was a seed that was naturally formed by himself without the assistance of a skill, but he would have to investigate whether he needed to somehow create a fractal to house it later. Since he was done he quickly opened his status screen in anticipation, and as he expected he saw the sixth Dao Seed of his.

**[Rot (Early): Wisdom +10, Intelligence +5.]**

This was exactly what Zac had aimed for, though he was a bit disappointed the attributes did not really suit him. The wisdom would help him with his resilience against mental attacks, but he still hadn't found any use for Intelligence for either of his classes.

As he sensed the seed in his mind he was certain that the fractal that he had slightly lit up was the Dao of Rot. His Dao of Trees slightly encompassed the concept of Life through death, and Rot was placed right on the crossroads between these two concepts.

He hoped that he could lead the Dao of Rot toward the direction of Death through life, and with the Dao of Trees form a complete cycle. But for now, it was a simple Early-stage Dao Seed that he guessed would add some corrosive effects on his attacks.

Zac quickly summoned a fractal edge with **[Chop]** and just as he thought the fractal gained a murky green color when it was imbued with the Seed of Rot. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything living in the area that he could test it out on, so he simply attacked the ground.

There was no added power to the fractal edge, and the scar that was created by the swing didn't corrode as though it was attacked by acid. However, a wet sheen of some green liquid was left around the rift, meaning that the attack was more akin to adding poison to the blade. It would be useless against inorganic things, but it might contain surprising power against living enemies.

Flush with success, Zac considered taking another Dao treasure in hopes of pushing his Dao of Trees forward as well, but in the end he forced himself to calm down. His instincts told him that he was too far away from being able to push the seed to its peak, and he probably wouldn't reach it even if he ate all three of his Dao Seeds.

Zac checked his watch and to his surprise 7 hours had already passed. It was more time than Zac had planned on spending inside the inheritance in total, but there was no getting around it. At least they knew he was still alive since he maintained his position on the ladder. He had also gained a level so they should understand that he was in a battle of some kind.

The weakness from using **[Hatchetman's Rage]** during the battle had already passed, and his Cosmic Energy was mostly full thanks to his passive absorption of energy during his meditation. So Zac didn't waste any more time and immediately headed toward the passage.

He held **[Verun's Bite]** ready in his arm, prepared for any kind of situation. But the passageway was completely barren, with not a single object or being in sight. It was only fifteen minutes later that the scene changed, and Zac stared wide-eyed at the world in front of him.

Paradise. That was the only thing that Zac could think of as he looked at the lush atmosphere around him. The hazy mists had given way to an exquisite field where each and every strand of grass seemed to be meticulously crafted to give a sense of beauty and harmony.

Small rivers were running through the fields of flowers, and various small pagodas and patios were placed along the field. Even more miraculously there were floating islands drifting about in the sky above him, each of them connected by steps wrought from fire and ice.

It slightly reminded him of the vision of the floating cultivation palaces in his vision with the axe-man, though these islands were far smaller and rather seemed to be there for aesthetic reasons. It was like someone had wanted to create a multi-layered garden, and had even bent the laws of nature to make it happen.

There was no sun in the sky, but instead there was a beautiful night sky unblemished and undiminished by any light pollution. Yet everything was completely illuminated thanks to a huge moon spreading a silver luster at the area, which added a mystical and dream-like ambiance to the scenery.

But Zac wouldn't relax just because the scene was breathtaking, and he hesitantly proceeded with his axe at the ready. He strained his mind to find any clues of hidden traps or arrays, but he couldn't sense anything. He couldn't even sense any Cosmic Energy being used to keep the islands afloat, which made him question whether he was stuck in an illusion.

That, of course, raised the question of where the inheritance actually took place. Was this whole zone even real, or did it all take place in some dreamscape? But Zac's instincts told him it was real, as it would be odd if he was able to gain a Dao Seed and gain a level while asleep.

"I had some hopes, but alas," a sad sigh suddenly came from one of the islands above. "You fail."

It was the same voice that spoke at the start of the trial, and Zac's heart lurched when he heard its proclamation. Had he really failed the inheritance because he used brute force to kill the construct earlier? But there was simply no other way for him to pull through.

The idea was to use death to snuff out the life and life to overcome death, but he didn't possess either of those elements in a way that he could properly utilize them in a fight. In the end, he could only win with the help of overwhelming might.

"You are far too ugly to even become an honorary disciple of mine. I might be dead, but I'm not that desperate," the voice continued with an unmistakable note of disdain, and Zac's blood pressure immediately spiked.

The way of speaking was way too similar to a certain tool spirit, and Zac started wondering if Brazla had somehow weaseled himself into the trial. The voice was different, but Zac saw no reason that Brazla should be stuck to one voice since he wasn't technically a living being. Zac quickly ran up the shimmering ladders toward the floating island that he heard the voice come from.

The sceneries on the islands were even more exquisite than on the ground, but he had no time to admire them as he hurried up toward the top. His anger had even made him forget the very real possibility that there were hidden tests on the islands, but luckily it seemed that he had already passed the only trial at this stage.

Zac was ready to blast off a tirade at the arrogant Tool Spirit, but the moment when he reached the top his words got stuck in his throat as he stopped in his tracks.

It felt like he had arrived at the garden of a fairytale castle, where every detail shone with beauty and perfection. Hundreds of different types of flowers that all had their own unique charms spread out in a seemingly haphazard manner across the island, but somehow there was order to the chaos.

A small pond was placed in the middle, and a brook that ran through it gave off a soothing sound. However, neither the flowers nor the brook was as striking as the celestial form of the Lord of Cycles sitting and basking in the moonlight. Where the statue had depicted a fine-chiseled but androgynous male, Zac saw a picture-perfect beauty in front of him.

He looked like he was chiseled by a master artisan as he looked up at the moon with a sorrowful gaze, one hand outreached as though trying to grasp it, with the other held over his heart. It was a scene of frailty and longing, and the silver light of the moon gave it a haunting feeling.

“Don’t fall in love with me, child,” the Lord of Cycles said with a long-suffering sigh as he turned his limpid eyes toward the gaping Zac.

But suddenly Zac realized there was a sense of wrongness, and with a grunt he pushed [**Mental Fortress**] to the limit. The result wasn’t reality cracking, showing him that he had escaped an illusion. But everything he saw had shifted somewhat.

The flowers, the brook, and the pond were still there, as was the Lord of Cycles, but while the environment was beautiful it was not enough to gobsmack him any longer. And the man in front of him was no longer the personification of perfection, but rather a somewhat feminine man who wore a robe that might be mistaken for a dress.

Everything about him was ambiguous, from his hairstyle to his choice of clothes, but that wasn’t what terrified Zac. That was some extremely scary illusion he had been put inside. What would have happened if he didn’t notice something was wrong? Would he have become the lover of a long-dead ghost?

Zac’s back was immediately drenched in cold sweat, and he thanked the stars that he had gained some experience in spotting illusions from his time in the hunt. The being in front of him was clearly not completely benign, and his vigilance rose to the peak to protect his mind and his butt.

“Tsch, so you broke my beautification field? How boring,” the man muttered and swapped out his elaborate pose to a more laid-back one. “So you are the one who passed the first inheritance trial? As I said, your face is pretty pathetic, I can’t take you as a disciple. Not that I was planning to take one in any case.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 283 - Mortals and Cultivators**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

## New month, new [Drive!](#)

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Zac was starting to regret choosing the Lord of Cycles rather than the Undying Fiend inheritance. This person was almost as bad as Brazla. Or had perhaps all the predecessors gone crazy stuck with the Tool Spirit for those untold ages? If that was the case then the inheritances might be useless.

He barely survived his trial and he was far stronger than anyone else on the island. How could he in good consciousness let his sister enter the trial for the Invoker if this was how it was going to be? But still, Zac had pushed through the trial and he wasn't ready to give up just yet.

"I'm sorry, I can't do much about my face, but I guess it'll get better as my race ranking improves. Why did you set this place up if you didn't want to find inheritors?" Zac probed.

"Because of that stupid Brazla," the man said as he leisurely ran his fingers through the pond. "I needed him to create something for me, and he wanted me to set this place up as payment."

"Brazla?" Zac asked with confusion. "You made a deal with the Tool Spirit?"

"That little spirit is not Brazla," the man said with a chuckle. "It has just confused its own identity with his creator and ours over the years. Brazla was a peak D-Grade artificer, and he also called himself The Celestial Artisan. That a D-Grade cultivator dared call himself that tells you all you need to know about his temperament."

Zac's brows rose in surprise from that little tidbit. He finally understood why the Tool Spirit acted so haughtily. It had taken various traits from the 8 predecessors, including his own master's. And if Zac was a betting man, he guessed that the narcissism came from the individual in front of him.

"So you made a deal with the real brazla. He created something for you, and you set up an inheritance. Why did he want to create this place? And may I ask what your name is?" Zac probed.

"Money isn't enough to create a true heritage for a clan. Brazla was rich, but money can only buy unimpressive and widely distributed skills and cultivation manuals. Things that might take you to early D-Grade but leave you with a pitiful core that can't evolve," the man said with a disdainful snort. "And my name is Yrial, so you can call me Lord Yrial or Beauty Yrial."

Zac really wanted to roll his eyes, but he held himself in check since Yrial seemed pretty capricious. Who knew how he would react if Zac did something that he considered disrespectful.

"So why not go to someone else? Don't you need to cut off a piece of your soul to create an inheritance?" Zac probed.

"Do you think it's that easy to hire skilled craftsmen that are at peak D-Grade or C-Grade? They are extremely scarce, and most are snatched up by superior forces. Rogue cultivators such as myself can't hire them no matter how beautiful we are. Brazla was simply unattached because he was obsessed with creating a force of his own for some reason," Yrial explained.

Zac frowned when hearing that. He was hoping to hire a blacksmith to create a real Spiritual Tool Shield for him, but if things were as Yrial said it might be harder than he expected. Still, that was a problem for later. He first needed to make this narcissist cough up some valuables.

“Well, anyways. I’m here now. I proved my cycle and I defeated the construct,” Zac tentatively said.

“Don’t you think I don’t know your so-called cycle is fake? Those fractals shouldn’t have lit up at all,” Yrial snorted as he threw Zac a disdainful glance. “But I have to admit, using the spy core for such a thing is pretty novel. I’m not sure what you encountered to allow your Duplicity core to work like that.”

“Spy core?” Zac asked with confusion.

“That’s what the duplicity core usually is used for. You take the race of those you wish to spy on. But usually, you shouldn’t get a true copy as you have, but rather a watered-down version that only gives a fraction of the bonus power. For some reason your variant seems a lot stronger,” Yrial said with a shrug. “Even I can’t understand the fractals covering the core.”

Zac wasn’t too surprised that the ghost knew about his situation. He had been probed by that monument just a few hours before, and he guessed that whatever the monument found out, so did the Lord of Cycles.

“I did some research on it when I was exploring my path since it contains the potential for duality,” the ghost added. “But in the end, I didn’t feel it was a good fit.”

“What do you think caused the difference with my core?” Zac eagerly said.

It appeared that this man was far more knowledgeable about his specialty core than anyone he’d met so far. And if the construct was any indication it was pretty likely that Yrial might be able to help him fuse his classes, or at least improve upon the core.

“Who knows?” the Lord of Cycles said with disinterest. “The multiverse is full of odd chances and miraculous things. Almost everyone who reaches any distance on the path of cultivation has survived some insurmountable odds and encountered some strange opportunities. You made your specialty core much better than normal, which is good but nothing too exciting.”

Zac slowly nodded, though he wasn’t really sure what to believe. Greatest seemed to have been of another opinion, and Zac truly felt that getting two classes was a pretty huge deal. He was more inclined to believe that the man in front of him downplayed or simply didn’t understand the greatness of his Duplicity core. Or perhaps nothing that wasn’t related to himself could enter his eyes.

“So, I might not be what you’re looking for in a disciple, but I still passed the test,” Zac said, focusing on what was important. “I should be given some treasures, right?”

“I guess,” the man grumbled, and reluctantly got to his feet. “It’s not like I need any of the things stored here in any case. Come here and let me sense your talent.”

Zac was elated and hurried over. Yrial indicated for him to hold out his hand, and it looked like he was going to inspect him directly. However, the moment before their hands touched the spirit seemed to have a change of heart, and first conjured a napkin to place over Zac’s hand.

Zac couldn’t help but feel pissed off. Was his hand that disgusting that a damn spirit needed some extra layers of separation? But he held his tongue since he knew that this was not the last time he was seeing this infuriating ghost. He would also administer future trials when he reached the E grade and higher.

So he endured the injustice as he waited for the spirit to finish his inspection. Zac didn’t know exactly what Yrial was looking for, but he guessed it had something to do with the Dao runes he lit up. Perhaps he was trying to choose which category of impairment would suit him best.

But Zac started to get worried as the frown on Yrial's face only deepened the longer he held Zac's hand. Soon he even felt some powerful pressure bear down on him, and he caught a glimpse of an extremely vast aura from the spirit.

It was tightly controlled, but it was far beyond the impressions he had of both Greatest and The Great Redeemer. He didn't know why, but it felt like he was pressured by the weight of a world when he felt the aura. That proved that the man in front of him had truly been an existence of a higher tier once upon a time, even though he was pretty annoying.

"This is unbelievable," Yrial finally said and looked at Zac with wonder.

Zac looked up at the spirit, suddenly filled with anticipation. Perhaps he had realized how special his core was, or that his body was far stronger than normal due to his numerous titles. Making a good impression would perhaps help him gain better treasures and guidance.

"You are beyond trash. You have absolutely no talent in any way manner or form. How are you even alive?" he said as he looked at Zac like he was a zoo animal. "I don't know whether to call you ultimate garbage or a genius."

"I know I'm a mortal," Zac said with grit teeth, stabilizing his heart from the emotional freefall it had just endured. "But I have been pushing along just fine until now. And with my special core I don't think I'll be worse off than any cultivator, even if my road will be bumpier."

"No, you don't understand," Yrial said with a shake of his head. "This goes beyond being a mortal. I knew you were a trashy mortal the moment you stepped inside my trial."

"Then what do you mean," Zac asked exasperated.

"Do you know what the difference between a mortal and a cultivator is? Apart from the obvious," Yrial said as he conjured up a divan to lie down on, making Zac shake his head.

"Being a cultivator is having a certain amount of affinity with the deeper truths of the universe. Some call it spirituality," Yrial said as he formed a ball of burning ice in his hand. "However, it's not a binary situation where you either have it or you don't.

"Simply put you can have various affinities with all the Daos, and you need a minimum affinity with at least one Dao to become a cultivator. Let's say that an affinity is a number. Someone with an affinity of 120 to an element will have an easier time learning that Dao than someone with an affinity of 80," Yrial continued as a second ball, this one frozen fire, appeared next to the earlier ball.

"Some races have extremely high affinities with certain Daos, essentially turning their whole population in a certain direction of cultivation. But many races, like us humans, don't have any racial affinity," he continued as the two balls started to dance around in his hand.

"I am a supreme genius who showed an extremely good affinity with both fire and ice, which is why I embarked upon my path. But most people aren't talented enough in any element that they would choose their class by their affinities. They simply get whatever class they get," Yrial continued, not forgetting to tout his own horn.

"No one knows the exact cut-off, but let's say the minimum to be able to control Cosmic Energy and push it through their pathways according to a cultivation manual to be 50, no matter which element.

"Both someone with an affinity of 60 and 160 will be cultivators in other words, though the one with the higher affinity might have an easier time pondering the Dao and breaking through the smaller bottlenecks," Yrial continued. "Most also have

multiple affinities, though not as high as myself. Apart from fire and Ice I also have an affinity with dozens of other Daos, though I don't focus on them.

"Choosing a path that both fits with your affinities and your personality is the best way to go as far as possible when it comes to cultivation. That's why children are tested when young."

Zac thought back to Emily, and how Alyn and Alea had tested her to confirm her great talent for cultivation. This was no news for him, but it was interesting to learn that nothing was completely clear-cut.

"In the same way, mortals can both have an affinity of 20 and 40. Both are trash, but different degrees of trash. And the one with an affinity of 40 will have an easier time of forcing open nodes or turning into a low-grade cultivator in the future," Yrial continued.

"So what's my affinity," Zac said, already having an inkling of the answer going by Yrial's earlier reaction.

"Zero. No affinity at all, not to any element, which technically shouldn't be possible. Cosmic Energy is the basic building block of the universe, and it should be impossible to at least not have a small connection to it," Yrial said. "Especially you who have already walked on the path of cultivation for a while. Yet I can't find a speck of spirituality in your body."

"I seem to have pressed on fine, though?" Zac asked hesitantly. "I even have a pretty good tolerance of energy, I can absorb crystals pretty damn quick even without being a cultivator. And I have formed multiple Dao Seeds."

"That's what's so mind-boggling," Yrial said with wonder. "You're ugly, but you are pretty interesting. Perhaps your trashy constitution might even be an opportunity."

"How is it an opportunity to have no talent?" Zac asked with a helpless smile.

"Because you are free. We're all prisoners to the System, playing within its ruleset. The system won't let you chose a class that is not in line with your talents since that would statistically lower the chance for you to become a powerhouse. And that's just one of the ways the System limits the boundless Dao. But you who have no talents are unfettered, able to do anything," Yrial said, growing more and more excited.

"I've decided, today is your lucky day. I'll lower myself to make you my disciple after all," the Lord of Cycles said, truly looking like he was throwing Zac a bone. "Hurry, kneel down and accept me as your master!"

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 284 - Beauty and Brawn**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**New month, new [Drive!](#)**

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"Now you want to make me your disciple?" Zac asked with hesitation since the situation seemed a bit fishy. "I thought I was too ugly? Also, I'm not really interested in kneeling."

"Well, you are a bit ugly, but I'll make an exception. A supertrash that's also a progenitor and having two classes through a variant core? It's too interesting to pass

up,” the Lord of Cycles said with excitement. “And the kneeling is just figurative, though there is one thing you need to do to become my disciple.”

Zac frowned at the explanation. It almost sounded like the Lord of Cycles wanted to take him as a disciple as a novelty. But he was long dead, so why did he bother about these things? And what would a shady person like Yrial have him do to become a disciple?

There had been too much new information in too short a time. He didn’t even know if Yrial was telling the truth about his aptitude, and there was no way for him to double-check. But something inside him was telling him that he wasn’t lying, and his mind immediately went to his mother.

Was this what she had done to him? Or was this simply the constitution of a technocrat, someone who hated the system. Various emotions flitted through his mind as he tried to fathom why she would do something like this. Kenzie’s AI he could understand, even if it put her in extreme danger. It would undoubtedly help her get further on the road of cultivation than if she didn’t possess it.

But why would Leandra want to give him an awful constitution like this?

“Let’s just say I’m taking a chance here. I only have one shot unless I set up another trial ground after I made this place. Your combination of unique traits might lead nowhere, but it might also turn into something amazing. So if you make it big, remember to resurrect me,” Yrial suddenly added, perhaps afraid the silence was due to Zac not wanting to become a disciple.

“Resurrect?” Zac gaped. “Is that even possible?”

“As long as you reach the peak of cultivation you can resurrect people as long as you possess a piece of their original soul or at least know where they died. Luckily I am such a piece,” The Lord of Cycles nodded. “Though from what I’ve heard it is extremely taxing, so even the most powerful people in the multiverse can only do it a handful of times.”

“Resurrection and immortality are two of the most common reasons people push themselves toward the peak. Who doesn’t have friends and loved ones who have fallen? This only becomes more poignant as you get stronger and the millennia pass,” Yrial sighed. “Some of my companions fell to battle, others due to old age since they got stuck and couldn’t progress. The road of cultivation is paved with not only the bones of your enemies but also your loved ones.”

“The only reason this place was created was that I needed Brazla to create a specialized item that I required for an expedition into an unexplored B-Grade Mystic Realm. Since I never came back to update this place I am guessing I died inside,” he said with surprising equanimity. “Such is fate when defying the heavens. Anyone can die at any time.”

Zac’s thoughts immediately went to his father. Was it actually possible to bring him back if he got powerful enough? Or if he got stuck due to being a mortal, then perhaps Kenzie could do it.

“Of course, even with your odd advantages reaching even B-Grade is a dream within a dream, so don’t start planning who to resurrect just yet,” Yrial added with some disdain, clearly understanding what Zac was thinking about.

“Why should I accept you as a master though?” Zac hesitantly said. “What benefits do I get apart from just getting the inheritance treasures?”

“If you decide to only become an inheritor I’ll just throw some treasure at you and then kick you out. Since I’ll be pretty pissed off the treasure might not be too exciting,” the spirit said without an inkling of shame. “But if you become my disciple

I'll go above and beyond to help you each time you enter here. I'll not only help you progress, but I'll also give you the best treasures I've got stocked here."

Zac looked at the spirit with some helplessness as he knew that he couldn't say no to such an offer, even if there were some hidden considerations behind Yrial's offer. Getting the guidance of a C-Grade powerhouse was something extremely valuable for someone like him. But he didn't immediately say yes since he did have other considerations.

"There is a rogue cultivator believed to be at Peak D-Grade heading toward my homeworld to enslave it. Are you able to help out against that?" tentatively asked.

"I can kill him for you if you manage to get him inside here. D-Grade warriors have only taken the first step on cultivation, it's nothing I can't handle even in this limited form. But I don't see how it's possible for you to bring him here," the spirit said with an unconcerned shrug. "So you would better off putting me and the repository in a portable mansion and fleeing to another planet."

Zac sighed in disappointment, but it was worth a try.

"I plan to find a force in the multiverse that can protect my planet from that man. Would that conflict with becoming your disciple?" Zac asked next

"Of course not, most walking on the path of cultivation will have many teachers and benefactors throughout their lives. There's no point in trying to reinvent the wheel all by yourself. Some puritans think that taking pointers from others would impact their path of cultivation, but that's only true if their path is fragile and built on unstable foundations," Yrial said.

"But you should also be ready that you might not be as sought after as you hope without exposing your secrets," the Lord of Cycles added. "Taking someone on as a disciple is a huge risk and a drain on resources. Both the risk and the drain is multiplied hundredfold when you're a mortal. Bringing a mortal to the D-Grade can bankrupt a sect, and that's just the start."

"So I should display my core?" Zac probed.

"I wouldn't recommend it. Between your odd body and your variation core, you would be lucky to last for a month before someone decided to cut you open. Your situation might not be very interesting for peak existences, but it would certainly be even for some C-Grade beings. If I wasn't dead would already have cut you open to study that core," Yrial said.

"You'd really do something like that?" Zac asked with shock.

"That's nothing. You don't understand how hard it is to progress after the D-Grade. You can spend thousands of years without being able to take a single step forward. If your unique constitution even gave me a minuscule chance of advancing I'd rip you apart in a heartbeat. Those lofty existences from elite families wouldn't be any different either, even if they pretend otherwise," Yrial said.

Cold sweat started to run down Zac's back when he saw the ruthless determination within Yrial's eyes, and it reminded him of the stark reality. Might made right in this world, and he was wrong to consider people like The Great Redeemer as crazy outliers. There were innumerable people who were ready to do anything to progress on their path of cultivation.

"In any case, what do I need to do to become your disciple?" Zac said, eager to change the subject from his dismemberment.

"Just a small test. I admit I slightly phoned in the trial for the trial. I mean I simply bought and modified a Dao Golem. But in my defense, I did not really want to

do this thing so I was annoyed,” Yrial said with a straight face. “But I did put in another small test in case I actually found someone acceptable to take on as a disciple.”

“Weren’t you already ready to accept me?” Zac hesitantly asked. “Is there really a need for another trial?”

“Well, perhaps not if I was still alive, but I am a construct now,” Yrial snickered. “I am created by a set of rules that I cannot bend. To become a disciple you must pass my test for disciples. Don’t worry, seeing your strength you should survive. Though I admit the trial tests not only your brawn but also your beauty, which might be a problem for you.”

Alarms started to go off in Zac’s mind, and he quickly turned around to run away. The trial for discipleship sounded extremely suspicious, and he wanted no part of it. Especially when he mentioned the risk of death.

“Naïve,” the Lord of Cycles simply laughed, and with a wave of his arm Zac was lifted up and brought back to where he stood earlier.

“No, wait!” Zac shouted, but it was too late, as an odd wave was released from an amulet around Yrial’s neck.

Zac helplessly glared at the man waving him goodbye from his spot by the pond until the scenery started to blur around him. Were all old ghosts scammers in the end?

Zac didn’t have time to complain over the similarly shady methods of Anzonil and Yrial as the odd pressure continued to build up in his mind. He had already realized that he was being put inside a dreamscape or an illusion so that the trial wouldn’t take place in reality. Zac tried to resist the growing confusion with all his might, even activating **[Mental Fortress]**.

But the might of the illusion wrought by a C-Grade powerhouse wasn’t something he could resist, and his defensive skill was effortlessly broken through by whatever Yrial did. Ceaseless information was crammed into his mind, and he realized it was memories from when Yrial was young. There was a flood of impressions and sights, and Zac started to become unsure who he even was until he finally blacked out.

Zac shook his head with a groan before looking around to see where he was. He was currently sitting at a camp in a forest, though the trees were a bit different from anything he had seen on earth. It was the middle of winter, and the barren trees were covered in a layer of snow. However, he didn’t move, and instead tried to sort out the new information in his head.

The confusion he felt during the impartment had abated, and he knew that he was Zac and that he was inside a dream trial for discipleship. Nothing he saw around him was actually real. But the problem was the parting words of Yrial. Even though this place an illusion it appeared there was a distinct risk of death.

The place he found himself in was modeled after a real place, and it was the homeworld of The Lord of Cycles. The forest around him had no name, and it was simply part of the untamed wilderness that spanned between the established influences in the area.

Zac quickly opened up his status screen, and it was with some relief that he found that all his attributes and skills were intact. **[Verun’s Bite]** was also by his side, though his own Cosmos Sack had been replaced by a much worse one with only some simple necessities and a few Nexus Crystals inside.

Zac wasn’t too worried though since he believed that the object was to finish the trial without the assistance of his vast wealth. He had to admit that he had taken

a shortcut with the Unholy Beacon, and Yrial perhaps didn't want such a thing to happen again. His real Cosmos Sack was no doubt still with his real body inside the trail.

He was also curious to note that he had gotten an actual quest this time around, rather than just being thrown into the ring against the Life-Death construct. Even the type of quest was new, meaning discipleship might not be something as simple as a verbal agreement between two people.

**Fire and Ice (Unique, Discipleship): Acquire a Profound Yin Orchid and a Ruby of Everlasting Yang. Reward: Discipleship of The Lord of Cycles. (0/2). Remaining: 04:23:58:23**

Zac blanked out for a second as he looked at the quest. He had no clue what those two things were, but he soon found them inside the added memories from Yrial's youth. And the more he looked through the memories the worse his face got. How the hell was he supposed to finish this quest?

It truly was a test of beauty and brawn.

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**Chapter 285 - Profound Yin and Everlasting Yang**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**New month, new [Drive!](#)**

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It seemed like a straightforward enough task, but Zac groaned inwardly when he saw it. The burst of information he had received included all the information he needed regarding the two treasures, and Zac knew this quest would be a pain in the ass.

Neither of the treasures were readily available. The Profound Yin Orchid was a top tier E-Grade flower that gave an enormous boost to the Ice-attributed cultivation manual that the Disciples of the Profound Yin Sect in the area used. It was so integral to them that they even named their Sect after it, and the gardens containing the flowers were strictly guarded deep inside the core of their sect.

The Profound Yin sect was nothing special in the multiverse, but its ancestor was a high-level E-Grade cultivator. All its elders were between the Low and Mid-grade E-Rank as well, and their force was not something Zac could handle even if he went all out.

Interestingly enough the Profound Yin sect was exclusively a female sect, and any association with males was strictly prohibited. There was no way for Zac to simply walk up to the sect in order to trade with them as he would be attacked on sight. Not that they would ever sell their core resource anyway.

The situation with the Rubies of Everlasting Yang was pretty much the same. They only slowly grew inside a volcano sitting atop a Nexus Vein, and it was strictly controlled by Everlasting Yang Sect. The sect was the exact opposite of the Profound Yin, and only fire-attributed males could join the sect.

The two sects were actually located quite close to each other, and not surprisingly there was non-stop contention between the two forces. Since both the sects were of roughly the same strength neither was able to root out the other, and it seemed like the elders of both the sects used the conflict as a whetstone to hone their disciples.

The mission was a replication of a feat that the Lord of Cycles accomplished when he was roughly the same level as Zac himself. In fact, Yrial was a lot weaker in terms of total attributes and power when he stole the two treasures in short succession.

The memories that Zac received while he fell into the dreamscape even went so far as to give him a few partial memories of how Yrial managed to snatch the two treasures, and the method Yrial used was the reason Zac was so vexed. A test of beauty and brawn was an apt description.

He had actually openly infiltrated the Profound Yin sect. He had utilized his ambiguous looks by ambushing a Profound Yin Disciple who was out hunting beasts in the woods, and then stolen her disciple's uniform. With that in hand, he simply waltzed into the gates looking like a woman. He even used an early version of his beatification field to gain access to the garden from the presiding elder.

Getting the ruby was a lot simpler. Yrial had walked up to the Everlasting Yang sect, proclaiming that he had beaten a core disciple of the Profound Yin sect in a duel, showing the orchid as proof. From there he taunted the disciples of the Profound Yang sect until one of their own core disciples stepped forward, putting a ruby as the wager.

The core disciple was stronger than Yrial in reality, but the Lord of Cycles once again used his beatification field to confuse the poor disciple, and then Yrial ruthlessly attacked him while his emotions were in turmoil.

It was not much later that his trickery had been exposed, and he was summarily hunted by both the sects for a good while. Zac's imparted memories stopped there though, and he didn't know how the story ended. However, since Yrial had become a C-Grade powerhouse in the end he had clearly gotten away.

Zac understood why Yrial had taken the risk. He had already started walking on the path of fire and ice, the two concepts that would allow him to reach the peak C Grade in the end. But he was a poor rogue cultivator, and getting his hands on those two treasures was his idea to push both his Daos forward.

Both of them helped a cultivator foster a constitution that was especially suited for the cultivation of their respective element. Zac guessed that Yrial later combined the two to create the foundation of a real fire-and-ice constitution.

The problem for Zac was that there was no way for him to replicate Yrial's feat. At least not in the same way. There was no way he would be able to pass as a woman, even with the help of **[Thousand Faces]**. There were limits to the skill, and not possible to change enough to pass off as a woman, except perhaps from a great distance.

He believed he could replicate the second half of the mission though, though he would be able to defeat the core disciple without the use of trickery. He had accompanied Brazla enough to know how to enrage a few cultivators, but he knew that they wouldn't offer up a Ruby for the wager unless he could put up one of the orchids.

A large part of the reason they were ready to duel Yrial was that they desperately wanted to succeed where the Profound Yin failed in a game of one-upmanship. If they could show the world that they had one of the prized possessions of their rival sects it would no doubt make their enemies lose a lot of face.

Finding another treasure to wager instead was out of the question as well. The time limit was pretty restrictive, and he would only have time to visit the sects one by one with little room for leeway. Since time was of the essence Zac would simply take it step by step.

That in of itself was a problem to Zac, who was already running late for his real-life obligations. He was supposed to go to Westfort today, but he might be stuck inside this place for another few days. However, Zac suddenly had an idea as he sat down and started to ponder upon his Daos.

But no matter what he did or which Dao he pondered upon, everything was just a haze in his mind. It was like he had lost one of his senses, where the truths of the world were completely blocked to him or even missing. Zac wasn't worried though, but quite satisfied with the results.

Being unable to improve one's Dao could be indicative of time dilation. Since the Dao of Time was a thing, creating spaces that had a different flow of time was quite possible. However, no matter whether you sped up time or slowed it down it was essentially impossible to improve inside those time chambers.

The different passage of time somehow messed up the connection with the Dao, and it all became a mess. Similarly it was apparently impossible to properly use cultivation manuals since they somehow were connected to the Dao as well.

You could advance, but it was extremely arduous and left your foundation unstable, so you would only hurt yourself in the long run if you tried to take a shortcut and cultivate inside a place with a different time-flow. That's why such spaces were never used to improve.

They did have some uses though. The current situation was one use, where one could perform a trial without wasting time in real life. Another example was whether you needed to slow down your aging to be able to protect your clan for longer or just stay young enough to be able to enter a Mystic Realm that only opened in set intervals.

Of course, time dilation chambers cost a fortune to build and run, and it was only something Ogras had mentioned that supreme forces might utilize. D or even C-Graded forces were very unlikely to own such an extravagant thing.

Zac was happy that he might not waste as much time as he feared, but he still immediately set out for the Profound Yin Sect. For one he didn't know how much time was passing in the real world, and he wanted to get back to Yrial. He had been whisked away before he could get all the answers he was looking for.

Yrial was the key to so many things that were currently stumping Zac. He obviously knew a lot about Specialty Cores, and he no doubt knew the means to evolve them. How to combine two opposing concepts was also the specialty of Yrial, clearly displayed through the two balls that he summoned to play around with.

Zac felt that the orchid part of the quest was the key. If he managed to figure out a way to get it, he was most likely set. If not he would simply sit out the five days and miss out on the opportunity of becoming the disciple of the Lord of Cycles. He simply wasn't ready to risk it all for this quest since there were too many people depending on him.

It was only ten hours later that he was hiding along a cliff wall, overlooking the female-dominated sect. His memories had unerringly led him to the Profound Yin sect, and his travels had once more proven he was in a dreamscape. The forests were full of beasts between the levels 50 and 75, but when Zac killed them he received no Cosmic Energy, meaning the animals weren't real.

The sect was placed in a large basin, and Zac noted that the whole area was far colder than the surroundings. It was winter in the rest of the forest as well, but the valley seemed to be permanently in this state, and frigid winds rose from the valley floor.

The problem Zac faced as he looked down was how to even get close to the outer walls. There was barely any cover in the valley, making it extremely hard to sneak up on the sect. Apart from some boulders, there were only some odd trees that seemed to be almost made out of rocks, but they were extremely thin and sparsely placed.

Zac decided on the same course of action as Yrial in the end, though not as brazen. He roamed outside the valley for a few hours until he finally spotted disciple

on her own, and she even had roughly the same hair color as himself. Zac wasted no time and flashed over with **[Loamwalker]**, and the next moment an unconscious girl lay in front of him.

Zac silenced the inner voice calling him a creep as he lifted the girl and took her away. He repeatedly reminded himself that this was all a dreamscape as he took her outer coat and placed it over himself. After some hesitation he also bound and gagged her, but he believed that a cultivator should be able to extricate herself in an hour or so after waking up.

He didn't choose to kill her, even though she wasn't real. He felt it would impact his personality if he heedlessly killed like that. If he started wholesale slaughter of innocent people in a dreamscape now, then before you know it he might feel it was okay to do it in real life.

Besides, it might backfire if someone found a murdered disciple. It might even alert the sect leader. A knocked out one should elicit a much more restrained response if it was discovered. Perhaps the disciple would even be so embarrassed that she wouldn't report it if she came to early.

Next, he activated **[Thousand Faces]** for the first time in a long time, and he grimaced when he was reminded of how extremely painful it was to utilize due to the mismatch with his pathways. But only a few moments later he had a face that bore a passing resemblance to the girl in front of him, but if he was properly looked at one would immediately notice he was a man.

No matter what he tried he wasn't able to change his features to those of a woman, the level or quality of the skill was simply not high enough. But after he had grown out his hair and covered his face slightly he felt it was good enough for his purposes.

He also took her disciple token and used **[Inquisitive Eye]** on her to find out her name before he left. Just a few minutes later he was trekking down the valley, his heart rapidly beating as he neared the sect. His eyes scoured the walls in the distance for any response to his approach.

He did not immediately walk toward the main gate since it was continuously guarded, but he rather chose to meander a bit so that he approached the sect from the side. He wasn't too worried about this since he saw steps in the snow everywhere. It seemed taking a walk outside the walls within the safety of the valley was nothing uncommon.

Zac strolled for twenty minutes until he could confirm there weren't any guards along the wall. An array covered the whole sect, and it would be a waste of manpower to continuously guard the walls as well. The only guards were the squad that was placed at the gate.

The disciple token should be all that was needed to pass through the array, but he didn't know whether something else would trigger if he jumped over the wall instead of passing through the array through the wall. There was no answer in his new memories, so there was only one way to find out.

When he noticed the vision of the guards was blocked by a boulder he suddenly flashed forward with **[Loamwalker]**, and the next moment he was above the walls.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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## Chapter 286 - Sneaking Inside

A note from TheFirstDefier

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Zac's heart was beating like a drum as he hurried along a secluded path of the Profound Yin sect. Things were starting to get a bit out of hand, and he had already left 8 unconscious disciples in his wake. Honestly, he was unsure whether he had actually killed a few of them by mistake, but he pushed down any such thoughts at the moment.

The initial infiltration had gone just fine. Some sort of silent alarm went off, but he had already anticipated such a thing and he hid to see what kind of response sneaking past the wall elicited.

Three guards arrived a minute later, and Zac had already hidden inside a nearby house, knocking out the occupant. She had only been level 31 and was likely a pretty fresh recruit to the sect.

Judging by the conversation of the guards they didn't put much weight to Zac jumping over the wall. His token belonged to the disciple named Tilri, and they believed it was her who had crossed the wall rather than passing through the gate for some reason. They noted a demerit in her name then went on with their day.

However, everything didn't go as smoothly from there. He took a very roundabout way toward the small garden that housed the Profound Yin Orchids to avoid people, but it was impossible to avoid them altogether. The garden was against a mountain wall in the back of the sect, and he had to pass a lot of structures to get there.

It only took Zac 30 seconds to get spotted, and the girl he encountered only need another second to realize he was a man. Luckily one second was all Zac needed to flash forward and tap her forehead with enough power to knock her out cold.

He dragged her into the nearest house, which alerted another person inside. Soon another disciple was lying unconscious with a large bump on her forehead next to her sect sister. From there one mishap after another happened, and he felt it was only a matter of time before he would hear sirens blaring across the whole valley.

But he still hadn't given up. As far as he knew everyone that had realized who he was had been knocked out, and the sect was only so big. He just needed to endure for another minute before he reached the garden.

A petite figure suddenly appeared from around a corner, and Zac instinctively slammed the hilt of his axe in her temple before she had even come into full view. Zac grimaced when he saw that she was barely as old as Emily, but what done was done. She was stuffed behind a few sacks of rice inside a shed before he kept speeding forward.

A wave of relief spread through his body as he saw the cave that was his destination. The orchids grew inside, perpetually secluded from the sun. Their only nourishment was water an extremely cold stream rising from the underground and the Nexus Vein that was placed beneath the valley.

The cave was off-limits to normal people, and there were no buildings or disciples close to the entrance. But Zac knew from his memories that a low-level E-Grade elder sat inside to tend to and guard the flowers. It was mainly to keep any greedy disciples away, while also being a reward to the elder. Sitting amongst the

flowers to cultivate drastically improved one's cultivation, though not as much as directly imbibing them.

Zac hurried through the entrance with his head lowered, taking one last look around to make sure that no one saw him enter. The moment he entered he immediately changed directions toward the elders trying to make his hair shroud his face for as long as possible. But the elder seemed to realize something was wrong, and a frown immediately adorned her face.

"Wha-" was all the elder had time to say before Zac was upon her with a monstrous momentum from activating **[Loamwalker]**.

However, she clearly was no slouch as a thick wall of ice immediately appeared in front of her as she started to fade away. Zac saw she was using some movement skill, and he knew he couldn't let her escape. The wall looked extremely sturdy, and it was empowered by some Dao, but Zac barreled into it like a bull with the help of the Dao of Heaviness.

Zac felt like some bones in his arm would break from the impact, but they held while the wall cracked. But Zac wasn't completely unscathed as a layer of frost completely covered him and hindered his movements. It seemed to be the effect of a Dao, and Zac wasn't able to simply shrug it off.

But he was already in melee range, and his fist slammed straight toward the elder guardian before she could completely escape. He was still imbued with the Dao of Heaviness, and the fist slammed into her midriff like a wrecking ball.

The fist connected and forced her back into a completely corporeal form, and she was slammed back into the wall behind her, causing widespread cracks. However, his hand felt like it was frozen solid from the hit, and before Zac even had time to follow up with another strike to knock her out he was pelted by dozens of extremely sharp icicles.

He managed to dodge a few and endure a few others, but he knew he couldn't take too many of these strikes. A couple of them managed to hit his body before he had time to activate **[Nature's Barrier]** and it felt like they contained some sort of cold poison.

If he didn't end the fight quickly he would be turned into a popsicle, so he forced his stiff body to move, and he landed another slam straight in her face. Blood spurted everywhere and her face was almost caved in from the force of the punch.

She was pushed back into the frozen wall, and this time she didn't get up again. A few twitches was the only sign that she was still alive, and Zac quickly moved his attention toward the dozen flowers in the garden.

He knew he was out of time. There was no way that the battle hadn't been heard from the outside even though it was over in just a few seconds. Worse yet he saw that some of the icicles had flown straight out of the cave mouth, likely alerting everyone in the area.

He ignored the elder and immediately flashed over to the closest flower and dug it out of the ground. There was already a cold-attributed storage box in his Cosmos Sack, and he quickly placed it inside before he put it back into his pouch. A glance in the quest menu showed that the progress of the quest had changed to (1/2).

Zac sighed in relief but he knew his difficulties had only started. He could hear the subdued shuffling of feet outside, yet no one entered. There was no doubt an ambush waiting outside, but Zac hoped that it couldn't be too organized since only a couple of seconds had passed. It was likely only the first responders to the scene.

If he could break out of the encirclement before the elders could wake up from their closed-door cultivation he had confidence he would be able to escape. The

powerhouses were mostly in deep meditation from what he understood, and they couldn't simply wake up and be fight-ready in the blink of an eye. That was the only reason he dared to break in like this.

Zac activated [**Nature's Barrier**] again and imbued it with the Dao of Trees. He even imbued himself with the Dao when he noticed that it seemed to have a small restraining effect on the frost that still covered parts of his body. One of his insights was based on resilience against the elements after all, the ability to survive in any climate.

Wasting no more time, Zac rushed outside with his axe at the ready. The reason he didn't use it before was that he wanted to give himself a small window where the elder was confused due to how he looked. But if he sported a large barbaric axe when he entered the cave he would have no doubt have been immediately discovered, foiling his ambush.

He flashed out with his movement skill, and as he suspected he was immediately met with a barrage of ice-attributed attacks. Zac growled and launched five fractal edges imbued with the Dao of Heaviness to crush any incoming ice. Frigid winds were trying to root him in place, but his blood pumped through his body due to his high Vitality, allowing him to keep running.

His fractal edges were extremely powerful and destroyed everything in their path before they kept moving toward the horrified disciples. But two strong auras erupted from two women who looked to be in their mid-thirties, and they quickly moved to intercept the strikes.

Luckily these elders were amongst the weaker ones as well, likely barely past level 80, and it took all they had to intercept the five massive blades of death coming for their disciples. Zac took the chance and immediately activated [**Loamwalker**], escaping the same path that he entered.

"Stop! Thief!" an enraged shout echoed behind him.

"Elder Gemoa is badly hurt!" another voice echoed with a tinge of panic.

Some worry started to rise in Zac's heart as he sensed one dangerous aura after another waking up, each more powerful than the last. Zac quickly took out a small pill from his pouch and ate it as he kept utilizing [**Loamwalker**]. The pill was a low-grade Blood Boil Pill that gave a temporary boost to Cosmic Energy and power, though using them too often would harm one's foundations.

But since Zac was just in a dreamscape he didn't care about that and used every tool in his toolbox. Since he no longer cared about stealth the way that took him minutes before only took him a few seconds. Zac saw the air shimmer above the wall, and he unhesitantly launched one [**Chop**] after another, each imbued with either the Dao of Sharpness or Hardness.

As he suspected a shield had been erected, though it seemed that it mainly was used to protect from attacks from the outside. It only took 3 strikes to cause a large crack, and another strike to blast open a temporary hole for Zac to jump through without losing any speed. However, just as he was about to exit the shield a massive ice boulder slammed into him out of nowhere, making him cough up a mouthful of blood.

He landed face-first into the snow outside, but immediately sprung to his feet and kept pushing Cosmic Energy through his legs as he sped out of the valley. Zac ignored his ragged state as he pushed himself toward the mountain in the distance. Hot on his heels were hundreds of women, each more beautiful than the last.

The only problem was that they all looked completely enraged, like they couldn't wait to tear Zac apart.

Now and then everything from large icicles to huge snowballs sailed toward him to slow him down. A few of the Profound Yin Disciples that seemed to focus on cold-attributed combat classes even ripped out trees from the ground and hurled them at him. But thanks to the distance Zac had no problem avoiding them, often without even having to waste Cosmic Energy.

After almost a day of running more and more female disciples started to fall behind, and after another day only those that were at least late F-Grade could keep up. However, the E-Grade elders that he sensed in the dwindling group did not seem inclined to push ahead of the disciples.

Perhaps they wanted Zac to lead them to a supposed leader, or perhaps they had already realized where Zac was headed and wanted to escalate the conflict. He even considered that they wanted to kill him in full view of the Everlasting Yang sect to show what happens to those who encroached on their bottom line.

Whichever case was right, Zac felt more than happy to play along as he lugged toward the Everlasting Yang sect. He could actually speed up himself and lose most of those behind him, but he opted to conserve his Cosmic Energy instead.

Besides, he was afraid that if he sped up to a pace that only the elders could endure they would immediately pounce on him. So he leisurely ran forward while dodging the occasional icicle as he tried to figure out his next move. He already knew that his original plan likely wouldn't work with the Profound Yin sect hot on his heel. However, he felt it would be possible to sow some chaos and use that chaos to fish in muddied waters.

Finally, after another 4 hours, he was closing in on the Everlasting Yang sect. Even Zac was starting to get winded by this point, whereas the remaining disciples who were still at F-Grade were deathly pale, while others were actually carried by their elders. Perhaps they wanted to retain a certain number of experts for whatever would happen next.

Luckily he wouldn't have to scale the whole volcano, since the sect was cut into the mountain, starting at the foot and going roughly halfway up. He also knew from memories that they had carved paths all the way to the magma inside, and the elites cultivated as close to the magma as possible since it emitted Fire-attuned energies.

As Zac started to close in on the gates leading up to the sect he started to sense that his pursuers started to slow down. That wasn't good news for his plan so he needed to improvise a bit. He took a deep breath and infused his lungs with Cosmic Energy.

"THE PROFOUND YIN SECT IS ATTACKING!" he roared on top of his lungs, his energy-empowered volume enough to push away the snow around him.

The shout had a pronounced effect as in seconds a stream of red-robed disciples started to appear on the wall as the sounds of heavy drums echoed across the Volcano.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 287 - Subterfuge**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac didn't stop running even if the wall was quickly filling up with somber-looking warriors, all of them looking ready to fight. However, a huge fireball ripped toward him, forcing him to a screeching halt as it slammed down in front of him, causing a large scorch mark.

"Help! I wish to join your great sect, but these crazy women want to stop me," Zac shouted as he stood right between the Profound Yin cultivators and the wall.

The cultivators from the Profound Yin Sect had also stopped their pursuit by now, but they seemed unwilling to let things go as they were. They seemed more than ready for a fight even though quite a few of them were pretty spent from the ultra marathon. But the disciples still in F-Grade all ate some pill that seemed to perk them right up.

"Hand this man over to us and we will not take this issue further," one of the elders said with a somber face.

There was only silence for a few seconds until the large gates suddenly rumbled as they opened, and a small group of cultivators walked out. They seemed to be roughly the same number as his pursuers, and Zac started to wonder if there were some unspoken rules between the two sects.

Perhaps they kept their clashes to a certain number to avoid too large losses. With their accumulated enmity it wouldn't be surprising if they would launch an all-out war, but it would at best result in a pyrrhic victory. These two sects weren't the only forces in the area, and such an action would surely lead to the downfall of both sects.

"You will not take things further, you say?" a robust man with bulging muscles said with a teasing face. "I wonder what a couple of birds so far from home would do if we don't comply."

"Romi, are you truly planning on testing our patience in the middle of winter? We are taking this man back either alive or in pieces. He grievously wounded Gemoa. A price must be paid," another of the Yin elders growled.

"It might be winter, but in this area the Yin is always suppressed," the man called Romi scoffed before he turned to Zac. "Young man, you managed to hurt that bitch? Very impressive. Too bad you look a little girly."

Zac quickly tried to find a good course of action, and his face started to change. It was no longer the slightly feminine youngster with long hair standing in front of them, but rather a man in his 40s with a masculine face.

Zac tied up his hair as he forcibly stopped his face from grimacing from the pain from changing appearance. He had decided to utilize **[Thousand Faces]** once more to become less threatening to the Everlasting Yang Sect. A middle-aged man defeating an elder was much more believable compared to a youngster. Perhaps they would think he was part of some other force otherwise.

"I managed to ambush her, but she was unfortunately too strong so I couldn't kill her," Zac said with a gravelly voice. "I changed my face to sneak inside and get this."

The next moment he held up the box, and he quickly opened it to show the orchid. He held the box so that both parties would see the orchid within, and their expressions proved he was on the right track.

"I wanted to present this to your great sect as proof of my sincerity," Zac said as he threw a scathing glance at the profound yin elders. "Who would have known that these bitches couldn't get enough of my handsome face and chased me for three straight days?"

The members of the Everlasting Yang Sect only gaped at Zac in surprise, whereas the Profound Yin sect members looked like they would explode in anger. Another of the

Yang elders quickly noticed an opportunity to further piss off their enemies, and he looked over at the women with a sneer.

“A profound yin orchid! A fine offering indeed. It’s useless for us, but perhaps we could plant them and feed them to our cattle,” he laughed.

That comment was the last spark needed to start a conflagration, and one of the female disciples screamed in anger as she launched a blade of ice right at the elder. However, he was somewhere in the middle of the E-Grade and with a laugh easily melted it, causing a mist to rise around him.

The two sects needed very little encouragement as the next moment over ten attacks sailed through the air between the two sides. One of the elders even turned her eyes toward Zac in rage, and a crystalline bird appeared out of nowhere as it flew toward him with a screech.

Zac screamed in alarm, only half-faking it, and ran toward the members of the Everlasting Yang sect. But the bird was extraordinarily fast and its beak pierced him in his back. Zack fell over and spat out a mouthful blood that immediately froze into sanguine crystals.

“Protect that man!” Romi shouted as a lance of fire erupted from his hand, shooting straight toward the elder who attacked Zac from the other side.

Zac’s pathetic state wasn’t fully a ruse, as the peck from the bird had contained a massive amount of frigid energies that rampaged through his body. He desperately circled his Cosmic Energy along with the Dao of Trees to slowly grind away at it, but doing so left him almost unable to move.

Luckily two disciples quickly ran over and lifted him up, and one of them even infused him with some fiery energy that helped combat the cold. However, the second one did not seem to be as benevolent, and Zac noticed a pair of greedy eyes looking at his Cosmos Sack.

“What are you doing? Get him inside the gate!” Romi shouted as two more molten streams erupted from his hands to intercept the disciples who tried to approach Zac.

Seeing that Zac was being taken away caused the brawl to turn into an all-out conflict, and soon the whole area had turned into a haze from the mix of water vapors and smoke from fires. Constant explosions and screams could be heard though, and Zac couldn’t help but shake his head in bafflement. They had been all too ready to go to war with each other.

Zac heavily hung on the disciple’s arm as he pretended to be extremely weakened by the strike. In reality, his eyes were scanning the rampart in front of him, until he finally found who he was looking for. A man in his late twenties or early thirties stood on top of the wall not too far from the gate, sporting a large sword fashioned from reddish stone on his back.

This was the core disciple that Yrial had fought in the real world, and Zac’s theatrics was a bid to get closer to him. There was no way that he dared to infiltrate this sect as well with the commotion that he had caused, so he needed to take one of the rubies that had already been harvested.

The core disciple had taken the ruby out of his Cosmos Sack when taunted by Yrial in his memories, and he hadn’t needed to get it from anywhere. Since he was at peak F-Grade he was likely preparing to use it and then evolve to E-Grade, though Yrial threw a wrench in those plans.

“Just sit down and rest,” the man who helped him combat the frigid energies in his body said to Zac after they entered the sect. “The yin-energies can leave hidden wounds if not properly dispelled.”

“Thank you. I’ll focus on recuperation,” Zac simply said as he sat down and closed his eyes.

The battle was still raging outside, and the two disciples who had helped him back to the sect hurried back outside to join their brothers, and Zac was left largely alone. Almost all of the other sect members had their focus on the battle outside their walls, and it almost seemed like they were watching a play.

“Elder Romi’s **[Molten Burst]** is powerful as ever, it’s even able to melt a hole straight through the **[Ice Bulwark]** of Tylaena,” one of them muttered from atop the rampart.

Zac shook his head in wonder. The disciples even knew their enemies by first-name basis, showing how often they clashed with each other. If they just put their differences aside they would have been able to create a great sect with complementing strength, just as Yrial’s two attributes complemented each other.

But who knew if these sects even still existed in the real world. From what he had heard the average sect only lasted between 5 and 20 generations, which meant for an E-Grade sect 2 500 to 10 000 years. Between natural disasters, declining talents, and calamities thrown at them by the System there was no such thing as a permanent force.

Since millions of years had likely passed since Yrial’s feat took place these two forces were most likely long gone and forgotten, their endless conflict not even mentioned in the ancient history books. Zac sighed with some melancholy as he opened his eyes and looked around. These projections all represented people with dreams and ambitions.

But Zac soon snapped out of it as he silently got to his feet. A few disciples looked over at him, but they didn’t have time to do anything before Zac exploded into action. The ground beneath his feet cracked as he pounced right at the disciple who possessed the ruby he was after.

The core disciple barely had time to turn his head before Zac was upon him from behind. But the disciple was clearly a battle-hardened warrior, as his hand was immediately gripping the large rock-sword on his back. He quickly raised it slightly to protect his head from Zac’s incoming fist.

But even though he was a core disciple of the Everlasting Yang Sect he was completely unable to endure the fist that was empowered with a high mastery Dao and almost 600 Strength. The sword slammed into the back of his head and he was thrown forward, landing in a heap outside the sect.

Zac didn’t give him a chance to gather his wits before he followed. He jumped down from the wall walk and landed right on top of the poor man, imbued with the Dao of Heaviness. Large cracks in the ground spread beneath the disciple and his face turned green until he emptied his stomach.

Some of it splashed straight in Zac’s face but he reined in his disgust as he ripped the disciple’s Cosmos Sack from his side. He gave the puking man another stomp for good measure as he scoured the inside of the Sack for his target.

“Traitor!” a disciple screamed, and a few enraged disciples started to prepare attacks.

However, Zac’s display of might made all of them hesitant to go first, allowing Zac to snatch the large red ruby before putting it away in his own sack. A quick glance confirmed his quest was (2/2).

But Zac’s brows furrowed when he was still standing on top of the core disciple after a few seconds. Was something missing from the quest? However his danger sense

started going off, and he unhesitantly moved away with [Loamwalker] a moment before Romi's [Molten Burst] ripped through the air where he stood.

"You have guts, thief!" Romi roared, completely enraged.

He was bleeding from his mouth and his right shoulder was frozen solid from ice, but his aura was still stable, meaning he hadn't been critically wounded.

"You try to play our sects while stealing our treasures?" he growled. "You can forget about leaving this area alive!"

The fighting had already subsided and the haze that covered the pitched battle between the two sects was quickly dissipating. Soon all the disciples and elders were in full view, and all of them sported various degrees of wounds. Some even lay unmoving on the ground, their fate unknown.

One thing that seemed to unite both camps was their seething hatred for Zac though, and they all looked at him with burning eyes.

"I'm happy to see you guys finally get along," Zac sighed before he immediately sped away with his movement skill.

Quite a few dangerous auras were waking up inside the sect as well, and Zac knew he couldn't stay any longer. He unhesitantly fled into the forests with members of both sects in tow. This time however the elders were quickly outpacing their disciples, and Zac was forced to go all out.

Luckily endurance was Zac's strong suit, and neither sect seemed to excel at speed. So Zac simply switched between [Loamwalker] and high speed running for 6 hours until he finally had lost the last of the elders.

It was one of the elders from the Profound Yin sect, and she screamed in frustration into the air when she finally gave up on the chase. Zac only shook his head with a wry smile as he kept running for another two hours. He found a secluded spot and sat down to wait out the clock.

When the quest timer hit zero the world blurred, and the next moment he found himself lying in a patch of flowers with a large moon shining down on him.

"You're back, as expected of my disciple. How about it, wasn't your master dashing back in the day?" Yrial's voice floated over from the pond.

Zac slowly got up to his feet, relieved to see that only 6 hours had passed since he got put under, meaning time passed 20 times faster inside the dreamscape.

"You're something, alright," Zac said with a shake of his head as he turned toward his new teacher. "I wonder how you escaped the pursuit of two rabid sects back then?"

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 288 - A Flower of Fire and Ice**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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"How would some backwater elders catch up to the great Lord of Cycles?" Yrial laughed from his recliner by the pond. "What about it, is your master not amazing? I

played those two sects like a fiddle. And that was in the real world where one could actually die.”

The next moment Zac was once again grabbed by an unseen force and placed on a mat not far from the pond.

“I wasn’t actually at risk for dying?” Zac said through grit teeth. “I ran my ass off to avoid getting my soul torn to shreds.”

“Well, there was still danger. If you died inside your soul would be hurt and you would have to trade some of your credits for soul-healing pills,” Yrial said with a smile. “Those things are pretty expensive.”

That quickly calmed Zac down, and he thanked the gods that he hadn’t taken anything for granted in the dreamscape. Clearly, the trial was mostly a veiled attempt to show off his own feats, but it looked like the old ghost was finally about to hold up his end of the bargain.

“What’s credits?” Zac asked, holding back any complaints or comments that might derail Yrial from handing over the inheritance treasures.

“When I needed to create this inheritance I simply threw a bunch of stuff that would be valuable for young cultivators and attached a price according to its value. For passing the first trial you get between 1000 and 10000 credits, depending on how I feel. For also becoming my disciple you get double,” Yrial explained. “What you choose to use those points for is up to you.”

The next moment he fished out a crystal from his sleeve and threw it over to Zac who caught it. Zac knew it was an information crystal from a first look, and he guessed that the stored items were listed inside.

“So how many points do I get?” Zac asked with anticipation

“Well, since you’re my terminal disciple I guess you’ll start at maximum credits, ten thousand,” Yrial said, but he continued before Zac could get excited. “However, I’ll have to detract a thousand points for your face. Being a barbarian is no excuse for skipping proper skincare. I’ll also deduct a thousand for the way you defeated the construct. So eight thousand times two.”

Zac was already starting to become immune to Yrial’s comments about his looks, and he felt that the deduction for how he finished the first trial was fair enough. It still left him with 16 000 credits to spend, and he eagerly infused some Cosmic Energy into the information crystal.

A long list of items lit up in front of him, and he was surprised to see that Yrial had stashed over two hundred items that were exchangeable after finishing the first trial. Most of the items were priced between one to two thousand credits, meaning one would usually walk away with five items or so. However, there were a few items that were much more expensive.

**[Ultimate treasure - Lock of hair: 10 000 Credits]**

“Lock of hair?” Zac read out loud and looked up at Yrial with confusion. “What’s that?”

“You are my disciple after all! Impeccable taste. That item is a true lock of hair from my real body. Now that I’m dead its value is truly priceless,” Yrial said with a sagely nod.

“Your hair?” Zac exclaimed, not being able to hide his disgust. “What would I do with that?”

Yrial’s face immediately scrunched up in anger, and the air around him seemed to freeze for a second before he took a deep breath to calm himself.

“What you would do with that? Gaze upon it in awe and wonder of course. Hair from my head is an item of unlimited artistic beauty, the physical manifestation of perfection. How about it? You would still have a lot of points over if you bought it,” Yrial said with anticipation.

Zac only snorted and kept looking, drawing another glare from Yrial. In reality, the item might not actually be as useless as Yrial described. Yrial was a high or peak C-Grade hegemon when he cut that lock of hair, and Zac suspected its strength would be extraordinary. If he used the hair for crafting he would likely be able to make an extremely sturdy item.

However, he wasn't keen on wearing an armor made out of human hair, and he had no one who could craft using such high-grade materials. He instead looked for items that could give immediate boosts to his power, or at least assist in the coming battle with the Dominators.

The lock of hair wasn't the only suspicious item in the list. In fact, almost a quarter of the treasures were vanity items that related to the Lord of Cycles. There was everything from paintings to collections of his poetry. One item was just called 'My 5<sup>th</sup> favorite scarf'. But there were a lot of good things inside as well, almost to the point it was shocking.

He did find the soul-mending panacea, costing a whopping 1500 points, more than any of the attribute fruits or even most of the Dao Treasures. However, Zac wasn't surprised since he knew just how troubling soul wounds were. If the wound passed a certain degree the soul would just keep disintegrating, and almost nothing could help. That's why he was so careful about overtaxing his Dao.

There were also over a dozen Spirit Tools, each of them seeming to be of extremely high quality. When he focused on those entries he could see them, and they all emitted a far greater aura compared to the tools he brought back from the Eastern Trigram Sect.

Part of it could be explained with superior craftsmanship, but the biggest reason was the grade of the tools. Zac was shocked to see that all of the Spirit Tools were E-Grade except for a few, making them better than almost any weapon currently on earth. And they weren't even that expensive.

All of the tools cost around two thousand, apart from the two robes that both cost 3750 credits. One was a robe in the same vein as the robes he received from the system long ago, with the difference of it being a Spirit Tool. It was mostly white though, with details in red and blue.

It was likely something Yrial used until he switched to something better, or perhaps simply something he kept because he liked the colors. It seemed perfect for Zac, but he held back on an impulse buy so that he could go through everything. The other robe was a more gender-neutral robe, that might almost be considered a dress on Earth, so it wasn't as tempting for Zac.

There was also a Spiritual Ship that seemed far supreme compared to the disk he gained from the Eastern Trigram Sect, but Zac knew he couldn't afford it at the moment. It was a luxury item that he couldn't prioritize as things stood.

“I'm your terminal disciple, why don't you simply give me all of this stuff?” Zac ventured.

“I only made a deduction for your face, but I could also make a deduction for your attitude,” Yrial snorted as he once again ran his fingers through the lake. “Don't be greedy.”

“Brazla set some ground rules. I needed to put in enough treasures for at least 25 inheritors at F-Grade, 10 at E-Grade, 3 at D-grade, and one C-Grade inheritance. But if you pass the final trial everything is yours,” the ghost added after a brief pause.

Zac quickly looked down, afraid to say anything that would make him lose any more credits, and continued to look through the list. Treasures were not the only things on the list, there were also quite a few skills and five cultivation manuals.

There were also almost thirty items that Zac didn't recognize, and he had no idea what they were used for. Some were natural treasures, and a few of them cost well over five thousand points. But they didn't seem to be either Dao Treasures or Attribute fruits, making Zac unsure of their usage.

It was a huge amount compared to the Dao Fruits which only cost between 800 and 2000. But that only meant that they might be extremely good items that would be impossible for Zac to get his hands on normally.

“Could you recommend any items that would suit me?” Zac asked before he decided to throw in some flattery. “You know my situation and you are far more talented and experienced than me.”

“I'm not as easily persuaded as that little Tool Spirit,” Yrial snorted. “But perhaps if you bought a memento to remember your Dear Master by when you leave, I might be inclined to give a few tips.”

Zac grit his teeth, and with great reluctance he bought one of the cheapest ones, a portrait of Yrial sitting in a meadow of flowers, half of which were a fiery red and the other an azure blue. It cost him 500 Credits though, making Zac thoroughly annoyed.

“*A flower of fire and ice*’. An excellent choice. I had a great artist create this to commemorate me breaking through to D-Grade. If you hang it in your home you will not only raise the grade of your interiors by multiple levels but meditating on this picture will even help improve elemental Daos,” Yrial nodded, clearly looking pleased.

“So, advice?” Zac sighed as he placed the large painting in his Cosmos Sack.

“Well, first of all, you should buy **[Eye of Har'Teriam]**,” Yrial said without hesitation. “It's simply the best thing available, apart from the lock of hair.”

Zac quickly looked through the list and found it was the second most expensive item available. This one cost a whopping 9500 credits. Zac's eyes drifted toward all the other treasures he knew would help, but in the end he grit his teeth and bought the thing. From what he could tell the costs were very accurate in relation to value, except for the vanity items.

“So should I eat it immediately?” Zac asked.

“No, wait until you have broken through to E-Grade,” Yrial said with a shake of his head.

“I can't use it now?” Zac said with exasperation. “You know how bad the situation is on Earth.”

“Well, just flee if it gets too bad,” Yrial said without concern. “You can even buy the teleportation token if you feel it's too dangerous.”

The token he mentioned was a random-teleportation token that would allow him to go to a random D-Grade world. Zac was honestly contemplating buying it since it only cost 1000 Credits. It would be a final life-line and something that could at least give his sister a chance at survival if everything turned to shit on Earth.

“So, what does this Eye do?” Zac asked.

“It is guaranteed to open one of your hidden nodes, though which one can't be controlled,” Yrial said with a smug grin.

Zac whistled in surprise, and he wasn't too miffed about paying through his nose for the item. From all accounts, the hidden nodes were all good things that were like free permanent power boosts. Getting the first one immediately was sure to be helpful, especially if he decided to evolve before turning his attention toward the Dominators.

But clearly Zac's reaction wasn't enough for Yrial, and he tsked unhappily.

"Ugly and stupid. The **[Eye of Har'Teriam]** is a treasure that never appears on baby worlds, and not something that the System rewards for any quests. It's only found in a few C-Grade Mystic realms containing the remains of a long-collapsed universe," Yrial said. "Your master almost paid with his life to get it."

"If it's so good, why didn't you use it yourself?" Zac skeptically asked.

"You can only use it in E-Grade, and I couldn't sell it. Every time I tried I was almost hunted down and killed by a couple of greedy sects. I had to run for hundreds of years to get away," he muttered, clearly still annoyed by the situation.

"So what makes this item so special?" Zac probed.

"It is one of the few items that can guarantee the opening of a Hidden Node no matter who eats it. Not only that, it will even give you a clue of where your other nodes are hidden, which will make it infinitely easier to burst them open later as well," Yrial huffed.

"Do you know how you normally find where your nodes are hidden? You use your Cultivation Manual and your inner eye to meticulously scour your body. Sometimes it takes a few months, sometimes it takes decades. For most, it never happens because they can't form a resonance with the nodes. It's exceedingly hard, and not even one in a million can open a single node, let alone multiple.

"For you, it would normally be completely impossible. Mortals have no conventional methods to create a resonance with their hidden nodes, so they would never be able to break them open by conventional means.

"As far as I know there are less than 30 treasures for someone like you to have a chance to open your Hidden Nodes, and this is one of the better ones. It's completely impossible to buy, and can only be found by chance," Yrial finished his diatribe and took a deep breath for air. "Now, is your master amazing or what?"

"But wait," Zac suddenly said. "With my... Special constitution, do I even have hidden nodes?"

The blustering ghost suddenly froze, and his brows slowly started to contract into a frown.

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**Chapter 289 - Setting a Course**

Yrial's features smoothed out and he adopted his lazy expression once again.

"No, that shouldn't be the case. There is no connection between talent and the number of hidden nodes, talent only affects the ease of breaking them open. So you should be fine. Everyone possesses at least the three gates unless their race gives them something similar," he said with a dismissive wave.

"The Three Gates?" Zac asked.

"The Gate of Truth, the Spirit Gate and the Gate of Flesh," Yrial explained. "These are the three foundational nodes that most possess. One increase your

connection with the boundless Dao, one expands your mind and one tempers your flesh. All of them are pretty good, though the best ones are usually the special hidden nodes, and those vary from person to person.”

Zac slowly nodded, remembering Ylvas’ mention of bloodlines and constitutions. At least it seemed that no matter how bad his constitution was he would still possess some Nodes to open up.

“So how do I open the other nodes after the first one?” Zac asked after sighing in relief.

“There are two aspects to bursting open the hidden nodes,” Yrial said. “The first is to locate them. This is normally impossible for mortals, so pay close attention to every feeling when you eat this treasure. Don’t let anyone disturb you,” Yrial said. “The second part is to force them open. Various treasures can do that, though they are always extremely rare as well.”

“Sometimes the nodes even burst open due to special encounters. You might get a sense after an intense battle, and might be able to open up a hidden node through resonance. But that is extraordinarily rare,” Yrial said.

“Hidden nodes is about chance and fate. For most people, especially mortals, it’s impossible to force. So don’t fret if you can’t open as many as you aim for. There are other opportunities to make you stronger apart from bursting up all your nodes,” Yrial said.

Zac agreed and kept going through the list to spend his remaining 6000 credits. After buying the Eye he also bought the robe, leaving him with only 2250 points. The treasures inside were mainly geared for either boosting one’s achievements at the peak of the F-Grade or give a good start right after breaking through the bottleneck. So after some hesitation he bought a natural treasure that would give a significant boost to his Race after evolving.

It wouldn’t be enough to push him all the way to D-Grade, but it was a good start. He knew that the attribute cap was quite high, but so were the attribute gains in the E-Grade. He did not want to encounter the same issue as he did with his Strength last time. The natural treasure would get the ball rolling, and for the rest he would have to use medicinal baths like most people.

The **[Fruit of Rebirth]** only cost 500 credits, as body tempering seldom was the hard part of progressing. Zac still had some problems deciding what to do with the rest of the points. He couldn’t afford the top tier items, but he also felt that the other items couldn’t help him too much in the short run. He also bought the teleportation talisman for a 1000 credits in the end.

“You should buy **[Cyclic Strike]** as well,” Yrial suddenly said from the sidelines.

Zac quickly glanced through the list of treasures to find that it was an offensive skill that would cost him his remaining credits.

“Is it strong? What’s it good for?” Zac asked.

“I wouldn’t say it’s a too strong an attack, that’s why it’s so cheap. But it will help you progress,” Yrial said, making Zac a bit confused. “I noticed that your utilization of Dao is still a bit clumsy. It’s not too surprising since such a short time has passed since the Integration of your world, but if you plan on walking the path of duality this is something you need to improve before you advance.”

“How come?” Zac probed with some lingering confusion.

“To start creating a system, and have your classes reflect your long term goals,” Yrial explained. “**[Cyclic Strike]** isn’t a particularly amazing attack, but it requires two opposing Daos to work. So you will need to learn to combine your Dao of Rot and Dao

of Trees to channel it. It will be a good lesson for you to learn to control your specialty core as well.”

Zac noticed that Yrial was actually doing his job as a teacher, and he memorized every word the ghost said. Yrial seemed pretty happy with the attention he was getting, and a satisfied grin started to appear on his face.

“In fact, take this as the first lesson of your master. After looking through your situation I understand that your current goal is something that has been born from a series of coincidences rather than a strict vision from your path of progression. You even learned the accompanying Dao inside my trial,” Yrial said.

Zac slowly nodded in agreement. What he said was true. He had no goal of walking a path of life and death in the beginning. He had only wanted to gain the Dao of Axes and perhaps use the Dao of trees to heal and protect himself somewhat. But one thing after another led to his current situation.

“There is nothing wrong with that,” Yrial said with a nod. “Searching for your path, or being able to adapt it due to circumstances is a good thing. But now that you have started to crystallize your path you need to formalize it.”

“What does that mean?” Zac asked.

“Your two classes are not moving in the same direction at the moment,” Yrial said. “But you can force them to align with the help of your Dao. The biggest problem is, in fact, your epic class. I am pretty sure I understand your reasoning for choosing it, but getting classes with complementing attributes isn’t as important as complementing Daos. You need to force your classes into a new direction.”

“Change direction? Can I even control that?” Zac asked with bewilderment.

“Dao fusion is the easiest way,” Yrial said with a nod.

Zac suddenly understood what Yrial was getting at. His Undying Bulwark was currently based on the Dao of Hardness and the Dao of Sanctuary, exemplified by the vision of the ancestral protector. What would happen if he modified those Daos? Yrial nodded when he saw Zac’s thoughtful expression.

“It seems you understand. You have various options, but if you would listen to my opinion I would recommend that you fuse your Dao of Sanctuary with your Dao of Trees, and your Dao of Rot with your Dao of Hardness. It is still worthwhile to pursue your Dao of Axe since it would work as the delivery method for your cycle of life and death,” Yrial proposed.

Zac’s brows furrowed when he heard Yrial’s idea. Honestly, the Dao of Trees and the Dao of Sanctuary together didn’t seem like a bad idea. He could envision a large tree providing shade and protection, meaning it shouldn’t be too hard to fuse the two. But the Dao of Hardness and the Dao of Rot?

“Are the Dao of Rot and the Dao of Hardness even possible to fuse?” Zac asked with hesitation. “And wouldn’t that risk cutting off my path of progression? And also, how do you know of all my Daos? I never mentioned them and I haven’t used Dao of Sanctuary since I entered.”

“Well, first of all, I’m your master so how can’t I know your situation?” Yrial said and waved his hand, causing a slightly modified version of Zac’s status screen to pop up. “And I have to say that your situation is a bit disgusting. If I had this many titles with my supreme talent and beauty I would have become a Divine Monarch by now.”

“As for the other parts, it seems you have a too reductionist understanding of the boundless Dao. That is usually the case with lower worlds. Dao Seeds are not small isolated nuggets of truth, but part of an endless fabric,” Yrial added and pointed at Zac with his finger.

Zac's vision once again started to change, making him worry that Yrial was once again sending him into a dreamscape. But the scenery soon changed and he wasn't looking upon some new world, but rather an enormous fractal. It reminded him of the first vision he had when he had an epiphany on the Dao of Heaviness.

The fractal in front of him was far more supreme though like it contained all the secrets of the universe. At first he thought it was Yrial's Dao, but he couldn't be sure because to his surprise he sensed the familiar auras from his own Daos in different parts of the fractal.

As far as he could tell all his Daos were represented to some degree in the fractal, though they were only a small part of the tapestry. Zac tried to remember as many details as possible, but the esoteric knowledge hidden in the vision immediately slipped out of his hands. Soon the vision shattered and Zac was back on the floating island again.

"Did you understand? Everything is part of something bigger. Those kernels of truth you have grasped aren't really the truth of Trees or truths of Hardness. They are simply truths that the System has packaged in an easy to digest manner. But it is within your purview to repackage them to something that suits your path better. It requires talent and a high understanding of your Daos though, so it is not something done in a day," Yrial said.

"It simply seems a lot harder to fuse the Dao of Hardness with the Dao of Rot, though," Zac said. "What Dao could I even strive for?"

"Well, the Dao of Corpses comes to mind, and it would be easy to upgrade to Death. But there are other alternatives as well I'm sure. In any case, it will allow your next class to not be so unbalanced," Yrial added.

"Unbalanced? My Undying Bulwark class is pretty damn strong," Zac retorted.

"It is, but much of its utility is lost on you. It's a class meant for an undead champion, leading legions of the dead into war. Is that a future you see for yourself?" Yrial probed.

Zac unhesitatingly shook his head. He wasn't even sure he'd ever visit the Undead Empire, and he had no plans to keep the undead on Earth.

"I have a feeling that you walk a solitary path, just like I did. Your classes need to reflect that better. Your other class is much better in that regard, it boosts a little bit of everything, and its weaknesses are easily shored up," Yrial said.

It was a sobering realization for Zac. He had felt that his second class was almost a cheat, but in Yrial's eyes it was barely serviceable. And what he said about solitary was true. He was so far ahead of the others on Earth that it might even restrict his progress to travel in groups. Perhaps a small group of elites would work, but not armies.

"So why incorporate the Dao of Sanctuary into Dao of Trees?" Zac asked.

"For one it's to not leave any Dao lying around that might affect your class choices negatively. Having too many Daos will cause your path to be crooked, so don't get lured in by the bonus attributes. Every Dao must have a purpose, so you need to categorize your Daos into three groups.

"One for life, one for death, and one for attacks. Both your life and death groups will also help your defense as well due to the nature of your insights. It will cause a balance that will make your progression smoother. Being a super trash will already make your path of cultivation extremely arduous, there's no need to complicate it further," Yrial said.

“Another alternative is to have four groups, with one for Defense as well. In that case, you should not fuse your Daos as I recommended,” the spirit then added after some thought.

Zac slowly nodded. It felt like a shroud over his eyes had been lifted, and he was finally seeing the path he should take. It truly helped to have an experienced master. Just a few small pointers would make his life a lot easier in the future. What was even more shocking was that the annoying narcissist in front of him was such a good teacher.

“How do I fuse Dao seeds though?” Zac asked. “I have only heard that it is possible, but not how you would actually do it.”

“First of all both need to reach the peak, so you have some work to do. After that you need to merge the two Dao seeds within your body while focusing on the way you want them to fuse. If you succeed you will have a new Dao Fragment, a piece of Dao that is no longer a seed,” Yrial said.

“What happens if I fail?” Zac asked.

“Then you’ll receive a pretty monstrous backlash. Some die, others get their brains turned into soup. But with your constitution you’ll likely be fine after a few months of recuperation,” Yrial said.

“Is it as risky to simply upgrade your Dao?” Zac probed with some hesitation.

“No, but it’s a lot harder instead,” Yrial said. “You need one piece of insight per stage to evolve a Dao Seed, apart from the peak where you need two. But to Evolve a Dao Seed into a Dao Fragment you would need to attain the equivalent of five insights in one go.”

“It’s not really hard for someone in the D-Grade, but it’s extremely hard for someone in F-Grade,” the ghost continued.

“So by when should I have fused a Dao?” Zac asked.

“You have no choice, you need to do it before you evolve. For one it’s a minimum requirement to have a Dao Fragment to get an Epic E-Grade Class. But you should do it in any case if you’re planning on getting a Class that suits your path,” Yrial explained.

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**Chapter 290 - Impartment**

Zac frowned hesitantly when he heard that. He was extremely far from getting to the point of possessing four peak Dao Seeds. The Dao of Sanctuary and Rot were only at the early stage, and he had no idea when he would be able to push them all the way to the peak. Yrial seemed to understand what Zac was thinking and snorted.

“You’re lucky to have such a magnanimous teacher. I will help you out a bit, though most of the work will depend on yourself,” Yrial said as he got up from his lazy position by the pond.

“What do you mean?” Zac said hesitantly.

“As my terminal, and only, disciple I will give you additional two gifts before you leave here,” he said, and the next moment his aura exploded outward.

Immense powers radiated outward from Yrial as he floated up into the air. The islands beneath fractured and disappeared, its debris swallowed into a huge circle of energy that appeared behind him. Torrential amounts of energy ran through the circle,

and it was as though it constantly changed its nature. The main two elements were those of fire and ice, and the debris was constantly remolded by these two forces.

Sometimes the circle gave Zac the impression of a cold asteroid belt and the next moment it was scorching hot plasma. It was both, and it was neither. Zac realized the difference between the C and D-Grade for the first time, and any last doubt that The Great Redeemer was actually a C-Grade powerhouse disappeared when he sensed the all-consuming aura of his master.

“For over two hundred thousand years I walked my path, never looking back,” Yrial said, his voice completely different compared to the one earlier.

It contained endless strength and conviction. Gone was the lazy youth who loved to see his reflection in the pond, and replaced with a powerhouse who had walked over mountains of corpses to reach his station.

“I impart my path of Cyclic Supremacy to you, in hopes you will reach the grand terminus,” he said next, his words echoing like thunder in Zac’s mind.

Zac looked up with somber eyes, seeing the enormous circle of untold power slowly shrink and condense until it only had a diameter of two centimeters. It still contained the massive amounts of energies, and it shone like a sun as it flew straight into Zac’s forehead, forcing him down on his knees. The next moment he found himself in the miraculous space in front of the huge fractal once again.

The enormous fractal lit up with boundless luster, and it caused stars to light up in the pitch-black expanse around it. Each star felt ancient, as though it had existed since the beginning of time. Thousands upon thousands of them appeared, each of them containing boundless knowledge and power.

Zac was completely frozen by the sight, but an enormous snap shocked him awake. It was the large fractal that had suddenly gained a massive crack that covered a large part of it. Zac didn’t know why, but he instinctively knew that it was putting an extreme strain on the fractal to summon those mysterious stars.

Zac quickly looked around for what to do, since he knew this was something extremely important. Was he supposed to fix the fractal somehow? He prepared to move toward it, but the next moment he felt a dozen tendrils approach him. He couldn’t see them with his eyes, but his Dao Seeds strongly resonated with them.

They were the pure unadulterated Dao, and he felt that he could gain a new seed by just grabbing one of the tendrils and absorb its knowledge. But he held himself back as he remembered Yrial’s words. Gaining random Dao Seeds could hamper one’s growth rather than helping, so he focused on the tendril that most strongly resonated with his Dao Seeds.

He wasn’t sure how long this magical state would last, seeing the worsening state of the fractal. So he hurriedly focused his soul toward one of the tendrils, one teeming with life and vitality. He knew it wasn’t the Dao of Trees, but rather something much grander. Not even the Dao of Life inside the construct was more than a shadow compared to what this tendril represented, and it was as though Zac was mesmerized as he approached it.

The moment his soul connected with the tendril the world changed again. He was once again the Lifebringer with its inexhaustible lifeforce, continuously growing and expanding. Everything could be a source of growth and empowerment, no matter if it was the planet, the air, or the universe itself. Even traveling through the boundless void could provide it with the sustenance it required.

A warm exuberance spread through his body, and Zac almost felt he would be able to live forever as long as he had access to Cosmic Energy. But he soon calmed down

as his connection with the tendril ended, and he saw that it was slowly returning to its star in the distance.

Another crack in the fractal reminded him of the urgency of the situation, and he immediately pushed his soul toward another tendril, this one containing boundless darkness and desolation. Zac stabilized his mind and connected with it as well, and once again the world changed.

He once again saw the Lifebringer, but this time it didn't shine with boundless vitality. The gargantuan tree still floated through the boundless expanse, but its leaves were no longer emerald crystals. They were shrunken and graying, and some sections of the enormous canopy were completely barren.

Nothing lasted forever. Life would inevitably give way to decay, and even the Tree of Life was no exception. Its trunk was mostly hollowed out, and massive lifeforce was leaking out in a slow death. Rot spread from within, and soon there would be nothing left.

Zac shuddered as the connection with the tendril broke, and he brought some of the death with him. He had no idea whether what he saw was true, or whether it was an adaptation to fit his own Dao. But in either case, he felt that his newly acquired seed had grown substantially in its space in his mind.

By this point the whole space was shaking, and Zac quickly moved on to the next tendril that resonated with him. It gave him a feeling of piety, of self-sacrifice and that everything in the universe was connected. He felt it was strongly connected with his Dao of Sanctuary, and he quickly connected with it. He was suddenly standing next to millions of people, looking up at the ancient protector, seeing the gentle smile on his face as he turned to face the end of the universe.

But Zac had no time to glean anything as the vision shuddered and broke apart. The insight slipped out of his grasp, and he once again saw the large fractal. This time it was illusory, and in just a few seconds it was completely gone. The next moment the stars in the universe reseeded, taking their boundless knowledge with them.

The vision ended and he was once again standing on the last intact island.

Zac immediately sat down with his eyes closed, ruminating on the massive gains he had just received. It was only thirty minutes later he once again opened his eyes. The first thing he noticed was that Yrial's form had grown dim, no longer exhibiting the boundless power as before. Zac had a feeling that imparting Zac with these massive Dao insights didn't come without a steep cost.

"This gift is immense," Zac finally said as he opened his eyes. "Is there anything I can do in return?"

"What could you do, little brat?" Yrial said with a snort. "Who knows how long I've been dead? Just be thankful that I didn't waste my impartment on someone else after I created this place."

"What do you mean?" Zac asked with confusion as he got up to his feet.

"What I gave you was a Dao Impartment. Most can only do that once in one's lifetime, and only after you have formalized your path," Yrial explained. "The cost is also massive, and very few are willing to pay the price. But then again, it does not really matter seeing as I am dead."

"I'll remember this," Zac said with a nod.

He remembered the massive fractal and realized that was likely a representation of Yrial's understanding of the Dao. It had taken serious damage to summon those mysterious stars, meaning that Imparting the Dao like that would likely cause massive damage to one's foundation.

“Don’t be so serious,” Yrial said with a wave as he produced a crystal.

“This is my second gift to you,” he said. “I took the liberty of studying your core a bit more while you were walking in your master’s shoes. It is marvelous, but it seems to come with a drawback. It is pretty arduous to change your race, no?” Yrial said.

Zac hurriedly nodded in agreement. The issue of changing between his two races was a constant annoyance. He hated the feeling of dying, and he was worried that something disastrous would sooner or later happen while he was out cold while he changed form.

“I need to essentially die to change class. Or at least I haven’t found a better method,” Zac said.

“I figured as much,” Yrial nodded. “The two sides are almost completely separated, which isn’t the case with the normal Duplicity Core. This crystal contains a skill that you can learn as both an undead and as a human. It will start the transformation for you without having to die. There is still a limit though, there is simply too little interconnectivity in your Node, a proper cycle isn’t formed. So it will still take roughly 10 to 15 seconds, and you will be quite weakened during that time.”

“That’s still a lot better compared to the old method, I was out cold for minutes there,” Zac eagerly said as he accepted the crystal.

It might still be pretty risky to use it in battle, but it was far better than before.

“Don’t worry too much. The time needed to change class should drastically decrease when your core upgrades to the next rank,” Yrial said. “I believe the skill should still be usable as well. If not I’ll just modify it when you come back.”

“How do I upgrade it?” Zac probed.

“I would guess that you need to feed it a higher grade of life and death,” Yrial said. “A great treasure representing each half of the whole. That and a lot of energy.”

As he held the crystal in his hand he was amazed at the means of Yrial. In just the few hours while he was undergoing the trial Yrial had managed to get a grasp of Zac’s odd core and design a Skill that worked with both his classes to better utilize it. Not only that, but he also had time to inscribe it into a crystal, something that he had heard was normally extremely hard.

Meanwhile, he hadn’t even taken the first step toward creating a skill of his own, something he knew was important in the future. From what he understood every stage came with less handholding from the system.

He knew he would still receive a few skills in the E-Grade, but he was also expected to create new ones himself, or at least get his hands on them some other way. At least he had gained **[Cyclic Strike]** that might help him take the first step in that direction. Zac immediately infused some energy into the crystal, but suddenly his face got odd as he looked up at his master with a helpless look.

“What? Is something the matter?” he asked with innocent eyes.

“No... It’s nothing,” Zac sighed as he looked at the name of his new skill. “It’s perfect.”

### **[Beauty Yrial’s Great Transformation Skill]**

“That’s fine then,” Yrial nodded. “With this, the first trial is over. You will not be able to enter this place again within 10 years. Before you come back you should at least have reached level 140 and have pushed your three Dao Groupings to High Fragments. Otherwise, you might not survive the trial. And even if you do I’ll just deduct credits because you cannot follow instructions.”

“Ten years?” Zac blurted out, but he suddenly took another look at Yrial’s faded form.

The impartment had no doubt drained the spirit quite a bit, and perhaps he needed to rest for a decade to restore his form. He was only a fragment of a soul after all, and the might he released for that instant was massive.

“Now, don’t disappoint me. If you ever doubt yourself because your unremarkable looks or shitty aptitude remember this; The great Lord of Cycles took you in, so you cannot be a complete waste of a human being,” Yrial said with a wave, and the next moment the air started to shimmer and distort.

Zac was about to give one final thanks, but Yrial’s voice once echoed out through the area before he was completely ejected. This time it held a majesty that reminded Zac of the great power he emitted right before the impartment.

“The path you have chosen is even harder than mine. Many will tell you to give it up, to not bite off more than you can chew. Ignore them, they are condemned for mediocrity. Only when you walk your own truth will you be free.”

He once again found himself inside the grandiose hallway of the Towers of Myriad Dao, and Zac looked up at the ten-meter high statue with mixed emotions. There was no denying that Yrial was a bit annoying and a true narcissist, but the help and gifts he had provided might last Zac a lifetime.

Yrial had taken Zac’s formless idea and turned it into a reality. Zac now knew exactly where he was at and what steps he needed to take to truly walk upon the path of Life and Death. But it had also made him realize just how much he needed to improve before he could evolve to E-Grade.

Luckily Yrial had provided him with an extremely valuable kick-start to get him going.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 291 - Return**

Zac finally opened his menu to properly check the result of the impartment. He was eager to see what his actual gains were. But before he could take a proper look he noticed some movement in his periphery.

“Thank god you are okay,” Kenzie’s voice suddenly sounded, and Zac saw her get up from a sofa not far from his statue. “We were worried when the hours kept passing.”

Brazla sat in an opulent throne next to the sofa, and he looked over at Zac with disinterest.

“You took quite some time. It can’t have been easy to pry treasures out of Lord Yrial’s hands with that face of yours,” the Tool Spirit snickered.

“It worked out fine in the end,” Zac said with a sigh. “If you knew about Yrial’s disposition, why didn’t you warn me?”

“It’s not for me to decide your path. Worst case you die and your sister inherits the towers,” Brazla snorted.

Zac shook his head and ignored the annoying Tool Spirit.

“Give me a second, I need to go over my gains,” Zac said to Kenzie as he once again opened his menu.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**74**

**Class**

**[F-Rare] Hatchetman**

**Race**

**[E] Human**

**Alignment**

**[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter**

**Limited Titles**

**-**

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - High, Seed of Trees - Peak, Seed of Sharpness - Middle, Seed of Hardness - Middle, Seed of Sanctuary - Middle, Seed of Rot - High**

**Core**

**[F] Duplicity**

**Strength**

**587 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 134%]**

**Dexterity**

**290 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]**

**Endurance**

**742 [Increase: 71%. Efficiency: 134%]**

**Vitality**

**433 [Increase: 61%. Efficiency: 134%]**

**Intelligence**

**160 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]**

**Wisdom**

**219 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]**

**Luck**

**132 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 134%]**

**Free Points**

**3**

**Nexus Coins**

[F] 296 516 043

The improvements were pretty noticeable all around, but Zac was most interested in the advancements of his Daos. He quickly opened his Dao screen and took a proper look at the changes.

**[Trees (Peak): Endurance +20, Vitality +90, Intelligence +5, Wisdom +5]**

**[Rot (High): Endurance +5, Wisdom +45, Intelligence +10.]**

**[Sanctuary (Middle): Endurance +5, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +15.]**

Not only had his Dao of Trees reached the peak, but his Dao of Rot had also completely skipped one stage and reached a high mastery. It truly made him want to quickly learn **[Cyclic Strike]**. An attack utilizing two Daos where the worst one was high mastery could only be extremely powerful.

He surprisingly enough also managed to upgrade the Seed of Sanctuary as well, but he only been had been shown a small glimpse of the vision, so it only reached the Middle stage. But he knew that wasn't the extent of the Dao impartment.

He still remembered the boundless insights in the stars, and he knew that connecting with those tendrils would make his progression on those particular Daos a lot smoother compared to others. Such a boon was extremely great for someone like him who lacked any affinities.

Truth be told Zac was still pretty unsure what that actually meant since he felt he could advance his Dao just fine up until now. He was even on the second spot on the ladder, only being trumped by the Abbot. But perhaps the difference would make itself clearer as he progressed further.

Zac closed the Dao screen and looked over his other gains. He was a bit disappointed that the attributes he gained wouldn't provide him with too many benefits, but it was better than nothing. He already knew that would likely be the case when he chose the two tendrils representing life and death over those that could improve his Dao of Heaviness and Sharpness.

Surprisingly he had gained not one but two titles in the trial as well. The had finally passed the 2500 attribute barrier, providing him with another title. Better yet, it was a special title that gave attribute effect.

**[Tyrannic Force: First to attain 2500 Attribute Points in world. Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%]**

**[Achievement Hunter: Gain 25 Titles while in F-Grade. Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%]**

He already knew about this title, but the one he saw in the Title Booklet instead provided 5% to all attributes. It seemed that being the first to gain this one gave him a slightly better version. The other one was a complete surprise though. He had no idea there was a title for gaining titles.

Zac understood why it was a high-tiered title though. If he looked at most of his titles they were things that almost no one would gain. He guessed that most would end their stint in the F-grade with between 5 and 10 titles. Elites might even pass 15, but 25 was something that perhaps only a progenitor could get.

The effect of the high tiered titles was really starting to stack up, and by now it would completely cancel out even the best boosts that proper cultivators could get from their cultivation manuals.

Apart from that, there was nothing to note. His Nexus Coins remained the same, meaning that none of his kills inside the trial provided Nexus Coins. He wasn't surprised

about the beasts he killed in the Dreamscape, but he was a bit confused about the Dao Construct.

But by now he was so used to not understanding how things worked so he simply shrugged it off. He put his free points into Strength before he turned toward his sister again.

“How did it go for Ogras, he should be out by now right?” Zac asked.

“It only took him three hours, but he left immediately afterward. He said he needed to enter seclusion to incorporate his gains,” Kenzie said before she lowered her voice. “I don’t know, he didn’t look too happy about the results. But he seemed fine.”

Zac frowned when he heard that Ogras’ experience wasn’t without its own tribulations. He threw another gaze at the Tool Spirit. Were all the inheritances made by troubling individuals whose personalities had turned them into pariahs? As long as Ogras was fine he wouldn’t pry, but it made Zac a bit leery about letting others risk their lives in the remaining trials.

“Did he say whether he was coming to Westfort?” Zac asked, making Kenzie shake her head.

Zac slowly nodded as he started to walk out of the trial with his sister in tow. He actually wanted to enter seclusion himself to incorporate the massive gains he received from Yrial’s impartment, but he simply didn’t have time. Besides, he wasn’t someone who had relied on meditation thus far, and he felt it would be more effective to get accustomed to his improved Dao seeds in the heat of battle.

“What about the others, have they already left for the Marshall Clan?” Zac asked.

“No, they’re still here. Emily was about ready to break into the trial ground and drag you out,” Kenzie responded with a smile. “We sent a representative to relay that you’re running late though.”

“Okay. Apart from Nonet and Emily, has anyone else said they want to come with?”

“Well, Calrin wants to go,” Emily noted. “The negotiations for setting up a branch has hit a snag. However, Julia came by earlier. It seems she doesn’t want to go after all.”

Zac wasn’t overly surprised by that, seeing how strong Emma’s hatred for the New World Government was. It was pretty hard to defend one’s employer when there were so many shady dealings going on. Zac also had a somewhat bad feeling about Thomas Fisher. How had he gotten so strong so quickly? What was the government up to?

“That’s fine, I guess. Our dealings with the New World Government can go through the Marshall Clan for now,” Zac said.

“There’s also Lyla and Olivia,” Kenzie added after some hesitation. “They both kind of want to go back to Greenworth to look for their families, if only just to bring them here.”

“I’m honestly not sure how I would accomplish that,” Zac hesitantly said. “Their teleportation network is closed.”

“Well just ask around while you’re over there,” Kenzie said before an impish smile started to spread on her face. “So, are you excited about seeing Thea?”

Zac almost missed his step before he quickly found his bearing.

“I guess, she’s still holding on to a lot of treasure I lent her,” Zac nodded, evading the real meaning of the question.

He, of course, knew what his sister was getting at, but he honestly didn’t know how he felt about it. He did enjoy the two weeks that he traveled the Eastern Trigram

Sect with Thea, but he wouldn't go so far as to say there was love. He had somewhat shut down on that department since Hannah stabbed him. Kenzie only snorted with a roll of her eyes, but she didn't stress the issue.

"You sure you don't want to come with?" Zac asked.

"No, I feel I am pretty close to gaining another Dao Seed, I want to focus on that instead," Kenzie said. "I want to be able to protect myself, but I'm still too weak."

"Finally, I was going crazy!" a shout echoed through the forest as Emily rushed toward the two the moment they entered Zac's compound. "And that big one is no fun."

To Zac's surprise, he saw that Emily was still slightly covered in dirt and war-paint. Had she put it on purpose? Zac mutely gazed on her face for a bit until it dawned on him. Was she trying to hide her childish features by obscuring them?

"Where is Nonet?" Zac asked.

"It's meditating in that courtyard over there," Emily said and pointed at one of the buildings that were usually empty. "Are we going now?"

"In a bit. Someone get Adran as well, I'll be needing his assistance for this trip," Zac said as he walked toward the courtyard.

He felt it wasn't enough to only bring a teenager, a gnome and an Anointed with him. The Marshall Clan was filled with wily old businessmen and politicians, and Zac was in no mood to handle those types on his own. Normally he would have brought Mr. Trang as a buffer, but he had taken up as the Admiral of his burgeoning Naval Force.

He was likely on his way back to the other continent to set up a base camp at this moment. Ogras was another candidate, but he was a bit unreliable, and with his history with the Marshalls, he might rather become a liability. That left Adran and Abby, and it felt like Adran was the best choice.

Zac entered the courtyard and immediately saw Nonet sit in the center of it. He was once again reminded just how massive these guys were, and it even looked like Nonet had grown at least half a meter since they met last time. Did they keep growing as their levels increased?

"Long time no see," Zac said with a smile as he sat down. "How is Hive Kundevi?"

"Hive is thriving now that our tunnels are restored. My warriors were getting restless though, but the eradication project in your mines have kept them busy. The hatred of corruption is slowly disappearing. It gives us peace, but it also leaves us without purpose," Nonet said.

"Your power keeps growing, Lord Atwood. I can no longer sense the limits of your Strength," Nonet added after looking him up and down. "It will be needed against the Dominators, especially with their recent boost in power."

Zac sighed with a nod.

"I encountered Inevitability in the hunt," Zac said with a helpless grimace. "They are extremely strong. I am not confident in defeating them unless I evolve first."

"Do not forget, you do not stand alone," Nonet said. "That is why I am coming with you. I need to discuss our response with my people."

"I heard something... from Inevitability. About the Anointed," Zac hesitantly said.

"That we will not be able to advance to what the system calls E-Grade?" Nonet said. "We know. I already feel I am approaching the limits of my body. That is why I wish to join you in this venture. The age of the Anointed is coming to an end, but we have one final task to complete. I cannot rest easy knowing the Dominators still are out there. The Cosmic Energy might not be corruption after all, but that group still brings about the corruption of the soul."

Zac nodded and retold what he had learned about the Dominators in the hunt, about the Great Redeemer and the connections that he found.

“The Great Redeemer...” Nonet muttered and clenched its fist. “There were always rumors of a great leader pushing the Dominators forward. To think it was like this. Selling out their own planet and people for strength. They are true abominations!”

Zac nodded in agreement. It took a special kind of callousness to condemn your whole planet for a shot at getting stronger. Especially when that wasn't the only method of gaining strength. They could just have progressed on their own like the rest, but instead chose such a sinister path.

“Well, I have already met one more Anointed who spoke of a council. They are preparing for battle,” Zac said. “I hope you can get in touch with them through the hive near Westfort.”

The two discussed things some more, where Nonet confirmed some details about human culture. This was the first time it properly left its Hive it seemed, and it wanted to avoid causing trouble. It seemed Ibtep would also join, though Zac was unsure whether that special Zhix would really lessen any potential confusion.

In the end, they decided that Zac would join Nonet at the hive two days after he arrived unless they came back first. The two got up and met up with the impatient teenager outside.

It was time to go to Westfort.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 292 - Westfort**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**Happy Easter!**

“It's almost night already,” Emily huffed. “We're so late!”

“Ibtep tells me this one is neither your progeny nor your mate,” Nonet said as it looked down at Emily with curiosity. “What purpose does she serve? Is she a warrior slave from a vanquished hive? Zhix slaves are seldom accorded such freedom of speech.”

Emily stopped in her tracks and gaped up at Nonet, who calmly returned her gaze. Zac coughed as he shot a gaze at the teenager. It honestly was a good question. Just what was Emily to him? In a sense, he had picked up her in the spur of the moment, and he knew he had somewhat used her as a temporary replacement for Kenzie, like an emotional binky. But now he wasn't sure.

“I guess she's a mascot?” Zac hesitantly said after a bit, drawing an enraged glare from Emily.

“I'm battle support! I can make anyone stronger! I just had a late start,” she said grumpily before she turned toward the teleporter and walked away in a huff.

“The young can be capricious,” Nonet said with a nod. “We usually send them into the deep caverns to learn survival and moderation. Is human childrearing the same?”

Zac was about to say no, but he wasn't sure if that was true any longer with Alyn in charge. They did send the students to battle beasts as soon as they were strong

enough. He also remembered Abby saying that making a beginner zone was already underway.

“Well, we do something similar with our Academy here I guess. But now we have adapted to teach more about Cosmic Energy,” Zac said.

“Would it be possible to send a few of our young to this Academy of yours?” Nonet asked.

“Sure,” Zac said with a shrug, as he was sure Alyn wouldn’t mind a couple of war crazy students to increase the competitiveness. “It’s getting late, let’s go.”

“Wait, let me come with,” a light voice suddenly resounded, making Zac look over with a slight frown.

Alea was walking over, wearing one of her battledresses that contained defensive charges. Zac was unsure what to say when he saw her approach with Calrin in tow, as the two hadn’t spoken since Zac told her off.

She had avoided him since the incident, even skipping out on meetings in favor of cultivating at the odd poison-tree in the mountains, and Zac didn’t really know where he stood with her. However, the thought of bringing a slightly unstable poison mistress to the Marshall Clan made Zac’s hair stand on end.

“Why do you want to go?” Zac hesitantly asked.

“To provide back-up. Adran and Calrin will likely be busy in meetings all day, but the Marshall Clan has so many people. You need someone who will be able to keep the bureaucrats at bay while you focus on the library and other more pressing matters,” Alea said. “Ogras said I should go. Janos won’t be any help and Ilvere is a meathead.”

“You should understand why I’m reluctant to bring you,” Zac said.

Alea slightly frowned for a few seconds before she suddenly looked up at Zac with a determined look. The next moment she started to change, growing into a horrifying swamp monster that was as tall as Nonet. Zac took a step back in surprise, and a knife appeared in Nonet’s hand as though from nowhere. However, the large monster didn’t attack anyone, and it soon started to shrink again, turning into a conspicuously naked Alea. Zac’s eye widened a bit before he forced himself to look away.

“Before I arrived at this planet I tried to force a change in my constitution to one that would better suit my skills,” Alea said, as she unhurriedly dressed herself again. “My heritage is incomplete, and some critical details were missing. It went awry and that form was the result of it. It has also caused some internal imbalances that made me... impulsive.”

Zac looked over at Alea who looked straight back at him.

“But the past month I’ve made tremendous progress by cultivating beneath the tree of Toxic Ascension. My body is still slightly impacted, but I have at least driven out the toxins out of my mind,” she said.

“... Fine, let’s go.”

Zac honestly wasn’t sure about his decision as he walked with the others in tow toward his teleporter, but he felt this trip could be used as an experiment. Alea was extremely powerful, and would likely be more helpful than anyone else in the upcoming battles, apart from Ogras.

If she could prove herself that she could be trusted and work in a group again it would be for the best. Then he could slowly return various responsibilities to her. And truth be told, he simply missed having her around. And he didn’t believe she would cause too many problems, especially not after what happened the last time.

“But I’ll make it clear. No poisons anything like that unless we are attacked, got it? These people are our most important allies for the upcoming battles,” Zac said.

“I know what to do,” Alea simply nodded.

Soon they arrived at the teleportation platform, and the group found Ibtep, and Adran waiting along with Emily. Zac internally sighed again as he felt this would be like a repeat of his motley crew when he went to the auction.

Only this time the ratio of Aliens to Humans was even worse.

“Eh, Alea is coming as well?” Emily gaped from her spot next to the teleporter before she gave Zac an odd glance. “You are pretty gutsy.”

“What?” Zac asked with a frown.

“Nothing,” Emily said with a giggle. “Let’s go!”

The next moment the teleporter lit up, and the group walked inside one by one. The group soon found themselves in a modern lobby. Zac didn’t know why, but he had for some reason expected to arrive at some old Gaelic fortress or something of the kind.

Thea hadn’t talked a lot about her heritage, but from what he had pieced together the Marshall Clan was practically ancient, with over one thousand years of history. But the surroundings reminded Zac of the lobby in New Washington, looking a lot like a terminal.

However, there were signs of the new reality they lived in as well, as large fractals covered both the walls and the roof. They were pretty crude compared to what he had seen in other places, but it clearly showed that the Marshalls might put even more effort into inscriptions than Port Atwood did. He remembered the homemade tools Thea used for example, such as the hazmat suit and the tent.

Unsurprisingly the group consisting of beings of all shapes and sizes garnered quite a bit of attention, but people were more prepared this time. Roland Marshal had clearly been waiting as he was snoozing in a comfortable sofa. But when their group arrived he quickly perked up and hurried over.

“Lord Atwood, I am happy you were able to make it after all. I must say, only a few days have passed and your aura has become even more formidable. As expected of Earth’s greatest powerhouse,” he shot off in quick succession as he got a proper look at the group. “I see that you’ve brought a larger retinue this time.”

“As you know my city is on an island,” Zac said with a small smile. “A few people wanted to come with to stretch their legs.”

“Of course,” Rolan said with a nod, as though bringing this odd group was completely normal.

Zac introduced them one by one, though Roland clearly knew of Ibtep and Calrin from before due to their appearance at the Auction. The impatient Sky Gnome immediately tried to glean why he hadn’t been able to set up a branch in Westfort, but Roland expertly dodged the question.

“We will have time to go through all these matters, but if you all would follow me first. All visitors must receive their tags. It is a security measure to combat infiltration by invaders or other hostile forces,” Rolan said as he ushered them toward a manned counter.

Zac and the others simply followed along, and each got a small metallic disk. Surprisingly enough there was a small engraving on it.

“This seems to be a tracking rune that is used in conjunction with an array,” Calrin said as he glanced up at Roland. “In most societies, this level of monitoring would be considered rude.”

“I do apologize. However, war calls for desperate measures. We are limited in our methods compared to the established forces of the Incursions, and have to use a somewhat heavy hand to protect our interests,” Rolan said with an apologetic smile.

“It’s fine,” Zac said with a disinterested shrug, as they had no plans to do anything untoward at Westfort.

“Excellent. If you would follow me to the West Compound. It is the inner area of Westfort where the main clan resides and does its business. A small welcoming dinner is prepared, and I am sure Thea would be happy to see you again,” Roland said.

Zac nodded but remembered his company and threw Alea a sneaky glance to make sure she wouldn’t cause any trouble. She caught his glimpse and only rolled her eyes in response. The group was shown to a series of cars, and Zac noticed that even the car windows had engravings on them. Just how many inscribers had these people employed?

The town was larger than Zac had expected, and he suspected that well over a million people could live here provided that the buildings they passed were occupied. But he noticed that most of the structures were recent additions. In fact, Zac realized Westfort might contain more recently built structures than Port Atwood.

There was not much traffic though, and they soon arrived at a manned wall. It didn’t seem to protect the core of the town, but rather a side-section much like his own inner wall. Roland flashed a badge and their convoy passed through the heavily armed gates without issue. They found themselves in a large neighborhood with a mix of large mansions. If Westfort wasn’t a small town he would have guessed that they were embassies by their varied designs.

“While the marshall clan maintained larger offices in London before the integration, much of our business was still handled right here in Westfort. These buildings were both residences and offices for family members holding various positions in our conglomerate,” Roland explained when he noticed Zac’s interest.

“Just how many family members do the Marshall Clan have?” Zac asked.

“It’s hard to say, really,” Roland said. “The core family has around two hundred members, but we also have thousands of branch family members. Some branches are a proper part of the family and worked within our businesses before the integration, but many also paved their own path.”

Zac nodded in understanding, but he wasn’t nearly as impressed as he would have been before the integration. A family consisting of thousands of members was extremely uncommon in the old world, but in the Multiverse it could barely be considered a clan.

With the increased lifespans families could grow extremely large, and many dynasties had hundreds of millions of members according to Alyn. Even Clan Azh’Rezak had almost a million family members all told, and it was considered a small and newly established group. It would have gotten even more out of control if it wasn’t for the fact that it apparently became harder to conceive a child the stronger one got.

“We’re still some ways away,” Roland added. “We’re heading to the old homestead. It is where the Marshall clan was founded, and parts of its structures can be traced back all the way to the 9th century.”

Zac whistled, suitably impressed, though Calrin and the Demons seemed a bit confused.

“Our history is extremely short and our technology has pushed us forward. Finding a structure over a hundred years old is pretty impressive, let alone one over a thousand years old,” Zac explained.

Soon the mansions gave way to large fields, and they drove on a solitary road toward a huge sprawling mansion in the distance. As they approached it he started to wonder how a palace like this could be called a homestead.

It was a huge Palladian mansion that should have been built a few hundred years ago. Just a glance would tell anyone that it was thousands of square meters large, and Zac wouldn't have been surprised if someone had told him it was a summer castle for the British Royals back in the day.

However, there were also some new additions to the mansion. Three large side-structures in matching design seemed to have been added quite recently, and one of them was still not quite finished. There was also a massive building to the side that looked like a gargantuan spiraled seashell. It rose well over a hundred meters into the air, and Zac had a strong suspicion that this was the library that Thea received.

Another small wall had been erected some distance from the compound, and it encompassed all the structures along with a sizeable garden. The wall wasn't even two meters tall, but Zac knew that it wasn't just decorative as he could see a shimmer in the air above it. There was likely at least one array protecting the area, perhaps a full set of them.

"I think we might have a different definition of a homestead," Zac said to Roland, who shrugged with a smile.

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**Chapter 293 - Different Choices**

"Our founder, the first Baron Marshall, called his small manor the Old Homestead. Through the centuries our family grew, and many expansions and remodels took place, but the name always stuck with us. The manor gained its current form in the late 18th century, though we have added quite a bit real estate since the integration. Our family was spread all over the globe before the world changed, but we have worked hard to bring as many as possible home," Roland explained.

When Emily heard his explanation she immediately perked up.

"Have you mapped out the world by now? Do you know where all the cultivators from Allentown appeared?" she hurriedly asked before Zac could rein her in.

It wasn't that he didn't want Emily to find her two siblings, but rather that he didn't want to give the Marshall Clan too much information. His relations with Thea didn't necessarily extend to the rest of the family, and he didn't want Emily's brother and sister to end up as potential pawns in some political game.

"We looked around the area of the town, but that group seems to have been teleported to somewhere else on earth," Zac added calmly to explain what she meant.

"I can't say that we have a full grasp of our new world so far, but we have successfully mapped out almost our supercontinent. However, according to our astronomers our planet is enormous, with a diameter of at least twenty times that of our old World," Roland explained. "And according to our calculations, Pangea takes up only around 20% of the total surface."

Zac was pretty shocked by the sheer size of their new planet. He knew that Pangea was simply massive. The Undead Incursion was as large as the former United States, but it was only a small section of the massive continent. To think that such a huge chunk of land was only twenty percent of the total.

But it also made Zac more certain that the other landmass was another continent rather than a large island. Zac had even thought it possible that they simply had reached Pangea from both ends, but that one of the coasts was uninhabited.

“We have reason to believe that our continent isn’t the only one, though we still haven’t heard any news about another. Perhaps it’s simply a massive ocean,” Roland said, almost confirming Zac’s thoughts. “But mapping the great beyond has proven difficult. Our drones get taken down by huge birds and our ship destroyed by frenzied sealife. In general, the Cosmic Energy causes great disturbance to transmitted signals.”

After asking a few questions to make sure he understood which city Emily was referring to he tapped it into some app. But he didn’t speak for a few seconds and Zac started to frown when he noticed his face. He quickly placed a hand on Emily’s arm for support.

“What is it?” Zac asked.

“Unfortunately... It seems they belong to one of the lost groups...” he hesitantly said before he looked up at Emily. “Young lady, do not give up hope though. We still do not know the fate of the lost groups, and they may be alive and well.”

“Lost groups?” Zac said after seeing Emily being stunned silent. “What do you mean?”

“By now we have mapped out roughly 98 percent of all tutorial groups in the civilized world. That does not include regions with weak censuses though where we can’t make accurate assumptions. Of the thousands of groups we and the New World Government has mapped, 29% are missing,” Roland said as he showed a graph on the tablet.

“We believe a few percents are missing due to the Zhix. We know for a fact that many groups with large Zhix presences were completely annihilated. Some made it with just a handful of survivors who managed to hide from the Zhix rampage during the quests,” Roland explained.

“But for the most part we believe the missing groups be to related to the fourth race,” Roland said and threw an odd look at Alea. “So we believe that a quarter of the tutorial groups have been moved to wherever the inhabitants of the fourth world reside, though their fates are unknown.”

Zac sighed and nodded in confirmation. He understood that look very well. The first time he introduced the Demons he said they were the fourth race to avoid trouble. But with the hunt, most of the larger organizations should have realized that the fourth race was the molemen living in the underworld.

Zac hadn’t met any humans from the underworld in the hunt, but between the molemen and other hunters there should have been hundreds of them appearing, and the information should have quickly spread.

Perhaps the Marshall clan and the government were already trying to get in contact with the underworld to liberate the people or claim the riches. Still, since they were almost at the mansion he didn’t bring up the subject and instead turned to Emily.

“Don’t worry, we will keep looking. Nothing is certain yet,” Zac said, and Emily somberly nodded her head.

Not long after they passed the manned gates as the two cars stopped right outside the doors. It was getting late, but floodlights kept the whole square in front of the manor completely lit, and multiple guards were making rounds.

Zac felt a bit out of place in this sort of luxurious environment, but being a top powerhouse instilled him with an air of confidence as they followed Roland inside. The

others had much more varied expressions as they ranged from slightly bored to gaping and loudly exclaiming at the opulence inside.

“Man, this place is creepy,” Emily muttered. “This place is haunted for sure.”

Zac coughed in embarrassment, but he inwardly had to agree. He had already met ghosts since the integration so he knew they were real. And if some existed on Earth, this old manor was a prime contender for being ghost central. The large hallway was stacked with antique relics, with everything from art to ancient weaponry and armors.

“Young lady, you might in fact be on to something,” Roland said as he looked over with a smile. “Stories of hauntings in this manor have circulated for at least two hundred years. The middle ages were quite bloody, and some say resentment might have lingered. We have even brought in experts to make sure that we don’t have any supernatural beings hiding in the attic now that the world is full of magic.”

Emily paled a bit as she glanced around as she walked closer to Zac. It didn’t look like she had expected her random remark to have such credence.

“You’ve made it,” a wizened voice suddenly echoed out through the doorway at the end of the hall, and when they entered they found Henry Marshall standing in front of a table laden with documents. “We were starting to worry some complications had arisen. But when we noticed you had gained another level we figured that you had found some opportunity.”

“The company you keep is still quite diverse,” the Marshall patriarch noted as he looked up from the stack of papers on the table.

“I haven’t changed my mind on that front since we last spoke,” Zac said as he accepted a glass of champagne from a waiter that soundlessly arrived with refreshments.

“There are a lot of new faces,” Henry said as he looked over the party until it stopped at Nonet. “Strength to your hive. I am Henry Marshall, leader of the Marshall clan.”

“I am Nonet, Anointed of Hive Kundevi. Strength to your hive,” Nonet said with some surprise.

“I assume you joined Lord Atwood to reconvene with your brethren at the nearby hive?” Henry asked, drawing a simple nod from the Anointed. “I will have my men escort you in a car at your convenience. If you could relay the message that we simply wish for peaceful co-existence I would be in your debt. Our own tries at diplomacy have proven unfruitful.”

“I will relay the message to the council,” Nonet said without promising anything further.

Nonet was anxious to visit the hive, so Henry arranged for an escort for Nonet and Ibtep, and they immediately left the manor.

“Thea is not coming today?” Zac suddenly asked as he looked around.

There were only Henry and a handful of family members that seemed to act as advisors and aides in the large room. Thea was nowhere in sight, and neither was Billy for that matter.

“When she heard that you got delayed she decided to head into the wilderness to fight. The beasts are progressing quite rapidly and unless we regularly cull them we would risk a beast tide. But mostly it was her competitive spirit that wouldn’t let her sit still while you improved,” Henry explained with a smile. “Your large friend went with her.”

Zac nodded in understanding as he sat down at a table that could seat over twenty people. For a moment he thought they tried to hide Thea to avoid returning the items he lent her, but he felt that Thea wouldn't go along with such a thing. A luxurious dinner was soon served, and the topics were kept light. The family members from the Marshall clans were great conversationalists, and it soon felt like a gathering of old friends.

Clearly, their goal was to dig out all kinds of information through the occasional and seemingly innocuous question, but everyone knew to keep quiet about sensitive matters. Besides, only Kenzie and Ogras knew of the truly sensitive intelligence on Port Atwood. Even Emily who lived on his compound had no idea about the true identity of the Creators.

After the dinner was over Zac noted that Henry gave the sign to the servants, and they all left the room in quick order. Left were only Henry, four aides, and Zac's retinue.

"I hope that we will be able to forge a strong alliance between our forces during your visit, and take the first step toward purging our planet from invaders," Henry began as his eyes swept toward Adran and Alea. "However, before that there is something that I would need clarified. I think you know what I am talking about."

"The demons?" Zac said with a smile.

As he expected the issue cropped up almost immediately.

"The Demons," Henry confirmed with a somber face.

"It is as you expect, they were once part of the Incursion close to Port Atwood," Zac said. "As you might have heard from Thea, the integration left me alone on an island along with a Demonkin Incursion.

"I am not sure how clear your people are about the details, but after the conditions for closing an Incursions are met, the invading force is given a grace period to escape through their Nexus Hub," Zac continued. "There was a group that chose to break ties with their old force, and instead join me in founding Port Atwood."

"We are aware of the mechanics," Henry nodded. "However you must understand the risk you are putting yourself and Earth in. In one hundred years they will be able to contact their former clan, leading them back here at full force."

The two demons at the table threw Henry cold glances, but he completely ignored them.

"So what would you do if you were in my situation?" Zac asked.

"We were in your situation a short time ago when we finally managed to close the Incursion that plagued the area. My granddaughter managed to assassinate a few of the leaders, allowing us to win the war. Most fled through the crystal when defeat was inevitable, but a few stayed on," Henry explained, a ruthless glint shimmering in his eyes. "We killed them to the last man."

Zac felt a shiver when he looked into Henry Marshall's eyes. The old man was nowhere strong enough to be a threat to him, but Zac knew that he himself lacked such ruthlessness. Henry was ready to go to any length to protect his family and their interests, and Zac had a feeling that was what he was conveying by telling Zac about their handling of the incursion.

"Well, our situations were different. I needed people and information, and the demons provided both. Besides, they would be the first to get killed by their clan if they called them over," Zac said. "As for how I handle the other Incursions, that will depend on their actions."

Besides, Zac already knew that the few D-Grade powerhouses Clan Azh'Rezak possessed were right at the start of the grade. They had barely managed to pass the hurdle of forming their core, but they wouldn't go any further on the path of cultivation.

Only the clan leader and the supreme elder were slightly better. There was no way that they would be able to mount an assault on Earth unless their planets for some reason became neighbors through some cosmic joke.

The atmosphere in the room started to become quite heavy, and the advisors threw Henry worried looks. They were no doubt unhappy about an escalating conflict, especially when Thea was out hunting. But suddenly Henry reclined in his chair with a shrug.

"The strong make the rules. Such is our reality now, and the rest will have to accept it and adapt. This brings us to another issue, have you been able to connect with the underworld?" the old man said.

Zac was slightly thrown off by the change in subject, but the two were connected in a sense. Since Henry had stepped back on the issue of the Demons, then so would he.

"No. Either their teleporters are not public or there is something else causing interference," Zac said with a shake of his head.

He still didn't feel it was time to disclose his theory of the second continent.

"You should know that most forces are currently desperately digging downward to connect with the underworld. The fact that there are massive riches has spread far and wide because of a few bigmouthed hunters," Henry said with a sigh. "It's a modern-day gold rush, and many are even ignoring the threats of the Incursions."

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**Chapter 294 - Cultivation**

"No one has been able to connect to the underworld yet?" Zac asked.

"Not to our knowledge," one of the aides said with a shake of his head. "There are speculations that there is some layer far down into the ground that hinder the teleportation arrays. Others even believe that the underworld is in fact on one of the moons."

Zac's first looked at the man with skepticism, but upon further consideration he felt it wasn't too far-fetched. Their new planet had three moons now, and while none of them looked like a proper planet there was nothing saying that it wasn't possible to survive underground up there. Perhaps his theory of the underworld being beneath the other continent was completely wrong.

But something told Zac this wasn't the case. It would be extremely odd if an incursion was placed on one of the moons. How were they supposed to close it if that was the case? His theory felt much more promising. But for now he kept his thoughts to himself. And, of course, none of his people would explain the situation either.

Henry seemed intent in sounding out Zac's thoughts about the coming battles, but Zac still hadn't decided on his course of action and kept his intentions vague. Besides, he did not want to make large decisions while both Thea and Billy were absent.

It was already well past midnight, and Zac was starting to feel tired since he had come here straight from the Inheritance trial. So he instead said he needed to cultivate, and he excused himself from the table. Emily had turned quieter during the evening, likely thinking about her siblings, and she excused herself as well.

No one slept a lot any more with their improved constitution, so Zac left Adran and Calrin to accompany Henry and his aides to discuss the details of their alliance instead. Alea chose to stay behind as well as a liaison for the military arm of Port Atwood. A group of maids waited outside, and Zac and Emily were shown to their rooms.

Zac's living quarters was a huge suite comprised of five rooms. There were two separate bedrooms, a living room and what seemed to be cultivation chambers. When Zac entered he was surprised to note that the density of cosmic energy was slightly higher inside compared to the outside. He also sensed that the walls were extremely thick, providing great isolation.

There even was a high-quality air control function inside that kept the air just right. The increased density didn't make any difference for a mortal like Zac, but it undoubtedly felt nicer to reside in more energy-rich areas. Zac closed the door behind him and noted with some interest there was even a Do Not Disturb-button by the door.

He had to admit that the Marshal Clan had gone a very interesting route where they combined their old lifestyle with the integration, creating something unique for themselves. That was also made apparent from their effort to incorporate inscriptions in modern items.

Port Atwood was to a far greater degree adapted to the general state of the multiverse, and Zac realized there were almost no modern items in his private courtyard anymore.

It almost felt as though he was inside a sensory deprivation chamber from the moment he closed the door, and he had no trouble to calm his mind. Zac usually preferred to sit in his courtyard to meditate while listening to nature, but this experience was nice as well.

The first problem he wanted to take a minute to ponder upon was what he should do in regards to Yrial's advice regarding his Dao.

The earlier he decided which of the paths he would take, the better. That would allow him to try to gain suitable insights for his Daos as he pushed them toward Peak mastery. As he saw it there were three alternatives to take, rather than the two Yrial mentioned. He could also go for only two Dao Groups in addition to three or four.

The final option would be where took his fusions one step further and created one group of life and defense, with the other group representing Death and Attack. That would reflect the two top tier Daos, Creation and Oblivion. But he quickly discarded his path as he took out **[Verun's Bite]**. Zac slowly dragged his fingers across the large axhead, and he felt a small resonance in his mind.

Zac had held an axe in his hand since the integration took place, and it had become a part of him. He couldn't imagine giving up the path of the axe in favor of only focusing on the two elements of life and death, so he quickly discarded the thought of only having two Dao Groups. Besides, he felt that doing so might result in his following classes to become even more lopsided.

After some hesitation he also decided to give up on having a fourth group, one solely dedicated to defense. He didn't have any connection to a shield like he did with an axe, and pushing for that Dao wasn't something he felt being too important.

He would shore up his defense with the help of massive attributes, skills and Hybrid Daos instead. That left the original suggestion that Yrial had put forth. The Dao

of Corpse didn't sound too appealing to him, but Yrial said there would be other alternatives as well.

He spent a few hours consolidating his improved Dao Seeds. He had very little experience with the Seed of Rot, and he knew that he would have to battle it out a bit while using it to test its might. He also taught himself both **[Cyclic Strike]** and his Transformation skill.

Yrial's transformation skill formed a layer around the core, and Zac realized he would need to either infuse it with the Dao of Trees or Dao of Rot if he wanted to change his form. **[Cyclic Strike]** was a bit more unique though.

The skill was the first one he had encountered that was comprised of two fractals, one on each of his shoulders. He was worried for a second he would need to use both his arms for the attack, but after channeling the two Daos into their respective fractals he realized that wasn't the case.

He did, however, realize that he was unable to completely activate the fractals. A very delicate balance was needed between the two Daos, and if Zac didn't control his energies exactly right the skill would fizzle out immediately. This was only exacerbated by the fact that the two Dao Seeds he used weren't of the same grade.

He frowned a bit, knowing he wouldn't be able to use his new skill in the short run. But he understood what Yrial meant that this skill would help him improve his control of his Dao. At the moment he only pumped his attacks full of his mental energy, but this skill required far more sophistication.

Since there would be no quick results from **[Cyclic Strike]**, Zac instead turned his attention toward the transformation skill. But before he tried to activate it he stopped himself as he looked around. He took a second look at the roof and all the corners for any hidden spying devices before sitting down again. But even then he put on a cowl to cover his face just to make sure.

Content that there was no one spying on him he infused the fractal with the Dao of Rot, and he felt a decent amount of Cosmic Energy getting dragged into the fractal as well. The next moment small lines of energies connected with the core, and Zac immediately sensed the change.

Miasma immediately started to flood his system, and he almost fell even though he was already sitting. At the same time his Cosmic energy was quickly getting absorbed by the core, and it was as though a cycle had formed where the death-attuned energy was driving all normal energy out of his body and into the Duplicity Core.

A wave of nausea hit Zac but he held on and kept infusing the skill with the Dao of Rot. Luckily Yrial's estimations had been correct, and the change only took around ten seconds. He opened his status screen to be sure, and he had truly changed to his Draugr form.

It was the first time he had the opportunity to properly observe the transformation, and it was pretty interesting. It wasn't only the energies that changed, but something else was dragged out of his body and pushed into his core. In its stead, his organs were filled with something else.

It was the change of this mysterious force that was the difference between vibrant red blood and the black sludge that now sat in his veins. He had no idea what it was since he couldn't sense it properly. At least he felt it was something completely different compared to life force and miasma. In the end, he could only chalk it up to be the essence of the respective races.

Luckily there was no trouble in learning the two skills in his undead form either. The transformation skill was already adapted for his dual races by Yrial, whereas the attack was mainly powered by the Daos.

Since he was already in his undead form he decided to test something that had been on his mind for days. He quickly took out the Cultivation Manual that Mhal had left behind. Zac already had learned how to utilize a manual from listening to Alyn and his sister and knew exactly what to do to see whether he was a cultivator in this form.

Luckily it didn't seem that the Undead manuals were any different, apart from running on miasma instead of Cosmic Energy. The first thing he did was to take out and crush a few Miasma crystals to fill the cultivation chamber with Death-Attuned energy. Next, he looked down on the manual and tried to start it up.

The first step to cultivation was slightly confusing to Zac, as it was to 'connect with the universe' as Kenzie had explained it.

By pushing his miasma in the specific pattern of the manual a rotation would be formed through his pathways. This rotation would, in turn, connect the energy outside the body with the energy inside, and as the rotation kept going some of the external energy would be dragged inside through his pores and join his internal energy.

Rotating the miasma didn't prove difficult, as he had ample experience of moving energy through his body to utilize his skills. But no matter how many revolutions he performed following the Cultivation Manual nothing happened. His internal energy was completely cut off from the miasma in the room.

Not even holding a Miasma Crystal helped in the least, even though he had seen Thea regain her energies a lot faster that way. Zac even expelled a bunch of miasma to test whether the manual could at least help him restore his energies faster.

But Zac's final hope was dashed when revolving his energy didn't help in the slightest to improve his missing miasma. Some Miasma continuously seeped into his body as it always did when he wasn't topped off, but cultivating made absolutely no difference on the rate of absorption.

Finally, he had to reluctantly give up on the rotation. If he was a cultivator he would almost immediately have started to absorb energy. There was no such thing as 'sensing the Cosmic Energy' for months until a connection could be made. It was an instant change, where the only difference over time was the amount of energy one could drag into one's body.

It looked like he wasn't meant to cultivate even in his Draugr form. He had honestly known this was a very real possibility after meeting Yrial, but it was still a disappointment. Zac shook his head with a wry smile, realizing he might be the only Draugr in the multiverse without any inherent connection to miasma.

Since he was done with everything he wanted to check out in his undead form he decided to change back to a human. He crushed a divine crystal in the room next, making the life-attuned energies cancel out the miasma to some degree. The rest would naturally be diluted and eradicated by the ambient energies in the air.

But when Zac tried to change back he was immediately stopped.

He soon learned that the transformation skill refused to activate for almost an hour until he could change again. It appeared that freely swapping back and forth still was impossible. But with some timing and subterfuge it should at least be possible to swap once during a battle, though it couldn't be done if he was completely exhausted since it required a decent amount of mental energy.

For the rest of the night, he kept going over his experiences and his Daos, trying to decide on the best path for himself. He only took a short nap of two hours before he resumed his meditation. He lost track of time until suddenly a subdued chime could be heard in the room, gently bringing him out of his meditation.

It seemed the Marshalls had installed a doorbell of sorts to alert the person cultivating. Zac stood up with a grunt and opened the chamber to the outside world.

To his surprise he found Thea standing right outside. A quick glance at the time showed it was almost noon, making his mouth slightly widen in surprise.

“You’re an addict,” Thea said with a shake of her head as she pointedly looked at the unused bedrooms before a small smile spread across her face.

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**Chapter 295 - Perusing the Library**

“Aren’t you the same?” Zac smiled. “I heard you went out hunting during the night? Isn’t Billy with you?”

“With you gaining so many levels I can’t relax,” she said with some annoyance, though Zac knew she didn’t really mean it. “Besides, it seems the beasts are getting more aggressive.”

“Billy won’t be joining us today. He heard we were going to the library and decided to sleep in. Did you know he can cultivate while sleeping?” she then added as she looked inside the cultivation chamber with a slightly confused look.

Zac guessed she sensed the odd mixture of attuned energies inside since they hadn’t completely dissipated, and he hurriedly closed the door behind him. It was only after he got out he had time to digest what she said. Zac didn’t know how to respond to something like that, he had never heard of anything like it. Billy was truly one of a kind.

“Is that even possible?” Zac said.

“Apparently,” Thea said with a shrug. “Between you and me, I think Billy might have some special constitution or bloodline. Even I could see his huge form when he smashed the array back in the hunt.”

Zac agreed with Thea’s guess, remembering Billy’s golden blood and the ancient aura he emitted in his titanic form. Bloodlines and special constitutions were things that Zac still was a bit confused about though. Could one just gain them willy-nilly?

“Give me a second to change,” Zac said and hurried to the bathroom.

He felt a bit silly wearing the golden robes from Tyrbat back on Earth. It was one thing back on Port Atwood since he was usually alone cultivating or battling, but it was different here. He took a quick shower and put on his new Spirit Tool robes instead.

The clothes adjusted to fit him perfectly, and they felt extremely luxuriant. After checking himself in the mirror he had to say that he looked a lot better in the tasteful battle robes compared to the gaudy defensive suit the Medhin Royals seemed to prefer.

Zac even considered growing out the stubble on his head to a longer hairstyle like Yrial, but in the end decided against it before he got out. Thea gave him a once-over with her eyes, her brows rising slightly when she saw the intricate fractals drawn in red and blue.

“Looks nice. I still have the things I owe you, but space here is a bit cramped,” she said and led him out toward a garden out back.

The two kept making some small talk while they walked until they reached a secluded garden behind the huge mansion. The moment they arrived Thea immediately summoned a small mountain of treasures, but he was a bit curious to note that they seemed to have been sorted.

“Truth be told we went through the items, but I promise that not a single thing is missing. I oversaw everything,” Thea said before she looked over at a few crates. “There are a few things we would like to purchase from you that we found in this pile.”

“Port Atwood is always happy to oblige in some trade, provided the price is right,” Calrin’s voice suddenly could be heard across the garden.

Zac almost jumped straight into the air in shock, since the voice had come straight out of nowhere. He quickly looked around to find Calrin standing just a few meters away. He saw Zac’s shocked face and gave a small bow.

“I smelled treasure,” the Sky Gnome said as he walked over to the pile that Thea had indicated. “I wonder what Miss Marshall would use in exchange for these treasures? You should know that Port Atwood currently lacks nothing apart from exotic treasures.”

“What are you doing here?” Thea said as she looked down at Calrin as he started rummaging through the things they wanted to keep.

“It appears our business interests have met a snag here in Westfort, so I had some free time to help out my good friend,” Calrin pointedly said. “Now these are some valuable items, no wonder your force would want to buy them.”

Some annoyance started to appear on Thea’s face, and she turned toward Zac. However, business was business so Zac only shrugged with a small smile as he let the two battle the out. He trusted Calrin’s discerning eye. The gnome would neither let a real treasure slip through his fingers nor take a loss on the items he was ready to sell off.

In the end, Calrin staunchly refused the sale of two large crates of herbs, but he was ready to haggle for the rest. Zac didn’t recognize those plants at all, but they weren’t bad since they emitted pretty dense energies. As for the rest, it was sold for 124 million Nexus Coins that would be paid in three installments. At this point, Zac made sure that the money would go to him rather than the insatiable little gnome since this deal did not go through the Thayer Consortia.

The price itself seemed somewhat low, but it came with some strings attached. It appeared that the Business Venture that Starlight backed was also aiming to set up a branch in Westfort, and the Marshall Clan was happy to have the two businesses duke it out and provide better benefits.

Calrin managed to get a three-month head-start through this deal, barring the Flowing Moon Corporation from doing business at all during that period. Three months wasn’t too much, but it was also a critical period on Earth. Large wars would take place, and Thayer Consortia would be able to unload its enormous stockpiles of equipment to the Marshalls and their allies.

Calrin’s original intention was for commercial monopoly though, just like he enjoyed in Port Atwood, but that was staunchly refused by Thea. Zac found that she was almost a completely different person when it came to business, and she gave the little sky gnome quite the workout.

Zac was also interested to see that Thea had no problems deciding these things on the spot, meaning that she might enjoy a similar status as himself in the clan. Zac let others handle most issues, but he always had the final say. Zac had assumed that Henry was calling all the shots since the family seemed to run like in the old world, but perhaps that wasn’t completely the case.

After they were done with the negotiations Calrin dragged him to the side.

“That’s a good one. Finding a wife with a talent for management will allow a man to adventure with peace of mind,” Calrin said with a satisfied nod.

“Great,” Zac sighed with a roll of his eyes. “What were those herbs you kept?”

“They are called [**Cosmic Bloodroot**] and are used to improve one’s constitution. Together with the [**Aetherbloom**] we attained from New Washington and a few other ingredients we will be able to make extremely potent Medicine Baths to move constitutions toward D-Grade,” the Gnome Excitedly said.

Zac whistled in surprise. That was something that Port Atwood currently lacked. It wouldn’t be long before both himself and a handful of the Demons reached E-Grade, and having this would motivate them to contribute even harder.

After saying goodbye to Calrin he rejoined Thea as they walked toward the enormous seashell. Now that it wasn’t pitch-black outside he could see that it was a deep blue and shimmered like it was inlaid with crystals all along the surface.

“It was initially built by an aquatic species, but the System remodeled it to work above-ground it seems,” Thea explained as they moved forward. “The librarian is a bit angry about it though, it does not like non-marine beings. We found that unless you are quite specific in your requests it might try to trip you up.”

Zac coughed as he threw Thea an odd glance. He was starting to form a guess about the System. It was the largest employer in the universe and had multiple sales channels. Was it awarding slightly broken or troublesome things for quests because it had trouble pawning them off to more established forces? The only exception seemed to be the Creator shipyard, though he knew that both Rahm and Karunthel seemed a bit odd even for being Creators.

As they got closer to the entrance of the library Zac spotted a familiar figure sitting on a bench nearby enjoying the sun. He felt a headache incoming but still chose to walk over with Thea curiously following in tow.

“What are you doing here?” Zac asked with some helplessness.

“The library sounded quite interesting. In contrast to Ogras and the others I come from humble beginnings, and never had a formal education. I wanted to see if I could join you inside,” Alea said with a smile as she looked over at Thea.

“This is Alea, one of the leaders of the demons,” Zac introduced her to Thea. “Alea, this is Thea Marshall.”

“Hi, if you’re a friend of Zac’s you’re welcome to join,” Thea said with a nod.

Zac internally breathed in relief when he saw that the poison mistress wasn’t here to cause any trouble and walked toward the library. The moment he stepped inside all sounds from the outside disappeared, and he was filled with a sense of tranquility as he looked around the magnificent building.

There were no ceilings in the shell and he could see up to the top of the spiral. Lining the walls were innumerable bookcases and floating crystals, and they kept going along the spirals all the way to the top. The bottom floor was also studded with reading nooks and comfortable sofas, the latter seemingly an addition of the Marshall’s. Zac also noted that there was at least one shimmering partition some ways up, which slightly distorted the vision.

“It seems I need to pass a certain trial to unlock the top tier information crystals,” Thea explained as she looked up at the layer. “Until then we can only browse what’s beneath.”

“So how do you find what you’re looking for?” Zac asked as he looked around. There were hundreds of bookshelves on just the ground floor, but not a single sign anywhere.

“Ask Big Blue,” Thea said.

“Huh?” Zac said, but the next moment an enormous monster appeared in front of him.

It was like something wrought out of a Lovecraftian nightmare, a monstrous head with hundreds of long tentacles. Dozens of pitch-black eyes stared down at them, the largest of which as large as a beach ball. Zac immediately took out his axe in alarm, and Alea looked ready to drown the whole area in poison as she turned her eyes toward Thea.

“Wait!” Thea said. “That’s the librarian!”

Zac hesitantly looked up at the enormous monster reaching almost ten meters into the air, and he couldn’t believe this thing was a keeper of knowledge.

“New bipedals soil my sanctuary. You even bring the barbaric demonkin this time? Base creatures that only know lust and violence,” a rumbling voice echoed out through the library as the large head of the Librarian turned away in annoyance.

“It has worked well for us so far,” Alea said with a smile, but there was a dangerous glint in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, just ignore Big Blue. He has some personality problems, but he is very knowledgeable. Just ask him what you want to learn more about and he will get it for you,” Thea explained with a helpless smile.

Zac nodded and simply asked about the Undead Empire to start with. Zac had honestly already figured out most things that were bothering him inside the trail already, meaning this place wasn’t as valuable to him anymore. But he still had a day to spend while Adran and Calrin hammered out the details of the cooperation agreements with the Marshall Clan and Nonet visited the other hive.

So he chose to shore up his knowledge of various fields during the day. He got a better understanding of how the multiverse worked for example, and he couldn’t help but be shocked by the immensity of it all.

One theoretically could understand that the multiverse was boundless, but such a thing was too abstract. But when one started to get down to detail it started to get insane. For example, a single undead family could control hundreds of thousands of planets, and yet they would only be the drop in the ocean of the Undead Empire. Even an A-Grade powerhouse might die of old age before having visited every planet.

But even though the universe held boundless planets and things to see it seemed that interplanetary travel was not something that was more than a fraction of people would experience in their lifetimes. No matter if one lived at an F or D-Grade world most would never leave their planet, much less their sector. It was both an issue of danger and resources.

To travel between planets in a local cluster you needed at least a D-Grade cosmic ship unless you possessed teleportation access. Those ships could utilize the Dao of Space to move faster than light, making it possible to traverse those massive distances. But you needed higher-grade ships to travel outside of the local cluster. A C-Grade ship was needed to travel within a galaxy, and a B-Grade ship was needed to travel between galaxies and explore whole star sectors.

In the end, there were too many forces and worlds to keep proper track of everything, and the system generally clumped sectors together. For example, it turned out that all the forces invading Earth was from the same star sector, though not necessarily the same galaxy.

The author of the book theorized that the System wanted to find a balance between safety for newly integrated planets, but at the same time waste a minimal amount of energy for the trials. So it didn’t want forces in too close a proximity to invade, but it also didn’t want to teleport people too far.

Of course, there were some exceptions to this. Some forces were just so massive that they existed in multiple universes, having pockets of control almost everywhere.

The Undead Empire was one such example, and there were a few more massive empires and alliances like that as well.

That meant that the risk of running into those forces of the Incursions in the future was a lot higher than he expected. A few of them might even come from the same galaxy their planet had been moved to.

“It’s shocking, isn’t it?” Thea suddenly said from the side. “I read that same crystal a few days after I got this place. The scale of it all is crazy.”

Zac nodded in agreement. But what Zac really was thinking about was what would happen to him after he offended every single incursion by killing their leaders and forcing the rest to flee in shame.

Would he even be able to leave the planet in the future?

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 296 - Division of Labor**

Zac shook his head with a wry smile before put aside the information crystal. He would need to survive the Incursions, Dominators, and the Great Redeemer before he could worry about potential vendettas with various factions in the multiverse.

The next hours were spent with Zac going over any subject that he could think of. One small regret was that the Library was extremely old, and any information about forces would have to be taken with a grain of salt. For example, there was no mention of the Allbright Empire in the Library, though Zac didn’t know if that was due to the Empire being too young or that the Library could only hold so much information.

But the most interesting crystal he found was a bibliography of a Mortal warrior who managed to reach peak C-Grade. It mostly centered on his exploits and experiences, but some snippets gave insights into the hurdles a Defier would encounter.

As Zac suspected the general method of Galvarion, the aquatic Mortal, to break through his nodes was to force them open. It took him almost a hundred years to reach the peak E-Grade, most of it spent on a sickbed from his wounds. It had taken him another 150 years to heal his foundations until he even dared to attempt to form his core.

As he read through the history of Galvarion Zac also started to understand Alyn’s standpoint regarding Class Rarities better. Galvarion only possessed an Epic C-Grade Class, the lowest possible rarity if one wanted to progress further.

In fact, it had been the same from the start for the man. He started with a humble Warrior class at F-Grade and slowly upgraded the rarity once every Evolution. He wasn’t supremely strong for his level, though better than most through a series of fortuitous encounters and good Dao insights.

But he was still looked down at by the elite forces in the area, and a few enmities had resulted in him almost dying multiple times over. But Galvarion always remembered the grudges as he slunk away, only returning when he had become stronger.

Soon after evolving to C-Grade he completely eradicated 6 D-Grade forces that had crossed him over the past thousands of years. That went to show that the rarity of a class wasn’t nearly as important as the Grade.

The bonus attributes he got now from an Epic class wouldn’t make much difference when Zac was a D-Grade powerhouse, and Zac started to wonder if he was

doing the right thing from pushing toward the peak rarity. But Yrial never mentioned anything about the subject, so he decided to stick with his gut.

He would ask the Lord of Cycles the next time they met just in case, but he knew that the extra attributes were only a small part of what the better classes brought to the table. Instead, he kept going through various information crystals to get a better basic understanding of the multiverse and cultivation in general.

It was only around 5 pm that Alea spoke up.

“We have a meeting in 30 minutes,” she said. “A council for the upcoming war.”

Zac couldn't stop a groan from escaping his lips, and Thea looked less than enthused as well. Both of them had turned to people of action from their experiences following the integration, and these meetings had turned into torture. But there was nothing to be done about it. Some big decisions needed to be made, and Zac needed to be present for them. So they simply took a small walk in the garden before entering the conference room.

Zac sat down with the other people from Port Atwood, nodding at Calrin. He knew this meeting would be a real marathon, and he got flashbacks from the monthly meetings back at the office that never led anywhere. He had shortly spoken with Adran and Alea just before entering, and the negotiations so far hadn't been without its issues.

Zac would have thought that everything would be easy sailing since his side was negotiating from a side of absolute power, but the wily diplomats had a million ways to slightly gain small advantages for themselves if his side wasn't alert.

A glance across the table told him that Thea was as bored as himself, and she even looked ready to fall asleep. But a cough from Henry woke her right up as he convened the meeting.

“Welcome all. As you know the objective of today's meeting is to formalize the coming war effort. With the benefits garnered from the hunt, we will never be any more ready than now. We also know that the restrictions are rapidly weakening on the invading forces, and the amount of support they can bring through the Nexus Hubs will increase. Time is of the essence,” Henry began, drawing nods from around the table.

“There is another reason for urgency,” his closest aide continued as he turned on a large monitor. “The Undead Empire is on the move.”

The screen showed aerial shots of massive hordes of undead walking through some fields. The numbers were on a completely different level compared to what Zac had encountered during his visit to the Dead Zone. The countless bodies turned the army into a sea, and it was impossible to make a correct estimation, but there were millions and millions as they stretched out toward the horizon.

Certainly, almost all of them were low-leveled Zombies, but they were still a huge threat. Even Zac would run out of steam long before he managed to grind down such a terrifying number of enemies. And others weren't like Zac with his 800 Endurance. The Zombies were extremely aggressive and one bit was all it took against most fighters. They didn't care if twenty of the Zombies were hacked to bits as long as one of them could wound a living person.

“What of the Monastery of Everlasting Peace?” Zac asked as he opened his Town Menu.

He breathed out in relief as he saw the teleporter to the Monastery still being active, hopefully meaning they were fine.

“For now they are only cordoned off, but we believe a siege will start in earnest sooner or later,” the man said as he pushed the button on a remote to show a few more

screenshots of the armies. “The main hordes extend outward in three directions as it stands, and we believe that all of them have great powerhouses in the lead.”

“One of the hordes is moving toward the reorganized strongholds of China, Korea, and India. This force could be seen as an Ally of ours, though we haven’t entered official negotiations,” Henry elaborated. “They mostly started approaching us recently due to the movements of the undead. But another reason is that the New World Government has proven to be an extremely flaky ally for them. They have been promised assistance with the Incursion for months, but the Government has only made a symbolic show of effort.”

“What about the other hordes?” Zac asked.

“One of them is heading toward the European Heartlands,” the aide explained and opened up a map of the central region of Pangea “This horde would cause widespread damage to both the New World Government, a large number of Ishiate settlements, and many of our allies. Even Westfort would be implicated if they aren’t stopped within a month or two.”

“The final group is moving toward one of the Incursions,” Henry finished. “That horde we’ll leave alone. Let the aliens weaken each other. But the other two hordes must be dealt with.”

“So what is the plan?” Thea asked from the side, looking at the map with a frown.

“The two hordes must be whittled down before we can assault the core of the Incursion,” Henry said. “Otherwise we would run the risk of getting trapped inside. There are still tens of millions of Zombies guarding the core, so we believe there will be a protracted siege to break it down.”

“This is where the visible part of our operation will take place,” another aide explained. “Armies run by the Marshall Clan, Port Atwood, and our other allies will join forces to battle the enormous monster hordes that threaten native settlements. It will protect our interests, garner respect with the civilian populations, and provide our fighters with a source of Cosmic Energy. We only need a number of powerhouses to offset the danger that the more powerful undead pose.”

Zac shook his head at the cynical explanation of why they would mobilize the forces.

“Do you not agree with the proposal, Lord Atwood?” the aide asked.

“We are fighting for the survival of our planet, do we really need other reasons to mobilize?” Zac sighed.

“The opinion of the population is very important even in our current world,” Henry said, though the demons weren’t convinced either.

Zac was also slightly unconvinced, but he motioned Henry to go on with the plan.

“We will use both old-world weaponry and Cosmic Energy to destroy these hordes. And if we can’t completely destroy them, we will hopefully weaken them enough to stall their approach. The undead have officially been declared to be an enemy of earth, no matter their previous identities,” Henry continued. “But in the end, this war is only a diversion.”

Alea and Adran threw a glance at Zac who looked a bit confused at this point.

“An all-out war is a diversion?” Zac probed.

“We have to face reality. No matter how many of our ordinary warriors we throw into the midst of war these days, it doesn’t matter,” Henry said. “The fate of a nation rests on the shoulders of those at the apex.”

Zac slowly nodded in agreement. Unless one could take out the leaders of a force it could always be rebuilt. If someone attacked Port Atwood he could simply retreat,

and return with a vengeance whenever he was prepared. It was the same with the incursions.

“They want you to close the other incursions while they fight the zombies,” Alea explained. “And they want it to be a secret operation, so no one will learn of your deeds.”

Zac looked at Henry, who made no efforts to refute Alea’s claim.

“That is correct. Our plan hinges on the monstrous power you have. You alone are more important than all our soldiers. There is no way for us to close any incursions without massive casualties. We would run out of manpower after just two or three of them. But you and a small support group would be able to go in, kill all the leaders, and then force the rest in retreat,” Henry said.

“We would provide the logistics, and you would ideally go from incursion to incursion, destroying as many as possible before any news could spread between the Invaders. We have already set up outposts close to every single incursion by now,” another Marshall Family member added.

“And guess who they want to lead the armies and win the adoration of the world?” Alea added with an acerbic tone as she turned her gaze at Thea, who frowned before looking over at her grandfather.

“Thea is the best candidate for the job,” Henry said with equanimity. “One powerhouse is needed to make sure one of the Undead Empire Generals doesn’t start a massacre. Your prowess is already needed with the incursion. Billy Trask Jr. is not suited for a leadership role due to his unique mental state. Enigma and Joker are suspected to be in the Underworld. Daoist Chosui and Guru Anaad Phakiwar are holding down the fort for the Sino-Indian Alliance. Silverfox is believed to be part of the New World Government. That leaves Thea.”

Zac had to admit that what Henry Said made some sense, but that still only covered one of the two armies.

“The other two and I can lead the other army,” Alea suddenly said. “The three of us are far deadlier together than Ms. Marshall is alone.”

Zac immediately understood that Alea was referring to Janos and Ilvere, and he felt it wasn’t a bad idea. Ilvere was a skilled commander, while Alea was just extremely effective against large groups of enemies.

“Does your and Janos’ skillsets work against the Undead?” Zac asked to make sure.

“Janos can’t do much against the brainless undead, but the leaders are the same as humans. I won’t face any obstacles with either,” Alea said.

The others curiously looked at the two, hoping for an explanation.

“That’s fine with me,” Zac said. “Three of my generals will lead one army while Thea leads the other. That way we can properly cover both the hordes.”

“Will you not need them for the Incursions?” Henry asked. “We can also provide a few elite squads to provide backup.”

“That won’t be needed,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “I have Ogras and my own elite soldiers for that.”

Truthfully he wouldn’t have minded some backup, but Zac was planning on using his undead form when possible to grind a few levels. He didn’t want a bunch of people from other forces snooping at him and reporting back.

“You should bring Billy as well,” Henry said after a brief pause. “Our investigation showed that almost all of the Incursions have set up strong defensive arrays. Billy is uniquely gifted at dealing with that.”

Zac nodded in agreement. No one was as clear as himself just how powerful that strike was. Many of the details got hammered out over the following two hours, and Zac got an information package containing the gathered intelligence of the remaining Incursions. Some of them were completely unknown to Zac from before and placed in extremely remote regions of Pangea. The Marshall clan was truly thorough.

He was also happy he had some other negotiators by his side. Adran made sure that the area every single incursion that Port Atwood conquered would become part of their land, apart from the Undead Incursion. That place was too large to handle in any case, and it would perhaps take centuries for the Dead Zone to heal.

“What about the New World Government?” Zac suddenly asked. “Won’t they assist us?”

“They are currently mobilizing their armies, but I would not count on them for the incursions,” Henry said with disdain. “Their two top powerhouses aren’t strong enough to take down even the weakest the incursions now that the restrictions have become so lax. Besides, I am not sure if they even want to.”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with some confusion.

“We have reason to believe that the New World Government, or at least a core group of its leaders, have allied with the so-called Dominators of the Zhix.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 297 - Changing Course**

“WHAT?” Zac exclaimed with anger. “Why the hell would they do that?”

“Control and self-preservation, I would guess,” Henry said. “After learning about The Great Redeemer from Thea we believe that the Dominators have promised them sanctuary in exchange for subservience. That they will be spared when that monster arrives. Either that or they simply needed strong allies against you and my granddaughter. They might not even believe The Great Redeemer to be real.”

“They would have to be crazy to jump into bed with those things. Even crazier than regular Zhix,” Zac said with disbelief.

“Perhaps. Or perhaps they simply feel out of options. The Dominators are already so much stronger than them. What about a peak D-Grade powerhouse? They likely believe there is no way for us to prevail, and took a desperate gamble to get a shot at surviving,” Henry said. “People will go to extraordinary lengths to survive.”

“Is that why Thomas Fischer is improving so rapidly?” Zac asked.

“Yes, we believe that the Dominators have provided him with some sort of opportunities. He has always been strong, but he had shown not only a rapid gain in level but also a power that belies that level lately. He also cleansed a large part of the New World Government shortly before entering the hunt. It is still officially a democratic alliance of free states, but it is more or less an autocracy by now. The official explanation was to rid the cabinet of the shapeshifters, but a fair deal of humans were put to death as well,” Henry continued.

“Will they actively work against us?” Zac said.

“I discussed this with your assistants yesterday. We believe, same as you, that the Dominators wish for the Incursions to be closed. So we will likely not encounter resistance at this stage. However, we should be ready for a civil war the moment the

foreign threat is dealt with,” Henry said. “You have already been painted as a traitor of humanity due to the company you keep. They might launch assaults at us under the guise of emancipation from the final threat, and they would be assisted by the Zhix hordes.”

“Not all of the hordes,” Zac said. “The council of the Anointed is preparing for a final Holy War against the Dominators. Where does the Ishiate stand?”

“They have been neutral so far,” one of the advisors answered. “Not even Starlight seems to have a great drawing power with their people, and they generally stay in small cliques. That is why Everglade Refuge was forced to open their teleporter to the public even though they are a decent-sized settlement.”

“So we are pretty much alone,” Zac sighed.

“Our forces are a bit smaller, but we have more elites,” Henry said. “But it would help our side if we were the ones who discovered and liberated the Underworld.”

“What about Salvation?” Zac said, changing the topic. “Do we know where the Cradle of God is located?”

“It has been located, but...” one of the aides started. “We believe that attacking that man at the moment would be at least as dangerous as attacking one of the Top Tier Incursions.”

“It doesn’t matter, we need to prioritize killing him,” Zac said without hesitation. “He’s turning people into weapons, and he is a real disciple of the Great Redeemer. He must be removed as quickly as possible.”

“It’s not that simple,” Henry said. “He has hundreds of thousands of those puppets, and he’s turned the whole zone around him lifeless. It’s impossible to get close without alerting him. We have tried multiple times to gain intelligence, but our scouts get killed by swarming puppets who simply explode themselves.”

“Then I’ll simply head straight in,” Zac said. “There must be a limit to his power. There is no way he can control hundreds of thousands at the same time. We already saw he couldn’t freely control a thousand in the hunt. We were able to destroy hundreds of them without the things reacting.”

“I agree,” Thea added from the side. “Killing Salvation should be a priority. He might even be able to open up a portal for the Great Redeemer. He did possess a protective talisman containing a whisp of his soul. Who knows what else he has? Perhaps he simply hasn’t gathered enough sacrifices to open the portal yet. “

In the end it was decided they would attack Salvation soon after Zac had closed a few Incursions and reached level 75. Thea would join as well in case the Undead armies stood down and returned to the Incursion. If not he would have to do things himself.

The meeting went on and one point after another was decided, and after another four hours Zac had a proper picture of how he would proceed the following weeks. There were some uncertainties, depending on things such as whether they could find the underworld and the response of the New World Government.

There were a lot of risks involved, especially to Zac himself. But if everything went according to plan earth would be free of any foreign invaders in less than two months. There was still the issue of the Dominators and the Great Redeemer, but they would have to take things one step at the time.

But just as he was about to call an end to the meeting Zac realized something odd.

“Wait, what about the Church of the Everlasting Dao?” Zac exclaimed. “They’re not in the information packets.”

“That’s the oddest thing...” Henry muttered. “We simply can’t find them.”

“How is that possible?” Zac asked with suspicion. “They are possibly the strongest force apart from the undead. How is it possible that they haven’t made any waves?”

“We are not sure what is going on either,” an aide said as he started typing away at his laptop.

The next moment a screen of a torched village appeared.

“Up until two months ago, we could regularly find the aftermath of their crusade. They have burned hundreds of towns to the ground, leaving no survivors. The crusaders were part of a completely mobile force that never went back to their Incursion to resupply, and they had no pattern to their slaughter. In fact, we do not even know where their Incursion is located,” the aide said.

“But some time before the Hunt all their activities stopped. We still do not know the reason. Some even speculate that they have left,” Henry said, though he didn’t seem too hopeful about that prospect. “What we have learned about those lunatics makes that unlikely though. I fear they are planning something big.”

Zac slowly nodded, but Alea didn’t seem as convinced. She touched her pouch and the next moment a piece of Springroot was thrown to every one in the room.

“Eat up,” Alea said. “If not you’ll be fed something far less appetizing.”

Zac frowned at her manner, but he did agree with the sentiment. He felt it was a bit odd that the Marshalls never tested them once, and he hadn’t seen anyone else using Springroot either since arriving. Had the Marshall clan been infiltrated?

The tension in the room rose to an entirely new level as the two sides looked at each other in silence, and energies were swirling in the air. Finally, Thea shrugged and ate the piece of the root, and the moment she backed down so did the rest. Even Henry bit down on the root after a bit, though his facial expression wasn’t great.

“Happy now, miss?” he said as he turned a stern glare at Alea, who only smiled sweetly in return.

Zac felt it was lucky that no one had mentioned she was a poison user. If they knew that then the situation might have gone out of control. However, it was as though Ogras was whispering in his ear that the Marshalls weren’t necessarily innocent just because they ate the springroot. They might still work with the Church.

In the end, Zac could only make a mental note of trying to gather intelligence on his own. His network wasn’t anything special, but it was at least better than before the hunt. Since they were done with everything Zac exited the meeting room with great relief. Having spent most of the day in the stuffy meeting room he went out in the garden to enjoy a breath of fresh air.

“Sorry,” a slightly helpless voice said from the side a few minutes later.

Zac looked over and saw Thea walk over and sit down next to him on the bench.

“For what?” Zac asked with some confusion.

“It feels like we’re taking advantage of you. You’re the one who will be risking your life over and over, while we have a much easier job. One could even say we are using the zombie hordes as an opportunity to power level our people,” Thea said. “But I honestly can’t find any better ways to do it. Only you can destroy the Incursions with relative ease at the moment. Your actions against that golem incursion made that extremely clear.”

“Well, that’s how things are,” Zac said with a shrug.

"It just pisses me off," Thea muttered. "No one has done more for Earth than you, yet people are talking behind your back all over the world. Even some people in Westfort believe the nonsense the government is spreading."

"It's that bad?" Zac said with a grimace.

"Well... Nevermind," Thea said after a bit. "You know, the reason that grandpa wants me to become famous on the battlefield is not to compete with you. It's the opposite."

"How so?" Zac asked with a skeptical look.

"We decided to reorganize after the hunt. The Marshall Clan will mainly focus on business in the future, and we are looking into the means of getting hold of a Mercantile License," she said. "But we need some renown first. We're an old family but we have always been low-key, so very few know about us. This war is also meant to showcase our wares and set up a foundation."

"That's why you refused to give Calrin a monopoly," Zac realized, getting a nod in confirmation. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because of you, of course," Thea said with a shake of her head. "You are so far ahead of everyone else that it would be foolish to become a competitor in creating the World Capital. The New World Government still doesn't understand your power, but I do."

Zac was unsure how he felt about having forced them to reorganize like this. Would there be resentment in the future?

"Don't worry about it," Thea said. "We were businessmen from the beginning. It was only due to the Integration grandpa saw an opportunity to become something even greater. But I think this is for the best. It makes my life easier at least."

"I can tell Calrin to stop his expansion in Westfort if you want," Zac offered.

"There's no need. From what we understand we will not be able to get a license in the short run. It might even be good for us to see how a proper multiverse Consortium does business," Thea explained.

"I am sorry to disturb," Alea's voice suddenly came from behind, making the two turn around. "Nonet and Ibtep has returned."

Zac nodded and got to his feet, but only after throwing the poison mistress a slightly suspicious look. Was she popping up when he and Thea were alone on purpose? But he could glean nothing from her face, so he only shrugged his shoulders before turning to Thea.

"I'll have to see what they found out," Zac said.

"Have fun," Thea said with a wave, clearly intent on staying outside to enjoy the sunset.

Zac breathed out in relief when he saw the two Zhix were in mostly good condition. Nonet had a decent-sized wound in its chest, but Zac had a feeling that was due to their peculiar manner of greetings.

"Did everything go well?" Zac asked when he saw them.

"Hive Dahiti was luckily part of the traditional faction, allowing me to return alive," Nonet said without any facial expression.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm as he realized that he didn't know whether the hive next to this place was part of the Dominator's sphere of influence. He had simply assumed they were part of the normal Zhix since they had come to a ceasefire with the Marshall Clan.

"Your meeting with Herat in the hunt was known by Hive Dahiti. Herat is a highly regarded warrior, and his word has some weight with the council. The asked me to relay

the message that they are ready to join you in battle, though we should do so soon,” Nonet continued.

“Is something happening?” Zac asked.

“We are losing hives to the Dominators at a steady pace,” Nonet said. “All pretenses have been dropped by now, and we are at war. Dozens of hives have been eradicated in the last weeks. Just as many have chosen to join them.”

Zac nodded with weariness.

“I plan on fighting it out with them as soon as the Incursions are dealt with,” Zac said, explaining the current situation to Nonet.

The large Zhix mulled over the information for a bit, until it spoke up again.

“I believe I will need to visit Hive Dahiti once more,” Nonet said. “I heard of the undead from Ibtep and my warriors. They are true abominations. It will also sharpen our blades for the Holy War. The Zhix legions will want to join in this battle.”

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**Chapter 298 - Rot**

Zac was delighted to hear Nonet’s proclamation. The Zhix were born warriors and they would be a great help against the endless zombie hordes. The Zombies were a huge problem for forces like Zac’s. His soldiers were a lot stronger than the Zombies, but there were simply too many of the undead.

“Did you mention the peace with the Marshall Clan?” Zac asked.

“The humans of this hive have proven to decently strong warriors, and hive Dahiti is amenable to an alliance,” Nonet nodded.

“Then you can stay behind here. Bring someone from the Marshall clan with you to the hive next time. The Marshalls know a lot more about the movements of the undead armies, and they can provide good input,” Zac said.

With that, it seemed everything was dealt with. The only thing left to do was to prepare for war. Zac also wanted to experiment with his latest gains until they needed to mobilize, so he went to find the others.

Calrin was ready to go as he needed to prepare the business expansion from his end. The Thayer family was already stretching itself a bit thin at the moment, opening over ten branches in just a week. But he was still energized by the thought of the increased revenue streams.

Adran would stay behind for a bit to coordinate the war effort, which only left Emily. After asking around a bit he finally found the teenager with Billy in a lounge area. The two were in the middle of a battle in a fighting game, with around ten children excitedly cheering them on.

“Billy has missed video games!” the giant said as he desperately mashed the buttons of his controller when he saw Zac enter the room.

Zac could only shake his head when he noted the five controllers next to Billy that were all crushed into scrap.

“We have both video games and movies at Port Atwood,” Zac said. “We will start to battle the other ratlights in three days. Do you want to help?”

“Billy will come. Billy already misses the ratlight. Gave Billy a lot of money,” the large man excitedly said, accidentally destroying yet another controller.

A maid hurriedly swapped it out with a new one that she handed Billy without an expression.

“Thea’s family’s controllers are pretty weak,” Billy muttered. “Billy’s old controllers almost never broke.”

Since everything was dealt with they started to gather their things as they headed toward the courtyard where a car was waiting. By this time Thea come over, while Henry and Adran were still in the middle of a meeting. Zac felt a bit reluctant, as he had hoped he would be able to hang around a bit longer. But there was simply too much to do.

“Stay safe,” Thea simply said as Zac opened the door.

“You too. I’ll hopefully see you in a bit,” Zac answered with a smile as he entered the car.

The return was pretty uneventful, and Zac stepped out of the teleporter with the others just twenty minutes later. Calrin left to resume their tasks and Billy wanted to see the town, so he went with him. The giant had become exceptionally excited to hear there were hundreds of Sky Gnomes at the Thayer Consortia and wanted to check it out. Only Emily and Alea remained, and after some hesitation Emily said she was going to the Academy to train.

“Wait,” Zac suddenly said as he took out the painting he bought with Credits from Yrial.

“Wha- What is this? Is this your hobby now? No wonder you didn’t make a move on Thea,” Emily blurted out, a small blush spreading across her face as she gazed at Yrial’s portrait.

Zac flicked her forehead to bring her back to reality, and he started to wonder whether he was making the right move giving this thing away.

“Snap out of it,” Zac said. “This is a Dao Painting of Yrial, the Lord of Cycles.”

“WHAT? This guy is the Lord of Cycles? He’s too good looking. He could even become a pop star in Korea,” she squealed. “That old statue is way uglier than the real thing.”

Zac froze for a bit as he realized that what Emily said was true. The statue in the repository only looked androgynous, and it lacked the perfection of Yrial’s face. Did the Celestial Artisan intentionally make Yrial uglier out of spite? He remembered that the statue of the real Brazla was extremely dashing. But he shook his head to refocus.

“Well, don’t mind that,” Zac said. “I got this from the Lord of Cycles since it can help one to improve Elemental Daos. I think it is especially effective for Daos related to Fire and Ice since they were the main paths the Lord of Cycles took. I don’t walk that path so it won’t really help me, but I’m sure many in the academy can benefit from it.”

“So what do you want me to do with this thing?” she said, her eyes repeatedly heading over to the pristine face in the painting.

“Bring it to Alyn. It might help the students progress faster in getting Dao seeds,” Zac said.

“You know, my class is a bit related to the elements. You saw my burning axe. Perhaps I can keep it-,” Emily ventured.

“Stop,” Zac sighed. “Just bring it to Alyn and let her decide what to do with it.”

“Fine,” Emily muttered and took it before heading over to the Academy.

That left Zac alone in the compound with Alea.

“Speak with Janos and Ilvere. Prepare the armies. Our enemies are weak Zombies, so bring as many as possible. Quantity seems more effective than quality against those things,” Zac said. “And send someone to the Monastery to see if they are okay or need assistance.”

“It is about time we weed out the weaklings and those who only want benefits without providing anything in return,” Alea said with a nod as she walked toward the exit.

“I much prefer your rugged face above that girly boy,” Alea suddenly said with a final wink before she left, leaving an embarrassed Zac behind.

Zac shook his head before a wry smile as he walked back toward the teleporter. He had to admit it was nice to at least have one person preferring him over the annoyingly handsome Yrial.

Since the operation was starting in only two days Zac immediately headed over to Mystic Island. The small camp had long been replaced with a proper settlement. However, it was completely military in nature, and mostly housed barracks and training grounds for the stronger students and warriors of the academy.

A couple of human soldiers walk back toward the barracks, all of them sporting various degrees of wounds. But they were still full of vigor, meaning their gathering trip had likely been pretty successful. Zac’s new robe was quite eye-catching, and he got a few questioning or even taunting glares from the soldiers. However, those people were quickly dragged away by horrified comrades who recognized who he was.

He didn’t mind such a thing happening. He already knew that Alyn was trying to foster a competitive and slightly ruthless environment for the Academy. As long as it didn’t cause problems he didn’t mind. They would all be tempered in the upcoming war. Standing face to face with millions of zombies would test anyone’s mettle.

Zac immediately headed to the core of the island, and he noted that the beasts had improved quite a bit since he visited the last time. He sensed multiple auras belonging to beasts at the E-Grade, though none of the auras were as strong as that of the tiger.

To gain the last levels before the assault would be impossible, so Zac instead focused his efforts on consolidating his latest gains. He would have preferred a bit stronger enemies to push himself against, but there were simply none around.

He spent the next hour testing the Seed of Rot with his various attacks, and he was quite satisfied with the result. As he expected the blade didn’t get stronger, but the attacks did gain an interesting effect.

It only took a second after wounding a beast before the wound started to look extremely infected, turning swollen and leaking pus. The animals were also noticeably weakened by the strikes, and with enough wounds they became so weak that they couldn’t even move. When it got to that stage the animals would die not much later, their carcasses completely rotted out.

This Dao was only effective when drawing blood though. He had no problems imbuing his hand with the Dao of Rot, but a punch didn’t cause the debilitating effect on the beasts. It did show some effectiveness if he hit a bleeding wound, but still not to the same degree as when imbuing his weapon.

The robes also proved to be extremely good and provided far better protection compared to the golden robes he took from Tyrbat. They even had a passive shield that continuously lessened the force of any incoming attack, though there was a limit to its effect.

It was as though there was an orb of water around him, and any attack would first have to rip through that invisible sphere. But as the defensive sphere weakened

the attack, so did the defensive option weaken. After a while the passive shield would completely run out, at which point it needed to absorb energy from the atmosphere for a few minutes.

There was also a stronger active shield like the old ones, though only one charge. Finally, there was another skill, though Zac wasn't able to activate it at the moment. It was a fractal that was engraved right over his heart, but it was completely dim just like most of the fractals on **[Verun's Bite]**.

The robe was the second Spirit Tool he possessed for personal use, and there was one slightly confusing difference between the two. He had tried to make contact with whatever Tool Spirit that was housed inside the robes, but he could only sense an indistinct consciousness inside. It was like a breeze touched his consciousness, without intellect or personality.

He didn't understand why there was such a difference between the two items. The only thing he could think of was the mysterious rock from the auction that he fed Verun. It was only after he got that item that Verun started appearing in battle.

It only took another hour for him to get used to the improved power of his other Daos, leaving him ample time to work on **[Cyclic Strike]** again. But the results weren't promising.

If it wasn't for his new gear keeping the beasts at bay he would have looked like a beggar after a while. He had long lost count of how many times beasts had slammed into him or tried to tear him apart with their sharp claws.

He hadn't even been able to activate the skill in a controlled environment earlier, and it had proven even harder in the middle of battle. The problem was that he needed to split his attention in two and infuse each fractal with the same amount of mental energy.

He only managed to maintain the balance when he infused small trickles of energy into the fractals, but that was no good. It would take minutes to activate the skill in this manner, and the moment a beast attacked him he lost concentration and the skill fizzled.

Zac even swapped over to his Draugr form to test whether he had an easier time using the skill there. But he quickly discovered that his Draugr constitution did not afford him any better control over manipulating the Daos.

Perhaps this was the way that his lack of aptitude took form. He might not have a very hard time learning to utilize the Dao, but his control wasn't very smooth instead.

Since he was already in his undead form he tried his new shield for a bit as well. It performed above expectations, and the beasts below E-Grade did not even manage to leave a scratch on it. The spikes were extremely sturdy as well, and Zac found it particularly effective to imbue them with the Dao of Rot.

One shield slam would gore a deep wound into the animal, and with the Dao Seed a festering wound would be left behind, quickly weakening the target. The active attack also performed quite well, and while it couldn't kill an E-Grade beast it helped set up a kill with his axe. If he only got **[Cyclic Strike]** to work as well he would gain quite a bit of lethality with his Undead Bulwark skill.

But he had remembered something in the excitement of the latest gains from the inheritance. He possessed another offensive skill to bolster his undead form.

It was **[Unholy Strike]**, the skill that he found among Mhal's belongings.

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### **Chapter 299 - Little Bau**

Zac quickly taught himself the skill, and a fractal was formed above his navel. It only took him a few seconds to realize how it worked since it was exceedingly simple. He only needed to push miasma into the fractal, and the fractal would in turn push concentrated power into the limbs of his choice.

Zac tried pushing miasma into the arm that was holding his axe, and he quickly felt the strength in his limb increase. There was no discomfort whatsoever either, so Zac kept pushing more and more energy through the fractal. In the beginning the arm simply felt pumped up like he was in the middle of a work-out, but soon it started to grow.

By the time he started to feel some pain in his arm the circumference of his bicep had almost doubled, and it radiated extreme power. Zac remembered the strength the Corpse Lord emitted when he used this skill, and that was nowhere near the monstrous energy that was stored in his own arm at the moment. It was likely either his extremely durable constitution or his high Endurance that allowed him to push far more miasma into his attacks than was the norm.

He had lost some of the arm's dexterity due to the new bulk, but it felt as though he could punch a hole in the sky. He quickly found a small hill and slammed the axe down with ferocious force, and the explosion almost matched the power of **[Nature's Punishment]**.

The hill was completely gone after the swing, replaced by a huge scar in the ground that reached almost a hundred meters in the distance.

The skill worked even above expectations, and it was almost perfect for the upcoming battles. It didn't provide great utility for fighting against hordes of enemies, but that also wasn't his job in this war. His enemies would be the Incursion leaders, and he had a feeling that very few of them would be able to walk away from a swing empowered by **[Unholy Strike]**.

Zac was forced to give up on **[Cyclic Strike]** for the moment, but he was still satisfied with the results of his experiments. He decisively headed back to Port Atwood after returning to his human form and walked toward the Academy. Perhaps Alyn knew of some method to improve the control of his Daos.

But who would have known that when he walked through the gates to the Atwood Institute he would be met by pandemonium? A few hundred people had gathered in front of a large structure Zac didn't recognize, scuffling to get inside.

It was an all-out brawl, though luckily no one used Cosmic Energy or skills. It wasn't only students either, as Zac spotted a few Valkyries and demons in the mix. They were the closest to the doors and were ferociously attacking each other to be the ones to step inside.

A few people sat some distance from the angry mob nursing their wounds while glaring at the people still struggling to enter. They were likely the first casualties of the curfuffle. Zac only gaped at the mayhem, wondering what was happening inside that made people so desperate to enter.

Suddenly he spotted a familiar form speeding toward him. It was Alyn, and Zac froze when he saw her facial expression.

"Are you trying to tear my poor school to the ground?" the irate school mistress asked in an accusatory tone as she stopped just in front of him.

It was the first time Zac could see the annoyance on the Alyn's face, and something about her expression made Zac's hair stand on end. She was usually the personification of grace, but Zac was once again reminded that she was meant to be a slave driver rather than an educator on earth due to her ruthlessness.

"What's going on?" Zac hesitantly asked as he secretly imbued himself with the Dao of Hardness just in case.

"Between the call to war and the magical painting things have gone out of control," Alyn said as she took out a few familiar balls and threw them at the congested areas. "You really planned this one out exquisitely, didn't you?"

Explosions erupted one by one, and dozens of people were blasted into the air by each of the bombs. Only the Valkyries and the demon guards fared a bit better from the bombardment, but Alyn only snorted and took out a handful of them and threw them all over at the same time.

A cascade of explosions finally put an end to the melee in the academy, with Alyn singlehandedly destroying everyone's fighting spirit. Zac could only wryly shake his head at her antics, and breathe in relief that the buildings seemed to be reinforced by arrays.

"Can you tell me what's going on now?" Zac said, deciding not to comment on the fact that Alyn maimed the people who would soon be on the battlefield.

He knew that she was a master at using those small energy bombs, and while it looked random no one was seriously hurt. They would be fine after taking a healing pill and resting for a day.

"It was that painting you had Emily bring," Alyn said with a shake of her head. "I couldn't see what was so special about it, so I simply placed it in the public meditation room since you said it would improve one's Dao comprehension."

"Two elemental mages sat down in front of it, and it just took them a few minutes to gain their first Dao Seeds. The news quickly spread like a wildfire and people are doing anything to get a chance to meditate in front of it before they are sent to the front lines," Alyn continued, some wonder creeping into her eyes.

"What? The painting was that effective?" Zac said with some shock.

He was just as confused as Alyn. He had looked it over when he got it, but he sensed nothing special from it. It was an exquisite painting, but that was about it.

"I believe that some special energy was left behind by the painter or the previous owner that helped the first couple of people to attain the Seed. After a while most of the effects wore off," Alyn explained. "It is still far more effective to meditate in front of it compared to without it though."

"You know how much getting a Dao seed improves one's combat power," Alyn said with a sigh as she kicked a few students who didn't get up fast enough after getting blasted as they walked toward the meditation building. "I will place it in a restricted chamber instead, and one will only be able to meditate in front of it in exchange for contribution points."

"Well, I'm good it is coming to some use at least," Zac said with a smile. "I am here for something else though."

He proceeded to explain his problem with **[Cyclic Strike]**, though he didn't mention his horrible affinity.

"There are trinkets that can help train one's spirit," Alyn said after a bit. "I don't have any, but they should be pretty simple for Calrin to purchase. They are slightly expensive, but that shouldn't be a problem for you by this point. Now go away, I have so much to do."

Zac was afterward unceremoniously thrown out of the Academy, and he walked over to Calrin's. Thirty minutes later he left with a tool that could train one's mental dexterity. It was almost like a toy, where one needed to utilize mental energy to activate the contraption in certain patterns, but the amount of energy and the direction was extremely strict.

It was just what Zac needed at the moment, and he kept trying to complete the little puzzle as he walked through the town. Finally, he gave up in frustration, and when he looked up he found himself in front of the tavern.

"Our fearless leader," Ryan smiled when Zac walked in and sat down at the same spot as last time.

There were a few people inside the bar, but it was uncharacteristically empty at the moment. A few people were sitting alone or in small groups, but they all hurriedly looked down into their drinks when Zac's eyes landed on them.

"How are things here?" Zac asked as Ryan placed one of the homebrewed meads in front of him.

"It was pretty calm until your people declared that Port Atwood was going to go fight a sea of Zombies," Ryan said with a wry smile. "You know, even I have been drafted?"

"You?" Zac said with surprise. "No offense, but what good are you in this war?"

"Thank you for the vote of confidence," Ryan snorted. "But it turns out I got a pretty good class, Barkeep. I can instill the drinks I serve to give small bonuses to things such as energy restoration and endurance."

"A support class?" Zac exclaimed. "That's pretty cool. Do you get experience from serving drinks?"

"I haven't figured everything out yet, but currently I get most of my experience from tending the bar. The better my business fares, the more energy for me. But perhaps I will get Cosmic Energy for helping in the war as well," Ryan said. "And at least I will be far from the front lines."

"Well, it's good to have you on our team. Have you spoken with that beastmaster lately?" Zac asked.

"That poor girl?" Ryan laughed. "She comes in here every other day full of scratch marks, drinking herself into oblivion while cursing your name. You're lucky she became a beastmaster rather than a hex master."

The two kept talking for a while longer until Zac decided to head back to his courtyard. He would be thrown into constant battle the coming weeks and needed some quiet rest before war engulfed their whole planet.

"SHIT!" the sailor screamed as he almost jumped two meters straight up in the air.

A massive blue tentacle wiggled back and forth a bit behind him before it once again slunk down into the depths.

"Almost scared me to death," the man muttered as he looked down at the azure waters with some dread. "Mr. Trang, can't you do something about your... uh... friend?"

"Little Bau is just playing around a bit," the old fisherman answered with a big toothless grin.

Four more tentacles suddenly appeared as though in response to Sap Trang's comment, and they latched onto the large Creator Vessel. The ship immediately started to rock back and forth in an alarming manner. However, none of the sailors seemed

alarmed after the initial surprise, and they went about their business as though the boat was pushing through still waters.

“Little Bau, that’s enough or no treat for you,” Sap Trang laughed as he walked over and slapped one of the tentacles lightly.

The tentacles quickly released the grip on the ship, but the next moment an enormous head breached the waters, rising until two eyes as large as barn doors looked at the old Vietnamese man.

Sap Trang wasn’t alarmed in the slightest, and he only laughed once more before throwing out a whole barghest carcass with a dotting smile. It splashed into the water and the next second it was gone, stuffed into a huge fanged maw beneath the surface.

“That’s a good boy,” Sap Trang said as a tentacle caressed him. “Are there any dangerous beasts in the area?”

Two more tentacles started to wave in the air, and the next moment huge half-eaten shark was lifted above the surface. The shark was almost as large as the Creator vessel, but it was shrunken and withered as though it had lost all of its moisture.

Hundreds of puncture wounds were crisscrossed across its body, created from the vicious stingers that Little Bau had on a few of its tentacles. Sap still wasn’t completely sure what sort of beast he had picked up and nursed back to health.

From its tentacles, one could think that it was an enormous octopus. But it was something else entirely. It had an enormous head with a large round maw, leading to a thick torso that seldom reached above the water.

It did share some features with an octopus. For example, it did not have scales, but instead a rubbery skin that was almost impenetrable to bladed weapons. It also possessed no legs, with the torso instead ending in a dozen or so tentacles that were over twenty meters.

Interestingly enough it also had four special tentacles that grew out from the torso like arms, and those things possessed nasty stingers that could suck a huge beast dry in less than a minute. Odder still was that blood wasn’t the only thing it sucked, but it even absorbed the Cosmic Energy through the suckers.

It had been on its last breath when Sap Trang found it. It had barely won a fight against an enormous crab, but it was barely hanging on. Sap had seen an opportunity and initiated a bond with the animal through his class.

Perhaps Little Bau was unreconciled to die like that and accepted the connection even though it was far stronger than Sap himself. From there the old fisherman had poured hundreds of healing pills into its insatiable maws as he had sewed its wounds shut.

The mysterious animal had quickly healed thanks to Sap’s ministrations, and afterward it started to follow along their vessel, much to the dismay of the other sailors. But they all had to admit one thing. Ever since Little Bau joined their crew they never had to worry about what lurked in the depths.

Because whatever was foolish enough to get close to their ship soon ended up in the belly of the beast.

“Just my luck,” the fisherman who had initially been spooked muttered under his breath. “I get placed on the god damn ship with a pet Kraken.”

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### Chapter 300 - Ready for War

A table was placed in the middle of Zac's courtyard, and six people were sitting around it. Apart from Ogras and his three generals, there were also Joana and Alyn. This was a war council, but Zac still wanted Alyn's input since no one had a better grasp of the strength of his armies than her.

"So, Alea should already have filled you all in on the general plan," Zac said as he turned toward Alyn. "Are the armies ready to be deployed?"

"Honestly? Barely," Alyn said with some annoyance on her face. "A lot of those people are too soft. War is exactly what's needed to get a few of those people in shape. And if they die we at least save on costs."

Zac frowned a bit at Alyn's callousness, but she was adamant.

"Months and months have passed and some have never even risked their lives. Many of those who joined the army were people who had huddled in fear within walls on the various islands, and they were thirsting for power. But now that they are faced with real risks many are balking, and we have even had to publicly execute a few people who tried to cause a disturbance," the schoolmistress continued. "There is a good core of over eight thousand men and women though, they will all be all be able to put up a fight."

"What? Eight thousand?" Zac gaped.

"Only the elites are actually at the Academy by this point," Alyn said. "Many are on other islands defending our various facilities. In total, our armies have already passed fifteen thousand men, though we need to leave at least twenty percent to protect our interests and maintain order."

Zac was surprised that the army had grown to such proportions, but then again new people were added to his kingdom every week due to the unceasing efforts of Mr. Trang and his fleet. By now there were over twenty ships in the armada, many of them high-grade vessels like the corvette he bought last time.

The best part was that they had been added to his naval forces without any cost to his personal fortune. Taxes from the consortia and the crystals from the mine were already providing Port Atwood with a hefty monthly income by this point, which made maintenance and expansion much smoother.

Still, eight thousand was nothing compared to a horde of tens of millions of Zombies. Even if they killed a hundred Zombies each they would barely have scratched the surface.

"This will also prove as an excellent opportunity for them. It is not easy to gain experience of large scale battles, but this provides just that," Ilvere added. "Many of our men are still quite low leveled, but an ocean of Zombies will provide an opportunity for rapid improvement."

"Well, it is settled then. Ilvere will be in charge of Port Atwood's forces. Try to cooperate with our allies and the Sino-Indian alliance, but the safety of our people comes first," Zac said.

"I understand," Ilvere said.

Zac suddenly had an idea as he looked at Ilvere, who seemed a bit confused by the stare.

"Here, take this," Zac said as he handed him a crystal.

"What's this? [Cyclic Strike]?" Ilvere said with some interest.

"It is a skill I received from the Lord of Cycles. It utilizes two opposite Daos to form a formidable attack. It is up to you whether you wish to learn it," Zac said. "But if you do learn it I would like to be updated on your progress in mastering it."

Zac had realized that Ilvere was working toward gaining both the Dao Seeds of Heaviness and Lightness. Zac wasn't sure, but perhaps the attack would work for him as well, and if he did manage to master the skill it might provide a shortcut for Zac to master it as well.

"So this skill is why you came by yesterday?" Alyn said with interest. "It is a very novel concept. Combining multiple Daos in one strike at F-Grade is quite uncommon."

"Thank you, I'll learn it. I am aiming to fuse the two into the Dao Fragment of Momentum, and this skill might help me toward that end," Ilvere said with some glee on his face. "If I learn something I will update you."

"Great," Zac said with a nod. "Next subject. The strike force. Who apart from Ogras should take part?"

"I guess I cannot opt out?" Ogras said with a grimace as he looked through the stack containing the information of the 17 incursions remaining on earth. "Some of these forces are pretty dangerous."

"You ate my food, now you need to work for it a bit," Zac said. "So, who else?"

"We have mastered the War Arrays for up to 18 people," Joanna said, speaking up for the first time of the meeting. "Truth be told we won't be able to increase your strength by a large degree, but we will be able to form a small shield that covers our small squad. With such a small area of protection, the shield will be extremely sturdy."

Zac nodded, feeling it was a good idea. Having that small squad with him would help protect Billy from harm.

"That sounds like a plan. Your main goal should be to guard Billy from surprise attacks. He is very strong, but his defenses aren't the best," Zac said.

"I will put together a team of our strongest people," Joanna nodded in affirmation.

"You should bring the feral child as well," Alyn suddenly added.

"Who? Emelie?" Zac exclaimed. "Absolutely not."

"She is only level 31, but her attributes are a match to many of the Valkyries," Alea added. "Besides, she is a support class."

"I am not sure I need the boost against the Incursions," Zac hesitantly said. "It's not worth risking her life for that."

"It's not only about that," Alyn said. "Support classes gain Cosmic Energy by simply empowering their allies. As long as you kill someone under the effect of her axes she will gain a part of the experience. Her levels would skyrocket if she came with you. And she could stay within the shield created by the spear maidens."

"Honestly if you don't bring her she will get herself in trouble somewhere else," Ogras said. "She has turned almost crazy in her pursuit of power the last days. She said she needs to go to the underworld. Better keep her in sight where we can protect her. And you're rich enough to deck her in enough defensive treasures to almost guarantee her life."

Zac sighed when he heard about the teenager's situation. She was probably extremely anxious to scour the underworld for her siblings. It was the last chance for her to find anyone of her old family alive.

"Fine, but keep her away from the fighting. I want her at maximum distance from me so people don't figure out she's a support," Zac relented.

"Anything else before we head out?" Zac said as he looked around the table. "Communication might be impossible for a while."

"There is the issue of the evolutions," Ogras suddenly said.

“The what?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Between the Origin Dao and the ample resources provided by Port Atwood, there are a decent amount of demonkin warriors who are able to evolve by this point,” Ogras said.

“So what’s the problem?” Zac asked.

“Most are still only able to gain a common class and are afraid we will force them to upgrade before the wars. They want to hold off on upgrading in favor of improving further before upgrading. As for the few who are able to gain an Uncommon class, they are afraid to evolve because of us,” Ogras said.

“Us? Why?” Zac asked with confusion.

“None of the leadership are E-Grade yet. Evolving at this stage might be seen as a power play,” Ogras explained. “It’s extremely uncommon for anyone apart from the core group to hold the highest levels in a force.”

“Well, our situation is a bit special,” Zac said with a shrug. “Have as many as possible evolve into Uncommon classes, we need all the help we can get. Will they be able to evolve before we head out tomorrow?”

“It’s only Uncommon classes, there will be no trial for them,” Ogras said with a nod. “They can join us.”

“Good, I want a small elite squad to mainly support the Valkyries and contain the battle,” Zac said. “And let those who can’t evolve to a decent class wait. Having them evolve into a useless class won’t really strengthen us enough for it to make a difference.

“Agreed,” Ogras said. “I’ll handle it.”

“Great. There is one more thing that those who participate in the fight need to do as well,” Zac suddenly said. “They all need to enter a contract with me. One that will last indefinitely. In return they will get a monthly stipend.”

“What?” exclamations echoed across the table, with only Ogras seeming to understand what was going on.

“You should all understand that my power does not only come from my levels. The details of a few of my lucky encounters will be exposed during the battles, but they can absolutely not be spread. Therefore I need to enact this protocol,” Zac explained. “The Valkyries are excluded since they are already in a contract of servitude.”

It was a measure to protect the information about his second class and race. Zac either needed to do this, or kill everyone who participated, and he was unwilling to do the latter.

“What about the big one?” Ogras said.

“I’ll talk with him about it,” Zac answered.

“Will you tell us what’s going on?” Alea asked, her eyes thinning in suspicion.

“No, it might only implicate you,” Zac said with a resolute shake of his head.

“What about witnesses?” Ogras said.

“We’ll handle it,” Zac answered, some ruthlessness appearing on his face.

Ogras nodded approvingly and didn’t prod any further.

“Anyone who spread this out will be executed, no matter who it is,” Ogras added without hesitation.

“Great. As for the final subject,” Zac said as he reached for the pile of intelligence in front of Ogras. “This is the first target.”

“Human Incursion, Ez’Mahal Confederation?” Ogras muttered. “Never heard of them. Anyone else?”

Everyone shook their head as well, indicating that they had no idea who they were.

“I picked this faction because of their ruthlessness against the natives in their zone. There are reports of indiscriminate murder and torture,” Zac said with a frown. “I want these people gone from Earth first.”

After reading through the information dossier there was obviously an extremely wide range of strategies employed by the invaders. Very few forces were like the Church of Everlasting Dao or the Undead Empire. Most simply conquered the area and turned their sphere of influence into slave colonies.

In some areas, humans were actually better off under control of the invaders compared to life in general. There were structure and security, and the deaths from the unforgiving wildlife were far less common.

But the Ez'Mahal Confederation was not one of these forces. Zac had already heard about them during his first visit to New Washington, and since then it had only become worse. The small country they had set up might be the worst place on earth apart from a scant few places like the Miasmic Zone and the Cradle of god. Killing them would not only free people living in horrible conditions but also create a lot of goodwill across the world.

“Low to Medium tier,” Ogras muttered as he read through the report again. “They haven’t shown any particularly strong traits. Obsessed with class systems, uses slaves like we use the Barghest. A force like this is usually quite fragile. A good place to push your level forward.”

“I want to avoid killing slaves as much as possible. The real targets are their leaders,” Zac said. “In fact, that should be the goal for all our operations. I will target the leaders, Ogras will occupy generals and assist the rest of you, while the rest keep reinforcements at bay. Ideally, the battles should not last more than a few minutes.”

The group kept going over the details for a bit until Zac adjourned the meeting. Everyone hurriedly left to prepare themselves for the intense battles that they would be thrown into. Zac spent the night once again switching between trying to activate [Cyclic Strike] and activating the toy before sleeping in.

At 8 am he woke up, ready for war.

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**Chapter 301 - The Ez'Mahal**

The next day a somber procession marched through Port Atwood. Thousands of men and women gripping weapons proceeded in an orderly fashion, everyone donning a backpack. They were all heading toward the undead incursion, to stem the spread of death. Some couldn't help fear from creeping onto their faces, whereas many glowed with anticipation. The civilians of Port Atwood silently looked on at the procession, knowing that the final battle for Earth was about to begin.

Meanwhile, a far less conspicuous group silently gathered within the inner walls, less than fifty warriors. But each one emitted power far beyond that of the general soldiers of the town. It was the strike squad that stood in front of Zac, and he surveyed them with Ogras by his side. He knew that he was supposed to say something at a juncture like this, but he didn't know what.

“Let’s go. This is just the first battle of many, so remember to stay alive,” Zac simply said as he turned toward the private teleporter.

It activated with a flash and soon the small group of people had entered. The next moment Zac and his people found themselves in a run-down warehouse. The shelves were empty, and dust was gathering in the corners. It was clear that this teleporter was not commonly used, but two armed men hurried over as soon as they arrived.

“Lord Atwood?” one of them asked, receiving a nod from Zac.

The man quickly pulled out a stack of papers from a back, handing it over. It was a missive providing the latest intelligence of the Incursion.

“We are currently one hundred kilometers away from the edge of the sphere of influence of the Ez’Mahal Confederation. They have been known to sometimes roam even this far out in search of new slaves, so be careful. There have been no special movements the past few days,” the man quickly updated them. “Will you be needing anything from us?”

“Thank you,” Zac said. “It’s fine like this. We will be back in three days at the most.”

The next moment the squad streamed outside like specters of death, and immediately set a high pace toward the Incursion. The climate of the area was temperate, with leafy trees that had already shed their leaves. Winter was coming to large parts of Pangea, and not all the areas were spared from the cold like Port Atwood.

They had no special plan, only to push straight toward the heart of the incursion, killing any resistance that might crop up. It wasn’t that Zac took lightly of the situation, but rather that there simply was too little information to go by. The Marshall clan had set up an extensive network around the incursions, but they were unable to gather any detailed intelligence from the core.

This was another reason that Zac chose this one. From all accounts this incursion seemed less organized than the usual, making it a good target for a first run. They would be able to improve their teamwork and planning as they kept going.

It didn’t take long for them to enter the area that the human invaders had claimed for themselves, but as the hours passed Zac started to frown.

“Where are all the people? The report said that these people didn’t kill everyone?” Zac asked Ogras who was running by his side.

They hadn’t entered any of the towns they passed, but they had sent a scout inside for intelligence. However, every single town they had passed was completely deserted and seemed to have been so for months.

“They have likely moved the population to large slave colonies, to save on resources. The beast problem will only get worse before it gets better, and it would waste too much manpower to guard all these small towns,” Ogras ventured with a shrug.

The demons were not too worried about the plight of the enslaved humans since they came from a society where slavery was quite common as well. Zac knew he couldn’t change anyone’s opinions on the matter, so he only kept running.

However, even the expressions of the demons started to change as they approached the core of the area controlled by the Ez’Mahal. They were proceeding along the main path toward the main settlement, and the path suddenly had an extremely disturbing change. The roadside was littered with corpses, an endless number of them. Some were impaled on large poles while others had been hung from trees along the road.

One thing that seemed to unite all of the poor people was that they had been alive when they were hung, judging by their expressions and poses. All of them had undergone inhumane torture before being left to die.

“Animals,” Joanna growled as she placed a hand on a pale-faced Emily, while the others seethed as well.

Even the usually bloodthirsty demons looked at the morbid scene with disgust and Billy had lost his usual joviality as he looked around with red eyes.

“Who did this?” the giant said with building fury.

“The guys we are about to attack,” Zac said with a grim face. “The Ez’Mahal Confederation.”

Billy silently repeated the name as he kept looking at the trees, but suddenly a sound echoed from the distance as they saw a car approaching along the lonely road. It was a Jeep that had undergone some alterations to increase its sturdiness, and a large familiar insignia could be seen on the hood. It was the very same one in the intelligence report, meaning the car belonged to the Incursion.

“It’s them,” Zac said, preparing to capture one of them as the car stopped fifty meters away from them.

But Billy was one step faster as he pushed away from the ground with a roar, closing the distance in one herculean leap. His enormous club was already in his hand, rumbling like thunder as it fell straight toward the Car. A few people hurriedly tried to create some distance from the car, but most barely had time to open the door before the club smashed into the roof with a thunderous explosion.

The tremendous attack flattened the car and most of its occupants in an instant. Only two men managed to escape in time, but Ogras was already on the move. One of them was immediately impaled by dozens of spears and thrown onto a branch, joining the other victims along the road. The other man was soon in Ogras’ grip and forcefully dragged back toward Zac and the others.

“Who are you? Attacking the Ez’Mahal will result in your forces being annihilated,” the man said with some remaining bluster. “Your men will become war slaves and your women whores!”

Zac didn’t bother responding to the man and simply motioned for Ogras to extract information.

“Look away,” Ogras said to Emily, but she staunchly shook her head as she glared at the man in front of them.

Ogras simply shrugged, and the next moment a shadow blade cut one of the man’s legs clean off, making the man scream his lungs out. One of the demons in the group stepped forward, conjuring a fireball, and pressed it against the wound to stem the bleeding.

“Now, answer our questions and you will get a quick death. Otherwise, we will keep chopping and cauterizing until you are more cooperative,” Ogras said with an unhurried voice.

The man frenziedly nodded that he would comply, his bluster completely gone in an instant. It turned out that the people hanging from the sides were slaves that had caused displeasure to the invaders. That could mean anything from not working hard enough or simply making eye contact, there was truly no rhyme or reason to it.

Normally the Ez’Mahal Confederation wasn’t this brutal. Slaves were a commodity after all, and this was a waste of money. But the leader of the invasion was someone called Thanso, a scion of some large aristocratic family in the confederation.

He was extremely cruel and didn't care about the well-being of the natives in the slightest since he didn't care about the resources that the slaves could harvest. Instead, he turned the area into a twisted hellscape where his closest circle could do any depraved thing they wished while he mainly focused on the Dao.

However, most people were still alive thanks to an early discovery by the Ez'Mahal. A very large area with Spiritual Soil had been found close to the Nexus Hub, turning the area extremely suitable for the cultivation of certain in-demand herbs. The slaves were mainly used as a workforce to clear farmland and work the farms. But they were also used to stave off the beast hordes who were attracted by the large fields of Spirit Herbs.

Ogras kept asking about specifics in the defenses of the Incursion, and anything other information that was lacking in the intelligence report. There were no particularly strong forces in the area, meaning that the Incursion hadn't really been tested so far. That was likely due to a stroke of brilliance by the generals of the incursions though.

A large number of strike squads containing humans from the Ez'Mahal Empire infiltrated all the promising forces in the area right before the tutorial ended, and assassinated a lot of cultivators the moment they returned. That caused the collapse of most of the towns in the vicinity, making for easy pickings to restock on slaves.

The core of the incursion was a newly erected town called Grand Escape. It was an allusion to the fact that the Ez'Mahal nobles did not consider the invasion a life and death struggle, but rather a retreat where they could play around and gain some benefits before going home. However, that would all change soon.

There was a defensive array that seemed decently strong, and apart from that, there was an identification array similar to the one in Westfort. A tag was needed to pass through the gates without causing an alarm. Everyone from the Ez'Mahal Empire possessed one, and it seemed that the main function of the array was to stop slaves from escaping rather than protect from infiltrators.

Ogras took the tag from the captive, and after throwing a glance at Zac slit the man's throat, making him bleed out in seconds.

"We can't use this," Ogras said as he observed the tag. "It seems to have been connected to his life force. If we walked through the gates wearing this we would no doubt be caught."

"So we can only brute force it?" Zac asked, not sparing the dead man another glance.

"No, I doubt that they went so far as to have a system that checks every single person's individual aura," Ogras mused. "I think that we can use these tokens if we keep the original owners alive. If that fails as well, then we can only go straight in."

"Okay, we'll find another squad," Zac said. "Billy, don't smash the next one."

The group set out again, and soon they were only 30 minutes away from the Grand Escape. Traffic was a lot higher here, with both cars and cultivators riding some horse-like beats passing the streets every other minute. The group had already gone into the woods to avoid being spotted, and they captured five groups passing by in quick succession.

They were stripped of their clothes and weapons before Ogras and a few demons took them away. Zac threw a confused glance at him when he returned with a dense aura of blood around him.

"They will live for an hour, perhaps two. Though they would probably wish it would be over much quicker though," the demon said with a nefarious smile, and Zac didn't care enough to ask anything further.

Soon they were all dressed in gear from the captured squads, though they were forced to make some improvised modifications for Billy and the Demons. Hopefully, no one would look too carefully at the people inside the stolen vehicles.

“If we get through the gates that’s for the best,” Zac said as he looked at the squad. “If not we’ll head straight for the castle. Kill everyone in the way, but conserve energy. Emily, give me the Endurance boost please.”

It wasn’t that he was worried about getting hurt, but the aura would also boost Emily. Letting her gain a part of his own monstrous Endurance would help her stay safe in the upcoming battle. Emily nodded and the next moment a green axe appeared in her hand, and she threw it into Zac. He felt a surge of power, and a quick check of his status screen showed that it worked just like the fire axe, except this one gave Endurance and Vitality.

“Wow,” Emily gasped as she looked with wide eyes at Zac, her own aura having suddenly increased by a large margin. “You’re like a tank.”

Zac shrugged with a smile, knowing she was surprised by the size of the boost she got. She had likely believed that Strength was his highest attribute after seeing how much she got from the flame axe.

“Girl, how much Endurance does he have?” Ogras said while poking Emily from the side.

“Not telling,” Emily grinned.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Zac said with a helpless shake of his head. “They’re going to notice a bunch of people has gone missing soon enough, let’s head out.”

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### **Chapter 302 - Rage**

Three Cars and a military truck soon drove toward the gates of the Grand Escape, with the humans in the cars while the demons hid within the tarp of the truck, their heads cowed just in case.

Zac sat in the passenger seat while Joanna was driving. Ogras was the only demon not hidden away in the truck, and he sat in the back seat as well. Shadows had gathered around him, making his features indistinct without drawing attention to itself.

“Who are you?” the guard captain said with a frown when he saw the odd procession.

“We bring news to his Excellency Thanso,” Joanna said without missing a beat. “The natives are amassing for an assault.”

The guard’s brows rose in surprise, but they soon furrowed again as he took a second look at Joanna and Zac who calmly looked right ahead. But Zac was starting to get a bad feeling when no answer was forthcoming.

“A-“ was all that escaped the guard’s mouth before he and the other four gatemens had their necks cracked by shadowy tendrils that somehow had reached the guards from the odd shadow appendage that usually stayed within Ogras’ metal casing.

Zac quickly looked around, and when he saw there was no traffic in the area he pointed out two fingers from the window, and the next moment a Valkyrie jumped out of the car behind. She rushed over to the dead guards who were still held upright by

Ogras' shadows and touched them for a few seconds each before running back to the car.

Zac nodded toward Joanna and she sped off, leaving the corpses of the five guards frozen solid. They knew that little stunt wouldn't buy a lot of time, but a minute or two was all they needed. The town wasn't very big, and they already knew where they needed to go since Thanso was always holed up in his palace, mostly occupied with cultivating or torturing his poor slaves.

The convoy sped through the town at a breakneck pace as it was only a matter of time before the corpses of the guards would be noticed. Interestingly enough the hurry of their group seemed to lessen suspicion rather than the opposite. The people on the street seemed to be under the impression that they were hurrying along on official business and quickly got out of the way.

But even though they drove as fast as they could Zac was able to see the type of town the invaders had built. The Grand Escape was a completely alien settlement, just like Azh'Rodum on his island, and all the architecture was foreign.

But the interesting design choices weren't what garnered Zac's attention. It was the copious amount of slaves that hurried along the sides with their heads held down. Most were barely clothed even though winter was coming, and he couldn't spot anyone without a fresh set of wounds.

It was easy to see the utter disdain the Ez'Mahal had for the native slaves, and they were treated worse than cattle. There were also a huge amount of brothels, with chained girls listlessly standing in the windows, their eyes devoid of emotion.

A fire raged in Zac's chest, and he wanted to jump out of the car swinging. The Valkyries in the car looked even worse and it was as though their fury would set the car on fire.

"They'll pay," Zac simply said as his eyes moved away from the road and toward the castle in the distance.

"What's our strategy?" Joanna said from the driver's seat.

"If the gate is open drive straight through it. If it's closed, then I'll open it. Afterward, we kill every soldier we can see," Zac simply said drawing quick nods from the others.

The town wasn't very large, and it took just a few minutes to drive straight through the main street to the palace.

"No array," the Valkyrie sitting next to Ogras noted as her eyes had a golden glow.

The Valkyries had proven more versatile than Alea had made it sound like, and the abilities they possessed were far more diverse than he expected. They did all have spear-related classes, but many possessed their own niche abilities that rounded out the 100 woman squad.

"Head right in," Zac said with an emotionless voice, his axe already lying in his lap.

A few guards made to stop them, but they were ripped apart by shadows before they could even voice a complaint. The group of vehicles easily entered the large square in front of the palace and leisurely stopped in a line as everyone got out. Zac had already ripped apart the robe Ez'Mahal robe he had covered his real gear with, disgusted with even pretending to be part of this debased force.

A red blaring light suddenly exploded in the sky above the castle, and soldiers almost immediately flooded toward them from every direction. They were all wearing

livery with two insignias; one for the Ez'Mahal Confederation, and one for whatever aristocratic family Thanso belonged to.

Zac breathed out in relief when he saw that it was only well-trained soldiers who had moved to intercept them. The intelligence packet mentioned that these people used human wave tactics, sending throngs of slaves to their deaths to tire out their enemies. But luckily it looked like the innermost core of the Incursion was guarded by elites instead, enabling Zac and the others to fight without any compunctions.

“Lay down your weapons immediately,” a guard captain shouted, but Zac simply hurled a large rock from his Cosmos Sack at him.

The captain was not bad, and a shield rose in front of him lightning-quick. But the force of the rock was massive, and he was thrown backward ten meters even though the rock disintegrated before it could harm him.

The guards stared with wide mouths at Zac, and the next moment shields and other protections covered the wide array of soldiers. There were roughly 800 people in front of them, and more were joining every minute.

Worse yet was that all of them were very strong, and a few of the soldiers might even have reached E-Rank, though barely.

“Attack,” Zac simply said as he started to throw out fractal blades.

It looked like the strongest people of the incursion still weren't around, so Zac wanted to take the opportunity to thin out the numbers to lessen the pressure on his strike team. Not that he needed a reason since he was still completely infuriated after seeing the misery these people had brought upon Earth's citizens.

Five blades imbued with the Dao quickly soared toward the defensive line, ready to cut the army to pieces.

“WHO DARES ATTACK LORD THANSO'S MANOR?” an enraged voice suffused with power echoed across the square, and a wiry man holding a spear jumped out from a window.

The man was clearly one of the stronger combatants of the force, and he even managed to destroy two of the fractal blades before they could wreak havoc on the army.

“I guess that's my cue,” Ogras shrugged as shadows started to converge around him.

“You sure you can handle it?” Zac asked with some hesitation.

Ogras was pretty strong, but he was still only a peak F-Grade warrior. The other spear wielder had not just Evolved though, making Zac unsure whether Ogras could handle it.

“You forget, my restrictions are completely gone while these guys seem to still be lacking 30 to 20% of their strength. Besides, you should be able to feel that this guy is nothing special,” Ogras said as he disappeared.

Heavy thuds followed Ogras' disappearance as Billy thundered toward a thick clump of warriors. His eyes were almost completely red in rage, and he bellowed on top of his lungs as he swung his club in a thundering horizontal swing.

A wave of destruction erupted from the club, and it was as though the air itself cracked and exploded. The energy wave moved quite quickly as it pushed across the square and hit the front lines of the soldiers. The first row of people was immediately turned to a bloody mess as they were flung high up in the air.

Even the following rows received gruesome wounds from the odd skill, many even dying. Between his huge frame and his devastating attack, Billy quickly became a target of the soldiers, and a storm of attacks sailed toward him almost immediately.

Billy's eyes widened in alarm, but the next moment a thick golden shield enveloped him, protecting him from the attacks falling like rain. It was the Valkyrie's that worked together to form a defensive barrier, and since it only needed to protect one man they were able to make it extremely sturdy.

The volume of attacks caused cracks continuously that allowed the occasional attack to slip through, but while Billy's Endurance wasn't the highest it was high enough to shrug off errant attacks. Emboldened by the protection he charged straight into the crumbling line of Ez'Mahal.

Furthermore, he wasn't alone but closely followed by a group of bloodthirsty demons rushing in his wake like a pack of wolves. Each of them was the cream of the crop among the demons, and they were also temporarily lent the best gear Port Atwood had to offer. The combination boosted their lethality to new heights as they entered a pitched battle with the soldiers who had already been forced to taste Billy's wrath.

They had all recently evolved, and they were extremely eager to start leveling again. Many of the demons had been stuck at the bottleneck for decades, and the possibility of finally moving forward again pumped their veins full of adrenaline. Besides, they desperately needed to rack up a mountain of contribution to get cultivation resources.

The E-Grade brought far greater power, but the cost of progression also multiplied manifold. There was not only the issue of needing higher-graded Crystals to cultivate, but the medicinal baths cost far more. They even needed to upgrade their gear, since their weapons and armor wouldn't be able to stand the increased Cosmic Energy for long.

Zac kept his distance while shooting out a constant stream of fractal blades to cull the numbers and prevent the soldiers from organizing. Since he didn't need to exert his full force he decided to experiment with the Dao of Rot, imbuing all his attacks with it.

Another benefit of the corrosive Dao started to show itself after he had shot a handful of attacks into the soldiers. The blades usually only managed to kill ten or so before they soldiers managed to exhaust the attack, but the Dao of Rot left a lingering effect.

Pockets of decay started to form on the battlefield due to the compounding strikes, and even soldiers who were not directly wounded started to show signs of weakness and nausea. Zac was elated by the results, but he still kept his eyes peeled. The main reason he hadn't entered the thick of it was that he was still waiting for the leaders to make their move.

Suddenly a spike of danger made Zac quickly erect his defenses. The next moment an ocean of small needles tried to rip him apart. All of them were even smaller than a sewing needle, but they contained a massive amount of force.

The swirling leaves around him were ripped apart one by one, and Zac felt like he was standing in an ocean of irate wasps. But an effective Endurance of over a thousand proved it's worth at this point, preventing the needles from causing anything more than light flesh wounds.

But Zac was a bit helpless in this situation since he had to block his eyes from being attacked. While his flesh was stronger than reinforced steel by this point the same thing couldn't be said for his eyeballs, and he would likely go blind if one of the needles struck him. Out of better options, he activated the charge on his new robes, and the thousands of needles were immediately pushed back from a shield looking like a shimmering blue shell.

Zac quickly moved his fingers as he glared around, and soon spotted a suspicious person standing in an alley between two houses. He was far from the battle, and his eyes were trained right on Zac. But most importantly he was decked in extremely gaudy clothes, completely ruining his attempt of hiding. Zac growled as he activated [Loamwalker] and the next moment he was in front of him.

The man looked shocked, and an amulet quickly burst into light, forming a protective barrier around him. Zac only sneered as his axe fell down three times in rapid succession, breaking open the turtle shell. The next moment he richly decked man was grabbed by his throat. Alarm could be seen on his face as he the swarm of needles return to aid him.

But Zac simply used the man as a human shield, blocking the attempts to attack him once again. But he didn't properly stop struggling until Zac tightened the grip to the point that his neck almost broke.

"Unhand the lord!" the wiry general shouted, but he was kept at bay by an ocean of shadow spears.

"If you harm me your pitiful planet will be eradicated!" the youth wheezed out through his teeth. "You're just animals of lower bloodlines, know your place."

Zac looked in the eyes of the man for a second, confused where he got this confidence from. In the end, he could only chalk it up to this idiot being too pampered throughout his life.

"You think you could come here and treat us like cattle?" Zac said, his voice echoing out through the square.

"Think again."

The next moment a fountain of blood spurted in all directions as Zac directly ripped off Thanso's head and slammed it down into the ground.

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**Chapter 303 - Punishment**

This was the weakest leader Zac had fought so far. He was clearly E-Rank, but neither his attributes nor Dao enlightenment were anything special. The weapon he used was pretty amazing though, likely a gift from his clan.

The soldiers looked on aghast at the fate of their lord, either worried about the incursion or the fate that awaited them when they returned. After seeing how easily Zac had handled one of the strongest men of the incursion their battle spirit quickly waned, and many started to look around for means of escape.

"We surrender, we'll leave your planet as once!" one of the generals immediately shouted, and the eyes of many soldiers turned toward a structure in the distance. "The wealth accumulated during our stay is all inside Lord Thanso's Cosmos Sack!"

"We can't let them!" Joanna spat from the side.

Zac touched the Cosmos Sack as he mulled over what to do. He remembered what he learned back in the library, and this wasn't necessarily the last time they encountered people from this confederation. He was still infuriated by how the Earthlings had been treated, but it would perhaps cause trouble down the line to act excessively.

There were no doubt a few who had already fled, making it impossible to keep the results of this battle on lockdown. But the moment he sensed what was inside the Cosmos Sack his pupils turned to needlepoints, and his rage was completely rekindled. Any thought of a ceasefire was immediately thrown out the window.

Corpses. Hundreds of corpses, mutilated and abused. Most of them were young women, but there were men and even children there as well. Zac looked down at the headless corpse of Thanso, infuriated that he died so easy. It took a special kind of monster to torture these many people then keep their bodies as mementos.

“Leave no one alive,” Zac growled, and the next moment he exploded into action.

Despair filled the eyes of soldiers when they saw Zac’s reaction, and they fled toward the Nexus Hub as fast as they could run. But how could it be that easy to escape an enraged Zac? Explosions of blood and gore erupted wherever warriors were clumped together as Zac arrived with **[Loamwalker]**, destroying everyone around with wide sweeping arcs of death.

The others needed little prodding either as they unleashed all their strongest attacks on the collapsing defensive lines of the soldier. Ogras had taken the opportunity to assassinate one of the generals who was caught off-guard by Zac’s wanton slaughter. That left only two more powerhouses on the side of Ez’Mahal, and Zac and Ogras picked each one. An all-out assault by Zac overwhelmed the mage, his defensive skills and treasure were whittled down in seconds.

Afterward, Zac simply shot out a handful of blades at the last general, who quickly got lost his life from being pincerred. By this point, quite a few people were starting to stream in through the gates, and Zac was wondering if they were reinforcements. But when he saw their appearance he realized that they likely had received some prompt and wanted to escape back home through the Nexus Hub.

The fires of fury were far from abated after seeing the bodies Thanso kept in his Cosmos Sack, and Zac’s eyes turned toward the large cathedral-like building that the Ez’Mahal people ran toward. The next moment a huge tear in space opened as the enormous hand of **[Nature’s Punishment]** emerged. Zac wasn’t thinking straight as he flooded the hand with his Peak-grade Dao and Cosmic Energy.

The only thing on his mind was to completely destroy their last hope and punish the invaders. It almost looked like the hand was shrouded in green flames as it ripped through the air, quickly arriving at the teleportation hub. A dense aura radiated from it, it’s very existence having a restraining effect on the soldiers beneath it.

Suddenly a fractal twenty meters across appeared above the hand as the fractal rings on the hands shone with blinding intensity. It was not something Zac had seen before, but when he laid his eyes on it he felt as though he breathed fresh air from a mountain top and smelt wet soil. It was the embodiment of earth itself.

Most importantly the aura kept intensifying, and everyone in the area was soon forced down on their knees, some even exploding due to the otherworldly pressure. It was as though the area in front of the building was being crushed by a mountain. However, that wasn’t all. The fractal suddenly flew straight down toward the ground, passing right through the wooden hand.

The fractal caused a hundred-meter wide indent to form around where it slammed down, and only those possessing decent defensive skills or treasures were still alive, albeit barely. The grand building that housed the Nexus Hub was barely standing. Its roof was caved in from the pressure and one of its walls had completely collapsed. It looked like it wouldn’t stay up for much longer unless it was reinforced.

Wails in pain and panic echoed across the area as the Ez'Mahal soldiers still alive found themselves in a pit full of bodies and debris. The fighting had largely died out amongst those who had chosen fight instead of flight, and even those of his own side looked at Zac with wide eyes. But only he knew that the attack was only half-way over.

The next moment the wooden hand punched down with monstrous strength. The last remnants of the house were completely destroyed, and a second shockwave expanded as though a bomb had gone off in the epicenter. The screams of the few survivors from the fractal were drowned in the dust cloud of the explosion, and the whole area was covered in the haze.

Then there was just silence.

Zac took a few deep breaths as he looked at the destruction with hard eyes until they switched over to Ogras who walked over.

"What about the rest?" Ogras said, not commenting the wanton slaughter Zac had just committed. "We've gone this far, we might as well hunt them down."

"Quite a few people arrived here through the Incursion, we won't be able to hunt them all down with our small squad," Zac sighed, the fires in his chest having slightly abated. "Let's focus on freeing the slaves. And kill anyone who looks like he can become a threat."

The demons nodded as he turned around. A sea of shadows suddenly emerged at the gate and dozens of spears impaled the few people who hadn't already fled after seeing Zac's attack. Billy simply sat down when seeing the battle was over, his lungs moving like bellows as he gulped for air. Tears were streaming down his eyes as he sat unmovingly, and Zac walked over with a frown.

"Are you ok, Billy?" Zac asked as sat down in front of him.

"Mama said to never hurt people," Billy said. "But Mama never met people this bad. These people deserved it, but Billy is still sad."

Zac sighed as he looked at the giant. He realized that Billy might not have ever killed humans before he joined on this mission as most of his time was spent in the Ratlight. The scene also made him wonder what kind of person he had become. He had killed close to a thousand people in just a few minutes. Yet he felt nothing, neither joy nor sadness or shame. It was as he had cut down a bunch of trees, eliciting no emotional reaction.

He patted the giant on his shoulder before he walked over to Emily and the squad of Valkyries who had protected her. They had stayed away from the thick of it, mostly providing support while keeping themselves safe.

"Are you guys okay?" Zac asked as he looked at the group.

"People are messed up," Emily muttered before she looked up. "We need to become stronger, or we'll become slaves as well when the world loses its protection."

The Valkyries emphatically nodded, having all too much experience in that department. When people could attain the powers of gods some truly started to treat normal humans as ants.

"We'll sweep this place clean before we liberate the slaves in the town," Zac said. "We'll also bring over a few hundred of the reserves to take control while we head over to the plantations. I'll watch over the remaining soldiers."

The girls nodded, and soon the small strike squad went through every nook and cranny of the castle. Soon hundreds of slaves had been found, some in extremely horrible conditions. A few even chose to immediately end their lives the moment their shackles were removed.

Everyone was moved out to the square, standing some distance from the timid group of Ez'Mahal soldiers who had thrown down their weapon. They didn't dare to move a muscle after Zac had told them to stay put before sitting down to restore his energy.

No one even as much as dared to breathe loudly when sensing the immense aura that Zac emitted. He was sitting in the middle of the square as both a deterrent for any foolish actions and also because he was simply a bit tired. The attack had cost far more than a normal [Nature's Punishment] had, and he curiously opened his menu as he waited for the others to finish their sweep.

**[Nature's Punishment - Proficiency: Late. Awaken the wrath of the world. Upgradeable]**

It had actually upgraded to late proficiency. Furthermore, Zac had a feeling that it upgraded before he even used it. After reading the flavor text he had a strong feeling that the upgrade was linked to his emotional response. He had been well and truly infuriated after seeing Thanso's bag, and that rage had fueled the skill.

Unfortunately, he also noticed that the battle hadn't been enough to reach level 75, even though he had killed two E-Grade cultivators. He even felt that he wasn't all that close, meaning that the final level seemed to require far more energy than the earlier ones. Still, if there was one thing he wouldn't lack the coming weeks were enemies, so he wasn't worried he wouldn't get there soon enough.

Eventually, Zac turned his eyes to the hundreds of ragged people who stood huddled on the square. Their eyes were all trained on him, some with hope, and others with fear. He retracted his aura as he stood up, gripping an E-Grade Nexus Crystal in his hand. His sudden movement made the group instinctually shrink back, and some even tried to hide the few children behind their emaciated bodies.

"I am Zac Atwood," Zac said with a loud voice. "You might know me as the Super-Brother Man from the Ladder. We have killed all the leaders of the Ez'Mahal, and we will begin clearing out the area to kill every one of these scum. You all are free."

All the people stared blankly at him for a few seconds, until a few broke down and started crying in large tears of relief. Others simply fell down on their knees, holding their heads. A few even kneeled in front of him in thanks.

But suddenly chaos erupted in the ranks of the former slaves as a young man around 17 or 18 jumped a middle-aged woman, ruthlessly started to punch her. Weirder yet was that not a single person tried to help her, instead opting to either look away or look on with schadenfreude.

"YOU FUCKER," he shouted and started to relentlessly punch and claw at the woman, seemingly intent to tear her apart.

Zac frowned and flashed over before lifting the youth and tossing him away with one hand.

"What are you doing?" Zac asked with a frown.

"That bitch sold so many girls out to those alien psychopaths. It's because of her my sister was tortured to death," he screamed, tears running down his cheeks.

"We all did what we had to do to survive!" she said, her eyes thick with fear as she glanced at Zac. "They would be found out soon anyway! They had eyes everywhere."

A spear tip suddenly burst out through her chest, and she looked down at her engorged chest with confusion, before her eyes turned vacant. Zac looked up at Joanna who stood behind her with ruthless eyes.

“Question everyone, find the other conspirators,” Zac said, steeling his heart. “Purge everyone who betrayed Earth.”

His order quickly caused a few individuals to be isolated as they screamed and pled to be spared. But the Valkyries had long turned to ruthless killing machines as the targets were quickly executed after the details were confirmed. Zac himself didn't act, but he passively looked at the result of his order. But while his exterior was calm the same couldn't be said of his thoughts.

He felt he was walking down a dark path, the weight of his victims causing a heavier and heavier burden. Would he emerge with his soul intact, or would the sin of his actions consume him?

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**Chapter 304 - Plantations**

Zac knew a lot of blood would be shed from his order, but he didn't want to leave cancerous individuals behind. Every force he liberated would also become part of his jurisdiction, and he could not leave such hidden risks in times of war.

Next, he purchased a teleporter, as the moment that he had killed thanso and the last general the town was considered his by the System. A Valkyrie immediately stepped through it to report back to Port Atwood, and to relay his orders. Hundreds of reserve fighters would join the area soon enough to stabilize the situation and return some order to the chaos.

He internally winced at the cost of all these transportations, but he also knew that the value of the area far outweighed the cost. It became increasingly clear from reading the intelligence on the incursions that they were all placed close to some sort of natural resource.

The demon Incursion not only got the Nexus Vein, but also the Tree of Ascension. It had already been confirmed that the mountains of the second Incursion he closed were rich in valuable metals, and this place had the farmland with spiritual soil.

That farmland was also why Zac was a bit hurried. And after giving a few more commands to Joanna he gathered Ogras, Emily and half of the Demons and Valkyries. The others would be led by Billy to keep things in check. All the strongest people had long been killed, so Billy would have no trouble keeping things in check as long as the remaining Valkyries shielded him.

The rest needed to go to the vast plantations and claim them before the Ez'Mahal people could ruin or plunder the fields in revenge. Winter was coming, but that didn't affect Spiritual Soil and Spirit Herbs who could grow year-round straight through the ice if need be.

“Who here has been to the plantations?” Zac asked as he looked at the slaves.

The bloody spectacle of Joanna had once again cowed the crowd, but soon a middle-aged man stepped forward.

“There are three large plantations, my lord,” he said with a posh British accent. “I have been to all three. I have also heard chatter of a higher-grade garden, but I never learned where it was situated.”

Zac had the man enter the car they used to get inside before he entered as well. Just as they were about to drive out they noticed people streaming out of the teleporter. The reserves clearly had been on standby since less than three minutes were

needed for them to organize everything. Zac felt confident in leaving the town now when there were hundreds of his soldiers keeping things in order.

The car once again sped through the streets of the Grand Escape. It turned out the man that Zac brought was called Henry, just like the Marshall patriarch. However, his history was quite different. He was a trained butler, and Thanso had thought it was novel to have a native servant to wait upon him.

He was one of the few people that had been treated somewhat decently of the slaves. Not through benevolence though, but because Henry was very skilled, and Thanso did not want to waste time finding a new native Butler.

More impressively the reason that he seemed so popular amongst the slaves was that he had dared to lie straight into Thanso's face, saving dozens of poor women who would have met grim fates otherwise. Of course, he had only been able to save a scant few of Thanso's numerous victims, but Zac was still impressed with the guts of the man.

As they drove through the town chaos was already taking hold. A lot of the people in the city were various non-combat classes supporting the invasion, and when the leaders and the soldiers fell, pandemonium soon erupted.

No matter where he looked former slaves were rising up against their masters in an all-out brawl. Neither were very powerful, but the slaves didn't seem to care about their lives as they mobbed the foreign invaders like a swarm of angry bees.

Zac didn't have any means to help them out, but after throwing Ogras a look, shadow spears started emerging within a hundred meters of the cars. No matter where one looked Ez'Mahal natives were getting skewered and by the time they left the town hundreds had fallen to Ogras' attacks. Ogras had understood Zac's intent though and only attacked those who were killing Natives.

They followed the directions of Henry as they sped through the roads, heading toward the closest plantation. According to the butler, around ten thousand slaves were working there. Zac couldn't understand how a plantation could need so much manpower, but when he understood why he was livid.

The Ez'Mahal possessed an extremely sinister array to speed up the growth of the plants. A slave was needed to continuously infuse the array with energy, and the energy helped the herbs grow faster. But it didn't only sap the slaves of their energy, it also slowly sapped them of their life force.

They even had special cultivation manuals that were extremely efficient in restoring lost Cosmic Energy, but in turn were essentially useless in progressing in levels since it harmed one's foundations. They forced any slaves who were cultivators to swap to this manual and used them to feed the most precious herbs.

Not only did that help the Ez'Mahal to harvest the plants far quicker than usual, but it also prevented rebellion. The slaves were always so drained that they could barely stand, let alone fight in an insurrection.

The group drove for roughly 30 minutes on a newly constructed road until the forests gave way to an enormous field spanning god knows how large an area. They didn't even see it all due to some fields having plants reaching a few meters into the air, but it had to be at least dozens of football fields large.

"Is all this on Spiritual Soil?" Zac asked with wide eyes.

"I am not too knowledgeable about what Spiritual Soil is, but the actual area with the better soil is even larger than this," Henry said after thinking it over. "Deforestation has been ongoing since the integration to open up more farmland. But apparently, the soil is littered with solid rock, and they have been forced to move a mountain's worth of boulders to clear it."

As they entered the plantation Zac soon noted mats placed through the fields, and on some of them people were sitting, seemingly in meditation. But at other spots people were aimlessly wandering with confusion and hesitation in their eyes.

They approached a large mansion that was almost in the middle of the fields, and Zac's brows rose when he saw it was surrounded by people. They looked emaciated but spirited, holding everything from wooden clubs to large rocks in their hands.

Unfortunately, the car Zac and the others sat in was a stolen Ez'Mezal vehicle and the moment they approached they were pelted by rocks as the revolting slaves closed in on them. Henry's eyes widened in alarm, but Ogras only snorted as he stepped out.

The smarter slaves quickly stopped in their tracks when they saw the demon's appearance, but the most irate slaves didn't even register the set of horns on Ogras' head.

"Don't kill anyone," Zac said as he stepped out as well.

The next moment the slaves had frozen in place, with everyone who still held a weapon in their hand having a shadow spear trained on their throat or hearts. Resistance immediately crumbled in the face of overwhelming power, and the rebels quickly discarded their makeshift weaponry.

"We are not part of the Ez'Mahal. We are their enemies. Where are the leaders who ran this place?" Zac asked with a loud voice.

"They ran in that way!" a woman shouted, pointed in the direction of the woods with anger. "They took everything they could carry as well. Treasures and herbs! We had no way to stop them or keep up with their speed."

"How long ago?" Zac asked.

"Fifteen minutes ago," she said with a note of uncertainty.

Zac looked over at Ogras, who nodded and suddenly got swallowed in shadows, disappearing from sight. Zac probably possessed the speed to run them down as well, but he was pretty bad at tracking. Ogras was even faster than he was, and his skill set was far more suited for assassinating the slavedrivers.

Those who remained hesitantly looked at Zac, their eyes occasionally darting toward their weapons again. But a burst of his bloodsoaked aura quelled any thoughts of resuming their rebellion.

Zac coughed and repeated the same story to this set of slaves, about who he was and what had happened. This time no one had seen the battle in the Grand Escape, so convincing the plantation slaves about the situation wasn't quite as simple. But the flight of all the Ez'Mezal personnel was a clear indicator that what Zac said wasn't without merit.

"What now?" one woman suddenly asked. "Where is the government? Will they help us?"

"I am sorry, but no," Zac said, realizing that these people likely had no idea what was going on with Earth.

"The governments have all fallen, and a few new ones have taken their place," Zac said. "Around 15% of the world's population remains, the rest have fallen to Incursions or wild beasts. Desperate battles are taking place all over the world.

"My armies are currently marching against a horde of tens of millions of Zombies. Yes, literal zombies like in the movies," Zac said. "There is even an old monster heading toward Earth, a being so strong that he can destroy a whole city with a punch."

"So there is nowhere I can take you all. And honestly, even if I could, why would I? It costs a fortune to teleport someone, and the world has become too massive and

dangerous to travel by road or air. But you are welcome to stay here. We are currently rooting out the last of the invaders, but this area will be part of my sphere of influence, and it will be somewhat safe at least,” Zac finished.

Hopelessness filled the eyes of the people gathered in front of him. Many had likely dreamt of being saved by the government, followed by a return to normalcy. But such a thing no longer existed on this planet, and it wouldn't return until their place in the universe was secured through strength.

“Will we be forced to continue using these arrays?” the woman who pointed out where the overseer fled asked.

“No one should be using those things,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “From what I understand they will sap your life force, slowly killing you.”

The colors of the faces in front of him turned noticeably better when they learned that they wouldn't have to slave in the arrays any longer though. Zac sighed when he saw their weak erratic auras, and the next moment a small hill of Nexus Crystals appeared in front of him.

“Each of you take one,” Zac said. “If you don't know, these are Nexus Crystals. They are used for either restoring one's energy or gaining levels. There is no side-effect to using them, but they aren't as effective for gaining levels as killing beasts.”

The slaves hesitantly looked at the mound of crystals for a bit until a few of them stepped forward. Zac noted that some of them were around level 15 to 22, and likely Cultivators. These people had probably been caught the moment they returned from the Tutorial, and barely had any progress since then due to the cultivation manual they were forced to use.

Since everything was dealt with for now he took out a chair to wait for Ogras, and he fielded any questions the people in front of him had. As the minutes passed more and more people were joining, especially after Zac told a few people to gather those out on the fields.

There were still quite a few who were still infusing their arrays, afraid that the odd situation might be a trap to trick them. But soon over a thousand people had gathered in front of him, each clinging to a Nexus Crystal as though it was a heavenly treasure.

“In the next few days, I will open up a store in the town. You can buy more Nexus Crystals there, or anything else you may need. From supplies to weapons and armor,” Zac said. “We only take Nexus Coins though.”

“Most of us barely have any coins at all, how will we survive?” one of the braver men asked.

“Port Atwood will provide for everyone for a limited time, but sooner or later you will have to provide for yourselves. You can either get jobs or hunt monsters for Nexus Coins and materials,” Zac explained.

“What can we even do? You're level 74, but most of us aren't even level 10. We weren't allowed to gain levels, any energy we managed to gather went straight into these god damn plants,” another man grunted.

“It hasn't even been a year since the integration took place. I am sure it has felt like an eternity to you, but in terms of the multiverse, it is nothing. If you manage to upgrade your race to E-Grade your lifespan will increase to 500 years. Upgrade it again you will live for thousands of years. What are a few months lost?” Zac retorted.

“The means to upgrade your race will be available for purchase in our shops. Even Mortals can evolve their race,” Zac continued. “But you should know that nothing

in this world comes free. Only those who struggle and gain enough resources will be able to afford the treasures needed.”

Quite a few of the haggard slaves perked up at Zac’s explanation. A fire rekindled in their eyes, shining with determination to overcome their current situation. However, Zac sighed when he saw that most of them were still downcast. But at least he gave a few of them something to strive for.

Not much later Ogras returned with a lazy expression, his eyes flashing with a hint of disdain as he looked at how the slaves clutched their Nexus Crystals.

“I thought you would want to see this,” Ogras said as fifteen heads thumped down on the ground. “This should be the leaders of this place. I didn’t bother with the heads of the others.”

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**Chapter 305 - War**

“The hordes will arrive in our designated War Zone in eight days. We expect the second horde to come in contact with the coalition of Port Atwood and the Sino-Indians two days later,” Mark said as he looked down at the map.

Mark was a distant uncle to Thea, and he was assigned as her primary advisor for the upcoming war. The middle aged man was a seasoned veteran of the Royal Air Force and a decorated general, so it was no surprise that he would be calling the shots in the battle against the undead. Officially he was only here in an advisory role though, with Thea being the figurehead.

Still, she wanted to understand as much as she could even if she might not be the real strategist of the war. A lot of people would die in the upcoming weeks, some as a direct result of her commands. She owed it to them to do everything she could to keep that number as low as possible.

“Why don’t we immediately fight them?” Thea asked with a frown. “We’re giving them free rein over hundreds of miles of land.”

“For one we want them as far away as possible from the Incursion,” Mark explained as he pointed toward the edge of the Dead Zone. “The geeks have surmised that these hordes are large enough to affect the area, changing the Cosmic Energy into miasma at a rate higher than they consume.

“But our goal is to splinter the horde and whittle them down, turning the horde into smaller groups that won’t have this benefit. If we can bring the units beneath the critical mass needed to maintain the transformation we can starve them out. Even if they turn back at that time they will have a week’s travel before they can resupply on miasma,” the general said as he scratched his beard.

“But they will destroy all the towns in their path,” Thea muttered.

“Small price to pay. Besides, we have evacuated most of the people living in the path toward us,” Mark said.

“How long do you think this war will take?” Thea asked, her thoughts heading to Zac.

“At least a month,” Mark said with some hesitation. “Problem is we can’t tell how many elite warriors they have, and that will affect the speed at which can

dismantle the horde. They have a thick layer of trash out at the edges, and the cloud of miasma blocks our vision of what hides in the core.”

“How many Incursions do you think their team will be able to close in that time?” Thea asked, interested in hearing the opinion of a war veteran.

“I wouldn’t know, girl. You know his strength better than me. But it seems they want to keep the land they claim, and that will take far more time than the battle,” Mark said with a snort. “Port Atwood is about to get a real headache on their hands.”

“You know, you will need a better strategy than simply running interference,” Ilvere’s voice said as he walked inside the tent.

“What?” Alea said with confusion, once again looking down at the map detailing the progress of the undead horde.

“Lord Atwood,” Ilvere guffawed, drawing an even stare from the poison mistresses. “I heard about your little stalking over in that human town. You even sent the little blue one to ruin the mood, no?”

“That is none of your business. Besides, it was to avoid letting that woman taking advantage of us,” Alea said.

“I’m sure,” Ilvere snorted as he walked over to the table. “You should know that our cultures are different. I could simply beat up the others to court Lady Alyn, but that sort of approach seems to make the humans angry.”

“I don’t understand what you see in that bloodthirsty lunatic,” Alea said with a shake of his head.

“Perhaps I simply like living on the edge,” Ilvere smiled.

Alea rolled her eyes before she looked down at the table in silence a few seconds, as if in deep thought.

“Am I a fool for pursuing this?” Alea suddenly asked.

“Following one’s heart is never foolish,” Ilvere said.

“When did you become so wise?” Alea said, some humor returning to her eyes.

“Well, I wasn’t blessed with a rich daddy nor a pretty face, so I had to use my head for my conquests,” Ilvere grinned before once again looking down at the map. “So what are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that we will have to work a lot without pay. These things will barely bring any money per kill,” Alea sighed. “At least it will temper this pathetic excuse for an army.”

“If you think ours is bad you should see the ones from that other force,” Ilvere said with disgust. “It’s no wonder their countries became food for the undead.”

“What do you mean?” Alea asked with confusion. “Our reports say their armies are almost three hundred thousand men strong, with more joining every day.”

“A large group of trash,” Ilvere said. “Armed with pre-integration weaponry. Most are below level 10. They will probably just turn into even more zombies to kill. And all that energy and money being left on the table. I’d say that only fifty thousand or so are proper warriors, though their levels aren’t anything impressive.”

“What about the two elites that are on the ladder?” Alea asked.

“They act like they’re gods, but I’d be able to fight them both to a draw with my restrictions in place,” Ilvere said with a shake of his head.

“About the restrictions,” Alea slowly prodded. “Did you...?”

“Yeah, I got the quest. As did Janos,” Ilvere said. “But completing our mission comes first.”

“Agreed, but if we see the opportunity,” Alea said, drawing a nod from the demon general.

“And if those two get in the way?”

“Then they can join the Undead General in hell,” Alea said with equanimity.

“If you were only this assertive with your private life,” Ilvere said with a final laugh as he left the tent, holding his breath to avoid the wave of poison that followed him out.

“Thank you as always, Miss Sui,” Ling Tian said as he stood up.

“You should rest some more,” Sui said as she looked at the back of her new team leader with worry.

He looked fine but Sui knew that he was anything but. His whole body was a maze of scars from countless battles with the undead.

“I might not be a cultivator but I can gain strength with these two hands,” Ling Tian said, tightening his fist. “More importantly, every Zombie we kill now will be one less to rampage across the settlements in the coming weeks. This is the final battle.”

“But you need to be alive to keep protecting the people,” Sui sighed.

“Haven’t you read the stories?” Ling Tian said with a youthful smile as he stood up to rejoin the battle. “The hero always starts out as a weakling, but soon grows into prominence.”

Sui didn’t know what to say as she saw the receding form of Ling Tian, unsure whether it was her place to butt in. She knew that many made fun of Ling Tian for his chosen name or what they perceived as a vain attempt of playing the hero.

But she truly felt he was a hero. He wasn’t overly strong, yet he dared to risk his life over and over. Who knew how many he had saved over the past months, relentlessly keeping the undead at bay in the area around Eastern Hills. That in of itself was a great achievement. After all, he was not like that man.

Ling Tian was not able to single-handedly mow through an army with a swing of his axe, and his aura wasn’t as vast as the sea.

Suddenly, as if summoned by her thoughts she saw the hunched-over form of Wang Fang walking by. By now he was only a shell of the man he once was, with his cheeks sunken and dark circles under his eyes. The aura of life around him had long turned a murky yellow, compared to the vibrant gold that she usually saw around people. He was not long for the world.

“Enjoying the effects of your boyfriend’s scheming?” Wang Fang growled when he noticed Sui’s glance.

“David told you the water was poisoned and warned everyone not to drink it,” Sui said with annoyance, having repeated the same thing untold times.

It wasn’t only his body that had warped, but so had Wang Fang’s mind. His actions against David had caused the Monastery to speak out against him in the end, causing their whole hunting squad to become pariahs in the whole eastern border of the Dead Zone.

But not once had Wang Fang looked inward to his own failings, and instead squarely put all the blame on the man who called himself David. Of those who had ignored David’s warning and partook in the cursed water, only Wang Fang was still alive.

Their group had no choice but to travel to a settlement far away to avoid the angry mob wanting to curry favor with the Abbot. But they were soon driven out again due to Wang Fang’s infamy and irascible personality. It was only at Ling Tian’s town

Eastern Hills they found sanctuary. Ling Tian took anyone in as long as they were ready to fight the undead threat.

“I might die soon, but that man might join the war. I will drag that schemer with me to hell if it’s the last thing I do,” Wang Fang growled after throwing Sui one last glance, walking away toward his tent.

“The next time we meet David will be the day he dies,” a condescending voice said from behind. “How does he still not realize who he is?”

Sui looked back at John, one of the few westerners who had lived in the Dead Zone since the beginning.

“The poisonous water has made him irrational and paranoid. He doesn’t believe people when they explain how the description of the Super Brother-Man in King’s Crossing perfectly matches David,” Sui said with some helplessness.

But she wondered, would he be in the army they were heading toward?

“Your Eminence, the town of Port Atwood has once again arrived to check up on our status. Do you wish to meet with them?” the elderly monk asked after opening the doors to the secluded courtyard.

Abbot Everlasting Peace sighed as he looked up at the sky. Ribbons of gold crossed the sky above him, making him feel both wonder and despair. Everything would come to an end, but would he truly be able to sever it? Should he?

Was this truly the correct path toward enlightenment?

Brother Stillness looked at the wistful expression on the usually serene face, and worry started to mar his ancient face. He had assisted the Abbot for decades, and he had never seen such an expression.

“Your eminence...?” elder Stillness said with concern as he took a hesitant step toward the pond. “Is it the yin creatures? The mountain will provide sanctuary.”

“Brother Stillness, do you remember when we were young?” Abbot Everlasting Peace suddenly said as he looked at the elder monk across the pond. “This penniless monk ate the Yumberries that elder Small Mountain had grown with meticulous care behind his abode.”

“When this one scurried away he noticed Brother Stillness sitting in a tree not far away, witnessing the theft. Yet when asked by elder Small Mountain Brother Stillness lied and said you ate them. Was this lie good or bad?”

The elder’s long wispy brows rose in surprise before he donned a thoughtful look.

“Lying is not only harming others, but it is also harming one’s self. It is a corruption of the path, and the Buddha decreed lying to be against one the moral precepts,” elder Stillness said before he bowed in thanks. “Amitabha. Only through self-reflection can one find the path.”

Abbot smiled as he looked at the ribbons once more, his eyes turning toward the 5 Pitch-Black ones rising into the cosmos from various corners of the continent. Next, his eyes moved toward the Silver ribbon inlaid with countless fractals, which as usual thrummed with recognition when it was being observed. He once again sighed and looked back down at his old friend.

“Small Mountain was not truly harmed by my theft. He never intended to eat them himself, and chalked it up to the berries going to their fateful owners,” Abbot Everlasting Peace smiled as he caressed the thick golden line connecting himself and elder Stillness. “Yet the shelter you provided a young scared acolyte proved to become a gesture that this penniless monk remembers even 80 years later.”

The old monk looked a bit confused at the Abbot's exclamation. Was this a karmic lesson, or was the Abbot simply reminiscing? But he didn't have the chance to inquire as the old Abbot suddenly rose to his feet for the first time in months.

"Abbot..! Your wound..?" Stillness exclaimed with worry, though he couldn't hide the excitement in his eyes.

"What will come to be, will be," Abbot Everlasting Peace said, stepping out from the lotus.

Small ripples expanded on the pond as the abbot stepped on the water surface as though it was solid ground. But that wasn't what truly shocked the old monk.

The magical Zen Treasure that Abbot had sat upon for months in order to recuperate started glowing and changing the moment that the Abbot stepped down from it. The flower radiated a holy light as it rose from the pond, and flew up to position itself behind the Abbot.

As Everlasting Peace walked across the pond golden Sanskrit started to appear in a script across the flower, which itself turned into a holy white. In just seconds it had turned into a Buddhist halo, with dense writings covering its every surface.

As brother Stillness' eyes read the lines his mind turned blank for a second, before he felt an unprecedented clarity. His eyes, full of understanding, quickly moved to meet the Abbot's, who only smiled in response. Excitement filled brother Stillness' heart for a second, but it soon was suffused by a deep sadness.

"Your eminence, this means...?!" he hesitantly asked.

"What will be, will be."

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 306 - The Tal-Eladar**

It took Zac three days to bring a semblance of order to Verdant Fields, which was the new name given to Grand Escape. The old name simply had too many bad memories associated with it. He initially wanted to head straight to the next Incursion the same day, but he soon realized he had to give up on that plan.

First of all the warriors needed rest. They weren't like Zac with his monstrous attributes. They had truly risked their lives in the battle, and most of the demons had various degrees of wounds, notwithstanding the high-quality gear that Zac lent them.

It was easy to forget that they had charged into an army of hundreds of men with less than twenty people, even though they were just a little bit stronger than the defenders. It was almost a miracle that no one died. Of course, chalking it up to just luck was oversimplifying it. They had arrived with monstrous momentum, and between Zac, Ogras, and Billy the enemies' lines completely collapsed before they could mount a resistance.

Apart from rest and post-battle meditation to consolidate the Dao, there was also the need to consolidate the area. Verdant Fields was in the center of a region with extreme potential value, and Gredas, the old demonkin farmer, had immediately rushed over when he heard about the huge fields of Spiritual Soil.

They had quickly decided to transplant a large amount of the soil to Port Atwood and its neighboring farming islands, but this place would likely become the agricultural headquarters of his empire in the future. The herbs that were currently growing would

be able to be used for medicinal baths, something that would be in extremely high demand on earth the coming decades as people tried to evolve their race.

But restoring order to the area was easier said than done. There was not only the issue of clothing, feeding, and treating thousands upon thousands of liberated slaves, but they also needed to set up a working governing body. All while hunting the Ez'Mezal warriors who still hid in the population.

Zac had made fleeing Earth impossible in his fit of rage, but that had also left them with the headache of finding the invaders. This wasn't like the golem Incursion where it was extremely easy to figure out who the enemies were, since the foreign invaders from the Ez'Mahal Empire were able to blend in with a change of clothes.

They were forced to bring over the array that Ogras had used to find the shapeshifters, but by the time they got the array running most had already left the area.

The one thing that made their lives a bit easier was how quickly the non-combat classes had given up, and they hadn't caused any problem so far. Their people came from an empire completely based on slave labor, so a force being defeated and its people turned into slaves happened every day. It was lucky as well that they adapted to the situation so quickly, since there were tens of thousands of them.

Zac was shocked at the count, as the number of people far eclipsed what the demons brought to his island. Usually, the incursions weren't too populous since it cost Nexus Coins to send everyone over, but non-combat classes were far cheaper compared to powerhouses.

But the biggest reason there were so many of them was that the invaders gained its first round of reinforcements not long ago. It was inevitable that the incursions would be able to bolster their ranks within the first year, but Zac was still a bit disappointed that it had already happened. It didn't really affect them in this battle, but he had a feeling that they simply got lucky this time.

The Ez'Mahal had no strong enemies in the area, and Earth's performance hadn't impressed anyone so far. Zac, Billy, and Thea were the only ones who had defeated their neighboring Incursions, and Zac's feat wasn't even publicly known. They likely hadn't felt there was any need to bolster their troops in the short run, and instead sent over personnel to manage the slaves and help extract everything of value in the area.

Currently, the vast number of non-combat people were separated from the former slaves, and their expertise and actions were being tallied by his army. They needed proper insight into what they were dealing with here.

As things started to get under control with the help of the personnel from Port Atwood, Zac and the others started to turn their eyes toward the next target. He and the others of the strike force were currently sitting in a conference room in Thanso's former mansion, planning their next step.

"Things are mostly settled here," Ogras said from the other side of the table. "Which one have you decided on next?"

Zac looked around the room and saw a wide range of emotions. The demons looked eager as ever, perhaps since two of them had managed to improve a Dao Seed after the battle. Apparently, one's connection to the Dao also improved when one evolved, though Zac didn't know if that also applied to himself with his weird constitution.

The Valkyries sat with stone-cold eyes full of determination. The pitiful lives of the slaves in the area had rekindled the buried memories of their own fates in Greenworth, and they wanted to keep fighting to free others who had been enslaved. For them the battles weren't about resources or improvement, but about liberation.

Emily had returned to her happy-go-lucky self. She had been shaken by the evil perpetrated in Verdant Green before they reclaimed it, but she had channeled that shock and rage into her desire to become stronger. And she was currently riding the powerleveling train that was Zac.

His rampage had actually awarded her almost two levels. Curiously enough she gained almost all of it from the weaker soldiers, whereas the death of the incursion leader awarded her next to nothing. It was at that point Ogras explained that she got a penalty due to the level difference, just like Zac gained no energy for killing weaker beasts by now.

It was a way to avoid too blatant exploitation. But the result was still above expectation since she gained quite a bit of Cosmic Energy without lifting her fingers. It wasn't even impossible that she'd be able to break into the ladder if she followed Zac for a month or two.

"The one with the elves," Zac said, taking out one of the intelligence missives. "It's another force that has actively hunted outside their region for slaves. But this one isn't run by trash. They have some sort of detection arrays, and their defensive array is perpetually running. We will not be able to ambush them."

Ogras grabbed hold of the stack of information with a frown.

"The Tal-Eladar," he said, causing some blood lust to leak from the demonic soldiers. "I do not recognize their crest, though."

The Tal-Eladar wasn't truly elves, but Marshall clan informally called them that due to their appearance. They had long pointed ears that slightly drooped at their tip and lithe frames, which brought to mind elves from fantasy stories. However, there were some differences between elves and the humanoids in the incursion.

First of all their eyes looked a bit creepy according to the report, and a comment likened them to goat's eyes, with oblong horizontal pupils and no sclera. Their teeth were also sharp, meaning they didn't live on morning dew and fruits like elves in the stories did.

Their actions of constant expansion and raids weren't very reminiscent of the harmonious bearing of the woodland people either. While the Ez'Mahal had been somewhat content with tending to their massive plantations the Tal-Eladar had increased the size of their Incursion three-fold since the initial push. It was nowhere near the actions of the Undead Empire, but it was still a large-scale conquest.

That was one of the main reasons why Zac chose this incursion. The Ez'Mahal was targeted for the combination of the horrible treatment of natives with their weak force. The Tal-Eladar were instead targeted for their constant expansion. Every time they conquered a new town more people would be enslaved or killed, and nipping it in the bud as quickly as possible was important to stop their expansion.

But what Zac didn't expect was the reaction of the demons in the conference room.

"What's going on?" Zac asked with some confusion.

"The Tal-Eladar and the demonkin are in an almost perpetual war in our sector," Ogras explained. "You remember how Clan Azh'Rezak makes their money as mercenaries? Our progenitor was a mercenary who made his name in a war against these people. In fact, most of our elders and veterans have fought in wars against the Tal-Eladar."

"So it's a racial thing," Zac said. "Well, we will still go by the standard plan. We will see how they have treated people. If it's like here, then they will get the same treatment. If they have acted within limits then we will let them leave, no matter your bad blood."

The demons looked a bit unwilling, but soon they acquiesced.

“Good. I don’t want to have to lug around the Origin Array everywhere to hunt dissidents,” Zac said as he turned to Billy who was sitting by one of the ends of the table with a vacant stare.

“Billy, will you be able to fight?” Zac probed.

“Ah?” Billy said, waking with a start. “Billy can fight.”

“Good. We are going to another bad place, just like this place was,” Zac said. “We need you to thwack their shield. Like you did in the hunt to save Thea.”

Billy seriously nodded.

“Mama always said the strong need to help others. Billy will help save the people.”

“Good,” Zac said. “Is there anything else that needs to be done here?”

“Everything is dealt with, except our lack of experts is making itself shown,” Ogras said with a sigh. “We don’t have anyone strong enough to hold down the fort.”

“I don’t want anyone to defend this place to their deaths,” Zac said. “If someone wants to take this piece of land, let them. I will make them give it back, and then some, after we’re done with the Incursions. But I don’t want to leave these people to their fates if I can help them.”

“We do not need too large defending forces for now,” Ogras agreed. “I doubt anyone on this baby planet can block teleporters or perform other advanced siege tactics. But we simply do not possess the man-power if we wish to run a dozen spheres of influence from all the Incursions we will conquer.”

“I think we can make use of the people here,” Joanna interjected.

A few of the demons threw her a dismissive glance. It wasn’t a dig at the Valkyrie, but rather about what they thought of the liberated humans. And it was true, there was not a single competent warrior as far as the eye could see. The Ez’Mahal had made sure of that. But Joanna ignored the looks and pressed on.

“I don’t mean for defenses, but running the places. We only need a small number of people to act as the police, while we set up a local government. It wasn’t like we needed the army in every city in the old days, right? That butler who has helped us can be the mayor or something,” she explained.

“I agree,” Zac slowly nodded. “Port Atwood has grown by incorporating new people from the beginning. There’s no reason not to continue doing the same here. But that leaves the issue of the tens of thousands of non-combatant captives.”

“Why not just keep them as slaves?” Ogras shrugged. “They’re already mentally prepared for it.”

Joanna and the other Valkyries in the room were visibly upset at the prospect of Port Atwood turning into a force utilizing slavery, and Zac frowned as well. But he honestly didn’t have any better ideas. He couldn’t simply kill them all, and sending them back was impossible since the Nexus Hubs were inactive.

At first, he considered sending them to isolated islands in his Archipelago where they could work for Port Atwood without the risk of them fleeing, but he knew that was just slavery with extra steps.

“I know many empires in the multiverse don’t condone slavery, what do they do in cases like these?” Zac asked.

“Well, simply throwing them off the claimed territory is pretty common. What happens then is none of their concern. Most simply become fugitives settling in other areas on the planet. But the most common thing is doing nothing. It doesn’t matter who

sits at the top for the common people, life is mostly the same for them in either case,” Ogras said.

“Our situation is a bit more complicated than that though, no?” Zac sighed. “If I simply released everyone then the people of Earth would be furious, and I would be marked as a traitor in no time. And I refuse to release the soldiers or anyone who has stepped over the line in the treatment of the people of Earth.”

“What about this?” Ogras said after some thought. “They all are from this Ez’Mahal Empire, right? That means that they should be able to use the Nexus Hub to return there when the hubs open. Just have them work for passage until then. They will also be assigned a debt according to their actions in the invasions. This debt will partly go to us and partly to the victims as compensation.”

Zac slowly considered the proposition as he threw a glance at the Valkyries. They seemed to be mostly fine with Ogras’ suggestion, and Zac knew he wouldn’t be able to think of something better in the short run. But suddenly something in Ogras’ explanation hinted at another possibility.

“Wait, they will be able to return there? Doesn’t that mean that you all will be able to go back when the hubs activate? More importantly, will you be able to come back here afterward?”

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**Chapter 307 - Finality**

Zac’s mind couldn’t help going down various venues of betrayal when he realized that the demons weren’t as cut off from their homeworld as Ogras had initially led him to believe. What if Ogras’ Grandfather came stomping through Earth in 99 years as a result of the scheming of the demons of Port Atwood?

“Where did that innocent wide-eyed youth go?” Ogras sighed in mock exasperation as he noted Zac’s look. “Here, look at this.”

The next moment a screen appeared in front of the demon. It was the part of the status screen that showed his alignment, and it actually said Port Atwood. It didn’t provide any title though, like his own status screen that also denoted him as lord.

“I’ve already told you, we have cut ties with our homeworld. To be able to use the Nexus Hub you would need to maintain your allegiance,” Ogras explained.

“What about the other demons? Not all of them stayed on earth voluntarily,” Zac probed, not ready to completely drop the subject.

“I have it all in hand. There are a few who maintain the old alignment, but as long as they work for us it doesn’t matter. Worst case they’ll have an accident before the world gets properly integrated,” Ogras shrugged. “Besides, I don’t think that’s how it works.”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked.

“From what I understand it’s a one-way ticket for those who have failed their invasion, but managed to survive for a hundred years on a hostile planet. A reward of sorts, I suppose,” Ogras explained.

Zac slowly nodded but made a mental note that he would have to research how things worked from a second source as well. He knew that interplanetary travel was

prohibitively expensive, but most D-Grade powerhouses should have no problem to teleport themselves in case they felt the potential pay-off was large enough.

“In any case, this might also be a good opportunity to recruit some people,” Ogras continued. “Just like there were people like us who wanted to stay behind, so are there likely people from the Ez’Mahal who wouldn’t mind becoming Earthlings. I can’t imagine a great fate is awaiting these people if they return to the Ez’Mahal Confederation.”

“We can’t recruit these slavers!” Joanna immediately interjected. “Not imprisoning them is bad enough.”

“Girl, I know you had a rough start of it, but one needs to be pragmatic to survive. You are part of the multiverse now, and the only law is the law of the jungle,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “So what if they kept slaves? It was their right as the strong. And if you get strong enough you can kill all of them without anyone speaking up in their defense.”

Joanna only unwillingly glared at Ogras, clearly not convinced by his argument.

“We’ll go with labor for reduced merits for now,” Zac finally concluded. “We’ll revisit the issue of formally incorporating the willing people at a later date, depending on how they behave. For now, is there anything else we need to do before we can head out toward the Tal-Eladar?”

“I would like to draft two hundred million Nexus Coins from Port Atwood’s coffers,” Gredas said, speaking up for the first time since the meeting began, as his only interest was agriculture. “I need your permission for that.”

“Two hundred million?” Zac exclaimed with wide eyes. “That’s not a small sum. What do you need it for?”

“The Spiritual Soil we will transplant to Port Atwood could become a true moneymaker for us,” Gredas said when he noted Zac’s shock. “You are approaching E-Grade, and in another year or two most elites of this planet will start evolving. The demand for medicinal baths will explode, and it will only keep growing.

“I want to plant huge fields of Spiritual Grass to prepare for that. But we need to buy seedlings and better arrays to get production going,” the demon farmer said, enthusiasm shining in his eyes. “It will give a return your investment tenfold within a few years, and it will just keep giving as long as we control the Nexus Vein.”

Zac slowly mulled it over. Two hundred million was less than he privately held, but it was still a large chunk of the free resources of Port Atwood. And agriculture was only one of the many expenses that the town faced. Who knew how much it would cost to integrate all these Zones that he was about to conquer?

But Zac also knew that you needed to spend money to make money. All that money would come back into his town coffers, which essentially was his own money. If worse came to worst he could simply pillage and loot a few more incursions to make up for it.

“Fine, but you will have to make a proper budget to show what you need everything for. We are not in a position to waste any money at the moment,” Zac agreed.

With that, the meeting was over, and everyone was given two hours to prepare their gear. Zac didn’t need to do anything at the moment and simply went back to Port Atwood to have dinner with his sister.

Kenzie almost continuously stayed in the cultivation cave nowadays, since her AI allowed her to make tremendous improvements. No energy was wasted between the

calculating power of the small chip and the improved cultivation manual that Kenzie utilized.

Zac only returned to Verdant Green ten minutes before the deadline, and the others were already waiting. The laidback manner of the demons was gone, replaced with bloodlust and determination. It appeared that old habits die hard, and they still carried their inherited grudges even if they had cut ties with Clan Azh'Rezak.

Zac activated the teleporter, and they soon arrived at their destination. It was a large hall without windows, and only two young men sat by a table at one side of the room, looking fidgety.

"Thank god you're here," a man immediately said as he hurried over when he saw Zac and the others appear. "The town is being raided as we speak!"

"Raided? By the invaders?" Zac asked with some surprise.

"We believe they found out that this small town possessed a teleportation array and is used for intelligence gathering. Their force is a lot bigger compared to the usual raiding parties that they use to capture new workers," the young man frantically explained.

"We're almost out of crystals to maintain our shield, and it has only been three hours," the other man added. "We have sent requests for aid from headquarters, but their resources are all tied up in the war with the undead. We have been instructed to start evacuation in twenty minutes."

"How many are there?" Ogras asked as he walked up next to Zac.

"Around three hundred warriors, and many of them are stronger than their normal combatants. They also have over a thousand of their huge wolf-things with them," the guard explained.

"Tal-Eladar and their god damn war beasts," one of the demons muttered, making Zac shoot a questioning glance at Ogras.

"Well, the main reasons our family keep a bunch of Barghest and Gwyllgi is because the Tal-Eladar is extremely adept at beast mastery," Ogras explained. "Their beasts are stronger and better controlled, so we can only try to lessen the impact with waves of dumb barghest. Better our fodder dies to the war beasts than our warriors."

"So what do you think we should do with this army?" Zac asked.

It wasn't that Zac was unsure whether they could defeat the army outside the gates, but rather that he wasn't sure if it was the right move. His tactic was to hit fast and hard with a small squad before the enemy could prepare themselves, and decimating an army would hamper that strategy.

"Good opportunity to gather some up-to-date intelligence," Ogras said with a spurious smile, though the killing intent was palpable in the room.

"Won't it be a problem if they find out we're here?" Zac hesitantly said.

It was unethical, but perhaps it was better to let this town fall if it meant that they could attack the incursion unnoticed.

"The intelligence report was clearly flawed. It never mentioned this large an amount of war beasts. We probably have no chance of succeeding in a surprise attack as it stands, those things are like scouts," Ogras said. "We might as well weaken their forces a bit. An attack like this should be led by one of their generals, and killing him would make our lives easier."

Zac finally agreed and the troop streamed out of the Marshall Clan headquarters that hid the teleporter. As they exited the building they immediately spotted a large number of people standing on a square, fearfully looking in the same direction. It was the townspeople who were likely waiting to be teleported out if things went sideways.

Zac's eyes followed theirs and saw a large shimmering shield that continuously shuddered from attacks. It was clear, however, that they were content on slowly draining the power of the defenses, rather than forcefully breaking it like Billy usually did. This tactic was much slower, but it also didn't waste any resources.

"I can handle this alone," Zac said. "No need for others to expend their energy."

Ogras seemed fine with it, but the other demons were rearing for battle. However, a look from Zac made them look down. Zac's overbearing strength made them pretty much consider him a powerhouse of an earlier generation, and they wouldn't dare speak against him even if they had recently evolved.

"You'll get all the battle you wish for, and more, before the month is over," Zac said as he flashed away toward the gate.

It only took him a minute to reach the newly erected wall, where he saw a few soldiers stood trying to kill at least a few of the beast swarming right outside the shield. But the Tal-Eladar easily intercepted the ranged attacks, allowing the beasts rake the shield unimpeded.

The animals were one size larger than even the barghest, and he understood why the guard called them wolves earlier. These things likely weighed as much as a bison, but they possessed a far more balanced build allowing for both power and agility.

However, their faces didn't exactly look like wolves, but rather like the head of enormous vampire bats. They possessed two wide pointed ears, and pitch-black eyes. The nose was pretty flat, and beneath was a large fanged maw. Its paws possessed nasty claws as well, and judging by the powerful aura the animals emitted they would have no problem ripping a person in two with one casual swipe.

"Who are you, head to the square with the others!" a guard captain exclaimed with some shock when he noted that Zac had appeared next to him out of nowhere. "We might need to evacuate you all at moment's notice."

"I'm the reinforcement," Zac calmly explained. "Do you know who the leader of their army is?"

"Reinforcement? You alone?" the grizzled captain said with some doubt.

Zac only sighed as he leaked some of his aura.

"I'm sorry about that," he hurriedly said with a pale face as he involuntarily took a step back.

"It's fine," Zac shrugged. "Their leader?"

"We think it's that guy with a green band on his arm at eleven o'clock," the captain said, not directly pointing him out of fear of alerting the man. "He singlehandedly routed our try at breaking out and culling these animals. We lost half our men in five minutes."

"Thank you," Zac said with a somber expression, and the next moment he disappeared again.

A monstrous killing intent suddenly billowed out in the middle of the animal pack as Zac appeared with **[Verun's Bite]** in his hand. Any thoughts of right and wrong that had plagued him the past days were completely suppressed, replaced with ruthless finality.

The frenzied roars of the war beasts were soon replaced with pained wails, and just a few minutes later the sounds of battle were replaced with an eerie silence. Zac stood alone in a field of blood and viscera, his robe fluttering in the wind, completely untouched by the carnage.

One Tal'Eladar warrior was all that remained, and he was lying on the ground with extremely bad wounds. The arm with a green band was lying a few meters away,

still gripping a broken spear. The rest were all dead or having fled fast enough for Zac to not bother with them.

A whole army dying would be immediately noted by a proper force like the Tal-Eladar, and they likely already knew that the army had fallen through the use of life-bound talismans. Catching each and every soldier wouldn't really stop the news from reaching the Incursion, so Zac had opted to not pursue the fleeing soldiers.

"Who are you? This world shouldn't have someone like you," he said with a wet cough.

"There are no absolutes in the multiverse," Zac said as looked down at the warrior who had valiantly fought to stop his onslaught. Of course, it had been impossible to completely curtail Zac's advances, but it had allowed some of his men to retain their lives.

"What will you do with our people?" he weakly asked, obviously understanding what would happen next to the incursion.

"That depends on how you treated our people in captivity," Zac said.

The humanoid man sighed with relief as he closed his eyes, his last breath slowly leaving his lungs.

From the ramparts the soldiers looked down in awe and horror, unsure whether what sort of Grim Reaper had arrived to their town.

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**Chapter 308 - Verana Tir'Emarel**

It didn't take long until the rest of the squad joined Zac on the field of death. Emelie and the Valkyries looked a bit shaken by the carnage that Zac had unleashed, but the demons nodded approvingly. However, there was one demon who didn't look pleased; Ogras.

"When you do something you go all out, don't you?" Ogras said as he appeared a few seconds after the others. "What happened with questioning them? We already knew our intelligence was incomplete, yet you killed or scared off everyone."

Zac took a deep breath, calm slowly returning to his mind. He felt a bit sheepish after hearing Ogras' admonishment. What he said was completely true. They needed intelligence. But the moment the battle had started he had completely ignored that need, only focusing on killing everything in sight. Any reason to hold back had been discarded with some flimsy justifications, all to be able to keep swinging his axe.

Luckily Ogras acted quickly and caught a warrior who managed to flee the scene. Zac looked at the demon general who looked back with a frown.

"I need a second. Find out anything you can from the man," Zac said and flashed away with his movement skill.

Ogras' words were a true wake-up call. He had already started to sense it during the last battle, but after this slaughter he was sure. Something was wrong with him, and his bloodlust made him lose control in battle. He quickly moved away to a secluded spot and sat down.

First, he checked his gear and possessions, but nothing seemed out of sorts. The only thing that had changed recently was his robe, but he sensed no bloodlust from it. It even gave a soothing and calming sensation, and Zac doubted it was the source of his

ruthless behavior. Yrial was a bit flakey, but he would have warned him of something like a side-effect.

Suddenly he had a bad premonition as he looked inward. His internal sight quickly moved to the pocket of isolated space in his mind, and the sight made him despair. The miasmic seal that was sealing away the **[Splinter of Oblivion]** had changed, and a small passage leading out of the space had somehow formed.

Weird energies, that Zac only could liken to distilled corruption, slowly seeped out of the crack and blended with his mental energy the moment it emerged. The amount was so small that if he hadn't specifically looked for it there was no way he would have noticed it in the short run.

Zac wanted to slap himself from holding himself back from asking Yrial for any tips of what to do with this cursed thing in his mind. He had thought about it, but eventually he had decided against it out of paranoia. If he had known that the seal would break so soon he would have made the splinter his highest priority.

Different plans to handle the leak cropped up one after another in his mind, but they kept getting rejected for being unfeasible. The power of the splinter was simply too great, and nothing he could get his hands on would be able to block it out. His mental defensive skill was completely crushed by it earlier, and he wouldn't fare much better today even with his recent powerups.

But as he despaired over what to do he noticed something odd. He had initially assumed that the seal was breaking, but a few signs indicated something else was happening. For one it didn't seem like the defensive runes had lost even a smidgeon of their initial power, but instead a few more fractals had formed.

It was through these new fractals that the small amount of corruption seeped out and entered his mind, and even though the tendrils of the splinter desperately tried to wriggle out, only a small amount of corruption managed to get through. Even more importantly, the corruption that entered his mind was different from that of the splinter. It was, for lack of a better word, dead. There seemed to be no inherent will in it, and it did nothing to spread or take over his mind.

A new theory was quickly formulating in his mind. The true use of the miasmic formation in his mind wasn't to seal away the Splinter, but rather to absorb it in a controlled manner. The crack wasn't truly a weakness, but a planned opening to let the corruption through after modification.

But the energies were still purified destruction, carrying a hint of the supreme Dao of Oblivion. Even if it wasn't tainted by the inherent will of the Heart of Oblivion it was still energy that was extremely troublesome for Zac to handle. Who knew what sort of effect it would have on his body?

He kept looking for a bit but couldn't make heads or tails of the situation. He could only gather that the change happened recently, likely just before or during the last battle. He would have noticed it otherwise since he checked up on it now and then.

It also was a relief of sorts, since the change in the fractals somewhat indicated that the Draugr woman was an ally rather than yet another enemy. He had initially considered the possibility that she placed the fractals in his mind to safeguard the splinter until she could rip it out of his head. But that felt less likely now that it seemed that she had devised a way for him to absorb it for himself.

"So are you going to tell me what's going on with you?" Ogras voice was suddenly heard from behind, making Zac look over.

"Some complications from my encounters," Zac sighed. "Luckily I noticed it in time, but I am not sure what the effect will be in the long run. Alert me if I start becoming... murderous."

“Murdery..?” Ogras snorted. “That’s just great.”

Zac only helplessly shrugged his shoulders, indicating that he wasn’t ready to disclose anything else. And it was not like the demon was placing all his own cards on the table. Something had happened in the inheritance, but he never made any effort of explaining exactly what had transpired.

“Anyway, we questioned the captive. Turns out they had spies among the Marshall Clan. Normal humans working for them, not shapeshifters or something like that. They recently learned about us and the destruction of the Ez’Mahal, and immediately moved to destroy the teleporter. They were just unlucky they were picked next by you, otherwise they would have been safe for the time being,” Ogras explained.

Zac nodded his head. He wasn’t surprised any longer that some people would choose to side with the invaders. If Thomas Fischer could ally with monsters like the Dominators, why wouldn’t some local people ally with the incursions to gain power and safety?

“What about their forces and human captives?” Zac asked.

“The situation of this Tir’Emarel Family is actually pretty similar to Clan Azh’Rezak. Though they didn’t have the bad luck to get stuck on an island with a humanoid netherbeast,” Ogras said, drawing a roll of Zac’s eyes. “It’s to the point that I don’t think it’s a coincidence.”

“They are a newly formed family just like us, barely qualifying as a D-Grade force. They only got the chance to keep their Incursion slot thanks to the huge war that our old sector is embroiled in, just like my own family. I think that if my invasion didn’t fail early I would have gotten a quest by The Ruthless Heavens to battle it out with these people,” Ogras said with some wistfulness.

“Well, sorry for ruining the cosmic plan,” Zac snorted. “So the strength of their leader should be around that of Rydel’s?”

“Seems a bit stronger, as Rydel still hadn’t evolved when you fought. This Verana Tir’Emarel has evolved and gained some sort of great opportunity after arriving, and she has spent most of her time in meditation since. Anyway, they possess a Nexus Vein, which naturally means various goodies have cropped up in the area, sort of like Port Atwood,” Ogras continued.

“So, the humans?” Zac probed.

“Most work in the mines or the fields, though they are treated decently enough. No soul-sucking arrays or anything like that. Not all are actually slaves it seems, and the mining parties are actually overseen by Humans or Ishiate foremen,” Ogras said. “They have some program with freedom for contribution. Sounds like a scam to me.”

“A scam?” Zac repeated with some confusion.

“It seems that these people aren’t planning on staying for much longer. It’s not surprising, with the Undead Empire being here and all,” Ogras explained. “I guess they are dangling freedom as a carrot to have people work harder until they cut and run.”

“Without making a lot of enemies in the long run,” Zac added with a thoughtful nod. “Neither your people or the Tal-Eladar seem too bad compared to the zombies and the Ez’Mahal, why are your species hostile?”

“Who knows anymore?” Ogras shrugged. “The war has lasted forever. The original reasons are long forgotten. Now it’s about stealing resources and birthing powerhouses through slaughter. The Ruthless Heaven always provide bonuses during wars since it’s one of the best ways to forge true warriors.”

“Well, we’ve wasted enough time. They will undoubtedly find out about this battle soon enough. Let’s not give them too much time to prepare,” Zac said as he got back up on his feet and walked toward the group waiting in the distance.

The others were ready to go and they immediately set course for the Incursion. This time they didn’t plan on sneaking inside, so the Valkyries took out a handful of modified cars from their Cosmos Sack. Far more effort was spent on strengthening and adapting these cars compared to the ones at the Marshall Clan.

Zac didn’t drive this time either, instead opting to sit in the front seat training with the mental dexterity puzzle. If his mind was slowly being infused with a foreign force it was more important than ever to have a firm grasp of his mental energy. Perhaps if he could control his mind better he would be in a better position to contend against the mind-altering effect of the splinter of oblivion.

They met no obstacles or traps as they drove along the road, but Zac wasn’t really happy about it. They had passed two strongholds that should have been manned by small frontier forces, but both of them were completely abandoned. They all felt it was pretty fishy, and the most likely cause was that the Tal-Eladar were gathering their forces for a concentrated defense.

Their fears were soon realized as they closed in on the core area. An army consisting of over ten thousand beasts and well over a thousand soldiers solemnly stood lined up, awaiting their approach. The scene caused some worry amongst the small squad of Port Atwood, but also some confusion.

Why didn’t they fight from within their arrays?

“What’s going on?” Zac muttered with some hesitation.

“I guess we’ll find out,” Ogras said as he nodded ahead.

A woman stepped forward from the orderly line and walked fifty meters toward his convoy before she stopped. On her shoulder a small alien creature sat perched, looking like a ball of fur with four glistening eyes. She also had a white furry pet tucked in her arms, which seemed to be contentedly snoozing away.

“I am Verana Tir’Emarel. Am I correct in assuming that Zachary Atwood, The Super Brother-Man is visiting?” she said with a strong voice carrying across the empty field.

Zac gave Ogras a nonplussed look before he stepped out of the vehicle to see what was going on.

“I didn’t believe the rumors of you working together with the treacherous demonkin at first. But seeing his wretched appearance I can only assume you defeated them and turned them into somewhat competent workhorses?” she said after throwing a scathing look at Ogras who stepped out of the car after Zac.

Zac’s mouth couldn’t help but turn upward with some mirth, but he didn’t believe the demons were too happy with the comment, even if Ogras donned a smiling face.

“Girl, what is your goal by confronting us like this? I don’t think even the half-animals of the Tal-Eladar to be stupid enough to step out of their Arrays unless necessary,” Ogras retorted, causing a wave of killing intent to billow toward them from the army.

“In contrast to the horned goats of the Azh’Kir’Khat Horde we know when to advance and when to retreat,” she answered without missing a beat. “You hid it well, but we have already learned of your great power, Mr. Atwood.”

“Well, thank you, I guess,” Zac responded, still not sure what was going on.

“I have a proposition for you. Even with your great power, the Tir’Emarel Family are no weaklings, and we have prepared for your assault. You might be able to defeat us, but not without casualties,” she said, her eyes moving toward the cars behind them. “Not everyone in your party is as strong as you.”

Zac frowned and was about to speak up, but Verana continued before he could say anything.

“You should already know that our family is young, and a lot of our resources are tied up in this invasion. The massacre of our whole incursion would cause lasting damage to our force, and the loss of one of our battalions is all the Tal-Eladar blood I want to see. So instead of further bloodshed, why not settle this with a duel? You versus me, one on one,” she said.

Zac’s brows rose in surprise, and he looked over at Ogras for his opinion.

“It’s not a bad idea. If they try to double-cross you, just go a bit murderly on them all,” Ogras said. “Saves me a lot of effort as well, so win-win.”

Zac mulled it over for a few seconds, but he saw no true downside to the proposition. If he could conquer another Incursion without losing a single soldier it would be for the best.

“Fine,” Zac said as he stepped forward, [**Verun’s Bite**] appearing in his hand.

“Lulu! Grub!” she said, placing the two small animals down on the ground.

Zac first thought that she wanted to let her pets get to safety, but his eyes widened the next moment. Terrifying auras started to leak from the beasts as they almost instantly grew to reach almost ten meters.

In just one second the small fluff balls had turned into terrifying killing machines who clearly were well into the E-Grade.

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**Chapter 309 - Grub and Lulu**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac felt pretty small and vulnerable for the first time in a while as he looked up at the ferocious beasts that trembled with battle intent. He looked over at Ogras and noticed that the demon had taken out a lounge and some refreshments during the transformation of the small pets.

“Uh, isn’t this against some sort of rules?” Zac hesitantly asked as he glanced at the E-Grade animals once more.

The one called Grub had turned into an extremely odd beast that reached ten meters above the ground. Half its body was an enormous head with a mouth that seemed to be able to open 180 degrees. It didn’t possess sharp fangs though, but rather huge flat slabs of teeth, looking like they were meant for crushing rather than tearing.

Its legs were short and stubby, but it radiated immense power even if it looked a bit funny. The thick fur that covered looked extremely coarse and dense, forming a natural armor covering its entire body. Zac felt that it should be a Strength or

Endurance-focused beast that excelled in raw power. It would likely possess a Dao seed such as Heaviness to deliver devastating chomps that could crush a large boulder without a problem.

Lulu seemed more speed-based as it had turned into a slightly smaller beast with long slender appendages. Where the fur of Grub was extremely thick this animal possessed a long white mane that looked extremely luxuriant as it glistened under the sun.

Zac wasn't exactly sure how what sort of attacks he could expect from Lulu since nothing about it seemed very threatening apart from its aura and size. It didn't have long fiendish claws like some beasts, and while its fangs were sharp enough it didn't look like an animal that used its mouth as a weapon.

What stood out about it were the oversized ears and eyes, and the closest Earthern animal that Zac could liken it to was a Fennec Fox, except it had a shorter snout. Zac wondered if it was a beast that focused on spells rather than physical prowess. It was rare, but Zac had learned from Alyn that many such species existed in the multiverse.

"I'm a Beast Master, they are my weapons. Is you using your axe against the rules?" Verana retorted from behind the legs of the one she called Lulu, a scornful glare adorning her face.

"Contracted beasts are generally considered a part of one's strength," Ogras agreed with a nod. "Since you need sufficient skill and strength to tame them. Be careful, her power comes from making her beasts even stronger than they already are."

Zac only sighed and cracked his neck as he walked forward, but he was inwardly relieved he agreed to the duel. These animals seemed extremely dangerous, and he wasn't sure that the shields produced by the Valkyries would be able to handle the force they would be able to generate.

He tried to use **[Inquisitive Eye]** on the two animals as he walked forward, but something blocked the skill completely apart from confirming their names. He sensed that energy stirred around Verana the moment he used his skill, and he guessed that she possessed some safeguards against spying on her animals.

"So, if I defeat you and these two things your force will leave Earth immediately," Zac confirmed with a steady voice.

"Agreed. But if I win we will be able to stay here for fifty years, provided that you all don't get swallowed up by the undead swarm," Verana countered.

Zac frowned as he considered the proposition. He didn't believe he would lose even against these two behemoths, but he still went over her words carefully. Fifty years wasn't a long time in the grand scheme of things, but it would likely be enough for them to completely strip the area of anything of value.

Still, it was only a small part of Earth, so Zac felt there wasn't too large a downside to her terms even if he lost by some chance.

"Agreed, provided that you provide basic rights to your citizens and don't expand from your current Zone," Zac agreed as he unleashed his aura. "Otherwise I will just come back."

No more words were needed, and immediately Grub released an earthshattering bellow that shook the whole area as a powerful aura started to radiate from Verana as well.

Zac immediately activated **[Loamwalker]** to strike straight at the source; the beastmaster herself. Being a tamer was like most other classes that utilized minions, such as necromancers or summoners. Their main strength usually lay with their minions,

whereas they weren't too powerful by themselves. If he took down Verana he would win without even having to battle the two animals.

The earth shrunk beneath his feet as he made a beeline for the Tal-Eladar, but as he closed in on her he started to feel a greater and greater restriction on his movements. He finally realized that the huge bellow that Grub was still releasing wasn't simply a bestial roar, but rather some sort of domain attack.

Zac wasn't able to pinpoint how it actually worked, but it wasn't like a gravitational field so he felt unencumbered. But the efficiency of his movement skill was almost completely gone, slowing him down by a huge degree.

A large fractal edge formed on his blade as he shot a glance at the stocky animal, and he immediately imbued it with a Dao. The fractal turned silver as the Dao of Sharpness imbued it before he shot it straight toward the mouth of the animal. He was hoping to force the beast to close its mouth, stopping the restriction on his skill.

The beast closed its mouth as Zac hoped, but when the enormous teeth slammed together an immense shockwave was created that instantly reached Zac. He only had time to steady himself before the attack punched into him with enough force to instantly kill most people of Earth.

A trickle of blood ran down from the corner of his mouth from the shock to his system, but he hadn't been truly hurt by the attack. Unfortunately, his strike hadn't proven effective either against Grub, as it had turned its head away with startling speed, letting the edge to hit its thickly furred side instead without much impact. Some of the thick hair was carved off, but the fractal edge didn't even draw blood.

Some killing intent started to bubble up in Zac's mind, and he realized that it was the corruption that was discreetly egging him on to start a slaughter. But now that he knew what to look out for he didn't have any problems stabilizing his mind, forcing himself to remain cool and collected as he surveyed the battle.

The stocky beast seemed extremely sturdy while also possessing restraining skills, making it a troublesome enemy to quickly take down. Zac chose to ignore it and instead started to run toward the beast tamer again, this time without a movement skill. He still possessed close to three hundred Dexterity, so even though he couldn't utilize **[Loamwalker]** he still moved like the wind.

Grub started bellowing again, putting further strain on Zac as he ran, while Cosmic Energy started to swirl around Lulu for the first time of the battle. Zac formed five more blades and shot them toward Lulu to shut it down before it could do anything, without stopping his own advance.

The blades ripped through the air with tremendous force, but the beast made no effort to dodge. Its huge eyes instead lit up in an almost blinding blue radiance, and a wave of extremely pure white-blue flames surged forward.

Oddly enough he couldn't sense any heat from the incoming attack even though it consisted of enough energy to make the air twist and distort around it. Zac initially planned on pushing straight toward it, but he quickly changed his mind when his fractal blades were incinerated in an instant.

The damage his fractal edges sustained were transmitted to his edge, and the enraged roar of Verun echoed in Zac's mind as the Tool Spirit woke up from the damage. Zac himself growled in frustration and stopped his assault to back away from the incoming blast wave. At this moment another shockwave suddenly arrived from the other beast, making Zac feel like he was punched in his gut.

Irritation started to build up in Zac's mind as he turned two blood-shot eyes toward Verana who seemed to be utilizing some skill behind her two beasts. Large amounts of Cosmic Energy swirled around her as she stood completely still with closed

eyes. It looked like she was controlling one or both the beasts with her mind, rather than fight with her own body.

The ground cracked beneath his feet as he once again tried to rush toward the beastmaster, this time with **[Nature's Barrier]** swirling around him to hopefully block some of the incoming strikes. But it was clear that the two beasts hadn't shown all their cards.

A huge sun ignited above the head of Lulu, and ray after ray blasted toward Zac, ripping the emerald leaves to pieces after a few shots. The attacks were pretty strong, but not to the point that he couldn't destroy them with a swing of his axe if they passed his defense. But it did noticeably slow him down, allowing Grub to launch his next attack.

The fat beast suddenly disappeared as the sky turned dark. Zac looked up with confusion, only to see the enormous maw of Grub opened wide right above him. Zac didn't know what happened next as his head slammed straight into the ground with enough force to cause large cracks to spread out.

A groan escaped his lips the next moment when the extremely heavy beast landed straight on top of him, causing a huge shockwave to spread outward. It was like a bomb had gone off in the area, causing widespread damage to the ground.

Zac's mind started to get muddled from pain and anger, but somehow he managed to actually push upward and lift Grub above his head with a bestial roar of his own. With a grunt the stocky animal was lobbed straight at Verana, and its short legs floundered as it tried to right itself in the air.

The lithe frame of Lulu moved like lightning, as it picked up the still unmoving form of Verana in her mouth, moving her away of harm's way. Grub crashed into the ground the next moment, causing another shockwave. This time quite a few of the Tar-Eladar soldiers were impacted, though they were only thrown down on the ground without any real injuries.

A roar echoed in Zac's mind once moar to complement his own anger, and the next moment the spectral form of Verun appeared even though Zac hadn't summoned it. Perhaps seeing its master being hounded by the two beasts had ignited its competitive spirit, and it turned into a hurricane of violence as it pounced on Lulu the moment it moved away from its mistress.

Zac's brows rose when he saw that the ghost-white flames of Lulu seemed able to harm Verun, but that alone wasn't enough to deter the frenzied Tool Spirit. A wail escaped Lulu's mouth as a large section of its fur was ripped off along with parts of its shoulder in a large bite of Verun's oversized jaw.

A tremendous pressure suddenly ripped apart the remaining parts of Grub's domain as the wooden hand of **[Nature's Punishment]** emerged from the void. It shot straight toward Grub who had just got back on its feet, looking a bit disoriented. But it quickly steadied itself as it tried to deter the hand with a concussive series of sound-waves.

Pieces of wood kept raining down from the hand, but damage quickly healed before any lasting wounds could be caused. The dense fractals on the hand lit up in green the moment the hand closed in on the animal, and the next moment an indent was formed in the ground from the pressure of the enormous fractal in the air.

Creaking sounds could be heard from Grub's thick bones as it was forced down on the ground, and the large hand moved toward its neck. Energy surged around Verana as a thick shield above her companion, but it immediately shattered at impact, making her cough a mouthful of blood and open her eyes for the first time during the battle.

Both beasts were occupied, and Zac rushed straight at the beastmaster who had just received a backlash from her attempt to defend Grub. He hadn't initially wanted to use his ultimate attack since it consumed so much energy since evolving, but he found no better alternative. The combination of the trio was too annoying, and he could only brute force his way through them before he wasted too much power.

He knew that he had less than half his Cosmic Energy remaining after summoning **[Nature's Punishment]**, so he needed to immediately end the battle so that he would still have enough energy in case something unexpected cropped up afterward.

"Wait, I give up!" Verana shouted with wide eyes as she saw Zac barrel toward her with the momentum of a runaway beast horde.

To prove her words she swallowed a familiar black pill. Next, the scene of the sudden and unexpected death of an Incursion general repeated itself just as Zac reached Verana.

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**Chapter 310 - Growth**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac mutely looked down at the unmoving form of Verana before going over the prompts he just received. As expected he got confirmation that the area had been put under his control, and he once again got the opportunity to appoint a mayor.

The two beasts shrunk back to their non-combat form the moment that Verana fell over, and they slipped out of Zac's restraints due to their diminutive size. Both of them scuttled over to their master and cried pitifully when she didn't move, trying to look threatening to keep Zac away. Zac only shook his head in bemusement as he ended his skill and exhorted Verun to come back.

The Tel-Eladar army didn't move a muscle, even though quite a few of them looked extremely displeased. Then again it was too late for them to do anything by now, with Zac standing within arm's reach of their leader. He could easily use her as a hostage in case they mounted an attack.

As he waited for Verana to resurrect Zac chose to look inward. He wanted to look at the splinter right after the battle to see if anything had changed. He sensed that it slightly woke up during the battle, though he felt he was able to block its most obvious manipulation of his emotional state.

But conversely, he had roared in anger and thrown an enormous beast at his enemy like an enraged King Kong. It felt a bit out of character for him, and he was afraid that the corruption was slowly changing his personality without him noticing.

He could at least breathe out in relief when he saw that the miasmic barrier hadn't changed or weakened in the slightest from the battle. But he still felt an even greater urge to quickly evolve to E-Grade.

Evolving wouldn't have a direct boost to his attributes, as they came with gaining levels. But it did seem to strengthen one's mental power considerably since people had

a much easier time to advance their Daos according to the demon warriors. Perhaps that would also help with his own problems. Anzonil's disciple had been able to stay sane for over a decade without the help of any miasmic fractals.

The Tal-Eladar leader woke up a bit later, the effects of **[Coward's Escape]** having passed. She breathed out in relief when she saw her two companions were safe apart from their battle wounds.

"Thank you for not killing me while I was dead," she said with a slightly raspy voice.

"Why did you go as far as to eat that pill?" Zac asked with some curiosity as he calmly watched her get back to his feet.

Since she had swallowed the pill the battle was truly over. She had already failed the invasion, and their path home would close in a few hours. There was no way for them to turn things around as things stood, so Zac wasn't too worried about Verana scheming something.

"I was afraid you wouldn't trust my surrender and kill these two cuties out of precaution," she said as she fed her two pets healing pills. "A deal's a deal. The Tal-Eladar will leave this planet immediately."

Zac internally breathed out in relief when he saw that she wouldn't make any trouble. But he also knew that there likely wasn't much she could do at the moment. When his eyes went to the two small critters who happily cried in her chest he noted that their auras were pretty weak and erratic, far worse than their wounds could explain.

Zac felt that it was likely that her class could instill her beasts with increased power for a short duration, but that it left both parties weakened afterward. Sort of like his own skill, **[Hatchetman's Rage]**. They had likely fought above their usual power from the start, just to have a shot at defeating him.

"I have another proposition," Zac suddenly said as he looked at Verana.

She hesitantly looked at Zac, with her eyes occasionally darting over to Ogras who was sauntering over.

"Are you going back on your word?" Verana asked somberly.

"No, your people are free to leave. But there is no rush. You have eight hours, right?" Zac said, receiving a nod in confirmation.

"We will not be a party to some demonkin scheme," she immediately declared when Ogras appeared in earshot.

"Since when has the Tal-Eladar been worthy of our scheming? You always run in head-first like your contracted animals," Ogras snorted as he walked up next to Zac, giving him a small thumbs-up as his evaluation of the battle. "What are you thinking?"

"You said that your force put a lot of their resources into this invasion. Why not stay behind for a hundred years?" Zac said. "This area will become part of my kingdom, but the Tir'Emarel can maintain a stake in its resources."

This wasn't completely an impulse-decision. He had already noted how understaffed they were after conquering the last incursion, and he knew just how huge an impact the demons had on Port Atwood. Just a tenth of their people stayed behind, but they had enabled Zac to create a faction that had almost everything a proper multiverse force needed.

Keeping some of the invaders in his employ would make his life a lot easier. They both possessed strong fighters and experienced non-combat classes that could easily manage this small area for him. It would allow him to keep the benefits

Such a strategy wouldn't work with most forces, but Ogras' mention of how similar this force was to his own planted the idea in his mind. Most forces invading earth wouldn't even consider allying themselves to Zac, but the Tir'Emarel family was pretty weak and recently established.

Even if they set up a connection between the two forces Zac felt it unlikely they would be able to be a threat to earth in a hundred years. The cost of the invasion would likely be greater than the gains, making it more profitable to turn it into a business venture instead.

Getting a permanent off-world trading channel would be a huge opportunity for them, and could even turn into one of their main revenue streams. The Mercantile system was great, but sometimes it was far more cost-efficient to take the trade outside it.

The Mercantile System wasn't without its demerits. The most glaring one was the prices the System charged for teleporting produce. Things that weren't too valuable couldn't be traded through the system since it added costs based on both value and volume.

That was why they couldn't simply sell off all their surplus gear made from the ant shells and wolf pelts through the Mercantile system. The System would eat up all of their profits, keeping them for itself. In such cases manually transporting the goods was a much better option if the items couldn't be sold locally. Teleporting a Cosmos Sack was quite a bit cheaper than a person, allowing for interplanetary trade as long as the volumes were large enough.

"That would leave us stranded here for a hundred years though, without being able to contact home. And at your mercy," Verana skeptically said.

"A hundred years is just the blink of the eye in the multiverse," Zac insisted. "You'll be back before you know it."

Verana's brows contracted in thought, and it looked like she was seriously considering the offer for the first time.

"That still leaves the issue of what would happen to us if the Undead Empire succeed in their assault. They never care about other forces. Everyone will be forced to leave in a hurry or become undead themselves," the beastmaster said.

"Well, it is a gamble on this planet's power I guess," Zac said. "You would have to leave at least as many fighters as non-combat classes, and they would be expected to join me in our defense against the Undead, and any other enemies of Earth."

"This... I cannot make a decision of my own on this matter. Will you give me an hour?" she said after hesitating a bit.

"Sure," Zac said with a nod, letting Verana return to her forces.

"Allying with the Tal-Eladar," Ogras muttered as he watched the back of Verana. "Are you trying to make sure my people will never be able to go back home?"

"Hadn't you already cut ties with them in any case?" Zac smiled.

"Well, whatever. The beastmen can be considered somewhat competent," Ogras reluctantly agreed. "Much better than the riff-raff we scrounged together from the former slaves of Verdant Green. But you shouldn't expect things to go this smoothly at the other Incursions. This Verana seems weak-hearted, treating both her beasts and slaves with unusual care."

"I know," Zac sighed. "But better make friends than enemies where we can."

The two sat down and rested for an hour until Verana finally came back.

“I have spoken with my elders and they have agreed to your proposal, though the terms of our future co-operation will be decided when this planet is released from its isolation,” Verana said.

Zac immediately agreed as that was better for him as well. He could only imagine that his position could improve as he grew stronger in the future, which would let him keep more of the benefits.

“We will leave 600 of our people, half of which are warriors as you requested,” Verana added. “They know that they will be part of your influence, but they are Tir’Emarel in the end. They will not accept any orders to be used as fodder or do things against their conscience.”

Zac was internally elated at the number of warriors he just gained. Three hundred veterans were as good an addition as his whole demonkin force, and far more valuable than thousands of his recruits.

“Will you be staying behind as well?” Zac probed, hoping he would get another powerhouse under his command.

“No, my grandmother does not allow it, and has ordered me to return,” she said, actually looking a bit disappointed. “I will leave two of my generals to manage our interests though, and they should be a greater addition than some flakey demon silk pants.”

“Have fun cultivating like a bird in a cage while we conquer a world and explore the multiverse,” Ogras snorted in return.

The three went over the details for a while longer, until Zac insisted on checking out the situation of the humans that lived within the Incursion. If the people of Earth had been secretly treated as cattle everything they had decided until now was moot, but Zac was relieved to find that the situation was as they had heard.

The humans within the Tal-Eladar didn’t live luxuriant lives, but they were better off compared to most people since the integration. They had a roof over their heads, they were fed, and the Tal-Eladar kept any beasts at bay. They weren’t even stopped from cultivating, though they were expected to provide a certain work-quota every day first.

Still, many had secretly held some hatred for the Tal-Eladar and were screaming for blood when they learned that the Super Brother-Man had conquered the area. Zac ignored those clamors, even if it caused some dissatisfaction. Zac could only hope that they would understand when they learned how the rest of the world fared since the integration.

After making sure everything was under control they watched the thousands of Tal-Eladar stream through the large portal the Nexus Hub had opened. A few looked despondent, but most actually looked relieved, like they were finally heading home after a long time abroad.

To Zac’s left the hundreds of people who would stay behind were lined up, bidding farewell to their people. It looked like Verana hadn’t compelled anyone to stay behind since most of them had excited expressions on their faces even though they knew they would be stranded here for a hundred years.

Staying behind was a risk, but it also provided many opportunities. If they survived the initial phase they could enjoy the Origin Dao for at least a decade longer, besides the other benefits that cropped up on a newly integrated world. It was an opportunity that most people in their situation could only dream of.

He did occasionally sense some killing intent coming in his direction from the soldiers though. Zac knew it was most likely due to the army he decimated earlier. It

was inevitable that his rampage had caused some bad blood, but he could only hope they would do their job. It all came down to the two generals who Verana left behind.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 311 - Peak**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac judged that the two leaders were around the same level as his demonkin generals. One was a mage while the other was a beastmaster like Verana. The beastmaster was named Jinan, and he would take a co-leadership role of this area along with whoever Adran appointed.

The mage was called Tylia, and she would join the Strike squad as support and ranged firepower. She was a nature mage, one that possessed some healing capabilities along with mainly control spells. Healers were something that Zac desperately lacked, and he felt it would be a great addition when going after the Incursions.

However, a change happened at the last moment before the Incursion closed. Verana who had stayed behind to make sure all her people passed through suddenly turned to Jinan.

“Jinan, take my place. I will to stay behind after all,” she said.

“What?” Jinan said with some shock. “What about the Grand Matriarch? She will skin us alive.”

Zac and Ogras only looked on with interest. It looked like the young mistress of the Tir’Emarel was a bit wilful after all. Verana took out a crystal and placed it on her forehead for a few seconds before giving it to her general.

“Give this to grandma, I’m sure she’ll understand. I am betting on this baby planet for the future of our family,” Verana said as she dragged Jinan to the Nexus Hub, and veritably threw him inside moments before it closed.

“That’s what I get for taunting her,” Ogras muttered under his breath. “A silly girl with dreams of adventure.”

“It’s not like it’s the first time your mouth has gotten you into trouble,” Zac said, suddenly in an excellent mood.

Not only did he get another powerhouse at Ogras’ level, but he also had a feeling that adding the Tal-Eladar to his force would balance it out. Currently, most of the important positions in Port Atwood were held by the demons, but the demonkin and Tal-Eladar would restrain each other, allowing his human faction to grow stronger while they competed.

If Verana went according to her original plan the elves would only have two generals and would not be able to have as great an impact as the demons. But with Verana and her two beasts holding down the fort they suddenly became an equal force as clan Azh’Rezak.

“I guess you’re stuck with us for the time being,” Zac said as he turned to Verana who was walking back toward them.

"I felt uncomfortable leaving my people to the whims of that one," Verana said as she threw a look at Ogras.

Ogras only rolled his eyes in annoyance but decided to keep his mouth shut for once.

"We will head out to the next Incursion almost immediately. Do you want to join us?" Zac probed.

"Lulu needs more time to recover, and they both need at least a week of rest. I used a berserking skill on them to push them to their limits, and if I send them to battle now it will truly harm them. I will stay and organize things here," Verana said.

"That's fine," Zac nodded, not surprised in hearing about her pets. "Figure things out with Adran or Abby, my two head administrators. I don't allow slaves, so figure out a system for the people who live here."

"You should take Tylia though," Verana added, which was just fine with Zac.

The integration of the Zone went far smoother compared to the Ez'Mahal Incursion. Thanks to the Tal-Eladar staying behind Zac only needed to leave some peacekeeping troops before his group was able to move toward their next target. He also instructed Adran to move the former slaves who caused trouble to some of his other towns so that they wouldn't cause any further unrest.

Zac chose one of the easier targets after Tylia had entered the contract of secrecy. That way she wouldn't be able to tell anyone about his undead form in case he was forced to use it, not even to her own master. Zac could only thank the Apostate of Order for creating the system of binding contracts.

The Incursion was situated by a large volcano and was controlled by some species that looked like a mix of humans and dragons. The assault started out fine, with Billy utterly destroying their erected defenses with a tremendous smash, but trouble cropped up almost immediately.

The battle produced their first casualties, even though they followed their strike plan and Tylia performed above expectations. Two demons and a Valkyrie fell in battle, which wasn't a lot of people, but still a sizeable chunk of the small elite troop. They hadn't done anything wrong, but they had been forced to defend against a much too strong an enemy.

The problem rather lay with Ogras who had performed far beneath what was expected. The two of them currently stood in front of the three bodies who had been cleaned and lined up. They would be sent back to Port Atwood to be properly buried later today. Zac felt especially bad about the Valkyrie.

Her name was Jennifer and was among the first dozen to follow him back in Greenworth. She wasn't a cultivator, but she had desperately clawed her way toward the top of the Valkyries with sheer effort. Yet now she lay here unmoving, grisly wound covering her body.

Death could come at any moment.

"What's going on with you? I've seen your strength, and it looked like you were holding back," Zac finally asked after Ogras failed to speak up. "Now we lost three competent fighters."

It wasn't that Ogras had shirked his duties during the battle - it was rather the opposite. He had desperately fought with his spear to take down the generals while Zac battled the leader and his support squad. But the shadows which were a large part of his repertoire had been completely absent, which left the demon with almost no battlefield presence.

It had allowed one of the general to veer off against the exhausted Billy and the demons, and if it wasn't for Tylia half the squad might have been eradicated before Zac unleashed [**Hatchetman's Rage**] to fight almost the whole Incursion alone.

"It's that god damn lunatic," Ogras finally spat out after some hesitation.

"What? Who are you talking about?" Zac asked with confusion.

"The Umbra," Ogras sighed.

"Kenzie told me you looked bad after exiting the Inheritance, what's going on?" Zac probed.

"I got quite a few benefits inside, but the man called Rez also forced something extremely troublesome on me. He had found an odd entity that lived within other's shadows in his journeys. Like a parasite. He never found a way to utilize it while alive, but he always believed it had great potential to strengthen one's shadows," Ogras explained. "So he used me as an experiment to find out if he was correct."

"Let me guess, he made the two of you merge?" Zac sighed.

"Knocked me out, and when I woke up I had this netherblasted critter in my shadows," Ogras growled, and waved his hand.

A blob of shadows grew from his arm, and a terrifying face appeared in front of them. It reminded Zac a bit of the ghastly beings from the hunt, though this thing seemed more corporeal. It soundlessly screeched at the two of them before it once again receded into Ogras' shadow.

"Pretty creepy," Zac muttered.

"Tell me about it," Ogras said with a shake of his head.

"But what does that have to do with this battle?" Zac asked.

"Its presence has increased both the power and volume of my shadows, but my control has lessened. It normally doesn't interfere, but it looks like it doesn't like fire. The moment we entered the battle and all the flame-attuned energies started swirling about it hid deep within my shadows, making me unable to send out any attacks," Ogras helplessly explained.

Zac shook his head, inwardly swearing at Brazla, both the real one and the Tool Spirit. Forcing people to pay for treasures by setting up inheritances was clearly a great way to create death traps for one's descendants. Zac suddenly felt lucky he only got a predecessor who was just a bit eccentric and disinterested in passing on his true inheritance.

"Any other surprises waiting for me?" Zac sighed. "We don't have a lot of people to spare, you know."

"I have no idea, I didn't even know the parasite had this weakness. That asshole didn't really leave an instruction manual. He just gave me a couple of rewards and told me to come back in a decade if I survived the fusion. Going to come back alright, if just to kill that ghost," Ogras swore.

Ogras' powers having turned unstable was a wrench in the plans, but he was still the strongest fighter on the squad even without his shadows. Besides Zac himself, of course. And so far the only weakness they had encountered was that of fire, and there were no other clear fire-attuned enemies apart from the incursion in the underworld.

This time it took two days to get everything in order. The addition of Tylia sped up the recovery of those who were hurt, helping the soldiers get back to fighting strength in record time. The dragonlings were one of the forces that killed or pushed out all other races from their lands, so taking control of the volcano didn't require any work at all. They simply erected a teleporter and sent a dozen scouts to scour the area for anything of value.

One good thing that came out of Zac being forced to go all out was that he felt he was getting extremely close to finally gaining his level. So he immediately opened the teleporter to their next target the moment that everyone was healed up and ready to go. The soldiers had taken the deaths in stride, as they all knew that assaulting multiple forces in short order was an extremely risky venture.

But the gains were quite impressive as well. Joanna had informed him that the Valkyries had all received a quest after they closed the third Incursion. It was an Incursion closing quest sort of like the one he gained for the demonic Incursion, but it gave out variable rewards depending on how many they managed to close in the coming month. So they were the ones most eager to get going, even though they mourned the death of Jennifer.

The fourth target was another humanoid race, but this time things didn't go according to plan either. As Zac sat in the front seat and played with the mental puzzle he suddenly got a bad premonition. He immediately took out his axe, which alerted the others in the car.

"Something is wrong," Zac only had time to say before a huge number of projectiles flew straight at their cars.

Zac immediately activated **[Nature's Barrier]**, and infused it with the Seed of Sanctuary. The skill had no problem covering the entirety of the convoy since the seed had been upgraded to the middle stage from the Dao Impartment. But the ambush cost him over half his cosmic energy as he was forced to reform countless leaves to keep his people safe until they could get in position.

Ogras disappeared from his position in the back seat, and immediately after he appeared in the sky above the cars, two huge black wings covering his back. He was clearly anxious to regain his honor from the last battle, even to the point that he used his ultimate transformation. He thrummed with unrestrained power as a sea of shadows swallowed a large sector of the forest that hid the invaders.

Wails of pain echoed among the trees as innumerable shadow lances destroyed anything within reach. One of the leaders of the ambush even fell from a beam of concentrated shadows before Zac even had time to reach the hastily formed defensive lines.

The strength of the response to their ambush had flustered the invaders, and a few even started to run away when they saw Zac barrel toward them, his towering aura spreading out in all directions. Only a small core of elites maintained the ranks, and they formed a small elite unit to counter his advance. But they were an established force of the multi-verse, and they had their own hidden aces.

A huge golden bell appeared in the sky above the leaders of the ambush, while the leader of the ambush held a perfect miniature copy of it. His eyes met Zac's, and the next moment he swung the bell with a somber expression. His face turned completely pallid, and it even looked like he aged a bit from the action.

A towering aura was suddenly released from the bell, and it was as though it was sentient. Zac felt an extremely powerful presence focusing on him, and he only had time to summon another layer of leaves before the bell rung. It's chime contained a mysterious force, and the moment it hit Zac he immediately fell over, his vision turning black.

When he woke up again he saw the backs of the Valkyries standing in front of him, desperately maintaining a barrier as he heard Billy's bellow ahead. He quickly got to his feet again with some embarrassment and rushed forward after activating **[Mental Fortress]**. That bell unleashed a terrifying mental attack, and he had forgotten to protect against that type of assault after being pelted by normal spells and arrows.

A glance around the battlefield proved that they had still managed to keep the advantage even with his own incapacitation, in large part thanks to Ogras huge expenditure of Cosmic Energy. Zac noted that the demon's aura was starting to get unstable, and immediately flashed forward with [Loamwalker] to relieve the pressure.

The moment he truly entered the fray was also the beginning of the end of the battle. The invading army had already lost all of their momentum from the massive losses Ogras and Billy had caused, and the addition of Zac at full fighting strength completely broke their spirits.

The Incursion truly had put everything in this ambush, as they fielded four generals and the Incursion leader himself in the fight. He had tried to flee at the last minute, but Zac ran him down and cut him in two. The moment he tried to kill them all with a sneak attack was the moment he sealed his fate.

Zac stood over the bisected body of the E-Grade leader, his eyes closed as a huge amount of cosmic energy washed over him.

He had finally reached the peak of the F-Grade.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 312 - Blood for Blood**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac couldn't bother with the cleanup of the battlefield as his mind was too preoccupied with other things. He had finally reached level 75, and he was anxious to see the gains it would bring. He knew he had become extremely powerful for a planet this early into an integration, but this battle proved that he was by no means invulnerable.

The most common way of closing Incursions for newly integrated worlds was with massive armies to drown the invaders through sheer numbers. Such a tactic required the whole world to come together and sacrifice millions of lives, and it was because of this that so few newly integrated planets made it through the early phase.

Planets who passed the initial stage through the effort of solitary powerhouses were far less common since normal powerhouses like Thea or even Salvation wasn't enough to singlehandedly close all the incursions of a world. He knew that the Marshall Clan had taken huge losses from the subjugation of their Incursion, even with Thea's help. It took something out of the norm, a monster in human form like Zac, close them as they did now.

But even Zac felt he was barely able to hold on. The cultivators of the incursions came from a wide array of forces, and many of them possessed all kinds of hidden cards that Zac had never encountered before. The bell was such an example. It had knocked him right out without him even having time to react.

So the power-ups of reaching the peak of F-Grade were just what he needed to have greater confidence to tackle the stronger Incursions as well. He only hoped that

the quests for the final skills would be possible to complete quickly, and he eagerly opened up his status screen to see what had changed.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**75**

**Class**

**[F-Rare] Hatchetman**

**Race**

**[E] Human**

**Alignment**

**[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step**

**Limited Titles**

**-**

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - High, Seed of Trees - Peak, Seed of Sharpness - Middle, Seed of Hardness - Middle, Seed of Sanctuary - Middle, Seed of Rot - High**

**Core**

**[F] Duplicity**

**Strength**

**605 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 134%]**

**Dexterity**

**297 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]**

**Endurance**

**752 [Increase: 71%. Efficiency: 134%]**

**Vitality**

**441 [Increase: 61%. Efficiency: 134%]**

**Intelligence**

**167 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]**

**Wisdom**

**226 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 134%]**

**Luck**

**140 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 134%]**

**Free Points**

**21**

**Nexus Coins**

**[F] 364 950 610**

He had made quite a bit of money closing the last Incursions, and he felt he needed to do something with his fortune soon. Perhaps he could invest it through Calrin, or at least use it to deploy more projects like the large scale agriculture program. As it was now he had no personal need for the coins, and they were no good creating dust in his status screen.

His attributes hadn't noticeably changed though, with one surprising difference. It looked like the final level awarded ten level's worth of free attribute points, meaning he was awarded twenty points plus one from his class. Twenty points weren't a lot for Zac by now, but they would get heavily boosted through his titles. He also noticed a change in his title screen, and first opened that window.

**[The First Step: Reach Peak of F-Grade Reward: All Stats +5.]**

It was a bit disappointing that he didn't get another 'first in world'-title, but either there was no such thing or one of the Anointed snatched it. But from his experience, he felt the former to be more likely since he had a lot of other titles that the Zhix should have stolen if they shared the same title pool.

When he opened his quest screen two new quests awaited him, though he was slightly disappointed there was no new quest on his hegemony chain. But when he looked at the requirements to complete the two Class quests he started to grimace.

**Class Quests**

**Deforestation (Class): Cut down a Tree reaching 500 meters in one swing.  
Reward: Deforestation Skill (0/1)**

**Hatchetman's Spirit (Class): Form a nature- or axe-Attuned Dao Fragment.  
Reward: Hatchetman's Spirit (0/1)**

Zac didn't get any descriptions of the skills, but going by their names he felt that **[Deforestation]** should be the ultimate offensive skill of his class, perhaps something akin to Nenotheop's Spear World. **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** might either be a defensive skill or some sort of Support skill, something to complement **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

**[Hatchetman's Spirit]** was both simple and hard to complete. Forming a Dao Fragment was something he would definitely do before evolving, but it was not something he was able to complete in the short run. It looked like he wouldn't have the skill to help him during the Incursions, and perhaps not even in the Tower of Eternity.

The **[Deforestation]** quest reminded him of his first Class Quest. That time he was supposed to chop wood, and now he needed to chop an enormous tree. He didn't think it would be too hard to chop one down, he simply needed to supersize a **[Chop]** and imbue it with the Dao of sharpness.

The problem was that he hadn't heard of any trees of that size on earth. Did they even exist? Things did grow bigger from the Cosmic Energy, but there were no such trees at Port Atwood at least. He would perhaps need to visit Westfort quickly after claiming this incursion to have their intelligence department see if they could find anything.

The next question was what to do with the 21 free points. Finally he chose to go all out on his main attribute, Strength. He was starting to veer away from the standard 2:1 balance with Dexterity, but with all his titles he already had more points in Dexterity than many agility-based classes would have at his level.

He did briefly consider putting the points in Wisdom to improve his mental defense. The attack from the bell was a poignant reminder that his mind wasn't as sturdy as his body. But he would have to put a huge amount of points into Wisdom to make a difference, and he felt it was more efficient to buy more mental defensive treasures to shore up that weakness.

Since he was done with his status screen he got up to his feet and walked toward the others. The Valkyries seemed quite excited when he approached, and he looked at them with some confusion.

“Congratulations on reaching level 75. Next stop E-Grade!” Joanna said with a smile as she held Nenothep’s spear in her hand.

The two had been inseparable since she got it, and she alone had likely killed as many enemies as the other Valkyries combined with its help. It was truly a testament that attribute was not the only important thing for a cultivator, the right equipment was almost equally important.

“Thank you,” Zac smiled as his eyes glanced across the forest to see how the cleanup of all gear and Cosmos Sacks went. It appeared they were pretty much done.

“Don’t forget about our appointment. In fact, stay away from the Nexus Node so you don’t get any ideas,” Ogras’ voice suddenly echoed from the shadows.

“I know, don’t worry,” Zac said with a snort.

But Zac knew it wasn’t inconceivable that he would simply skip going if it came to that. Things were heating up on Earth, and he wouldn’t hesitate to evolve if things got desperate. He would lose a top tier title and the opportunity to make strong allies, but one needed to be alive to enjoy those benefits.

“Are there any movements from the Incursion?” Zac asked.

“None that we can see,” Ogras said with a shrug. “The ambush contained most of their elites it seems. The others have likely evacuated by now unless they are fools.”

Zac agreed. He had already got the notification that this area was under his control as well.

“That begs the question on how they knew we were coming,” Ogras muttered.

This was something that crossed Zac’s mind as well. Just how had these people know to lie in wait?

“They may have some sort of diviner,” Ogras added. “But there is a simpler solution. I think the Marshall Clan might have realized we are even stronger than they expected. Perhaps they thought we would lose elites from every battle, leaving us considerably weakened after we had finished closing the incursions. But when they saw that wasn’t the case they tried to make it happen by leaking intelligence.”

Zac was about to disagree with Ogras’ words without even considering it, but he stopped himself. He truly didn’t believe Thea would do something like that, and Henry’s main focus was on ridding Earth of all invaders. But the Marshall Clan consisted of thousands of people, most of whom had no relation to him or Port Atwood. Some people might have betrayed their cooperation for a misguided attempt to help their clan.

“We will report it to the main branch of the Marshalls, and we’ll just have to be more careful. I have some things I need to look into with the Marshall people as well,” Zac eventually said, as he started to walk toward their cars. “Let’s go secure the core town.”

“Joanna has reached the ladder!” another of the Valkyries suddenly blurted out when it was apparent that Zac was preparing to leave.

Zac’s eyes widened, and he quickly stopped in his tracks to open the ladder. It was true; Joanna was currently on the 98<sup>th</sup> position at level 47, meaning she had gained three levels since the assaults started. He wasn’t too surprised considering how high the levels of their prey were, but his brows instead rose when he saw the name she had chosen.

**98<sup>th</sup> - Atwood Valkyrie Joanna - 47**

“Congratulations. But why not use your own name?” Zac asked.

“We need the world to know that Port Atwood is not just you and the demons, no offense Ogras,” Joanna explained. “Hopefully, we’ll get a few more of the Valkyries on the ladder soon. We had already decided on this naming scheme long ago in case we ever got on the ladder. It was quicker than we expected.”

“Great job, keep it up,” Zac said with a smile. “And it’s a good idea. I’ll put out some good rewards for anyone of Port Atwood who reaches the ladder, no matter which one. Try to figure out what you want and I’ll try to make it happen.”

The group made their way toward the core city of the incursion, but they didn’t hurry in case they had left more ambushes on the way. Luckily no attack arrived, and they drove straight through the wide-open gates of the alien town four hours later.

But Zac was enraged the moment they entered the walled city, as the invaders had left a gift for him. A mountain of human corpses was thrown into a pile reaching over fifteen meters on the main square. The whole area dyed red from thousands of liters of blood, and a hastily written message were scribbled on the walls in red.

“*‘Blood for Blood’* it says,” Ogras said with a frown. “Foolish.”

Zac ground his teeth as he looked at the scene that could be straight out of a nightmare. The blood still hadn’t dried on their bodies, meaning they were probably executed the moment these people noticed their leader had fallen. Killing innocents who were no threat just as some sort of petty revenge could only be considered as extreme cowardice. They could just have left through the Nexus Hub, but they stayed behind to butcher all these people out of spite.

“Blood for blood,” Zac repeated with anger smoldering in his eyes. “They better pray I won’t find them in the multiverse later. Search the area. If any invaders remain, kill them.”

Zac himself walked over to the pile and personally put them all in a spare Cosmos Sack before he bought a new teleporter. These people had been enslaved in life and killed for no reason. Giving them a proper burial was the least he could do.

While the forces of Port Atwood secured the area he headed over to Westfort. Ogras insisted on coming along, saying that Zac might back down too quickly in their interrogation. Zac could only acquiesce, and he thought it was fine since Thea was away at the frontlines in any case.

Roland Marshall rushed over ten minutes after they arrived, and when he heard they needed intelligence he drove them to one of the large mansions within the inner wall. It was the headquarters for the intelligence arm of the Marshall Clan, and if anyone knew of any such trees it would be them. Zac explained what he was looking for, though he didn’t mention it was due to his quest.

“So, have you found any trees like that on earth?” Zac asked.

“Well, there is a species of trees from the Ishiate world that grew almost as large as the Redwoods of earth. A few of them might have grown larger than 500 meters by now,” the intelligence officer who had been assigned to help them out thoughtfully said. “But I would avoid those trees unless you truly need them.”

“Why?” Zac asked with a frown.

“From what we have gathered the trees are called Treefathers, and they are holy places to the ishiate. Even the technologically inclined camp of the beastmen considers the trees holy. If you cut down one of them you might inadvertently declare war with the whole Ishiate population,” the man explained.

“Is there no other place?” Zac sighed, wanting to avoid that kind of trouble if possible.

“Well, there are the actual redwoods,” the man said. “Many of them were over a hundred meters before the integration, so one having mutated and grown to five hundred meters is within the realm of possibilities. We have many other examples of plant life growing to that degree compared to their former sizes,” the man said, but his face was still troubled.

“So, spit it out. What’s the problem?” Ogras snorted.

“The former Redwood forests are within the Cradle of God.”

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**Chapter 313 - The Belly of the Beast**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac’s face soured when he heard that he would have to enter the belly of the beast if he wanted to evolve his skill. His initial plan was to reach level 75 and get his two new skills before assaulting Salvation, but now it looked like that idea was impossible to achieve.

He had already discarded the idea of felling one of the so-called Treefathers. For one they weren’t as tall as the Redwood according to the report he was holding in his hand. They rather grew wide whereas the Redwood grew tall. And he didn’t feel right about essentially killing the representation of the Ishiate’s ancestors.

Still, there was some hesitation in his mind until Ogras suddenly motioned him to the side and erected one of the small array disks that Zac brought from the hunt. It isolated the small area around them, and Ogras’ shadows did the rest to completely obscure the two.

“What do you need such a high tree for? You never mentioned anything like this,” Ogras said. “I thought we were here for rooting out the spies and dragging out some compensation of these fools.”

“Compensation?” Zac blurted out with raised brows.

He never even considered such a thing and had simply wanted to fix an issue that the main branch of the Marshall clan perhaps wasn’t even aware of. To demand compensation at this juncture seemed a surefire way to sour the relationship with the Marshall clan which felt especially ill-timed now that he had just taken in another group of invaders.

“Don’t go overboard. I’m sure your stock around here isn’t the best since your stunt at the Auction,” Zac sighed. “And I need the tree for my class.”

“You need an enormous tree for your class..?” Ogras repeated with a blank face. “Never heard anything like it. Does it need to be 500 meters? The ones I spotted in the Mystic Realm weren’t that tall, but still pretty huge.”

“It’s 500 meters minimum,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“So what are you thinking? Do you want to assault this Salvation guy immediately?” Ogras probed.

Zac threw a look at the intelligence officers around them. They were clearly curious about what was going on inside the portable array, but they all kept a respectful distance.

“I think it would be for the best. I don’t have any powerups coming up I think, apart from a few improvements of my Dao. My other skill quest won’t be finished in the short run as well,” Zac said.

Ogras thoughtfully mulled over the information, before he nodded.

“Might as well. But I don’t think our current lineup will be very useful against that person. He might seem to have a huge army on the surface, but in reality, he is only one entity from how you described him. There are no elites and no generals, just Salvation and his puppets. Bringing a bunch of weaklings will only slow us down.” Ogras said.

“Us?” Zac asked with a raised brow, ignoring the comment of the others being weak. Why was the demon so interested in heading into a heated battle?

“As I mentioned I got a few goodies as compensation for the forced fusion with this shadowbastard. I think fighting Salvation with his odd class might be beneficial for me. I have never heard of anything like it before, it’s even more mysterious than your class,” he said.

“So what do you propose?” Zac asked.

“Well, others can’t enter his little kingdom without being spotted, but that doesn’t necessarily include us,” Ogras said. “I say we sneak inside, cut down a tree, and kill the guy when he comes to investigate. The others could use the break to consolidate their gains. Many should be able to gain or upgrade a Dao seed from the recent battles.”

Zac nodded in agreement. He even felt that a few of his own Dao Seeds had improved even though the massive gains he just received from the Inheritance. The most notable was Sharpness, the Dao Seed that he used the most since gaining it. He was even considering using one of his remaining Dao Treasures to push it one step further before heading to the Cradle of God.

“Do you need to prepare anything before we go?” Zac asked, tacitly agreeing with Ogras’ plan.

“I just need a few hours in Port Atwood to make sure my shadows are fed and stable,” Ogras said after some consideration. “She gets a bit agitated otherwise.”

“Great,” Zac nodded. “We’ll head back after this. I will try to improve a Dao seed to at least get a small boost before we fight Salvation. That guy is the strongest person I’ve met considering his level.”

“Which is what makes him so intriguing. Now for the next issue,” Ogras said with a malicious smile as he turned off the Array and dispersed the obscuring shadows.

“Don’t do anything crazy,” Zac said with some helplessness.

“When have I ever?” Ogras answered, throwing Zac a youthful smile as shadows flooded the room.

Things took a pretty nasty turn from there, with Ogras essentially taking the entire building, including Roland, hostages until a young man was brought in front of them. He was called Henry Marshall, named after the current patriarch, and his ambition matched his name.

He wasn’t part of the main branch though, and was rather part of a distant branch. Before the integration, he had barely been considered part of the clan. But since the world changed he had been allowed into the fold, where he had been desperate to prove himself to improve his lot.

He had already been suspected of cooperating with the I'Rallashar, the humanoid clan that just ambushed them, giving intelligence in return for cultivation resources. After hearing that Zac's group was ambushed he was immediately captured and brought over by the chief of the Marshall Intelligence Bureau, a thin and unassuming old man named Charles.

A cursory search of Henry's home was all that was needed to find ample evidence of his culpability.

"So, what punishment will this little guy get?" Ogras sneered as he looked down at the quivering man on the ground.

Charles simply pointed at the forehead of what could be considered his distant nephew, and the next moment a hole appeared that immediately started to leak blood and brain matter. The attack was silent and deadly, and even Ogras seemed a bit surprised by the strike.

"Consorting with the enemy in time of war has always been punished by death by the Marshall Clan," the man said, his face not moving a muscle.

Zac's eyes drifted over to Charles, and he wondered just what kind of man he was before the integration. Something told him that the old man wasn't one of the family members in prominent positions, but rather one of those working in the shadows.

It was a good reminder as well. The Marshall Clan wasn't very strong now when compared to Port Atwood, but that was because his force improved with tremendous speed and left everyone in the dust. But the Marshall Clan teemed with talents that would probably shine when they had managed to completely adapt to the Multiverse.

"It seems we have been too lax with our members as of late, which is our mistake," Charles continued as he started tapping away at a tablet. "I will make sure to rein any aspiring profiteers."

"Thank you," Zac said, not wanting to push the matter any further. "Inform Henry and the others we will delay the operation a week to recuperate."

"We estimated each Incursion to take 5 days at the minimum to assault and incorporate," Charles said with a smile. "You are ahead of schedule as it is. Slow and steady wins the race."

Zac nodded and dragged the demon out of the building before he could cause any real trouble. Having pointed his shadow spears at everyone until he got answers was bad enough, though Charles didn't seem to mind.

The two returned to Port Atwood, and Zac sent a guard to inform his squad of the break. Ogras disappeared the moment they exited the teleportation station, and Zac headed home. Kenzie was back in the cave it seemed, so Zac immediately erected the arrays around his courtyard before sitting down with a Dao Treasure in his hand.

His gains since meeting Salvation the last time were huge, but this time they would fight at that madman's home turf. Reports indicated that he had turned hundreds of thousands of people into puppets, and who knew what kind of power he would be able to exert. Hoarding his treasures at such a time was a waste.

He stabilized his mind before biting into the treasure, swallowing the sweet juices of the mysterious fruit. His mind was immediately whisked away, and he was once again one with the Dao.

Due to the multiple intense battles recently he had gained no small amount of inspiration to improve his Dao. He had a pretty good idea of what to do with his Dao of Rot, Sanctuary, and Sharpness. But for this treasure, he chose to focus on Sharpness.

Rot had improved extremely rapidly, and he needed some more time to utilize it in battle before he felt ready to push it toward the peak mastery. Sanctuary was

perhaps the one he was closest to improve due to the semi-completed vision he saw before Yrial ran out of power. But he still felt Sharpness was the way to go.

His inspiration came from various sources such as the extremely penetrative power of Nenothep's strikes, the swarm of needles that Thanso used, and he even went back to the old vision of the Axe Man. His last insight was centered around speed through sharpness, to cut through all obstacles. His current insight was a continuation of that, but it rather centered on penetrative power, which in a sense was the essence of sharpness.

He wanted an edge that would be able to cut through anything, even the void if needed. The boundless Dao answered and he felt the seed housed in his axe fractal improve one step further. The mysterious effect of the Dao Treasure ended not long after, and he only had time to slightly stabilize his foundation of his improved Dao Seed before his mind returned to his body.

Zac opened his menu the moment he opened his eyes, eager to check his latest Dao improvement.

**Sharpness (High): Strength +5, Dexterity +40, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +5**

He had reached High mastery as expected, though Zac was a bit surprised at the attributes he received. Half of the 30 new points were added to Dexterity, whereas the rest got spread out over Strength, Intelligence, and Wisdom.

Still, what Zac cared about wasn't the Attribute gain any longer. It was the improvement stronger Dao Seeds brought to his battle strength. He had a feeling that his improved Seed of Sharpness would massively improve his lethality against stronger opponents. As he got up to his feet he immediately spotted Ogras sitting in a lounge outside his gates.

"I sensed the Dao through the Array. You wouldn't happen to be hoarding Dao Treasures by any chance?" Ogras said the moment Zac stepped out of the courtyard.

"That was my last one," Zac lied face without missing a step.

"I'm sure it was," Ogras muttered as he followed Zac toward the private teleporter.

There was nothing else for Zac to prepare, so he immediately activated the array to open a passage to the secret outpost that the Marshalls used to observe Salvation's actions.

They emerged in what seemed to be an abandoned cellar. The Marshalls had bought off the town from the former mayor, and it was one of the tens of thousands of small towns that managed to get a Nexus Node, but not much else. Most of these places became indefensible as the wildlife got stronger, and those who were strong enough opted to head to larger towns for safety.

According to Ogras, the number of towns would likely increase again in the future when more powerhouses emerged. A mid E-Grade warrior would be enough to stand guard of a town on a D-Grade world unless a particularly aggressive type of beast lived nearby. With the help of arrays, they would be able to fend most beasts unless a beast horde formed.

This place was quite far from the Cradle of God, as Salvation was relentless in his endeavor to eradicate every living being. Staying too close would mean that one eventually would get swallowed up by his puppet tides.

So even though the area that Salvation controlled was much smaller than the Dead Zone no one would stay in any neighboring towns, leaving a huge perimeter without a single living being. It took the two of them almost three days of travel through

untamed lands before they entered the area that could be considered part of the Cradle of God.

And they only needed to travel for another thirty minutes before they spotted the first puppet.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 32 chapters ahead) please check out my**

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**Chapter 314 - Sneaking Inside**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**One last top note plug for my.**

**Want more of the Universe of Defiance of the Fall without joining ? You can check out the fanfic [A Storm in the Fall](#) on RR by wordsinaline.**

**Disclaimer:**

That story is a fanfiction, and not part of the original DotF canon. The work is 100% done by wordsinaline, and my only involvement is giving the go-ahead. Don't blame me if you don't like it. But feel free to compliment me if you enjoy it ;)

Zac and Ogras were currently hidden within some foliage up a tree, and they had made ample preparations to obscure their presence even further. Both wore treasures that hid one's life force, just like the amulet Zac used to trick the Zombies during the beast waves. Ogras was even continuously operating a shadow skill to hide them even further.

The two even used a portable arrays disk to hide from the mindless sentry, though they could only use it while they were stationary. The only way for them to be any better hidden was if they brought Janos as well who covered them in another layer of illusions, but he was occupied with the battle with the Zombies.

It might have been overkill, but Zac didn't want to take any chances with this excursion. The fact that Salvation got away still irked him, and he didn't want a repeat of that situation. Especially when he saw the man's rapid leveling speed. Salvation had long passed level 60, and likely received another round of powerups from his class quest.

But the worst thing was that Zac knew his levels likely came from killing humans rather than fighting off beasts or the invaders. Every day that lunatic remained alive even more suffering would descend on Earth.

"How intriguing," Ogras said as his eyes were trained on the puppet.

It was one of the guard sentries they had heard about. It simply stood on a small hill with good vantage in a certain direction, its head unceasingly moving back and forth like a moving camera. Other than that it was completely immobile.

"It slowly absorbs cosmic energy, but it is not cultivating. I would guess it possesses a gathering array to keep it going. That explains a lot," the demon continued.

"What do you mean?" Zac asked with some confusion.

"It likely means that these things and the way Salvation fights are not purely a result of a unique class," Ogras explained. "It is more likely a combination of an extremely intricate mother array that control these things, and a class that focuses on puppetry. Rather than a mystical class that does everything."

Zac slowly nodded in understanding. The prospect that Salvation was using tools to gain his current power was a relief since it would be pretty unsettling otherwise. He was lower level than Zac and not even on the Dao Ladder, yet he had almost fought evenly with Zac who had Thea for support.

“Does that help us in any way?” Zac asked.

“Well, breaking the connection between a mother array and its children is much easier than breaking the connection of a skill,” Ogras said. “And it means we can substantially weaken Salvation if we find the mother array and destroy it.”

“Don’t you think it’s on his person?” Zac ventured.

“Perhaps not,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “The more complicated the array the larger it needs to be to house the inscriptions. There are array plates as large as planets out in the multiverse from what I’ve heard. More skilled inscribers can inscribe smaller fractals, but I don’t believe The Great Redeemer is skilled enough to cram an array like this into something that Salvation can carry on his body.”

“It’s not necessarily his own creation though,” Zac countered.

“That’s fair,” Ogras nodded. “It might be something found in a Mystic Realm or on some dead powerhouse. That is a problem in itself. All the underlings of this Redeemer you’ve met are different class archetypes, making it hard to guess the situation with the boss.”

“And it seems Calrin won’t be able to dig up anything useful either,” Zac added with some wistfulness.

There were no news from his side even after two weeks of asking around, trying to buy a report on the mysterious Redeemer. The man was either very discreet or Calrin’s connections weren’t good enough to get his hand on the information.

Zac was about to move on from the invader, but another thought suddenly struck him.

“Wait, will we even be able to kill the guy?” Zac blurted out. “He might have one or many of the Dominators guarding him.”

“I thought about that as well, but I doubt it,” Ogras said. “If our speculations are correct I don’t think anyone would be happier than them if Salvation got himself killed. The Dominators should already be in a bad spot compared to those humans of the other world in the hunt, and if they have to contend with a direct disciple? Forget about it, they will probably throw you a banquet if you kill him.”

Zac knew that what Ogras said was based on a lot of speculation on their side, but at the same time, he felt it made some sense. There had been no cooperation between the two forces during the hunt at all, and Salvation had been left alone even if he was weakened since he couldn’t bring his puppet army. If the Dominators truly were concerned about his well-being they would have sent protection just like the Medhin with their guards.

“Fair enough. But if we see any non-puppet Zhix in the area we will need to rethink our plan,” Zac decided. “Perhaps only cutting down the tree and then make a run for it.”

“Fine, but I doubt there will be any living beings in this place if your description of that man is accurate,” Ogras shrugged. “It sounds like something has broken his mind. Either the stress of the integration or the Inheritance the Great Redeemer left behind. In either case, it doesn’t sound like he is in any position to make logical choices like keeping friendlies alive.”

The puppets at the perimeter seemed to be in a passive state where they only performed a simple loop over and over, and Zac and Ogras had no problems proceeding

further into the Cradle unobstructed. There were a few hidden sentries though that they only spotted thanks to Ogras' superior observation skills.

One was dug into the ground with only its head sticking out, and another one was crammed into a tree. It proved that the former humans were truly only seen as tools and that Salvation had them in abundance if he could use them frivolously like this. They had spotted over a dozen sentries the past hour, and they had only traversed in an extremely small part of the Cradle of God.

The total number of sentries must count in the thousands, and Zac could understand why there was so little information about what was going on inside. Very few would be able to enter this place unnoticed, and fewer still were willing to take the risk. But to Ogras all these traps were like a child's game, and he unhurriedly guided the duo through the outer perimeter.

"So where are these trees of yours?" Ogras asked, prompting Zac to take out a tablet and open up a map.

"According to the guesses of the Marshall clan they should be roughly another five hours' travel due northeast," Zac said with some hesitation. "But if they are five hundred meters tall we should be able to see them much earlier."

His words turned prophetic 90 minutes later when they trekked up a small hill under the guise of some shrubbery. They wanted to get a better vantage to check for any threats as they were starting to get pretty far into the core of Salvation's Zone.

But after the outer perimeter of silver scouts, the zone was completely devoid of both living beings and puppets, making the two believe that Salvation kept a large chunk of his guards close at hand. What they did spot, however, was the gargantuan trees that towered into the sky in the distance. Some even reached above the clouds, a testament to how huge they had become.

Even though Zac was unable to properly gauge their height he had a strong suspicion that at least a few of them were large enough for him to complete his quest, and he motioned Ogras to lead the way.

It took them a few more hours before they reached the forest, and Even Ogras couldn't stop himself from being impressed by the majesty of the Redwoods. Zac had never gone to see them before the integration, but he had seen the pictures on the internet.

The forest they walked through now were far beyond what he had seen in pictures, as the trees had grown not only in height but also in width. Many reached more than twenty meters in diameter, and it was to the point that Zac started to hesitate whether he would even be able to fell one of these monstrosities in one swing.

He even started to feel a twang of guilt when he saw these majestic trees reaching up toward the skies, but he hardened his heart as they looked for a target. This was unfortunately not a time for environmental conservation. He truly needed the power up to fight the stronger Incursions. Otherwise, the losses on his side would turn disastrous.

Finally, the two found a tree that fit the bill. In contrast to the other trees it seemed to carry some sort of fungal infection, and cutting it down might even protect the forest from the spread of disease. Zac also had Ogras climb the thing with a fifty-meter rope to make sure it was tall enough, and the crown clocked in at over 540 meters. It was essentially a skyscraper from its dimensions.

"When this tree goes down the sound will probably be enough to alert the whole country," Ogras commented as he knocked on the trunk that was larger than a basketball court. "It must weigh an insane amount. You might even cause an earthquake."

“If I can even bring this thing down,” Zac muttered as he looked at it with some hesitation.

As he had grown stronger he was able to create a longer and longer edge with [Chop], though it was still unstable above ten meters in length. Now he needed to at least triple that number, and keep it active long enough to swipe through the whole tree.

But nothing ventured nothing gained.

“Get ready to run,” Zac only said, as he took out [Verun’s Bite] and walked up next to the trunk.

The edge from [Chop] grew with rapid speed until the edge reached ten meters, where Zac momentarily stopped its growth. He needed to instantly push it to 35 meters or so from there, and do it as quickly as possible.

Zac simply decided to push his energy control to the limit and completely flood the fractal on his hand with as much energy as he possibly could. He found that his training with the mental puzzle helped somewhat, as it also made the control of his Cosmic Energy smoother. To stabilize the skill further he imbued it with his recently improved Dao Seed as well.

The edge gained a silver sheen from his Late-stage Dao of Sharpness as it stretched out from his axe until it started to gain ridiculous proportions. He tried to maintain a semblance of control of the fractal edge as long as possible as it grew, but he felt it was starting to become unstable the moment he passed fifteen meters.

He did everything he could to have the Cosmic Energy remain its shape until it finally reached the necessary length. His axe was already moving with fluid motion the moment the fractal edge became long enough, but he started to frown as the edge tore through the wood.

There was significant resistance to his swing, even with his E-Grade axe and Dao of Sharpness combining to make an extremely strong attack. The properties of the wood had clearly been strengthened by the Cosmic Energy to allow it to support its own massive weight.

Zac’s muscles strained to push through the tree as his mind started to become dizzy from the effort of maintaining the shape of the edge. But just as it was about to pass through the other end it finally fizzled, leaving a small piece still intact. Disappointment started to flood Zac’s mind, but his hopes reignited when the tree started to creak ominously.

“Did your quest complete?” Ogras asked, and Zac opened his status screen as the two started to create some distance from the redwood.

The attack had contained enough momentum to make the tree swing, and the movements were in turn enough to break off the last piece of the

A thunderous explosion that caused the ground to shake spread out in the area the moment the tree slammed into the ground, taking two smaller redwoods with it. Zac and Ogras were thrown tens of meters in the air, wildly flailing until Ogras shot a shadow spear into a nearby tree with one hand, and grabbed Zac with the other.

It was as though a hurricane went through the forest and the remaining trees wildly swayed back and forth, making Zac fear that he had started off a chain reaction with his attack. But the area soon calmed down, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief and open his status screen and enter the skill tab.

**Deforestation - Proficiency: Early. Their army is the forest and you are the Hatchetman. Upgradeable.**

The swing had counted as a success, and Zac breathed out in relief. He realized the quest had told him to cut the tree down in one swing rather than to completely cut through it so that the edge didn't go all the way through wasn't the end of the world. The quest had likely finished the moment the tree slammed into the ground, but the shockwave had made Zac miss the fact that he gained another fractal on his right bicep.

As he read the description he was reminded of the flavor text of his Hatchetman class. It had said something very familiar, and it almost felt like **[Deforestation]** was the signature skill of his class. Zac really wanted to try it out as soon as possible, but another change made him stop in his tracks.

**[Chop]**, the first attack skill that he obtained had finally evolved from Late to Peak Mastery, becoming the first skill to do so. His skills hadn't improved as quickly as his Daos, and he was quite far away from pushing them all to the peak. He briefly wondered what he could do to push his skills further, but a prod from Ogras brought him out of his musings.

"Holy crap," Ogras muttered, losing some of his trademark calm as he pointed toward a field in the distance.

Any thoughts of skills were thrown out of Zac's head as he visibly paled from what he saw. Holy crap was exactly what Zac felt when he saw the ocean of silver puppets that swarmed toward their position.

And above the puppets hundreds of silver rivers streaked across the sky, forming a beautiful pattern that spoke of impending doom.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 32 chapters ahead) please check out my**

**Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have a**

**Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!**

**Chapter 315 - Against the Clock**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!**

Worry marred Zac's face as he looked out at the ocean of silver puppets. He already knew the force that Salvation could summon was huge, but it was still intimidating to see such a line-up in person. The endless silver rivers looked like scars in the sky, and the combined aura of the puppets on the ground was extremely daunting.

"This kind of power should not be available to an F-Grade warrior," Ogras muttered, his face slightly pale. "There must be some kind of drawback."

"I didn't sense any weakness last time, apart from the fact that his actual body is pretty weak. He needed to use treasures and his puppets to stay safe. If I can get to him I'd be able to kill him in one swing," Zac said, mustering up some courage.

He was still not happy about the situation, as the arrival of the army arrival was too fast. The forest they were in was an hour away from the central city that Salvation had occupied, a chunk of former Los Angeles. It should have taken the puppets even longer to get here, meaning that Salvation set out toward this place hours ago.

Had they already been spotted?

"Well, so much for a sneak attack," Ogras muttered, echoing Zac's thoughts. "So what do you want to do?"

Zac frowned as he kept looking through the incoming horde through a pair of binoculars. Every single one was a puppet, which in a sense was good news. It meant no one had allied with Salvation, not even the Zhix under control of the Dominators. He did spot a few of the insectoids, but they had invariably been turned into puppets, just like the humans and Ishiate.

However, there were simply so many of them. What if he summoned another face in the sky, except that this one was a hundred times larger? Zac doubted that even he would survive such a strike. But he suddenly froze when he spotted the familiar form walking among the puppets.

Salvation still looked like an insane hobo, but Zac could spot even from this great distance that he had noticeably aged. Silver streaks ran through his oily head and wild beard, and his face was marred with wrinkles. Had he been forced to utilize Life Force in battle recently? If so he might be weakened, making this an opportune moment to strike.

The mad prophet had also arrived at a similar solution to his amputation as Ogras. The hand that Zac managed to chop off at the last minute in the hunt had been replaced by the metallic liquid that ran all the way up to his shoulder. Suddenly Salvation's head snapped straight toward their direction as Zac scouted him out, and it felt as he looked straight into his eyes. Zac didn't know why, but he was sure that it wasn't just a feeling, but rather the truth.

They had already been spotted.

"Let's head down," Zac said. "Perhaps we can surprise attack him while speaking. He's the kind of lunatic who likes an audience."

Ogras nodded and the two jumped down from their position up the tree. Just two minutes later they stood in front of the enormous army of puppets, with Salvation having walked toward the front. The world had almost turned monochromatic from the rivers obscuring the suns, but Zac's whole attention was on the lunatic wearing the dirty sheets.

"Like a moth to flames the spirit longs for salvation," Salvation said as he stepped forward, with ten silver rivers circulating him for protection. It looked like he wasn't taking any chances with Zac within axing distance. "Are you ready to join the Great Undertaking?"

"Unfortunately not. I'm here to finish what I started back in the hunt. Why don't you call your Zhix allies here as well?" Zac said, making a gambit that Salvation was too crazy to realize he was digging for information.

"Those three are but tools of the Great Lord," Salvation said with some disdain. "They lack the piety and the dedication to the cause and only serve a purpose until they've led the Great Lord here. They know better than to encroach on the holy land."

Zac felt some relief when hearing that, as it didn't look like Salvation was lying. His mind was consumed with his insane crusade, and things as subterfuge were beyond him at the moment.

"This one is even loopier than I thought," Ogras muttered with some interest as he studied Salvation like one would a rabid animal.

"Do not worry, horned one. Not even the scions of Lucifer are beyond redemption," Salvation said, throwing Ogras a pitying glance.

"Oh? You know of Lord Lucifer?" Ogras said with surprise, making Zac look over with some shock.

“What?” Ogras asked with some confusion after seeing Zac’s look. “Lucifer is one of the most powerful demons around, a true hero. This whole region should know of his name.”

Zac wanted to ask a dozen follow-up questions to that, but there were far more pressing matters at hand.

“How did you find us?” Zac couldn’t help but ask of the grimy man.

“The Lord hears all, sees all, is all,” Salvation lifting his eyes far into the air. “How can I not sense your Sapience, your suffering. Let me free you.”

That was all the time Salvation was willing to waste on the conversation as five rivers descended from the skies to charge at the two. Meanwhile, an enormous change took place with the rest of the rivers. They started to change and form fractals in the sky, creating a circle of inscriptions.

A dozen shadow spears suddenly appeared around Salvation that tried to skewer him the moment they rose out of the ground. But it was as though the swirling rivers around their enemy had a mind of their own as they blocked all the strikes before Salvation himself even had time to react.

Large clouds of dissipated silver rose into the air, and a few dozen of the innumerable spare puppets immediately liquefied and joined the defensive perimeter around their master. Ogras tsked in disappointment as he looked up at the change to the liquefied puppets, his spear already having appeared in his hand.

“They seem to be forming an array,” Ogras muttered. “We should probably disrupt it.”

“Can you handle it?” Zac asked. “I’ll try to go straight toward the source.”

“Fine, you’re better suited for charging straight into it like a bull anyway,” Ogras agreed as the two huge shadow wings sprouted on his back.

Zac simply nodded and exploded into motion with **[Loamwalker]** pushing him straight toward Salvation himself. As he pushed forward he charged up his new and improved **[Chop]** to tackle the protective layers surrounding the puppeteers.

Cosmic Energy effortlessly entered the fractal as usual, but when infused the fractal with his energy Zac noticed a startling change. For one he infused over ten times as much energy as usual before the blade assembled, but that wasn’t all. As the fractal edge materialized he also formed a mental connection he had never felt before.

Suddenly it was as though the large five-meter edge was a part of his body, and with a simple mental command, it detached from its position in front of his axe. However, it didn’t shoot off toward Salvation and his metallic rivers but rather started to hover around him like a large scythe of death.

Zac tried to summon another edge, but this time there was no mental connection forming, but rather just another standard blade that required the regular amount of energy. It looked like the change in his skill was that he received one special edge, while the others remained the same.

Unfortunately, this wasn’t the time to experiment where the limits of his new addition lay, and Zac refocused on the battle instead. He created another five blades and launched them in quick order toward Salvation, as the special edge stayed within like a bodyguard.

Each blade was imbued with the improved Dao of Sharpness, and they pushed Salvation’s defenses to their limits. Each edge completely ripped a river to shreds before dissipating, forcing over a hundred puppets to liquefy. Only around a month had passed since the two fought last time, but Zac had not only improved his Daos considerably but also his weapon.

The rabid fanaticism in Salvation's eyes was briefly doused as fear flashed in his face for the first time. Zac was almost upon him, but this time Salvation wasn't willing to confront him head-on. The ten rivers surrounding him swallowed him up before they scattered in different directions, making Zac unable to tell where he had gone.

Another fifty rivers were created from the puppets, and as they twirled and intertwined it was completely impossible to tell which was which. The only relief was that he hadn't launched **[Nature's Punishment]** immediately in an attempt to destroy Salvation, as he had gotten even better at staying hidden. He would have been forced to waste the huge hand on killing a few hundred puppets, wasting its massive power and energy consumption.

Soon the rivers started to shoot toward Zac, and he rapidly started to destroy them by launching his blades at them, but there was no end in sight. He soon realized that he would need to infuse the blade with the Dao of Sharpness to completely destroy a river, but his mind would become overtaxed before he managed to launch enough attacks with **[Chop]**. Salvation had simply brought too many puppets.

"Shit! What are these things made of?" a frustrated shout could be heard from above as Zac hesitated what to do next, and he looked up to see Ogras desperately trying to destroy the enormous fractals that had already fully formed.

The rivers in the sky had turned into a long string of fractals in just seconds, and they formed an enormous circle in the sky. Its diameter was at least a square kilometer, and it encompassed the whole battlefield and the puppet army. So far he couldn't sense them doing anything, but even he could sense the massive amounts of Cosmic Energy they started to absorb.

Zac frowned and launched a handful of Dao-infused blades toward the fractals as well, but they were extremely sturdy. The strikes did chip them down somewhat, but a handful of the tens of thousands of puppets immediately reinforced them. Ogras swooped down toward him with some hesitation on his face when he saw that the battle below had stalled as well.

"It has truly formed an array," Ogras said. "This guy is just too weird. We might be better if we exit the encirclement before we consider our next step."

"You have entered the Holy Kingdom, it is time for you to join the unity. Through pain comes clarity," the voice of Salvation echoed across the field, though it was impossible to pinpoint its source.

A foreboding feeling crept into Zac's heart as he shot Ogras a glance. He started to feel that they had been a bit overconfident in confronting this madman. They should probably have backed off when they saw the huge resources that Salvation had expended to confront them, but he had been too anxious to finish the fight, emboldened by his recent powerups.

The demon imperceptibly nodded and the two immediately disappeared from their spot, rushing out of the encirclement. But the moment they were about to cross the threshold it was as though Zac slammed into a wall, and the rebound threw him over ten meters back.

A shockwave made Zac's robe flutter immediately afterward as Ogras launched a beam of shadows at the invisible shield. But there was not even a shudder, making the ominous feeling in Zac's heart worse.

"There's no way we will break this thing in the short run," Ogras muttered.

"What do we do?" Zac asked, pushing down any panic that threatened to rise to the surface. He hated feeling like a trapped animal.

“Everything should be controlled by that man. We kill him and the rest of it should sort itself out,” Ogras hesitantly said. “Judging by how the fractals are absorbing energy it will take a few minutes for them to charge whatever they’re supposed to do.”

“I have no method of locating him though,” Zac said with a grimace. “He can seamlessly move about the puppets. He might even turn himself into that liquid from what I can tell.”

“Well, all the puppets are within the array, so he should be as well, no?” Ogras said. “So if we destroy all the puppets we should be able to find him. If we still can’t find him we will at least have destroyed what allows the runes to regenerate, which might allow us to destroy them.”

Zac thoughtfully nodded in agreement. It was far better than just standing around, even if he still was a bit unwilling to destroy these poor people who had become victims to Salvation.

“But we’re against the clock here, so no holding back,” Ogras added.

“I think I have just the thing,” Zac said, tightening the grip on his axe.

Zac once again started to run toward where he came from. But this time his aim wasn’t to directly kill Salvation, but rather to cause widespread mayhem.

It was time to unleash **[Deforestation]**.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 316 - Deforestation**

Zac knew time was running out as he rushed toward the sea of puppets. They had no idea what the enormous array in the sky would do, but he couldn’t imagine it being anything good. Since Salvation said it was time to join the unity it might mean that both he and Ogras would be turned into puppets the moment the fractals finished charging up.

He also knew that **[Chop]** wouldn’t cut it, even with its recent upgrade. There was a limit to how many puppets he could destroy per swing, and the number was too low to rip apart the endless army in front of him. It was like the mission he received to kill enough zombies in ten minutes. This time he needed to kill to maintain a killing speed that was at least ten times higher.

The function of the special blade from **[Chop]** was still unclear as it still hovered around him. However, Zac noted that it had barely cost any Cosmic Energy to maintain since he formed it, meaning it might be possible to keep a permanent edge on hand. He needed to explore ways to manipulate it though, as traveling with a five-meter cutter swirling around him would be pretty inconvenient.

He instead put his hopes on his newly acquired skill, **[Deforestation]**. He received no explanation of how the skill worked when he got it, and there were rather only a few names that entered his mind. But its description indicated it was used as an army killing attack.

So it was with fervent hope he started to flood the fractal on his bicep with Cosmic Energy as he ran toward the puppets. The fractal immediately activated and he finally received a burst of insight, making him understand how to properly utilize the skill. And it was just in time with him arriving in front of the Silver Guards.

“Axe of Felling,” Zac muttered as his arm started to perform a wide horizontal swing.

It felt as though he was pushing through a viscous liquid, but to Zac’s massive pool of Strength it was only a minor inconvenience, some additional strain on his body. The energies in the surroundings started to churn while a large chunk of Zac’s own Cosmic Energy also was dragged out of his body to feed the attack.

[Verun’s Bite] only cleaved air as Zac finished his motion, but the swing was only there to summon the real strike. The true effect of [Deforestation] materialized the moment Zac finished his strike, and it moved to repeat Zac’s own swing.

It was a forester’s hatchet, almost a bit reminiscent of his first weapon, his trusty hatchet that had unfortunately turned to scrap in his battle with Vul. The summoned weapon had a somewhat small head for its very long wooden handle, and if it wasn’t for two details one could have thought it was a normal hatchet from Earth.

The first oddity was its size. The hatchet was well over ten meters long, with its head being larger than Zac himself. The second clue to its origin were the fractals that adorned it. There were two lines of inscriptions, one running along the back of the long handle, and the other along its edge.

The fractals along the chestnut-colored handle emitted a sense of imperviousness and fortitude, making it seem the axe would be able to handle any amount of strain without snapping. The ones on the edge gave off a completely different feeling, and it was one that Zac was familiar with. It was sharpness, the ability to cut through anything.

The fractals’ functions might be the standard set that a multiverse hatchet would contain, but they were extremely different from the fractals on a weapon that one might pick up in the System’s general stores. They contained a boundless intricacy in their simplicity, and it was clear they contained truths that were well beyond Zac’s current understanding of the Dao.

Zac tried to imbue the enormous axe with his Dao of Sharpness, but his mental energy was actually rebuffed when he tried to infuse it. Zac knew he might be imagining things, but he almost felt as though the huge axe disdained his Seed of Sharpness, not wanting to be sullied by such a lowly insight into the Dao.

Zac quickly tried a few other Daos, but the result was the same. The axe finished its trajectory without getting imbued at all, and it was an exact copy of Zac’s own swing. The attack was simple and unadorned, but the effect was anything but. Zac first thought the attack was a dud, but soon one puppet after another started to fall apart, bisected in the middle by a clean cut.

First it was one, then two, then hundreds of puppets that fell into pieces before turning into vapor. The silver rivers weren’t faring any better as they shattered one after another as well from the forester’s axe. The attack kept moving outward and the battlefield was soon obscured in a dense silver mist from the thousands of puppets that were destroyed in an instant.

Zac estimated that over twenty thousand puppets had been destroyed by that one massive swing, but he knew that the effect of [Deforestation] wasn’t over. It was not a single-use skill, but rather a skill that ramped up, as long as his body could take it.

Zac hurried forward through the shrouded battlefield so that he could unleash the follow-up swing as close as possible to the remaining puppets. He shot a glance at Ogras while he rushed forward to see that the demon had unleashed his largest sea of shadows yet.

A large sector of the battlefield was shrouded in utter darkness, and puppets were swallowed and destroyed by the dozens every second. Ogras himself was floating above the shrouded field like a God of darkness, shooting concentrated shadows to destroy any silver rivers that tried to flee his sphere of influence.

It was starting to become clear that Salvation possessed some rationality at least, and it looked like he was trying to stall out the battle. His puppets had actually been trapped within the barrier as well, but there was still a lot of room for them to move about.

The mad prophet wasn't trying to gather his forces to charge at the two, but he rather seemed content to sacrifice parts of his army while the runes in the sky kept gathering energy. Zac couldn't be sure, but from the power they were starting to emit he feared that they had even less time than they had hoped.

Zac reached the edge of where the attack of **[Axe of Felling]** reached, and he once again charged up the fractal representing **[Deforestation]**.

"Infernal Axe," Zac growled, and suddenly it felt as though he was carrying a mountain on his shoulders when he tried to repeat the swing.

His whole body strained to the max as he desperately pushed his Axe forward, and once again an enormous axe materialized in front of him when he completed the swing. This time it was even more massive, with an edge at least twice the size of the **[Axe of Felling]**.

The axe also looked completely different. The last one was a simple axe apart from the line of fractals, whereas this one was clearly meant for war. The head was larger with a long curved edge looking like molten stone, and it emitted an aura of fiery annihilation. Its handle seemed to be created from a burnt-out trunk of some unknown tree, and scorch marks formed dozens of fractals in a seemingly random pattern along the handle.

It was a forest fire turned into a weapon, and as the enormous axe swung an inferno rippled outward in a massive wave of destruction. This attack was nothing like the nondescript killing of the first swing. It looked like a red tsunami that pushed outward toward the puppets, swallowing anything it reached.

The puppets were not only burnt to when the wave consumed them, but the flames actually contained an extremely sharp cutting power. The flames somehow chopped the silver guards into tens of pieces that were soon turned into cinders before the wave passed on. They didn't even get the chance to form the silver mist this time as only burnt chunks were left behind.

Salvation tried to move his remaining puppets and rivers away from the firestorm, but the attack was way too fast for even the more agile silver rivers. The wave kept growing and growing in a massive conflagration, and soon the attack had passed hundreds of meters, leaving nothing but scorched earth in its wake.

Zac had fallen down on his knees after releasing the attack, panting with exhaustion. After the two attacks he had a pretty decent idea of the requirements for the first two swings. The Axe of Felling required somewhere around 500 Strength to launch, whereas the second one required 750.

He guessed that normally only the first swing was meant to be used in the F-grade unless perhaps someone managed to reach the required Strength for the second with the help of **[Hatchetman's Rage]**. But thanks to his titles his effective strength just about passed 800, allowing him to launch the second swing, though not effortlessly.

But Zac knew that still wasn't the end. There was one more axe one could summon with **[Deforestation]**.

Zac hesitantly looked at the remaining puppets and rivers. His two first swings had killed off roughly a third of the Puppets, where the second swing had destroyed over a hundred thousand puppets alone. The Shadow Ocean that Ogras had summoned would be able to handle a quarter of the original number as well before the time ran out. But that still left almost half of the puppets.

In a perfect world he would repeat the swing of the Infernal Axe a couple of times to rip apart the rest of the puppets, but he realized that this attack couldn't be used repeatedly. The fractal on his arm had dimmed by a large degree, with only a third still being illuminated by a mysterious power.

Zac realized that the attack was a bit like his upgraded axe. The powerful skill had charges, and it needed to restore its energies before it could be used again. Perhaps that was for the best, as Zac felt how wrung out his body was after using the second strike, even with his extreme physique.

That meant he would either need to try to summon the third axe or cancel the attack and try to destroy the rest of the puppets some other way. Salvation still doggedly refused to leave his position within one of the rivers, so using **[Nature's Punishment]** to finish him off was impossible.

Meanwhile, he didn't feel that **[Chop]** was up to the task of destroying the well over hundred thousand remaining puppets in short order, leaving the final axe as his only solution. The problem was that Zac wasn't sure he would be able to withstand the backlash from trying to force the ultimate attack of **[Deforestation]**.

However, they were running out of options and Zac could only make a gambit on his oddly durable body. The air around him twisted from a massive surge of power as he activated **[Hatchetman's Rage]** to push his effective strength to over a thousand points.

The mental effects of the skill were especially poignant with the added effect of the **[Splinter of Oblivion]** bleeding into his mind since the battle started, and Zac forcibly had to restrain himself from actually trying to bite a puppet to death the moment he reached the defending line of silver guards once again.

"Desolation," Zac wheezed with red-tinted eyes as almost all of his remaining Cosmic Energy was sucked dry in the blink of an eye.

Zac started to swing his axe to launch the final axe, which was called **[Desolation]**. But he only managed to swing the axe half-way before he was pushed to his knees from insane pressure, one that didn't only affect his body but even his soul. He felt a deep unwillingness to give in as madness took control of his mind, and he used everything he had to push the axe forward.

His muscles tore as blood started to run down his nose and ears, but it actually seemed to work as the outline of an enormous axe started to form. But its true shape couldn't even be discerned before a loud snap echoed across the battlefield, and the axe immediately fractured.

The sound came from multiple bones in Zac's arm shattering due to overwhelming pressure. His strength wasn't enough, even with **[Hatchetman's Rage]** activated. Zac had hoped that the requirement for the third axe was 1000 Strength, but that clearly wasn't it as he wasn't even close to finishing the swing before his body broke down and his mind was damaged.

But surprisingly the attack wasn't a complete failure. As the indistinct outline of the axe fractured it turned into a hazy grey mist that rushed out toward the puppets. The mist was pretty sparse and only a small part of the remaining Silver Guards was affected, but the result was still astounding.

Anything the anthracite mist touched started to crumble, and in just seconds the affected guards had turned into nothingness. There were no marks, no remains, nothing. Just a complete and total annihilation. Zac's eyes widened in shock as he looked upon the destruction as he lay immobile on the ground, wondering just how strong the fully finished strike would be.

Unfortunately, the mist was only enough to destroy another ten thousand puppets. But sometimes a little bit of luck was all that was needed to turn a battle around.

As a silver river fragmented due to an errant gust of the deadly mist, and a wretched Salvation was thrown out with a pained wail, a silver shield shattering around him. Even the silver arm he had created for himself broke down, turning into blackened motes that dissipated.

Only Salvation himself seemed fine, with his puppets sacrificing themselves to protect him from the effects of **[Desolation]**. Madness and fear marred the man's face as he looked at Zac with horror, and Zac growled in response as he tried to get back on his feet.

"DESCENT!" Salvation screamed in panic, and the remaining tens of thousands of puppets broke down simultaneously, rapidly forming a sinister cloud beyond anything Zac had seen before.

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**Chapter 317 - Explosions**

Zac's eyes widened in alarm because the scene was the same as when Salvation summoned the enormous head in the sky during the hunt, only on a far grander scale. If this attack was allowed to complete its buildup the face would at least be ten times the size of the last time.

Something needed to be done, but his limbs didn't respond to his commands. His last attack had completely overtaxed his body, and apart from the broken bones in his arm and shoulder, he felt he had ripped most of his muscles as well.

He still had some remaining Cosmic Energy in his system, but he couldn't even stand up at the moment, let alone launch an attack to stop Salvation from bringing the equivalent of a comet down on their heads. He only saw one possibility to turn the tides.

**[Beauty Yrial's Great Transformation Skill]** activated around his core, and his battered body was immediately flooded with Miasma. Zac's vision blurred and a sense of weakness immediately spread through his body. The effect was even worse as **[Hatchetman's Rage]** was forcibly canceled before it's time limit, and it looked like switching Class was not a viable method to avoid the backlash from activating the buffing skill.

The transformation would take less than ten seconds, but he started to despair as he realized he wouldn't make it in time. An enormous silver river formed in the clouds above, and it quickly moved down to swallow Salvation's exposed body.

But blood suddenly spurted out of the mad prophet's mouth as a shadowy lance erupted from his chest. He looked down with bafflement as even more lances skewered him, making him lose blood like a sieve.

It was Ogras who had somehow teleported into Salvation's own shadow to attack him before he had time to get back into the protection of his silver rivers. It looked like Ogras had been patiently waiting like a hunter for Salvation to appear to get a shot at assassinating him.

A wet cough escaped Salvation's mouth as he slowly turned his head toward Ogras. The demon was just about to slice off his head when his eyes widened in alarm. The golden fractal on Salvation's forehead lit up with blinding light, and the demon fell back as though he was grievously wounded.

"So it is my time to join the unity," Salvation rasped as he rapidly started to age. "But redemption comes to all. I will be accompanied by thousands, my last gift to the great Lord."

Ogras suddenly started to scream as though he was being ripped apart as he was bathed in golden light. He desperately tried to move away, but it looked like his body didn't respond to his actions.

"Horned one, join me in ete-" Salvation said, but was forcibly interrupted as a huge spiked shield slammed into him with the force of a ballistic missile.

Half of Salvation's body, including most of his head, was destroyed, instantly killing him. The golden fractal lost its source of energy when the grimy priest lost his remaining life force. Ogras soon calmed down, but he was still on his knees panting from whatever he had experienced.

It was Zac who had finally finished his transformation but had found himself unable to move even in his Draugr form. Luckily one of his arms was still mostly intact apart from a few pulled muscles. He had forced it full of miasma with **[Unholy Strike]** and hurled his huge shield at Salvation since he was afraid he'd miss if he threw his axe with his left arm.

Zac was filled with new energy after the shield hit home, confirming that Salvation had truly died from the attack. But the energy was extremely lacking for how taxing the battle was since Salvation was only level 62. It was enough to push his level to 54 and some ways toward the next level, but nothing more than that.

He arduously got to a sitting position as he sardonically wondered what his opponent would think if he ever got killed in battle. Would he be shocked at the minuscule amount of energy compared to the strength that Zac exhibited? But he was soon dragged out of his musings from the rumblings of the sky.

The silver clouds had stopped condensing with Salvation's death, but they hadn't dissipated. The enormous amount of energies they contained rapidly became more and more chaotic, and alarm bells were starting to go off in Zac's mind.

"Good job, though I believe kill stealing is my job," a weak voice came from his side as Ogras appeared with the shield gripped in a shadow tentacle.

The demon was pale as a sheet, and tear streaks were running down his face. Zac wondered just what the demon had experienced inside that golden light to look like that. After glancing over at the demon's original position Zac saw that the body of salvation was gone, likely snatched up by Ogras as he rushed over here.

"Unfortunately we don't seem to be out of harm's way," the demon continued. "The arrays have stopped gathering energy, but they are still active. My soul is wounded and I'm out of energy, are you able to destroy a rune to let us out of here?"

Zac sighed and shook his head.

"I don't have a lot of offensive skills in this class. The only thing is that throw," Zac explained.

Ogras only groaned and started to desperately rip up huge chunks of the scorched ground beneath them.

“Then get to digging,” Ogras said. “We have twenty seconds at best before the energies in those clouds above us rip this area into pieces.”

Zac’s brows rose in realization, and he punched a deep hole with his working arm, ignoring the pain from using his torn muscles. It only took them ten seconds to dig over twenty meters down in the ground, after which they covered themselves with layers of soil.

However, they weren’t done with just that as Zac summoned [**Immutable Bulwark**] to form a thick shield above them, and he immediately imbued it with the Seed of Hardness. Ogras still wasn’t satisfied as one Array Disk after another appeared, along with a few other defensive treasures that Zac had never seen before.

“Treasures are no good for you dead,” Ogras muttered, though he seemed a bit pained as he clutched his items.

Zac was about to respond but a shockwave that almost knocked him unconscious slammed into them, even with the multiple layers of defense. The next moment the world turned white as a massive explosion erupted that drowned out everything else.

Miasma was being drained at an astonishing rate as torrential forces continuously slammed into his shield, and three quarters of his death-attuned energy was gone in just a few seconds. Finally, he was forced to remove the shield while shouting out a warning to Ogras, letting the defensive treasures take the brunt of the attack.

The shimmering layers of shields started shattering at a rapid pace by the unceasing onslaught, and Zac was starting to wonder if he would have to resummon his shield and push it until he ran out of Miasma. But as suddenly as the force erupted it also disappeared and calm once again returned to the area.

Zac and Ogras found themselves at the bottom of an enormous crater, and the two couldn’t help but gawk as they looked around. There was simply nothing there apart from the enormous hole that was at least fifty meters deep.

There was a clean line of demarcation in a circle where the edge of the array once was, as it seemed the blast had been contained and pushed downward, at least in the beginning of the eruption. The large fractals in the sky were all gone, clearly unable to hold against the massive forces that had been unleashed.

The two were both pretty bad shape, but they knew it was risky to stay here. The dominators hadn’t appeared in the fight, just like they had hoped, but the massive discharge just now could likely be seen from outside Salvation’s area of control. So they arduously made their way out of the crater, only to see another scene of utter desolation.

Half the forest they came from had been toppled, and anything aboveground had been ripped to shreds from the blast after the array containment failed. Zac shook his head in wonderment, feeling as though he had survived staying in the epicenter of a nuclear explosion, mostly through his own power.

The world of Cosmic Energy was both terrifying and wondrous.

Thomas walked through the streets of New Washington, or what remained of them. A somber face marred his tired face as he looked at the scene of devastation.

“Do we have a tally yet?” Thomas sighed, turning to his aide who walked along him with one of her arms in a cast.

“The cleanup process is still underway, but we fear that up to twenty percent of the population died from the explosion, and many more are wounded. The commercial and residential districts were particularly badly hit,” she said with a downcast face.

“Do we know how Salvation managed to smuggle so many of his puppets to our sewer system?” Thomas growled, an ember of fury burning in his chest.

“We still have no idea, the routes were completely destroyed from the explosion, making it impossible to map. One theory is that he found an abandoned sewage outlet that ran out of the town that provided him ingress,” she said, though it was clear she did not believe in this theory.

“What do you believe?” Thomas sighed, though he had a good idea of what she was thinking.

“Wasn’t Salvation allied with... *them*?” the aide said with a low voice, avoiding eye contact with Thomas.

Thomas sighed again as they returned to his office after making the rounds.

“They served the same master, but from how we understand it they belonged to rival camps. I reached out to our contact earlier and they fervently denied any involvement in this terrorist attack. Truthfully I believe them, if only because this insanity is against their goals as well,” Thomas said with a tired voice.

He knew what his aide thought of those monsters, and the path of no return they had embarked upon. But they were out of options and time was running out. Perhaps that man would be able to defeat the Dominators given enough time, but their lord was on his way. He knew that fighting against him was futile, like ants trying to destroy an elephant.

It was time to salvage what could be saved. He knew that only a small fraction of humanity would survive the arrival of The Great Redeemer with his plan, but that was better than the whole world getting harvested. If he needed to sell his soul to save at least a small part of humanity, so be it.

But he hadn’t completely given up. As long as he had two hands he would do everything in his power to turn the tides.

“Have there been any news from our other project?” Thomas asked, and the aide immediately took out a few documents, knowing what he was referring to.

“The spies we caught had limited knowledge about the movements of the church, but we have finally managed to locate one of the four entrances that the Church of Everlasting Dao control. We are amassing our armies to strike that outpost as we speak,” she said.

“Any new intelligence?” Thomas probed, as he had been too occupied with the Zombie threat as of late to be up to date to the activities of this clandestine project.

“We have confirmed from multiple sources that they all lead to the same Mystic Realm and that it is an enormous structure that would likely be able to house millions of people. But it is already populated by multiple indigenous forces, and even the core members of the Church have found themselves in pitched battles without making much headway,” she read from the reports.

“Have you found out what’s inside that’s so important that they ignore all the resources of Earth?” Thomas asked with a sharp look in her direction.

“The infiltrators have no idea, even they seemed pretty shocked at the resources their High Vicar spends at conquering that place,” she said. “And the main branch of their church seems to have spent a huge sum to provide reinforcements to help in their efforts.”

“Do we have the strength to conquer the base?” Thomas asked next.

“It is guarded by multiple E-Grade warriors, though they are still somewhat limited by the restrictions. We will need to expend both plenty of lives and a sizeable portion of our old-world weaponry to seize it according to our generals,” she said, waiting for instructions.

Thomas nodded in thought. In fact, he knew more about the situation inside those portals than his aide. Only a handful of people from the Government knew the true reason why the Church so desperately wanted to seize the enormous facility. It had cost them a shocking amount of lives and resources to receive that snippet of information since it had required them to capture one of the Churches’ bishops.

It was the key to not only surviving this calamity but actually making huge strides forward. Their alliance with those lunatics under the Great Redeemer was just the back-up plan to save some of their people if things didn’t work out. It wouldn’t be necessary if they attained their goals with this Mystic Realm.

“It is the gateway that might lead to the salvation of humanity. Spare no expense, we need to seize that entrance.”

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**Chapter 318 - Dao Funnel**

“He’s dead?” Void’s Disciple said with a small frown without looking up from the scriptures in front of him.

Inevitability hesitantly nodded and muttered a confirmation, unable to read their leader’s mood as usual.

“The fulcrum teamed up with the leader of the demonkin invaders to assault Salvation. The large explosions at the end appear to be the collective detonation of all his Silver Guards,” Inevitability said.

“How did he manage to move so many of his puppets to all those towns unnoticed?” Void’s Disciple casually asked, but fear immediately gripped Inevitability’s heart. “At least a million people have died, robbing our Lord of his harvest.”

“That... It was me and Harbinger,” Inevitability admitted, her heart rapidly beating.

“Explain,” Void Said, looking up from the ancient texts for the first time since Inevitability entered his cultivation chamber at the bottom of the expansive hive.

Void’s Disciple looked unassuming and even a bit frail, but Inevitability knew that he was anything but. He had always been mysterious to herself and her brother, and they did not even know his age or which hive he originated from.

They only knew that even before the integration the two of them were unable to as much as touch his clothes when teaming up. Now that he had made massive strides in the Dao and racking up all those titles he was far beyond their reach.

It was a shame, she thought. He was a perfect mate now that they had evolved away from the restrictive fetters of the Anointed. Unfortunately, he was just too focused on the mission, to the point it was all-consuming.

“We wanted a back-up plan for when the lord arrives,” she admitted, not daring to lie. “We thought that if we kept that man happy he would speak up for us. We didn’t expect him to detonate the puppets though, but rather capture the townspeople when the lord Redeemer arrived.”

“Did you at least retrieve the Origin Funnel?” he asked with a sigh.

“It was on Salvation’s body when he died. We believe it’s with his killers now,” Inevitability admitted with a grimace.

“So the fulcrum is currently not only walking around with one of the beacons that guide our lord, but also all the Origin Dao that lunatic collected?” Void’s Disciple said, the air around him starting to twist and turn.

Void’s Disciple closed his eyes in exasperation and lightly started tapping his finger on the table. Inevitability started to shudder as she knew that was a sign that he was greatly annoyed, and carnage almost always followed. But the tapping suddenly stopped, allowing Inevitability to breathe out in relief, feeling like a sacrificial offering being granted clemency.

“Well, it’s just one of the beacons, and the Funnel is just a copy the lord made in his youth. The loss is regrettable, but not overly so. That Mystic Realm is far more important. If we can provide our Lord with that thing he will likely not care about our other failings,” Void’s Disciple muttered.

Inevitability ardently nodded, extremely happy to change the subject. The loss of the Funnel was a worthy price to get rid of that man in her opinion. She might not have dared to kill Salvation herself, but the less competition the better.

“What about the church?” Inevitability hesitantly asked. “That thing is valuable, but I don’t believe the Great Lord is willing to make an enemy of the Church of Everlasting Dao.”

“Soon after it awakens the entrances will close. All three of us will enter at that time,” Void’s Disciple calmly explained. “The Mystic Realm is completely separated with high-grade shielding. No karma threads will leak out, allowing us to kill everything without holding back. Only the three of us need to return from that place, the rest can die inside, no matter if it’s the church or the aboriginals.”

Inevitability’s eyes lit up in anticipation when she heard Void’s words. They had been forced to stay hidden for so long that her whole body was itching in anticipation. Her killing spree in the hunt had barely whet her appetite for blood, and they had avoided all interesting targets out of fear of exposing their intentions or their lord.

But it seemed that it all was coming to an end.

“Even the fulcrum?” Inevitability probed.

Fury still suffused her as she thought of her shameful display during the hunt. Every day she dreamed of tearing that man and that little chick apart, but she held herself back due to fear of the person in front of her.

“Nothing can go wrong inside the Mystic Realm,” Void’s Disciple said after a brief pause. “If he enters, then that’s his fate.”

Bloodlust started to leak from her body as Inevitability imagined running into Zachary Atwood inside the Mystic Realm. Perhaps she could trick that human to go there without Void finding out?

----

Zac and Ogras sat hidden inside an array, three hours from the battlefield. They had pushed their tired bodies to the limits to get as far away as possible from that place, afraid that someone would take advantage of their situation. But their bodies could only endure so much, and Ogras was unable to keep going after an hour, forcing Zac to carry him. Finally they found a Cave to hide in while they recuperated.

The moment they sat down they ate a second set of healing pills, and as if by an unspoken agreement created some distance before they started to ponder on the Dao.

They had both been in a desperate battle that pushed them to their limits, and it was time to reap the benefits.

Zac gained more from the last battle compared to all of the battles with the Incursion Leaders thus far. An all-out struggle was truly the best way to move forward. His eyes closed as he focused on the large axe fractal in his body. He wasn't pondering on the Dao of Sharpness again, but rather on the Dao of Heaviness. It hadn't been that long since he improved it last time since he evolved it during the hunt. But the previous battle showcased multiple sources of heaviness for him, which he wanted to capitalize on.

The first was the three instances of pressure that his body was subjected to when summoning the axes for **[Deforestation]**. The last one placed such a burden for him that his body almost collapsed, and if his bones didn't break first even his soul would be wounded. The first axe, **[Axe of Felling]**, also contained a hint of imperviousness and solidity that was in a sense related to heaviness.

The second heaviness could be gleaned from the immense explosion that almost killed them earlier. Just the shockwave from the blast was powerful enough to cost him a quarter of his Miasma, and being within sustained errant energies was like being in a zone with far higher gravity. Zac believed the two insights together with other snippets he had gathered from various fights and other sources were enough to push his seed to the peak naturally.

He already possessed one peak seed, but that one came at the cost of multiple Dao Treasures, and he couldn't consume them so freely. Besides, Zac noticed that the effect of the treasures was waning when he improved his Seed of Sharpness. He only had a few shots left to use Dao Treasures before they became useless.

At that point, he would need to get treasures of a higher grade, but it was a complete waste to use such a thing on a Dao Seed. The higher-grade Dao Treasures were rather meant to improve Dao Fragments, and they could save years of effort rather than months. To use them at this juncture was a complete waste.

The two were strapped for time, but both of them needed a day or two of recuperation before they could move again. Ogras was especially badly off as his constitution was far inferior to Zac's. The golden beam had even wounded his psyche, which was much thornier to heal. Zac, therefore, didn't feel rushed when it took hours to enter a calm state of meditation, but when he finally arrived there the rest came surprisingly easy.

Zac opened his eyes an unknown time later, and after glancing over noticed that Ogras was still in the middle of meditation. Ogras even seemed to be in the middle of a breakthrough judging by the mysterious fluctuations surrounding him, and Zac closed his eyes again.

He didn't want to disturb the demon while he was right in the threshold of improving and instead focused on a second Dao Seed. This time it was Sanctuary. He had been extremely close for a while now thanks to the partial vision, their desperate situation where Zac shielded the two from the blast was enough to push him over the edge.

When he opened his eyes the next time he saw Ogras fiddling with something on the ground, and Zac's eyes widened in shock when he saw it was a piece of Salvation's head. More precisely it was his forehead that still had the shimmering golden fractal imprinted.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Zac wheezed with alarm, knowing how terrible that fractal was. He even forgot checking on his boosted Daos due to the shocking scene.

“Oh, you’re up?” Ogras said with a start, having been completely engrossed with the fractal. “I believe this is the control inscription for the array that allowed Salvation to possess so many puppets.”

“You better not get any ideas,” Zac muttered. “I’m pretty sure the array continuously consumed his life force. When I met him during the hunt he looked slightly above my age, and you saw how rapidly he aged when that thing lit up. He might have been Emily’s age when he got his hands on that cursed thing.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t infuse my head with some unknown array. I have enough troublesome things in my body as it is,” Ogras snorted.

Zac sighed, knowing the feeling all too well. The multiverse was simply too full of double-edged treasures. Or perhaps it was fairer to say that nothing came without a price. A treasure wouldn’t simply boost one’s power to great heights without exacting a price in return. It was true for the creature living in Ogras’ shadows, and it was true for the splinter in his head.

“Still, it is very interesting,” Ogras continued. “I believe I have found a pretty important clue.”

“Oh? What’s that?” Zac asked with interest as he walked over.

His right arm was still mostly useless as his bones hadn’t mended, but at least the muscles in his body had healed enough for him to move about effortlessly. It would take a few more days to be able to push his body in a battle though.

“This thing resonated with me when I evolved a Dao Seed,” Ogras explained. “I think it contains Origin Dao.”

“What?” Zac asked with surprise as he looked down on the fractal.

“I believe this treasure steals the Origin Dao of the people who Salvation turned to puppets, storing it somehow,” Ogras explained. “That would also fit with why that old goat wants to find these baby planets. It might be this type of thing that would be forced upon the so-called fulcrums.”

Zac slowly nodded as he mulled over the information. It felt like they were getting close to the truth, although they were still missing some pieces of information.

“It would also explain why such a powerful person as Salvation wasn’t even on the Dao Ladder,” Zac added. “The array might have stolen all the Origin Dao around him, including his own.”

“Exactly,” Ogras said with some excitement in his face. “So what I am thinking is this; What if we used all this Origin Dao for ourselves?”

Zac’s heartbeat sped up in anticipation as he looked down at the fractal. Even if his improvement was extremely rapid it would take a lot of time to not only reach the peak with his six Dao Seeds but also fuse them into three Fragments.

The fusion itself was far harder than simply reaching the peak, but he was running out of time. But being bathed in a huge amount of Origin Dao might be the key to pushing his Dao further, allowing him to quickly evolve before the Dominators did something irreversible.

“So how would we go about getting our hands on the Origin Dao?” Zac asked with some glee on his face.

“Huh? I have no idea,” Ogras snorted. “We’ll need to do some research.”

Zac threw Ogras an even stare before shaking his head with annoyance.

“What about safety? Do you think the Dominators will be able to track that thing?” Zac asked.

Ogras frowned when he heard the news, and he looked down at the pouch fastened to his belt. But suddenly his eyes lit up again.

“I can throw his corpse into the Mystic Realm for now. That place is completely isolated, and there’s no way the dominators will be able to sense anything across dimensions. We can leisurely study the thing inside,” he said.

“Sounds like a plan,” Zac agreed with a nod. Creating a stable tunnel to the Mystic Realm was on his agenda in any case. “Keep me posted. Don’t try to keep that thing for yourself, there are a lot of people on our island who could benefit from that.”

“Fine. You ready to go?” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes.

The two kept as high a pace they could, considering the state of their bodies. But it still took one day longer to return to the small outpost town the Marshall Clan controlled. The guards looked at Zac and Ogras as though they were monsters when they arrived, but their captain still stepped forward with a shocking revelation about worldwide explosions caused by Salvation.

Zac finally understood what Salvation meant with his words in the end, but he knew there was nothing to be done about the situation. The two stepped through the teleporter back to Port Atwood, Zac’s mood greatly dampened by the realization that over a million people had died because he killed Salvation.

But the two didn’t even have time to digest the news of Salvation’s final revenge as Emily rushed them the moment they stepped out of the teleporter.

“They’ve found it!”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 319 - Sugar Daddy**

Zac was a still bit muddled from getting the news that Salvation had managed to kill so many people as a final act of lunacy that he didn’t quite understand what Emily was getting at.

“Who found what?” he asked while looking around.

“Mr. Trang and his squad finally managed to set up a base camp. It took some time because they needed to finish a quest, but they succeeded because of his Kraken. When they bought the teleporter there was already a public teleporter in range that we can’t see here. It’s probably the underworld,” Emily explained, the words tumbling out of her mouth.

The eyes of both Ogras and Zac lit up at the news. Getting to the underworld before the fire golems destroyed the whole thing was of the highest priority. For Ogras it was about resources, while Zac also considered the humanitarian component. But the exciting news were suddenly eclipsed by a snippet of information from Emily’s report.

“His WHAT?” Zac exclaimed, looking at Emily with some horror.

“His pet Kraken,” Emily said with a wide grin. “He’s named it Little Bau, which apparently means treasure in Vietnamese? I heard it’s crazy strong.”

Zac didn’t know how to react. He was reminded that the old fisherman’s class was something like a maritime beast tamer, but he didn’t expect him to snag such a scary thing. It also made him a bit leery about having an island kingdom if Kraken were swimming about in the depths. Would they start getting harassed by Lovecraftian nightmares in the near future?

“Anyway, how’s their situation?” Zac asked.

“We still don’t know, we’ve been waiting for you,” Emily explained. “Our teleporter is hidden because of your settings, so they shouldn’t know about us. And all the strong people here were occupied so we didn’t dare open it.”

“That’s good,” Zac said with a nod. “We can’t go right now though. My arm is broken in multiple places and Ogras is wounded as well. Salvation was even stronger than expected.”

“Wounded? That guy was that strong? He was only level 61 right?” Emily said with some confusion.

“Girl, he had an army of half a million puppets that exploded in our faces,” Ogras snorted. “It’s a miracle we’re even still alive. The underworld will still be there in a few days. Go punch some barghest or something.”

Emily looked disappointed at the news, but she soon nodded. Zac knew she wanted to get down there as quickly as possible as the underworld was the last hope she had of reuniting with her siblings. Unfortunately, he simply wasn’t in any condition to battle a supposed high- or even top-tier Incursion at the moment. So, for now, it was best to keep their presence hidden in case some unexpected dangers lurked on the other side of the teleporter.

“I’ll go train then,” she said as she hurried away.

“I need money, I’m flat broke,” Ogras suddenly said from the side.

“What?” Zac asked with some skepticism as he threw the demon a glance. “I’m not your sugar daddy.”

“My what? Anyway, between the Origin Array and the temporary gate to the Mystic Realm I barely have enough resources to even support myself,” the demon said. “Remember, we couldn’t bring Nexus Coins here either.”

“What do you need?” Zac finally said after a brief pause. “And isn’t your income from Calrin’s enough? The revenue should have exploded recently.”

Truthfully, Ogras had provided a lot of assistance not only in battle but also in management and setting a course for the force as a whole. If he needed some Nexus Coins it wasn’t the end of the world since Zac had hundreds of millions to his name, and even more in the form of treasures and Nexus Crystals.

“That money won’t arrive for a while yet,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “To begin with I need a hundred million to upgrade the temporary array into a permanent one. It’s especially important if we want to set up the hidden outpost to research Salvation.”

Zac sighed and transferred the money to Ogras, not bothering to investigate how much was actually needed. It truly felt like a worthy investment. They still didn’t know how The Great Redeemer tracked his targeted planets. Perhaps even killing his people wasn’t enough. Throwing anything with a connection to him into the Mystic Realm felt like the best solution for the moment.

“It’ll take a day or two to get the needed components from the blue one,” Ogras nodded. “What do you want to do afterward?”

“How long until you are back to fighting condition?” Zac asked.

“Three days at the maximum. That golden light tried to drag my soul out of my body, but it didn’t cause any real lasting damage,” the demon said after thinking it over.

“We’ll head down to the Underworld immediately after,” Zac said. “The other incursions aren’t critical, and it should take a while to whittle down the zombies to a manageable number.”

“Great,” Ogras said with naked greed on his face. “Can’t let those people below us wait for too long, and they can incidentally help me with my financial situation. I’ll handle the gate immediately.”

Zac snorted as he watched the demon get swallowed by shadows before he stepped into the teleporter again to head to his cultivation cave. As he expected he found his sister sitting with closed eyes on one of the mats he acquired in the hunt. She opened her eyes and smiled at him when he approached, before her eyes suddenly widened at the sight of his arm limply dangling to the side.

“You’re hurt?” she said as she hurried over to him.

“My ultimate skill is pretty taxing to my body, I need to get a bit stronger,” Zac shrugged.

“At least that lunatic is dealt with. But don’t take on more than you can handle,” she said and looked relieved when she realized he was in decent shape at least.

“I’m fine,” Zac smiled. “How are things on your end?”

“I’m making amazing progress in this cave!” she said, her eyes brightening up again. “I think I will enter the level ladder soon. And the other one I have already entered.”

“What?” Zac said with confusion as he opened up his ladder system.

The only one that made sense was the Dao Ladder since Kenzie didn’t possess a lot of wealth. She didn’t handle any of Port Atwood’s finances or fought beasts to level up, so she shouldn’t have a lot of Nexus Coins. So Zac quickly read through the ladder for her name, but he instead found another moniker.

### **[63 - Pretty Pretty Mega Kenzie]**

Zac wryly smiled as he saw the name he hadn’t heard in almost twenty years. It was the moniker Kenzie had given herself when she was four to match his Super Brother-Man alias. Her superhero costume had been a Halloween princess costume and a cape made from a blanket.

“I can’t believe you chose that name,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter,” Kenzie laughed. “I have already confirmed that these pseudonyms only count for Earth’s ladders, not on other things in the multiverse.”

Zac sighed in relief when he heard that since it had actually been a small worry of his own. He already knew there were ladders in the Tower of Eternity to both showcase historic records and the current status of trial takers. It would have been a bit embarrassing to have Super Brother-Man show up at such a place when he was looking for a strong force to join.

“What level is your Dao to get placed at the 63<sup>rd</sup> spot?” Zac asked with some curiosity.

“I have the Seed of Tinder at the late stage, and I recently got the Seed of Loam,” she said. “When I only had the late-stage seed I didn’t get a placement,”

“Seed of Loam?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

“It’s a basic elemental Seed,” Kenzie explained. “Jarvis wants me to get seeds for the four elements before evolving. So I have earth and fire now, but I still need water and air.”

Zac nodded, feeling it made sense since her class was Elementalist. He also felt a bit surprised how quickly people had advanced on the Dao Ladder. He knew he was still far ahead of the curve, but the fact that a Late-Stage seed wasn’t alone to enter the ladder was pretty surprising to him after hearing how hard it was for the demonkin soldiers to gain Dao Seeds back home. It was truly no surprise that The Great Redeemer wanted to get his hand on their Origin Dao.

“Loam doesn’t assist me in battle at the moment, but it does improve my healing and it helps the flower grow,” she added and nodded at the small lotus.

It hadn’t been that long since Zac saw it the last time, but it had actually grown quite a bit and now had the diameter of a dinner plate. But it still emitted almost no life-attuned energy, proving it was still in an extremely early stage. Who knew how many years it would take until it possessed the supreme energies of the one that the Abbot possessed.

“Have you heard anything from the battle with the Zombies?” Zac asked.

“I get an update every evening from Adran. They have started clashing a few days ago, but no big battle has taken place yet. They are essentially nipping at the Zombie’s sides as the horde pushes forward. They’re trying to split up the horde, but that requires killing the high-grade Zombies who keep the dumber ones in line, and those creatures are hidden in the middle of the horde,” Kenzie said.

Zac nodded, feeling more confident in his plan now that he knew the situation likely wouldn’t get too out of hand in the short run.

“I’m heading to the underworld next,” Zac said. “Will you stay here?”

“I have no interest in fighting with a bunch of fire golems,” Kenzie said with a wave of her hand. “I’d rather stay here for now.”

“Are you changing to a non-combat role?” Zac asked curiously since Kenzie rarely fought since she arrived at Port Atwood.

“No, but I don’t need as much practical battle experience as others thanks to Jeeves,” Kenzie said. “But I think I will get a secondary job when I reach E-Grade. Alchemist perhaps? It seems pretty fun.”

Zac’s eyes lit up when he heard her mention alchemy. That was one field where they were sorely lacking at the moment, and after hearing what Dao Seeds Kenzie possessed she felt perfect for the job. Fire and Earth could both help in concocting pills, and the precise energy control she got with the help of heir AI could boost her skills even further.

And no one would be happier than Zac if she focused on a non-combat profession since that would keep her out of harm’s way. As long as she still possessed a mage-like class she would be able to defend herself. Besides, Alchemists were always extremely wealthy and had great powerhouses protecting them. It would help secure her future in case something ever happened to him since skilled Alchemists were welcome no matter where they went.

“That sounds like a good idea. I did find that nice cauldron earlier, you can have it,” Zac said and immediately took it out and placed it in the cave. “Just tell me if you need anything to train your skills. Port Atwood could really use a skilled Alchemist.”

“Are you trying to turn your poor sister into a money printing machine?” Kenzie giggled. “In any case, it would have to wait a bit. I want to focus on my Dao while the Origin energies are still abundant in the atmosphere. Dao is the one thing that Jeeves can’t help with, so I need to do that one myself.”

“Ogras and I got our hands on something nice earlier which might come in handy,” Zac said and told her about the golden fractal. “Do you think Jeeves would be able to figure out a way to extract the energy?”

“It’s impossible to tell without looking at it,” Kenzie said with hesitation. “I need to borrow the crystals on formations and inscriptions as well to give Jeeves a better understanding of fractals.”

“Sure, just tell the Merit exchange I gave the go-ahead to browse them,” Zac agreed without hesitation.

The crystals had already been put into the merit exchange. But the cost of reading them could be waived for whoever Zac wished since they were his possessions. In fact, anyone could put information or skill crystals into the merit exchange, and any time the information was perused that individual would get most of the charged Merit.

It was a way to make people share their knowledge with the others of the force instead of hoarding it. Right now there were essentially no information or skill crystals except Zac's own though, but that would probably change as the years passed.

"The others will complain of nepotism," Kenzie said with a smile.

Zac only rolled his eyes, completely uncaring what the others thought.

"Oh, by the way, the Abbot's custodian came here and asked for you while you were gone," Kenzie said. "You should probably visit him before you leave for the underworld."

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**Chapter 320 - Karmic Ties**

"Abbot Everlasting Peace is looking for me?" Zac said with some worry. "Are they under attack?"

"I have no idea, but it doesn't seem like it," Kenzie said with some hesitation. "But it seemed pretty important."

Zac frowned thoughtfully as he wondered what the old monk could need from him at this juncture. If their mountain wasn't under attack by the undead the other most likely reason was that there was some issue related to Karma. That old man seemed to have a miraculous insight into that mysterious Dao, to the point that Zac suspected that the old man possessed an advanced Dao Fragment.

"There's no need to be so serious, just go over there and see what he wants. You'll get wrinkles if you keep scrunching up your face like that," Kenzie said with a shake of her head.

Zac snorted but he felt what she said made sense. There was no point in guessing when he could simply check the situation himself. But he first wanted to heal his arm in case the visit would lead to a battle with the zombies.

"I'll go tomorrow, I want my bones to properly set first," Zac said after some consideration. "Ogras will construct a stable gate to the Mystic Realm as soon as possible. We'll set up an outpost inside to keep sensitive matters, such as Salvation's things. You can go over whenever you feel ready to look into things."

"Sure," Kenzie said with some interest. "I wanted to see that place anyway. It's like we found an enormous space station."

"Stay inside the sealed area though, and have a handful of Valkyries always accompany you. There were some odd beasts inside that were almost evolved," Zac said with some worry.

He was afraid that his sister would do something drastic given the opportunity, and Zac would be down in the core of the planet fighting Fire Golems.

"I'm not stupid," Kenzie said with a roll of her eyes. "Remember I survived both the tutorial and living next to the Dead Zone for months."

"I just worry," Zac said with a smile.

Zac spent the rest of the day recuperating in the cave while consolidating his recent Dao improvements. Since he and Ogras rushed out of the Cradle of God he didn't have time to stop and get a sense of his improved seeds, but now that he was finally home he opened up his menu to take a proper look again.

**Heaviness (Peak): Strength +90, Endurance +25, Wisdom +5**

**Sanctuary (High): Endurance +25, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +25.**

He was pretty happy with the attributes both the seeds provided. Heaviness had gained mostly Strength as expected, but Sanctuary had changed a bit from giving mainly Wisdom to providing an even split between Endurance and Wisdom instead.

The situation also made him ponder what he should do in regards to his Dao. Yrial wanted him to get the fragments for Life and Death before evolving which would allow him to gain a class that was centered on that concept. However, he was far closer to getting a Fragment related to the Dao of Axe than one of Death as it stood. He still wasn't used to Rot and Hardness was still only at the Middle stage, making the road to get both to Peak pretty arduous.

Perhaps he could boost them if their plan with Salvation's array worked out, but Zac was more inclined to use that opportunity to form his first Fragment instead. Perhaps getting a Fragment of Axe would be enough to evolve both his classes, which would be for the best since he wasn't in a position to delay evolving for too long.

The problem was that he was stumbling in the dark since the System didn't provide any hints to what the results of his actions would be. If he got a fragment of axe and life and then evolved, would he veer away from his Life-death cycle to a simpler evolved axeman? Would that even be a problem?

He finally gave up trying to decide on the spot what to do. He would simply have to see how things progressed and take things one step at a time. Worrying about fragments was a bit premature. He didn't only need to improve his seeds to the peak but also master them to the point that he would be able to fuse them into something that made sense.

When Zac woke up the next day he could move his arm again, though it was still a bit tender. Between his enormous pool of Vitality and expensive pills, he was like a troll from the old tales, regenerating at monstrous speeds.

The morning was spent on some more meditation before he got up and left for the teleporter after saying goodbye to his sister. He wasn't planning on bringing anyone to Mount Everlasting Peace, and he soon found himself at the foot of the sacred mountain. It wasn't the first time seeing the thousands of characters inscribed into the mountain walls, but he was still awed by the sight.

Not much had changed in the months since he came here last time, and the normalcy of the atmosphere was a bit surreal in of itself. One difference though was that no people were staying at the foot of the mountain like the last time. People had likely left the area when the undead horde started spreading, turning this place into an isolated pocket with death all around.

Even the monks were all but missing, leaving the fields completely untended. The only sign that the mountain was still populated were the two monks who sat in meditation a few meters away from the teleporter. They woke up from Zac's arrival, and he nodded at them before he glanced in the direction of the core of the Dead Zone.

It felt like there was an unseen war taking place as a thick wall of miasma rose into the skies a few kilometers away. The line of demarcation was much clearer now compared to before, making Zac believe the Undead might have erected some unholy beacons outside to combat the purification of the runes on the mountain.

The two young monks stepped forward and told Zac that the Abbot was waiting in his courtyard and directed him toward the summit. Zac followed in tow, ascending the same set of stairs as the last time. This time the pressure was almost negligible, perhaps since Zac had a naturally stronger grasp of his Dao.

They soon reached the peak and Zac truly started to worry when he saw that the temple buildings were devoid of monks as well. A sense of wrongness crept into Zac's heart as he looked around, trying to figure out just what was going on.

"Where is everyone?" Zac asked the monks, who looked slightly troubled. "Did the undead attack?"

"The Abbot will explain everything," one of the two said. "But our disciple brothers are fine."

Zac slowly nodded, as he kept walking toward the small courtyard in the back of the mountain. But he stopped in his tracks the moment he reached the square in front of Abbot Everlasting Peace's home.

Thousands of monks sat silently with closed eyes, not one of them moving a muscle. They were so still that Zac almost would have thought them statues if it wasn't for the terrifying amount of Cosmic Energy that swirled around them, infusing some enormous newly added runes on the ground.

The runes were Sanskrit just as the ones on the mountain walls, but the power they emitted was far beyond anything he sensed from those covering the mountain. Zac still couldn't read the script, but he guessed it was some Buddhist Sutra functioning as an Array.

Cosmic Energy wasn't the only thing that the air was ripe with. Mysterious energy that made the fractal of **[Mental Fortress]** tingle was also everywhere. It was as though the monks had combined not only their energy but also their Dao for some unknown reason.

Zac's heartbeat sped up from feeling the power that was contained in the runes as he walked toward the Abbot's courtyard. Was the monastery planning to launch some massive strike at the undead, and needed his help to stabilize the situation?

Various possibilities ran through Zac's head as he pushed open the large doors to find the old monk from last time standing inside. It was the old man who had accompanied him up the stairs and given him some pointers, but he had a complicated expression when he saw Zac enter.

At first he smiled and bowed, and it seemed as though he was about to utter a greeting. But he suddenly looked down again, and if Zac didn't know better he would have thought that he saw shame on the old man's face.

Instead, the old man indicated for Zac to head further in, and Zac complied with some confusion in his heart. His eyes immediately turned to the pond, but to his surprise the huge lotus was gone. He quickly looked around and saw Abbot Everlasting Peace sit on a prayer mat under an old tree on the other side of the pond with a pot of tea by his side.

Zac flashed over to the Abbot and breathed out in relief when he saw that he was fine. The horrifying wound in his chest was gone, and the old man was brimming with vitality even though he still looked quite old.

"This penniless monk is happy to see that benefactor could arrive in time," the old man said with a kindly smile as he indicated for Zac to sit down.

"It is good to see you as well," Zac said, accepting the cup of tea the Abbot poured him.

“This is a wild tea that grew on our sister mountain before the world changed,” Everlasting Peace said as he took a small sip with contentment in his eyes. “It was gifted to this penniless monk by a Daoist who lived in seclusion there. He was a great scholar, but this one fears he fell during the Tutorial.”

Zac wasn't sure what the old man was getting at, so he simply sipped the tea as while silently listening. It was unlike any tea that Zac had ever drunk before, with a heavy and bitter taste. It was still quite delicious, but Zac was mostly surprised by the fact that there was a smidgeon of Cosmic Energy in the tea.

It wasn't anywhere near what any true spiritual tea would contain, and it was impossible to gain any strength from it. But it was still pretty shocking considering it was something that came from the old Earth, and perhaps it was an indication that magic might actually have existed even before the integration.

“These cups were gifted our mountain three hundred years ago by the local lord. He came to pray to Buddha for a son after years of being unable to conceive a child. When his wish came true he returned with ten chests of gold and these cups that were given to him by a great scholar from the capital,” the Abbot continued.

“This monastery has lived side by side with the secular world for over a thousand years, spreading the word of Buddha, and sowing seeds of karma. This poor monk hopes that we have left the world a better place than before. But just as day inevitably gives way to night, so must Karma eventually be severed.”

“Severed?” Zac repeated with a frown. “What's going on? Are the undead mounting an attack?”

“Benefactor needs not to worry. This penniless monk is simply rambling, remembering a lost era. The Yin Creatures are of no threat to us,” The abbot said as he finished his cup of tea and stood up. “This penniless monk invited benefactor to witness.”

“Witness what?” Zac said, his confusion only growing as he drank the last of the tea and followed the old man who was walking toward the exit.

The old monk had waited while the two conversed, and he silently opened the gates to let Zac and the abbot exit. The two stopped right outside the gates, and for the first time since Zac arrived, he saw the monks open their eyes.

“Amithaba, it is time,” the Abbot said with a sad smile as he looked at the sea of monks.

No one said a word, but power immediately surged from the thousands of people and a pillar of light suddenly shot into the sky from the runes on the ground. It almost looked like the light of an incursion, but enormous lines Sanskrit floated in concentric circles around it.

Zac couldn't believe what he was seeing. The pillar was unlike anything he had witnessed before. Just what had these monks accomplished? It was as though they had invented their very own way of utilizing Cosmic Energy, turning it into something that Zac could only call Buddhist Energy. It gave off a holy and stable feeling, but it was clearly different from the energy of Sui or his Divine Crystals.

A golden halo suddenly erupted with boundless life force behind Abbot Everlasting Peace, and Zac actually had to take a step back with wide eyes. The power that the abbot emitted was almost at the same level as Inevitability, though it was completely different. It was soft and elusive, and it felt as though it contained endless mysteries.

Oddly enough the power that the old monk emitted wasn't didn't cause danger sense to go off in the slightest. Zac could usually feel at least something unless the

disparity between himself and the other party was too great. Did the Abbot's Karmic powers obscure his perception awarded from his high Luck?

His thoughts suddenly were interrupted as a silver cloud appeared inside the pillar as though it had been teleported. One moment the pillar was empty, and the next the cloud was there as it had always been present.

Zac's heart immediately started to beat wildly as he realized that there was someone inside the cloud. He couldn't sense the slightest ripple of energy, but Zac could barely discern the shape of a person slightly moving inside. Worse yet was that Zac's instincts screamed at him that whoever was summoned was far beyond what he could handle.

The shocking turn of events made Zac unsure what to believe even to the point that he took out **[Verun's Bite]** to get ready for a desperate struggle. His confusion only grew when the old abbot suddenly got down on his knees and bowed down until his forehead touched the ground toward the silver cloud.

"Disciple greets master."

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 321 - Severing Karma**

Zac wasn't sure what to think when seeing the old man getting down on his knees, but he knew that whoever was inside the silver cloud wasn't a simple character. However, panic started to set in when he made a horrible connection. Between the silver haze and having disciples on newly integrated planets there was one clear contender of who hid within the haze - The Great Redeemer.

Was it possible that this secluded monastery was yet another seed planted by the Great Redeemer long ago, just like the Medhin Clan and the Dominators? Had they been biding their time all this while until they finally found the means to summon their lord?

Fury started to build in Zac's heart as he thought about the betrayal. Had these seemingly altruistic monks sacrificed the whole world for their selfish gain? The pained face of the old monk once again flashed in his mind before his eyes turned to his trusty axe in his hand.

If this truly was the arrival of the Great Redeemer things might already be over and their planet doomed. But should he unleash **[Deforestation]** in a final act of defiance? Perhaps it would even buy time for his transfer talisman to complete its activation. The token he got from Yrial was still in his possession, and it might allow him to flee even the seemingly hopeless situation in front of him.

But he knew it took over ten seconds to activate it, so the plan felt like a long shot. But even if it worked, then what? He would be stranded god knows where, while leaving his friends and family behind. He wouldn't be able to learn of their fates until he managed to get back to Earth, and that in of itself would be a form of torture. But it was better to kill some traitors than simply giving up.

Strangely enough, he was unable to act on his idea. It was as though he had a mental block, making him incapable to turn thoughts into action. He wasn't restrained or under hypnosis, yet his arm was unable to swing his axe at the monks around him.

*"Decisiveness can lead to greatness, but it can also lead to ruin. Decisiveness will turn to foolishness unless you first make sure your path is true"* a voice suddenly

resounded in his head, making Zac immediately turn his eyes to the figure within the portal again.

The voice had spoken straight into his mind rather than out loud, but Zac breathed out in relief when he heard it. The reason for his relief was very simple; the voice didn't belong to The Great Redeemer.

It was likely that his plan had been seen through by this person and somehow stopped through unknown means. So it was both with anticipation and trepidation he saw the figure slowly emerge from the golden pillar. But reality sometimes didn't conform to imagination and Zac couldn't stop himself from gawking in shock when he saw the true form of the mysterious powerhouse.

The same could be said about most of the monks in the square, as they threw each other small questioning glances, confusion clear on their faces. It was not a rugged warrior like Greatest that stepped out of the light, nor was it a sage monk. It was rather a fat little child only wearing a thick bead necklace and a pair of silver silk pants.

He looked mostly human apart from his earlobes who dangled all the way down to his shoulders and a set of mercurial silver eyes. He was also completely bald, with a thin line of silver fractals starting between his brows and going back over his head.

Zac's first thought was that something had gone wrong with the summoning, but he soon realized that wasn't the case. The child didn't seem the slightest surprised to be here, and the fact that he was actually floating in the air was quite telling that he wasn't some random kid ripped through space. Thea had already told him that flying was the mark of the D-Rank, so the kid in front of him was at least that powerful.

Suddenly he remembered the comforting words of Calrin when Emily was dismayed about her youthful appearance. Was this kid some supreme existence that had was so skilled that he embarked on the path of cultivation early? The fat child threw Zac a knowing wink when he saw the confusion on his face.

*"Don't be alarmed. I simply saw the future you contemplated with the axe in your hand and removed it from the realm of possibility,"* the little cherub once again spoke in his mind before turning to the Abbot.

"No need for such formalities child," the kid said with a sweet voice.

Oddly enough it was the voice of an adult, though it was quite high for a male, and Zac could immediately confirm the voice in his head was the same as the one that exited the child's mouth. The Abbot hurriedly got to his feet, completely unflustered about the odd appearance of his apparent master. Zac meanwhile had trouble digesting the information he received mentally.

The child said that it had removed a possible future as though it was nothing special. If one was able to change the future like that, what couldn't he do? Just what kind of monster had the Abbot summoned?

"This penniless monk is called Everlasting Peace, may I ask Master's name?" the abbot said, only increasing Zac's confusion as he stood on the sidelines. Did they not know each other?

"I am the 84<sup>th</sup> incarnation of the Lotus Emperor. Some call me 84<sup>th</sup> Fatty or Lord 84<sup>th</sup> depending on mood and karmic ties," the child said with a laugh as he looked at the mountain. "How fascinating."

The next moment reality shifted and everyone found themselves at the foot of the mountain, in front of the steps leading up to the summit. Zac didn't understand how he got there since it was instantaneous and it felt as though he had always stood there somehow, making it seem like his past had changed.

“Spirit consecrated through faith,” the child muttered before turning away from the mountain. “In any case. Have you prepared yourself?”

“Disciple is ready,” the Abbot said with a somber expression. “Disciple’s fellow monks have been informed as well.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but just what is going on?” Zac finally interjected, unable to sit on the sidelines any longer.

The child looked over at Zac, and after a brief pause smiled.

“When I reached the peak of my power I decided to split my soul into one hundred thousand pieces and enter those pieces into Samsara,” the small child said. “It birthed 100 000 incarnations without any recollection of their true self. Only when reaching high enough power will our memories return. I was the 84<sup>th</sup> incarnation to regain its memories.”

The explanation wasn’t the one Zac was asking for, but his brows still rose in shock when he understood the implications of what the child said. Doing such a crazy thing must require not only enormous power but also great conviction. And if this powerful person was just a small part of his true self, just how powerful was the true Lotus Emperor?

“Isn’t it risky? What if a part of you dies before regaining your memories?” Zac asked, curiosity overcoming the oddity of the situation.

“To understand the Karmic cycle is to understand all parts of life, including death. Through walking one hundred thousand paths I will better understand the universe, and through the universe better understand the self. If an incarnation dies so will that part of me die,” the child explained with equanimity. “Such is the price of enlightenment.”

“It is the fault of this penniless monk. This one was not sure whether he was allowed to say anything before teacher arrived,” Abbot Everlasting Peace explained, understanding what Zac was truly asking about. “I wanted you to understand what transpired here today. Master has come to take me and my fellow monks away.”

“Take you away?” Zac dumbly repeated.

It turned out it was a farewell rather than a betrayal. But Zac suddenly realized the implications of what the old man was saying.

“You’re not staying for the battle against the undead or the other incursions?” Zac probed, some dissatisfaction creeping into his voice.

He had been working his ass off to protect Earth and needed all the help he could get if they wanted to save their planet. The Abbot was likely the strongest person amongst the humans apart from himself due to his high-tiered Dao, and he possesses mysterious insight into Karma that could greatly assist their efforts.

The fact that he decided to take his monks and leave Earth in the moment of its need was almost as great a blow as a true betrayal. He finally understood the look of the old monk who had given him pointers at the stairs, and a frown started forming on his face.

“You mentioned severing Karma. You’re going to cut and run when the undead hordes are destroying everything in its path like locusts, and when we face threats from all directions? I hoped you would join the efforts to protect our home when you had healed up,” Zac continued, but suddenly he realized something and looked at the little child floating next to them.

“Don’t look at me,” the child said with a shake of his head. “I could kick out the incursions, but that would only create a worse future for your planet.”

Zac didn’t say anything, but his face must have conveyed his skepticism.

“Your friend and I walk the same path of Karma, which is extremely rare in the Multiverse. That is how we found each other. Through the boundless Dao, our paths converged and a Karmic connection was formed. I showed him how to create this gate through that link,” Lord 84<sup>th</sup> explained. “But I am not without enemies. No one would reach any great heights without creating some enmities. Resources are limited after all.”

“Karmic Cultivators are extremely hard to kill because of our ability to see, and to a certain extent tamper with, the great tapestry of fate. But our weakness is that we cannot allow our Karma to get entangled with too many people.”

“I can see the threat you’re facing,” the child continued, and to Zac’s surprise a slightly hazy picture of the Great Redeemer materialized. “This one utilizes a rudimentary method to control Karmic ties to locate your planet. I could easily cut those ties, but by doing so I would get billions of entanglements with the living beings living on this tiny planet.”

“My enemies would eventually find out, and those people are all far stronger than this man,” the child continued. “They would capture everyone on this planet and torture your souls for eternity just to cause trouble to my cultivation.”

“Is there nothing to be done, master?” Abbot Everlasting Peace suddenly interjected. “Completely severing Karma has proven troublesome for this talentless monk. Perhaps if we could provide my friend with some small assistance this poor monk would be able to completely move forward with a pure heart.”

Zac finally realized the true reason why the Abbot had asked for his presence. He likely felt bad about leaving Earth and wanted to get some small assistance from his master. Zac was by far the strongest person, so having him here would be the best option to improve Earth’s fighting chance.

The child seemed to mull it over for a few seconds before slowly nodded and pointed at the Abbot’s forehead. The old man closed his eyes for a few seconds before his eyes opened again with some excitement as he turned toward Zac.

“If benefactor would be so kind as to lend his hand for a second?” the old man said before grabbing it.

A burst of odd energy suddenly entered Zac’s body, and the sky was suddenly filled with odd lines in all kinds of colors. There were golden lines of various thickness that reached toward each of the monks, and a silver one swirling around Lord 84<sup>th</sup> like a living snake. There were also four black pillars reaching into the sky in the distance, looking like sickly tears in space.

Three of them were bunched together to the north, whereas one was off by itself far on the horizon.

“This penniless monk is temporarily sharing his vision with benefactor,” the old man explained. “The lines are the ties of Karma. The four sinister lines are connections to the man that master conjured. There was a fifth one but I sense that you are responsible for its severance.”

“I killed Salvation a week ago. He had somehow become the in-name disciple of The Great Redeemer,” Zac said with a nod.

“Something in his possession is still calling for its master,” the old man said and indicated the line by itself. “Taking it into a separate space will not work. The line will simply lead to the entrance.”

Zac didn’t understand how the old man could know of his plan, but he rather focused on the message.

“What should we do? Destroy everything in his possession?” Zac asked.

“That will not help either,” the old man said with a shake of his head. “But this penniless monk now has a way.”

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### **Chapter 322 - Convergence of Fate**

Considering the circumstances Zac still felt it was extremely lucky that he went back to the monastery in time. If they went by their original plan to simply study Salvation’s belongings inside the Mystic Realm outpost they would have entered a state of false security while The Great Redeemer was bearing down on them. However, that still left the issue of actually destroying the black pillar.

The old man suddenly produced a small fruit knife from his sleeve, and the next moment the golden ribbons in the air started to flutter wildly. The golden light from the monks all poured into the knife, filling it with a massive amount of the unfamiliar power.

Both the monks and the Abbot himself looked extremely drained after, and a few of the younger ones even looked ready to keel over from the expenditure. The amount that the Abbot personally infused was just shocking, and Zac felt it was even more energy than what his [Infernal Axe] contained.

“Master imparted me with a skill that allowed me to condense the will of us all into an item. It contains our hope for this planet and its people. Bring it next to the item and the rest will become apparent,” Abbot Everlasting Peace explained. “The other three ties can be severed the same way as the last one.”

Zac looked down at the small knife that the old monk gifted him, and if it wasn’t for the special sight temporarily given him he would never have guessed it contained such massive power. It truly was a simple fruit knife without a single fractal, but if he figured out a way to turn the energy into a weapon he might even be able to kill one of the Dominators with it.

“This one truly wished he could do more, but the result of the last battle was largely due to this mountain, and it’s power is not endless,” the Abbot sighed. “This is the limit of what this penniless monk can do. I am truly ashamed.”

“Don’t be. This gift is perfect,” Zac said as he stowed away the knife. “Without this item all our efforts might have been for nothing.”

“This old man also spent the past month to divine the fate of this planet. I believe it might be of importance to benefactor,” the old monk added. “The fate many forces on Earth have converged on the very same hidden realm that benefactor has connections to. This old monk believe-”

“That is sufficient,” the child suddenly interjected, cutting the old man short. “Exposing heaven’s secrets does not come without a price. You are yet not strong enough to divulge more than that without permanent ramifications.”

“That’s enough,” Zac hurriedly agreed, not wanting to turn the old man crippled. “I will look into it.”

The news came like lightning out of the blue. The hidden realm likely referred to the mystic realm. But how could any other forces have connections to that realm? And which forces?

It also begged the question of what made people so interested in that place. It was truly a very odd Mystic Realm, but the energy inside wasn’t amazing enough to

indicate there being some supreme treasure inside. And even if there was something of great value inside, how would he even go about seizing it for himself?

The forces staying on Earth weren't the only ones he would have to fight with if he entered the fray inside. There was also the natives who were far too strong to contend with for the current Zac. If one added the Dominators and the stronger Incursions into the mix the whole thing turned into a deathtrap.

"We must leave now, I should not stay in this sector for much longer," Lord 84<sup>th</sup> said before turning to Zac. "If fate wills it, you two will meet again."

The floating child Buddhist pointed at the mountain next, and it quickly phased out of existence. Zac looked at the empty space with wide eyes before turning back toward the mysterious expert. But not only were Lord 84<sup>th</sup> and the Abbot gone, but so were all the other monks.

*"I recommend you keeping my identity to yourself to avoid any ties of Karma between your planet and me,"* Lord 84<sup>th</sup> voice echoed in his mind.

Zac didn't even have time to react to the disappearances before finding himself standing in the middle of his courtyard, looking around with confusion. It almost felt as though everything had been a dream, but when he opened the teleportation screen he saw that Mount Everlasting Peace was gone from the list.

A thought suddenly struck him, and he opened up the Dao Ladder to see if it had changed. Abbot Everlasting Peace was gone as he suspected, putting him in the first position. Better yet, the change actually wasn't only good for his vanity, but it brought real benefits. When Zac opened his status screen he noticed that he had gotten his first Limited Title.

**[Frontrunner [Limited]: Maintain the first position on all three ladders in world. Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%.]**

From the wording it seemed like he would hold the title for as long as he held the first position, which meant the title was secure at least in the short run. The only way someone would pass him at the moment was if he got stalled because he aimed for high-rarity classes, allowing others to evolve much quicker than him.

The additional Attribute effect pushed the efficiency to 140%. It was a huge difference compared to normal cultivators, and it made his overtuned attributes even crazier. The effect would easily nullify any boost wrought by cultivation manuals when he encountered experts from the multiverse in the future.

It was still somewhat of an empty feeling to receive these gains as he only got them because the abbot left Earth rather than through his own effort. But Zac shook his head to snap out of it. Now was not the time to get picky about the power-ups. He hurriedly left his courtyard and teleported over to Mystic Island. Every second that the karmic link persisted was a threat to those around him.

Soon enough he reached the core of the island and found Ogras standing some distance from the spatial cracks with a large chest by his side. The chest was wide open and housed dozens of metallic stakes full of fractals, likely the array flags needed to stabilize a path to the Mystic Realm.

The demon immediately noticed Zac's arrival and gave him a questioning look.

"Making sure your money gets used properly?" Ogras jested when he saw Zac hurry over.

"I wish I had that much free time," Zac sighed before retelling his experience with the Abbot, though he didn't mention the identity of Lord 84<sup>th</sup> as instructed.

"I have never heard of such a thing, but he sounds extremely powerful. Cultivation through rebirth," Ogras mumbled before throwing Zac a weird look. "How

odd that a baby planet not only birthed a monster like you but a second oddity like that old monk. I can't remember a single person from my planet ever gaining insight into the Dao of Karma, yet that old goat did it within a month of getting integrated."

Zac nodded in agreement. Stranger yet, it felt like the Abbot wasn't the only one. Salvation would be completely unstoppable on Earth unless Zac was there to thwart him, showcasing a power far beyond what was normal for his level. And there was Billy with his superhuman power and the primordial aura he emitted when he changed form. And those were only the ones he knew of.

Perhaps there were even more oddities that simply matured a bit slower and couldn't be found on the ladder yet.

"So what do you think about what the prophecy?" Zac asked.

"We know too little to be sure what's hidden inside the Mystic Realm. But if multiple forces are currently invested in that place it can only mean that our entrance isn't the only one. Things might get extremely chaotic soon, which might be our only chance. Perhaps we can fish in muddy waters and snatch the benefits for ourselves," Ogras mused.

"I've been thinking about it. The Underworld Incursion is fire-attuned, which might be troublesome for you. It might be better if you stay here and investigate. I could bring Verana instead to test her out down there," Zac ventured.

Ogras hesitated for a bit before he reluctantly nodded.

"You better not hoard all the goodies down there if I do this for you," he muttered. "You're going to the treasure caves and I'm stuck wandering those spooky halls where E-Grade monsters might be lurking around every corner. And don't give those beast maniacs too many benefits, they have just joined and haven't contributed anything."

"I'll set aside anything that looks like it might benefit you," Zac said with a snort before taking out the small golden dagger. "Are you ready?"

Ogras nodded and threw out the mangled corpse of Salvation.

"I still haven't touched anything in his Cosmos Sack yet. How do you know which item is sharing our position?" Ogras asked.

"No idea," Zac said a bit sheepishly as he held the cutter. "The Abbot said things would become apparent."

"He wasn't messing with you by any chance?" Ogras said as he skeptically looked at the small fruit knife in Zac's hand.

Zac was about to open the floor to suggestions when the knife suddenly burst into an almost blinding light reminiscent of the golden ribbons that Zac had seen. He had to cover his eyes for a second while Ogras shied away as he shrouded himself in layers of shadows.

"What the—" the demon shouted, but as soon as the knife burst into light the blinding radiance disappeared.

But a golden luster was still circling the knife as it hummed with power, and Salvations' Cosmos Sack was actually humming with it. Zac walked over to see what was going on, and when he spread his awareness into the sack he immediately spotted the thing that was causing the connection.

It wasn't the golden fractal as Zac had expected, but rather a small nondescript token that seemed to be made from stone. There were no fractals on it and no power emanated from it either when he took it out from the pouch. Zac would have thought it was a simple memento if it wasn't marked by the knife.

"What now?" Zac asked, looking over to Ogras.

“How would I know? Try stabbing it, that usually solves most of my problems,” Ogras shrugged, still keeping a respectful distance.

Zac didn't have any better idea, so he placed the token on a stone before stabbing down at it with the fruit knife. He didn't use a lot of his power, but the stab still contained enough force to turn a normal stone to dust. But his swing was stopped short the moment it hit the stone and not a single mark was left on the surface, proving it was no ordinary stone.

The knife suddenly shattered, making Zac's eyes widen in alarm, but the next moment a flood of golden light poured into the token until it cracked with a loud snap. A hurricane of energies erupted from the stone, throwing Zac a dozen meters away and almost pushed him into the zone with spatial tears. Zac grunted as he got to his feet, but he froze when he spotted a familiar figure within the storm of energies that the token unleashed.

It was The Great Redeemer.

Two people floated in space, seemingly unbothered by the fact that there was no oxygen to breathe. They were looking down at a planet with two massive continents separated by a vast singular ocean. But only they knew what they were seeing as their eyes sparkled with enigmatic light.

“Such a grand convergence of fate,” Lord 84<sup>th</sup> said with some wonder. “But I wonder if it is orchestrated or the will of the heavens?”

The other monks and the mountain had already been stowed away and missed out on the spacewalk. Even the Abbot had been shocked to find that his master housed a whole world in his heart where his disciples resided.

It was where he would live as well for the foreseeable future, hidden away from all pain and suffering of the mortal world to ponder upon the mysteries of the universe. To his aide were senior monks who had walked the path for thousands of years and treasures that most could only dream of. But even though such an opportunity had presented itself he couldn't help but feel unreconciled.

“Is there nothing this poor monk can do to help? Is severing Karma truly the only path?” Abbot Everlasting Peace sighed from the side as he looked down on the planet.

“You should understand the price of meddling with karma by now,” Lord 84<sup>th</sup> said as he pointedly looked at the old man's arm that was limply hanging to the side. “There is nothing you can do.”

But the Abbot looked resolute even though divulging the path to his young friend had cost him the use of his arm.

“What is the point of enlightenment if one cannot use it for saving others?” he retorted.

Lord 84<sup>th</sup> shook his head as he looked into the distance.

“You remind me of my senior brother. He walked the path you are speaking of, taking on the world's sorrows. That path is wrought with suffering, the sea of bitterness has no bounds. And who knows if there is even salvation at the end of the road? Is it truly worth it?” the little master said with sorrow in his eyes.

“But if this useless monk doesn't step through the gates of hell, who will?”

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### Chapter 323 - Sowing Grudges

Even though Zac was placed face to face with the largest threat to Earth he didn't panic. The reason was that The Great Redeemer was obviously not there in person. With his hazy appearance it was clear it was a projection or a splinter of his soul like the one inside Salvation's protective talisman. He had already survived a hologram of this man before, and that was when he was far weaker than now.

But after observing the man for a second Zac felt that the former was more likely than the latter. While the man who appeared from destroying the token was clearly The Great Redeemer, so was it also clear that he looked a lot older than the man Zac saw during the hunt.

The version of the Redeemer that saved Salvation looked to be around Zac's own age or even younger, a man in the prime of his life. But the figure currently glaring at Zac and Ogras was a lot older, looking like someone in his fifties or sixties. That wasn't the only difference as a large scar ran across his face, and the wound contained some sort of sinister energy. It seemed like the result of an extremely powerful attack, one that couldn't be easily healed.

Zac knew there was only one reason that a cultivator would look this old. There was a large difference to how aging worked with cultivators compared to mortals. Most of one's lifespan was spent looking pretty young and when you evolved further you gained enough control to change one's apparent age without using any skill. At the same time, you would be at peak physical capacity all the while.

It was only when one was truly closing in on the end of one's lifespan would one begin to age physically, and most races even lost attributes as the body degraded. The undead was one exception to this rule, as they became stronger as they lost their sanity due to the degradation in their minds.

That meant that the Great Redeemer was nearing the end of his life, and might be dead in just a hundred years unless he managed to break through his current bottleneck and improve his race once again. It was no wonder he had concocted such a cumbersome method to harvest new worlds that took thousands of years; he was out of options and running out of time.

"The two of you are not mine, and you have broken my beacon," the Great Redeemer said with a raspy voice as he looked back and forth between Zac and Ogras. "It looks like you know of my grand design."

Zac was about to answer, but Ogras quickly motioned for him to be quiet as a muzzle of shadows appeared around his mouth.

"Clever child. A bit unusual for your race," the man snickered with a sinister light in his eyes. "But it will not be enough. Those who try to cut my lifeline will inevitably be condemned to a lifetime of suffering. If I cannot find you now then I will find you a hundred years later."

The next moment the projection disappeared, leaving the two alone by the Mystic Realm.

"That was close," the demon muttered as he put away Salvation again.

"Why didn't you want me to speak with him?" Zac asked.

"A precaution, and it looks like I was right. That man was truly here in person this time, who knows what means he possesses," the demon explained. "He obviously has some insight into Karma, and I don't think he would do something so taxing as to project himself all the way here without reason. He was likely trying to form a new Karmic connection with us."

Understanding dawned in Zac's eyes, and he once again felt lucky to have the demon by his side.

"What about his threat? Do you really think he will try to find us in a hundred years?" Zac asked with some skepticism. "Even if we lose our protection from the System we wouldn't be that easy to find in the multiverse."

"Hmm," Ogras mused. "Probably?"

"What, really? He would be that petty?" Zac blurted.

"Well, he seems to be at the end of his line. If he fails his promotion because of us he might as well kill us as revenge before he passes on, right? And if he manages to evolve in spite of us he might still go for us to nip any potential revenge in the bud, or just because he can," Ogras said. "It's pretty common. Keeping grudges in one's heart is detrimental to concentration and can even negatively impact one's cultivation. And he does not look like the person who will just let go of his grudges."

Zac remembered the crystal about Galvarion he read in Thea's Library. That man had been the same. The moment he broke through to the next stage he would start a round of revenge against everyone that had slighted him while he was weak. Perhaps it was not only due to being unforgiving but also to clear his mind of any demons that might haunt him as he pushed toward new heights.

"So even if we defeat the Dominators he will still be a threat?" Zac asked.

"There is always a threat," Ogras laughed. "If not him then some other bastard that either has what you need or needs what you have. That is what it is to be alive. But it would at least buy us 100 years to get stronger. Don't dwell too much on it."

"You're right," Zac nodded, "No point in taking his words to heart when there's a century to go."

"Well sure, but it might also be another ploy by him. Why would he expose his plans like that like some second-rate villain? He seems more calculating than that. Perhaps he wants us to obsess about the looming threat of his arrival to the point that we actually form a connection with him that way," Ogras said.

"Is that even possible?" Zac asked after a brief pause.

"No idea, Karmic Cultivators are pretty secretive about what they can and cannot do. It's best to focus on the tasks at hand anyway. What will be will be," Ogras said and walked over to the chest with the array flags. "For now let's squeeze that asshole's disciple for all benefits we can get."

"I've asked my sister to look into a way of getting the Origin Dao inside the fractal. She should arrive when the gate is stabilized. If you're in the area help her out if you're able to," Zac said, drawing a surprised look from the demon.

"What does that lass know about arrays? She's an Elemental Mage," he said with confusion.

"She's pretty good with energy control and she has started looking into inscriptions and arrays lately. Besides, we don't have any other experts in that area, and I trust her. Unless you want me to ask around with the Tal-Eladar?" Zac explained.

"Don't bring those beasts into the mix. We should keep the Origin Dao for a small circle to maximize our gains," Ogras said.

Zac snorted, knowing he was mostly thinking about his own benefits. However, he did agree with keeping the Dao for a small group. He did not know the effect of the Origin Dao, but he didn't want to dilute it if it was anything like the Dao impartment he got from Yrial.

“Well, I’ll help the girl out as best as I can while I look into what might be hiding inside this place,” Ogras said as he looked at the crack in the air in the distance. “When are you leaving?”

“My arm is mostly fine, but I need at least another day to get in fighting condition,” Zac said before he left the demon to set up the array.

Zac spent the next day catching up on everything that had happened while he had fought the Incursions and Salvations while he planned his foray into the underworld. The war with the Zombie hordes was proceeding as expected, but it was clear that the Undead Empire did not care about the braindead Zombies they unleashed on the world.

It seemed as though there were surprisingly few elite zombies, and foreign undead like the Corpse Golems and specters were nowhere in sight. Ilvere posited in a report that he believed that the Undead Empire was simply using the hordes as sacrifices to spread Miasma.

Every place they passed essentially turned into a Dead Zone, increasing the area that was under their control. It wouldn’t surprise Zac if they started expanding in other directions as well now that the threat of the monastery with their purifying powers was gone. Zac frowned as he read the reports, once again feeling how strapped for time they were.

Emily had already caused a storm in Port Atwood to get the expedition to the underworld ready at the fastest speed, and while she held no official position most knew that she lived in the restricted area. So many took an order from her as an order from Zac himself, apart from the true core of Port Atwood. Zac didn’t bother stopping it since it was the first and only time she had borrowed his authority like this, and her orders were in line with his wishes.

Both soldiers and non-combat classes stood at the ready to quickly set up a base camp in the underworld. It would both extract the riches of the area while acting as a stronghold in the fight against the underworld incursion. Since everything was dealt with at the home front Zac instead headed over to the Tal-Eladar to get some help.

He might be enough to conquer the Incursion alone, but they didn’t know exactly how strong the invaders were. Besides, it had proven extremely effective to have two powerhouses in the strike squad. Zac couldn’t protect everyone all the time, and Ogras had been instrumental in keeping casualties at the minimum.

A maid immediately led Zac to a sprawling mansion when Zac arrived through the teleporter, which was Verana’s private manor. The beast tamer sat and enjoyed the breeze as she had Grub in her lap while Lulu lay snoozing to the side. When the fat little beast noticed Zac’s arrival it roused itself and made a gurgling sound that he supposed was meant to be threatening.

“What brings young master here today?” Verana asked as she petted Grub to calm him down. “I heard about your battle with the one called Salvation. Is that demon talking you into removing the competition before the war is even won?”

“The integration turned Salvation crazy. He killed over a million of our own people before I stopped him,” Zac explained.

He still hadn’t told her about the looming threat of the Great Redeemer, but he felt that it still wasn’t time to divulge that. That topic would instead be broached when the situation on Earth had stabilized somewhat.

“More importantly, I require your assistance,” Zac added.

“We stayed behind as to set the foundation of a mutually beneficial cooperation between our two forces,” Verana said with a frown. “We are not soldiers you can simply send to the front line.”

Zac rolled his eyes before he explained the situation with the underworld, making sure to divulge the massive wealth in passing.

“While we might not be soldiers we are also Tel-Eladar. We can’t stand for innocent people getting slaughtered like that. We will join your assault on the fire golems,” Verana nodded, before quickly adding. “As for the resources that might fall under your control, we of course expect a share equal to the help we provided.”

“Of course,” Zac snorted.

It looked like that one thing that tied most people together was the love of shiny things. After Verana agreed to accompany Zac she asked her maid to gather twenty soldiers to join. Since battle would likely take place in tunnels and slightly cramped spaces they didn’t feel fielding a large army was the best option. Instead, they would stay with the tactic of utilizing small elite squads.

But the Tal-Eladar also insisted on bringing a contingent of non-combat classes to eke out their own piece of the underworld. The demons and Calrin had already prepared similarity in addition to the people that Emily gathered, so Zac didn’t stop Verana from doing the same.

He would still be in control of the outpost and the teleporter above-ground, and he could easily have it act as a toll booth for any and all resources that flowed from the underworld back to this continent.

Besides ironing out the details of their cooperation Zac also had Verana sign the same type of agreement that all others of the strike force had already agreed upon. He had already decided that he would take this trip in his undead form unless the underworld incursion proved too powerful. He wanted to be as time-efficient as possible, and he wanted to gain some levels to his Undying Bulwark Class.

He had already planned a few things out since it would be too troublesome to force everyone to sign an agreement. Instead of using the easily recognizable **[Verun’s Bite]** he would use the unassuming Spirit Tool Sword from the hunt along with his shield while changing his appearance with **[Thousand Faces]**.

Only the core people who went would know his real identity, while the rest would know him as another alien expert that he took under his wing. Between the different skills, face, and aura there should be no one who was able to glean his true identity.

Divulging his second class after Verana was sworn to secrecy went about as expected with her almost keeping over in shock. Interestingly enough she seemed equally annoyed as Ogras about his unique advantages.

“No wonder Tylia has looked constipated since returning. She hates keeping secrets,” Verana muttered. “I can’t believe you possess two races. Teaming up with you might be my biggest contribution to the family ever.”

“That’s nice, I guess,” Zac shrugged.

“So what should we call you when you play undead?” Verana asked, pulling herself together.

“Uh...” Zac said, blanking out.

“Why not something simple, like Mr. Black?” Verana proposed.

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**Chapter 324 - Mr. Black**

Zac grimaced at the suggestion but he couldn't think of anything better to call himself.

"Fine, Mr. Black it is," Zac said with some resignation.

He had heard that many Cultivators in the multiverse went by a self-chosen Dao Name rather than their real name while they traveled or visited Mystic Realms. Perhaps he should start looking for a good one so that he didn't find himself in this position all the time.

The two waited for another twenty minutes before the maid arrived once again to inform them that the required people had been assembled. The two got up and after Verana inspected the group and made some small personnel adjustments they left for Port Atwood.

Soon they found themselves in the large lobby of the official teleportation array, and the Tal-Eladar looked around in surprise, some praising the architecture. For all their other differences Zac felt the two had pretty similar tastes in buildings after visiting the Tal-Eladar town. Both seemed to enjoy integrating nature into their homes, making their buildings living and ever-changing.

Verana only briefly looked around the building before her eyes found the large sign by the exit.

"What's the Tower of Myriad Dao?" she immediately asked with a small frown.

"It's a Dao Repository," Zac sighed, inwardly cursing Brazla for his insistence on keeping that sign up.

"How does a baby world possess a Dao repository?" Verana said with confusion. "And why would you choose to broadcast it like that? It seems like a way to invite trouble."

"The system gives out all kinds of things as rewards to quests," Zac shrugged. "And we have our reasons for putting it there."

"The Tir'Emarel Clan would be willing to pay a large amount of Nexus Coins or Crystals for the opportunity to peruse it, and you can name your price for taking one of the eight named inheritances," Verana said.

"I am afraid the things inside are not for sale, but some are available through merit. We can talk about that at a later date," Zac said, ending the conversation on that topic.

The Tal-Eladar had been quite accommodating so far, and it was true that they were stuck here on Earth for better or worse. But hey had just joined his force last week, and Zac wasn't about to give them the keys to the kingdom. They would have to prove themselves before they could dream of even seeing the inside of the Towers.

Verana and Tylia threw each other a glance before following in tow. They quickly exited the teleportation structure, and they were soon met with a contingent of Demon Warriors and Valkyries, both of which glared at the Tal-Eladar behind Zac.

"What dense energy," Verana muttered as she looked at the town still undergoing rapid construction, ignoring the squads who had likely come over to intimidate her. "Did you chose this spot due to proximity to a Nexus Vein?"

"I guess you could say this spot chose me," Zac responded with a sardonic smile, nodding at Joanna who hurried toward them.

"You remember the people from the Tir'Emarel Clan. Settle them for the day. They will join us tomorrow when we head to the new continent," Zac explained. "And please come to my courtyard later."

Joanna nodded and was about to respond but turned toward the sound of a rapid tapping on the ground.

“Honorable Beast Masters!” a voice suddenly resounded from the distance, and Zac saw Calrin run over with as much speed as his short legs allowed him. “You honor Port Atwood with your presence. This humble one is Calrin Thayer, merchant by trade. I was quite delighted to hear that the great Tal-Eladar has chosen to align itself with Port Atwood. Please don’t hesitate to peruse our humble wares before heading to battle. You can’t bring money with you to the afterlife, so better spend it on our great armors and weaponry!”

Zac rolled his eyes and dragged the Sky Gnome over to the side.

“What’s with the show?” Zac questioned. “We are about to head to the underworld.”

“Great businessman will always make time for making money, even when facing death. And who knows what dangers lurk down there? Better if I get friendly with these people so I can use their dumb beasts as shields,” Calrin said with a shrewd look. “Besides, who knows if they will find treasure down there? We want it spent or traded with us rather than taken home for their clan to inspect.”

Zac gave the Sky Gnome a small thumbs-up before heading back to his courtyard, leaving the merchant to make some inroads with the Tal-Eladar. He wasn’t interested in the logistics, and Verana had expressed interest to tour the city, so he let Joanna handle that.

This time his place was already occupied as Kenzie sat under the shade of a tree with a crystal in her hand. Zac noticed that it was the same crystal on formations that he had perused himself during the time he was trapped at the entrance to Anzonil’s array in the hunt. Zac didn’t interrupt her and instead started to go through the merit exchange for things to use while under the guise of Mr. Black.

The Merit Exchange tokens that all Port Atwood citizens carried had the extremely convenient options of opening a screen to display all the available items at any time. However, it was impossible to buy or reserve any items, so one could only browse. The golems had explained it as a motivational tool. If people kept browsing for treasures they desired, then they would work harder to gather merit.

Joanna later arrived as instructed, and Zac filled her in on his plan. He didn’t need to worry about her or any of the other Valkyries since they were all bound to him, so he freely told her about how he would pretend to be Mr. Black. Kenzie had stopped reading by this point and instead chosen to listen in on the conversation.

“I have the perfect thing for your disguise,” Kenzie said with some excitement after Joanna left to handle things for tomorrow.

Zac skeptically looked at her as she took out a demonic face mask made from some metal, reminding Zac of a Japanese Oni. It was mostly black but had some red details, while a few simple fractals covered the inside. Zac took it with some interest and looked it over.

“Where did you get this thing?” he asked curiously.

“It’s Ogras’, but I don’t think he will mind. It was meant to be worn by one of the villains in his movie,” Kenzie explained. “It’s a prop.”

“His WHAT?” Zac blurted, almost dropping the demonic mask.

“Oh, he hasn’t told you?” Kenzie giggled. “He’s trying to make an action movie about Cultivation. He has essentially stolen what happened to you and made some alterations. I think this particular mask was made for one of the generals in the incursion that the main character would battle before a final fight with the big boss.”

Zac blankly looked at Kenzie for a few seconds before sighing and shaking his head.

“He actually did it. I better get some royalties if he is using my story to make money,” he said before suddenly looking up at his sister. “Wait, why do you have that thing if it’s Ogras’ movie?”

Kenzie looked a bit startled for a second before rolling her eyes.

“I’ve attached myself as a consultant and liaison between his actors and the human engineers he has scrounged up for CGI,” she explained. “So I have access to all kinds of things. Did you know that Zakarith has been made the love interest for the main character?”

Zac’s thoughts went to the diminutive demoness he had captured for information back in the day and could imagine how Ogras had bullied the poor girl into joining the production. It was distracting enough that he lost his train of thought, and soon he was back to finding things that would go well with the mask.

The next morning four distinct groups streamed toward the teleporter to transport over to Westbound Harbor, the name Mr. Trang had chosen for the outpost on the desert continent. One by one the people stepped inside the circle and disappeared.

The smallest contingent were the fourteen Sky Gnomes decked from top to bottom in defensive treasures and Cosmos Sacks. Next was a squad led by the Valkyries who guarded around 150 non-combat personnel who would be responsible for setting up camp in the underworld.

Finally were the demonic and Tal-Eladar groups. The demons were a bit subdued because all their leaders were occupied elsewhere, but it didn’t stop them from glaring at their old enemies with all they had. The newest additions to Port Atwood wouldn’t be outdone in the death stare department, and if glares could kill the whole area would have run red with blood by now.

Zac looked on at the proceedings from the sidelines, having already changed his appearance before appearing this morning. The Spirit Tool sword named **[Hunger]** hung by his waist, still radiating boundless killing intent. He had chosen not to bind it with a drop of blood because he would probably return it after the incursion into the underworld.

Not binding the weapon would essentially cut the power the sword could exhibit in half, but a weapon wasn’t too important to his fighting style as an undead in any case. His power rather came through his shield. As for his robes he had found a pitch-black warriors robe from his gains during the hunt that possessed at least the basic cleaning and resizing fractals. It was nowhere near as good as his real Spirit Tool he got from Yrial, but defense was the last thing he lacked in his current form.

The official story was that Ogras and Zac both were occupied with an important mission, and they had instead summoned Verana and Mr. Black to hold down the fort while testing them out with a hard mission. Mr. Black’s true identity was unknown, but he was only said to be extremely strong and ruthless.

A few demons had seemed interested in testing the veracity of the rumors, swaggering over with some bloodlust in their eyes. But after Zac released a deathly aura teeming with killing intent and the Dao of Rot they quickly changed their minds and hurried away, leaving him to his own devices while the groups teleported over to the other continent.

At least it showed that no one could recognize who he truly was, and Zac wasn’t surprised. He had completely changed every part of his appearance, and even if he didn’t wear the mask he didn’t believe anyone could tell who he truly was. He had even taken it off a few times in passing in front of others to quell any unwanted rumors of his identity.

Zac was one of the last to step through the teleporter. After a few minutes of darkness, he stepped out into a scorching hot atmosphere. It had to be at least 45 degrees from what Zac could tell, and if this had been him from before the integration he would have been incapacitated in no time from the billowing heat.

Now it barely registered for him, and only the weakest non-combat personnel were sweating a bit from the sun's rays. He took look around and he had to say that Mr. Trang had found a pretty nice place for himself. It was a secluded bay protected from the winds, and tropical trees lined the sandy beach. The familiar face of the old fisherman hurried over when he saw Zac standing and taking in the view.

"Mr... Uh... Black?" Mr. Trang hesitantly said as he looked Zac up and down.

Zac had already instructed Joanna to inform Mr. Trang of his true identity, because just like during the auction Mr. Trang would be representative of Port Atwood's human faction in the underworld. So Zac simply nodded in response before he was led to a recently erected structure where Joanna, Calrin, and Verana waited.

With them was also Harvath, one of the E-Grade demons who was part of Zac's strike squad against the incursions. It looked like he had been chosen to represent the demon's interest in this venture. Zac looked around the room and took off his mask before sitting down.

"It's good to see you again Mr. Trang," Zac smiled, causing the old man to flinch a bit.

Zac knew Mr. Trang was a bit thrown by the pitch-black eyes, but he pretended to not notice.

"Has something happened? I can't see the mentioned town in the teleportation menu," Zac continued.

"It only opens two times a day at random times, and it stays open for just a few minutes. We believe it is a security measure," Mr. Trang explained. "It was through dumb luck that we noticed it. But it opened five hours ago so it should open again within 5-6 hours."

"Great," Zac said. "I want everyone ready. We're immediately heading down the next time it opens."

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**Chapter 325 - Underworld Nexus**

"Who's going first through the teleporter?" Mr. Trang suddenly asked.

Zac was about to say that he would enter first, but he suddenly froze when he saw the old man imperceptibly glance at the new addition to Port Atwood's forces. Only at that point did he realize the problem.

If he went first Verana would become the strongest person above-ground, and she could easily destroy the teleporter, effectively trapping Zac in the underworld. He didn't know what she would gain from doing something like that, but he also wasn't willing to take the risk with so many things riding on him. This place was the only link to the surface, and if it was that easy to reach it by foot the people of the underworld would already have left.

"Verana, Joanna, Mr. Trang, and I will all go down together. When the situation is secured Joanna will return to get the rest," Zac said, quickly adjusting his plan.

Verana looked a bit surprised at being included in the advance group, but a small smile suddenly crept up on her face and she simply nodded in agreement.

“I want to go as well,” Emily said as she burst through the door, clearly having eavesdropped on them. “You promised.”

“... No, you’ll join the second group,” Zac finally rejected after some hesitation.

Things might get a bit crazy when they arrived unprompted, especially when they brought an alien, so bringing Emily in the earliest group was without benefit. He was also worried she would act hastily when she got down there, so he wanted to stabilize the situation first.

“My goal is to make whoever is on the other side open the teleporter within an hour to let the rest of you through,” Zac then added when he saw Emily’s face scrunch up. “If that doesn’t happen something might have gone wrong. But don’t enter the teleporter before Joanna has come out even if it opens again.”

The others quickly nodded in agreement before they ironed out the finer details of the expedition. The name of the teleportation destination was Underworld Nexus, and it hinted at what sort of place they were heading into. Since the teleporter opened to the public every day there should be some strong people holding down the fort, and there might also be quite some foot traffic.

If it was possible they would avoid causing any commotion since it might be more convenient to get a better understanding of the underground if their true identities weren’t exposed yet. The fact that Verana would join them would make that a bit harder, but she said she possessed a treasure that would allow her to accompany them without her origins getting exposed.

There was also the risk that the place was like the Cradle of God, a death trap that tried to swallow everyone foolish enough to enter, which was another reason why Zac was hesitant to bring Emily. Better the small group of elites go first and sound out the situation.

In the end, there was only so much that could be done when they had no idea what they dealt with, so soon enough everyone retreated to their respective groups to sit down and meditate while waiting.

Zac briefly pondered on the Dao of Rot until one of Mr. Trang’s men let him know that the teleporter was open on the other side. Zac only grunted in affirmation as he got to his feet, and was soon joined by the other three who would go with him as the advance group.

Zac was interested to note that Lulu and Grub were nowhere to be seen, replaced with a rocklike snake that circled her left arm like a bracer. The Beast Master noticed Zac’s look and smiled as she scratched the head of the snake, eliciting an odd purring sound.

“This is Slither,” she introduced. “Lulu and Grub might be out of their element in the underworld considering their size. Slither is much more accustomed to subterranean fighting and scouting.”

Zac nodded in understanding, feeling that Beast Master was a pretty convenient class. One could simply shore up any weakness by capturing another beast, and you stayed out of harm’s way while your beasts battled for you.

Then again, Zac knew things weren’t that simple. It took both time and a large number of resources to rear a battle beast. And just capturing it was not enough since if there was no connection it might refuse to fight for you, or even betray you at a critical juncture. Zac didn’t like the concept of relying on others for keeping himself safe. He would rather depend on his own fists for protection than some familiar.

Time was of the essence so the small group immediately headed over to the Teleportation array. Zac still donned his mask, making him look like a human hiding his identity. Verana instead wrapped a white cowl to obscure her features, and it completely hid her non-human features.

More interestingly the cowl seemed to possess some magical feature that made Verana less conspicuous, and Zac had a hard time focusing on her even though he knew about it. It was as though he got distracted by stray thoughts any time he looked in her direction, and soon his eyes drifted away.

“How curious,” Mr. Trang muttered with some interest, clearly having realized the magical feature of the cowl as well.

Since it looked like Verana wouldn't be a problem Zac immediately activated the array, and in short order all four had stepped through and disappeared.

After a brief stint in the darkness, the foursome found themselves in a large vaulted cavern teeming with people. They stood on a platform that was raised around a meter into the air, and as he looked over the sea of people he noted that most were streaming toward two large exits on the opposite side of the cave.

The cave itself didn't feel as stuffy as Zac had feared, and the ceiling reached almost twenty meters in the air. The area was also pretty well lit by a combination of large inlaid crystals in the walls and the ever-present glowing moss. The air was a bit stale though, and the lack of any natural light was a bit uncomfortable. But Zac easily adjusted his state of mind, since he had been in a similar place for weeks during the hunt.

A quick estimation would put the number in the cave above a thousand, and he noted that this place was far more integrated between the races than how it was on the surface. Humans made up almost half of the people in the cave, which wasn't surprising considering how populous the old Earth was compared to the other planets that got smashed together.

But there were representatives from all three of the other races in the streams of pedestrians, and many groups consisted of a mix of human, Ishiate and the Ratmen. Even a handful of Zhix walked along without causing any trouble, though it looked that the Zhix always only walked with their own kind.

“Hey, stop dawdling! Present your tokens and make way for the next group,” a gruff voice said, making Zac look over at a guard who glared at them from beneath the platform.

Zac realized that over twenty guards were standing there, and apart from three who inspected a group in front of them they all looked in their direction. The one who had spoken to them was a muscular Ishiate, but all four races apart from the Zhix were represented among the guards.

He could also breathe out in relief when he realized that neither his nor Verana's hidden features had caused any alarm amongst the guards. Actually, quite a few of the people in the area had obscured their features to varying degrees.

In the end Sap Trang stepped forward after shooting a brief glance at Zac and Verana.

“We do not possess any tokens,” he explained with a smile. “It is our first time coming here.”

“You cannot enter the Underworld Nexus without a token,” the beastman said with a shake of his head. “Are you members of the Union or the Council?”

“The Union? Council? We are not part of either,” Sap Trang said with some confusion.

“Fresh meat?” the Ishiate interrupted with some surprise. “You’re the first in a while, must be from a pretty secluded sector. Come with me and I’ll explain things.”

The man seemed pretty eager, and Zac noted that the other guards looked at the beastman who had spoken up with some envy as he ushered them away from the teleportation platform.

He wasn’t worried that this place was a trap since the people who were continuously streaming out of the teleporter seemed aware of the rules of this place, and they hurriedly presented the same sort of token upon arrival. At the same time, there was a smaller stream of people leaving as well, walking against the stream to use another teleportation array to return to wherever they came from.

“The Underworld Nexus is a neutral town meant as a gathering place for all the native factions of the underworld. Most of those you see coming and going either belong to the Union or the Underworld Council. The Union is led by a group of merchants,” the guard started explaining as they entered the side passage.

“A notable name among you humans from the Union is Little Treasure, who is one of the eight top figures. The union control most of the high-grade mines and many other lucrative resources, so they are extremely wealthy. That’s why many elite cultivators have joined them to enjoy great benefits.

“The Council is a group of extremely strong warriors. They are on the frontline in the fight against the incursions, but they also control a lot of the best training grounds. They aren’t as wealthy as the Union, but they make up for it with military might.”

“The Incursions? What does that mean?” Zac asked, thankful his voice didn’t change too much in his Draugr form.

Zac, of course, knew what the beastman was talking about. But from how he explained it, it sounded like there was more than one incursion in the underworld.

“You are truly lucky if you haven’t been impacted by those alien cultivators in all this time,” the Ishiate guard muttered as he led the group to a guarded side-exit of the cave. “When the Integration took place it also opened portals to other worlds, and foreign invaders have come through those gates. The main goal of the Council is to close those gates, and the Union is generally helping the war effort with resources.”

“How many gates are there?” Mr. Trang asked, understanding what Zac wanted to know.

“There are four that we know off, and the worst of them are the fire golems. They have killed millions of people,” the Ishiate sighed. “I moved here after they flooded my hometown with lava. Only a fraction of us survived, our ancestral halls turned to cinders.”

Zac was truthfully not too surprised that there were multiple incursions. The Underworld spanned a huge area, and hundreds of millions of humans had been teleported here. In fact, he felt it was pretty good news to hear there was more than one. If the system only sent one incursion to test the whole underworld it would likely have meant that particular incursion was terrifyingly strong.

“So where are we headed?” Sap Trang finally asked after they had walked the empty passage for some time.

“We need to issue tokens if you wish to enter this place. Please beware, these tokens are not free as they require inscriptions to work. Each one costs 50 000 Nexus Coins,” the guard explained until he finally stopped in front of a door. “In here.”

The group entered and saw a human sit with an engraving kit in his hands, with a small mountain of tokens behind him. The process of acquiring tokens was pretty

simple, with only a drop of blood being needed to bind the Token while the inscriber activated it. But Zac suspected the tokens contained a tracking array just like the one in Westfort.

“If you want my advice you should quickly join one of the forces as quickly as possible. There is some semblance of order in the Nexus, but truthfully it is quite dangerous for a small unaffiliated group to walk the streets. You might get robbed of your treasures, or even killed,” the guard suddenly said as they got their tokens. “As luck would have it I know a few people in the Union, and I could introduce you.”

“Are the two forces the only ones around?” Mr. Trang asked, sidestepping the offer.

The guard looked a bit irritated at getting his pitch derailed, but he quickly controlled his mood.

“Well, there are some smaller groups and towns that are not directly affiliated with the Union or the Underworld Council, but at least 60% of those who walk the streets here are part of either of them. So what do you say, do you want to head over to my friends in the union? It’s a pretty rare opportunity, and I wouldn’t offer if I hadn’t felt that you guys are pretty strong,” the Ishiate explained.

Some disdain flashed in the eyes of the inscriber as he worked on the final token, but it quickly disappeared a moment later as the man refocused on his work. But both Zac and Verana had noted it, and they threw each other a look.

It seemed to Zac that the great opportunity was nothing more than a scam. Perhaps joining the Union would mean something like joining the New World Government, getting an overlord taking control of your hometown. It was most likely not very hard to join on one’s own, and the guard in front of them perhaps even got a commission for leading new blood to the slaughter.

“Is it the Council or the Union that controls this place?” Zac suddenly asked, as he never heard the guard mention it.

“Actually, neither,” the Ishiate said as he scratched his chin.

At this time the inscriber spoke up for the first time, briefly shooting Zac a glance.

“This place is under the control of the richest man in the underworld, Lord Smaug himself.”

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**Chapter 326 - Subterranean Diplomacy**

“He controls this town by himself? How is that possible? He is not even on the power Ladder,” Mr. Trang said with some suspicion after hearing the inscriber’s proclamation.

“Wealth trumps over power,” the inscriber said. “Anyone who tries to cause trouble will get blasted by his various treasures or arrays. I doubt even the Super Brother-Man would dare to cause a ruckus in the Underworld Nexus.”

Zac slowly nodded, remembering Ogras’ words. With enough wealth it was possible to completely ensconce yourself within your sphere of influence, buying layers after layers of defensive and offensive structures. Of course, while it was entirely

possible to smash your enemies with piles of money it was also true that wealth couldn't trump over supreme power.

"So he's not part of any force?" Mr. Trang asked curiously. "Seems like he would be better off joining this Union."

"He has his own company, Dragonwing Enterprises, and many underlings here in the city. I work for Dragonwing Enterprises for example," the inscriber explained drawing a glare from the guard.

"They only recruit locally though," the Ishiate hurriedly added. "So how about it? Shall we head to the Union? Or if fighting is more your style, I actually have some friends working for the Council as well."

Zac didn't immediately answer but instead went over what they had learned. He knew they might only have scratched the surface, but it still felt like they had a good enough understanding of the underworld to get to work.

The splintered forces had generally clumped together into larger groups, but it seemed there were no individuals strong enough to become sole leaders. Instead, councils were formed where power was shared. The only exception was this Smaug character who seemed solely to control this town by virtue of wealth rather than strength.

Now that they knew who the players were and what kind of place they had arrived at there was no longer any need for subterfuge. Zac never meant for them to keep their anonymity forever, as there was no point in doing so. They needed to speak with Smaug, and the quickest way to do this was to explain who they were. Mr. Trang seemed to be of the same idea, as he shot a glance at Zac who made a small signal with his hand.

"I am afraid that we do not plan to join any force," Mr. Trang said with a smile at the Ishiate, before turning toward the inscriber. "We would like to meet your boss."

Both the Ishiate and the inscriber looked a bit startled at the quick change in demeanor before the beastman let out a guffaw.

"Are you crazy? Do you think just anyone can just walk in here and act as they please?" the guard laughed derisively. "I am being nice enough to help you out, but you better smarten up before something bad happens."

But the inscriber's eyes thinned as he glanced at Zac's party, and he seemed to take the situation seriously even though all of their auras were completely restrained.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"We come from the surface, and we represent the Super Brother-Man," Mr. Trang said, hiding nothing. "The forces of the surface world all tried to reach this place the moment the hunt ended, but currently it is only the Super Brother-Man who possess the capabilities needed to reach this place."

"Oh, the Super Brother-Man, is it?" the Ishiate laughed even harder. "I forgot to introduce myself, I am Starlight's long-lost brother, and this inscriber here is the cousin of Thea Marshall."

"That's enough Terre-" the inscriber said, but his words got caught in his throat as an aura as heavy as a mountain spread out, suffused with killing intent.

The whole cavernous room started shaking and the two men both were unable to move. The Ishiate had fallen down on his belly and was crawling toward the door with horror in his eyes. The inscriber was not much better off as he had fallen back into the pile of empty tokens, his face white as a sheet.

It wasn't Zac, but rather the snake who peeked out of Verana's sleeve that was emitting the dense aura, proving that it was another E-Grade beast under her command.

In fact, the aura it emitted was even stronger than those of Grub and Lulu, making Zac wonder if Verana held back during their fight.

“The Super Brother-Man has closed multiple incursions in the past week, but there is far more to do. He sent his right-hand man and a general to close the incursions down here, and help the people stuck here,” Joanna explained when the snake finally crawled back inside Verana’s sleeve and restrained its aura.

“Are you... truly from the surface?” the inscriber said, clearly starting to believe their words. “Then why have only you arrived and no one else? We have waited for so long for assistance. And do you have any proof you’re with the Super Brother-Man?”

“It is simple. Most of the people on the surface believe that our new world consists of one huge continent, but that isn’t true. There is, in fact, a second continent, but it is separated by a vast ocean. The Super Brother-Man is the only one with a fleet powerful enough to cross the ocean and survive the leviathans of the sea,” Sap Trang explained.

“Shortly after we set up our outpost we noticed this place appearing now and then on the teleportation panel,” Joanna added. “And as for proof? The force of the Super-Brother-man is Port Atwood, which you should know after the hunt.”

The next moment both her alignment from her status screen appeared, and her current position on the ladder.

“Atwood Valkyrie... a ranker!” the inscriber said with shock. “Are you his right-hand man? Or General?”

“No, I am not strong enough for that yet,” Joanna said, looking a bit pained before gesturing at Zac and Verana. “It’s those two.”

The implication was clear, and the inscriber immediately understood what she was getting at. Not even low rankers were strong enough to become generals under the Super Brother-Man.

“So, can you take us to Smaug now?” Mr. Trang asked.

“Well... It’s not that simple,” the inscriber said with a grimace before turning to the Ishiate who was still on the ground. “Terrek, you can leave. I will take it from here.”

The Ishiate had been frozen by the door, both afraid to speak up and leave. When he heard the inscriber’s words it was as though he was granted a pardon, and after giving Zac’s party a deep bow he scrambled out of the door.

“Why can’t we meet him?” Joanna pressured, her eyes thinning.

“I don’t know where he is. No one does,” the inscriber hurriedly explained. “We don’t know what Smaug looks like or where he lives. He’s only communicating through the network he has set up here, and the few times he appeared he has been disguised.”

“So what now?” Joanna asked with some displeasure.

“I can take your party to the headquarters of Dragonwing Enterprises. I am only middle management so I can’t contact the Lord, but someone there should be able to,” the appraiser said and got up from his seat.

The group nodded since it seemed as good a plan as any. They might have been able to force the man out by wreaking havoc on the town, but they had come to help people, not cause trouble. The appraiser, who introduced himself as Farid, led them out of the passageways into the town proper. A few scared faces peeked out through doors along the way, but hurriedly shied away when they passed.

The Underworld Nexus was completely different from what Zac had expected. It was still a cave, but it was just massive, likely even larger than Port Atwood. It was at least 100 meters to the roof, helping quite a bit with the claustrophobic feeling. There

was even some wind getting generated by a massive waterfall that fell into a lake where Zac clearly could spot a large number of fishing vessels.

The structures were simple but sturdy, mainly created from a mix of metal and stone. Many rooms didn't have roofs or walls though, instead opting for open architecture. Perhaps people felt enough closed-in as it was, and didn't want to box themselves in even further. Besides, it was not like there was going to be any bad weather down here.

The oddest thing was that the whole thing was brightly lit up as though it was the middle of the day on the surface. The whole cave was illuminated by a couple of massive crystals placed on top of sturdy metal towers.

"We call them Day Crystals, and use them instead of sunlight," Farid explained when he saw the group's looks. "Smaug owns a mine where they extract them. These crystals are lit up 18 hours a day, with the first and last hour being at half power. We also sell smaller versions to add to your home because electricity is limited."

Zac nodded, quite impressed by how quickly these people had adapted to life underground. But even with these pretty optimal conditions for a subterranean town, it was impossible to forget they were stuck under miles of rock. The town sharply ended where it reached the wall, and a few barricaded gates led out into the wild.

As they walked it seemed to become more apparent that the explanation of the guard wasn't completely accurate. It was true that the Union and the Underworld Council were the two most powerful forces along with Hive Arbak, the strongest Zhix hive in the underworld. In truth, their numbers only made up around 10 to 15% of the people in the Underworld Nexus rather than the 60%.

But their influence reached far and wide in the underworld, and it was obvious by how they could so overtly bribe the Underground Nexus guards to do their bidding. As Zac suspected guard did get a commission for enlisting new towns into these forces, which was why he made them sound grander than they truly were.

But Farid explained how there was a large number of varying forces and independent warlords who controlled their respective sectors, making the underworld almost as chaotic as the surface. The towns were far more integrated between species though, mainly since the surface species were dropped off together at the same place when the randomization of the planet took place.

But there was also a large number of refugees as the things Zac heard about the fire incursion was all too real. Every day more refugees streamed through the teleporter, and by now there was no more room to house them in the Underworld Nexus. Luckily there was no lack of crystals, meaning the refugees could be teleported away to reinforce other towns in the underworld network.

"So why has no one of you come to the surface?" Joanna asked as they walked toward the Dragonwing headquarters. "You've had half a year to dig your way out."

"We tried," Farid said with a sigh. "We all tried the first months. But something is odd with the stone, most of it is incredibly hard. Unless you're at least level 30 you can forget about even cutting out a chip from the walls, and even the stronger people have trouble making way. Not even the Geomancers are any good. Perhaps when people start reaching E-rank they will be strong enough."

"Just like there are mines with minerals and Crystals there are also mines with softer stone that can be extracted," the inscriber explained. "Most settlements are made by the molemen though. The Underworld Nexus is almost unique in the fact that it is completely made from scratch. The cave was found by Lord Smaug, and he founded the Nexus by the shore."

The group soon enough reached the Dragonwing Headquarters, a vast complex next to the lake. As they passed through the gate Zac couldn't help but notice there were multiple layers of arrays around the building. He wasn't worried now that they had already been let through, but if he read the energy fluctuations right he guessed that even he would have trouble cracking this place open.

After Farid explained their identities and the snake once again exhibited it's might things proceeded quite quickly from there. The group was led to an open-air conference room while the manager sent an emergency transmission to their boss. The manager kept them company as they waited, ensuring that Smaug never took longer than 20 minutes to respond to a message.

The minutes passed and refreshments were brought in as they waited. The manager was extremely curious about the state of the surface and was elated when he heard that the Super Brother-Man was going around closing one incursion after another. The fact that he had started eyeing the underworld wasn't met with suspicion at all by the stocky middle-aged man, but rather delight. The fire golems had truly pushed people to their limits, and it looked like there wasn't a single person who hadn't lost someone to their attacks.

But Zac suddenly got a bad feeling as a gust made his black cloak flutter. He immediately looked around and spotted an odd sphere beneath the table that he knew wasn't there before. It didn't emit any energy, but the feeling only got worse by the second, and Zac knew he could tarry any longer.

"Behind me!" he growled as a field of death expanded around him from **[Fields of Despair]**, while his defensive layers were erected one by one.

The large fractal shield was the last to materialize, and Zac placed it square between the rapidly enlarging ball and the group. The manager was held by his neck by a furious Joanna, but he was clearly not part of what was happening since he was screaming in fear, looking completely shocked by the change in atmosphere.

Suddenly it sounded like a piece of glass cracking, and then the world turned white.

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#### **Chapter 327 - Billionaires' Brawl**

A massive wave of electricity slammed into Zac's shield as he imbued himself with the Dao of Hardness. The ball had been something similar to his own **[Thunder Punishment]**, though the energies were far more concentrated. It gave up the massive area of **[Thunder Punishment]** but instead gained a far greater intensity.

A scream from behind told Zac that his shield wasn't able to properly block out the energies as it was, and he tried imbuing **[Immutable Bulwark]** with the Dao of Sanctuary to see if it would change anything. The shield quickly started transforming, turning into something that looked like a wall that circled his group.

The Dao imbuelement apparently changed the way the shield worked, where it gave up some of its strength to instead be able to protect from all directions. Luckily the durability of the shield was still enough even though it was spread out over a wider area. The problem was that the Miasmatic consumption drastically increased, though he would be able to keep it up for some time before he started to run out of energy.

But Zac didn't want to wait for his attacker to tire himself or herself out, and he looked in all directions for the source of the attack. But it was impossible to see a thing through the storm of lightning outside the protective shield, and he could only growl in frustration. Joanna meanwhile looked ready to rip the Dragonwing manager into pieces as she threw him down on the ground and pointed her spear at him.

"What's going on?" she spat out through grit teeth. "Who's attacking us?"

"I swear I do not know! We have had some friction with the Union lately, perhaps it's them?" the manager frantically said, trying to keep his head as far away from the spearhead as possible.

Soon enough the lightning storm abated, but Zac barely had time to glance around before a dozen more spheres flew toward them, releasing an inferno of flames that tried to eat through his protective layers.

Zac sighed as he realized that whoever was attacking them was unwittingly a pretty good counter to his undead class. He had activated [**Deathwish**] the moment he realized they were under attack, but he sensed that it hadn't been used even once. It meant the skill didn't work against treasures, allowing their attacker to go on as he pleased without receiving any retribution.

"Do you want me to help out?" Verana suddenly asked from behind, not sounding alarmed in the slightest even though flames raged all around them.

"No need," Zac said after a brief pause. "Protect the others while I deal with this."

Verana would likely not have too much trouble dealing with this attacker, but Zac wanted to gain some experience in fighting in his undead form. He had only fought dumb animals when using Undying Bulwark, most of them turned even more rabid and irrational from the Darkness in the caverns beneath the Eastern Trigram Sect. Fighting a person in disadvantageous conditions felt like a pretty good way to find the limitations and strengths of his current class.

Finally, Zac managed to spot a hooded figure in the distance, and he immediately activated [**Inquisitive Eye**] to get some idea about their attacker. But either the man possessed tremendous Intelligence, or more likely he owned a protective treasure because Zac could not even get the man's name from the skill.

The limits of the ocular skill were once shining through, and Zac was starting to wonder if it was even worth that he relearned and evolved the skill for his undead form. But he was still unable to get his hands on a better option, as the only ancillary skill that the lowest floor of his Dao Repository contained was [**Thousand Faces**]. Hopefully, there would be some more options for supportive skills on the next floor, as those were the only skills that seemed to work for both his classes.

It looked like the man in the distance was imbuing yet another ball with Cosmic Energy, though this one shuddered with another type of energy than electricity. Zac didn't want to give him time to lob yet another of those things at him and slammed his shield into the ground with a roar.

A huge shockwave of spikes ripped out of the ground and pushed toward the masked man with great speed, destroying anything in its path. It was the attack engraved into the shield itself, and its effect was even better than Zac had expected. The attacker looked up in alarm, but before he could move the wave of spikes was upon him.

A green shimmer appeared around the masked attacker, and the spikes immediately turned into a murky liquid formed a corrosive pool on the ground. Zac tsk'ed in annoyance and pushed forward, inwardly annoyed with the lack of movement options in his undead class.

But he was still extraordinarily fast due to his massive pool of Dexterity, and Zac was upon the man before he could finish fueling the next offensive array. But the masked attacker seemed to possess an almost endless bag of tricks, and two of his rings lit up when Zac swung his sword down with furious momentum.

The man disappeared in the blink of an eye, replaced with a large head of a humanoid skeleton that radiated extremely sinister energies. Zac's brows rose in surprise, but before he had time to create any distance the skeleton spewed out a large gust of a grey haze, covering every inch of his body.

Zac froze for a second, but he soon realized the odd attack simply had no effect on him. He once again thanked the cheat-like constitution of a Draugr, realizing that the mist was likely some poison his undead body was immune to. He swung his huge tower shield with a grunt, creating a gust that blew the mists away, and he immediately spotted the man in the distance.

"Smaug?" Zac ventured, and the man stopped moving before once again starting to prepare for his next wave of assaults, pretty much confirming his hunch. "Why are you attacking us? Port Atwood and The Super Brother-Man has no enmity with you or your faction."

"It does not matter," Smaug answered with a flat voice, taking out a smaller crystal this time. "Sometimes we're just leaves drifting in the wind."

The crystal released a shockwave before a blue fractal appeared in the sky above him. Zac wouldn't have been alarmed if that was all it did, but he looked on in trepidation as another fractal hundreds of meters across also appeared in the air above the lake.

Strong winds that had no place in the Underworld buffeted the whole cave as waves rose over ten meters in the air from the disturbance caused by the huge fractal. Zac was even having some trouble keeping his footing from the torrential winds, and he finally punched the shield into the ground to get a proper footing.

Zac was unsure what to do as five enormous streams rose from the lake, causing dozens of fishing vessels to capsize. The streams melded together into an enormous leviathan that reached the ceiling of the cave before falling toward him. He wasn't sure if Verana could handle an attack of this magnitude, but she gave a signal that they were fine when he looked back at them.

The others had moved far away from the battle, and a sturdy-looking red barrier shone around them. It gave Zac some confidence as he turned back to face the incoming attack of the array. His muscles swelled to almost ridiculous proportions as he empowered his arms with **[Unholy Strike]**.

The last moment before the humongous water creature slammed into the ground he infused his shield with the Dao of Heaviness and Swung it forward with a punching motion. Between his massive pool of Strength and the multiplicative boost of **[Unholy Strike]**, the shield contained terrifying force and the moment it hit the water creature they both froze for a fraction of a second.

The next moment a massive shockwave exploded from the point of impact, shooting water and hurricane-like gusts across half the cave. The massive energies ripped the whole complex of Dragonwing Enterprises to pieces, and quite a few of the surrounding structures were toppled even though they were made from stone and metal.

One small relief was that he got no streams of energy from any kills, meaning that people in the vicinity had managed to evacuate in time before the battle reached a crescendo. It had been a worry in the back of his head since the battle started. He didn't want any innocent bystanders to lose their lives due to Smaug's crazed assault.

Zac's whole body hurt from being right next to the impact, but he ignored the pain as he looked around with wild eyes. He was tired of all the nasty things Smaug seemed to have up in his sleeves, and he wanted to end this now. He quickly spotted a bedraggled Smaug currently scrambling to his feet, his clothes ripped and in disarray. He hadn't been unscathed from the shockwave either, and blood was running down his forehead.

The true appearance of the wealthiest man of the Underworld was finally exposed, and it was not what Zac expected. He was a young man that might be from India or the Middle East, with a pair of emerald green eyes. He had olive-colored skin and short black hair, and pretty fine features. Zac would guess he was around 20 if he went by the standards of the Old world.

Smaug's eyes widened in alarm when he noted Zac's glare, and he quickly took out a heavily inscribed rapier as Zac barreled toward him like an angry bull. The rapier slightly reminded Zac of the terrible array that Hannah stabbed him with once upon a time, and rage flared up in his heart when remembering the betrayal.

Zac pushed his speed to his limit as he swung [**Hunger**] with ferocious force straight at Smaug himself. The man desperately tried to defend with his weapon, but a snap could be heard as soon as the two weapons collided. It was Smaug's wrist not being able to withstand the power in Zac's swings, immediately shattering from the force.

Smaug wailed in pain, but the scream was quickly cut short as Zac's boot slammed into his chest with the force of a truck, launching him like a ragdoll into the ruins of what might once have been an office building. Zac was right behind him and before he could get up Smaug found [**Hunger**] against his throat, the sword actually shivering with excitement.

Zac's boot was firmly pressed on the man's chest, and his shield was slammed into the ground right next to Smaug's head. His eyes were red and he breathed heavily even though there was no need for it in his current body. Bloodlust had almost completely clouded his mind when he saw the rapier, but he finally managed to calm down before he killed his captive in a fit of rage.

"Why?" was all Zac said through grit teeth as he looked down at the man who had attacked them with a storm of treasures.

The man didn't answer, instead looking back and forth to the sides with some panic. Zac frowned and looked around, but they were in the middle of a pile of rubble and sight was obscured in every direction. A thought struck Zac and he took out one of the mobile array disks with his free hand and threw it down on the ground next to them. It quickly shuddered before a small shield encapsulated the two.

"This area has been obscured by an array," Zac said with a frosty voice, his foot still on Smaug's chest. "Now tell me what the fuck is going on or I'll skewer you."

"Please, save my sister," Smaug coughed out with a pitiful voice, his demeanor completely changed. "I was forced to attack you by those bastards of the Union. Why the hell would I want to attack monsters like you people, only to drag your boss here on the off-chance I survived?"

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**Chapter 328 - Captive**

Zac looked down at Smaug that was still being kept at sword-point, unsure what to think about the rapid change in his demeanor. It looked like he was truly telling the truth about his sister, but it wouldn't be surprising if the second-place holder on the wealth ladder was someone adept at deception.

Besides, even if he was telling the truth, did it even matter? Zac if anyone could sympathize with the desire to save and protect one's sister, but the fact remained that Smaug had launched a terrifying barrage of attacks on them. If Zac wasn't strong enough he and his people would have been blasted to pieces by the offensive arrays.

But Zac finally decided it was worth to keep asking questions before deciding what to do about this man.

"Why would the Union want to attack us?" Zac finally asked.

"They are working with the invaders," Smaug said, looking relieved Zac held off on skewering him. "Not the flame golem one, but the others. They are trying to take all of Earth's natural resources for themselves. The invaders provide the Union with pills and other items that are hard to get down here, and the Union provides them with raw resources and Slaves."

"Slaves?" Zac repeated with a frown, though it couldn't be seen through his mask.

"I have been investigating them for months. Some settlements that were said to be eradicated by the golems were actually captured by the Union's people and sold to the invaders for forced labor," Smaug wheezed. "They don't want you here because they are afraid their profiteering will be cut short."

"You should know that if we fell the Super Brother-Man would just come here in person," Zac retorted.

"By that time they would have been able to turn black to white, pinning all the blame on me," Smaug sighed.

"Still, it's quite the coincidence that they managed to kidnap your sister just when we arrived, and immediately had you attack us?" Zac said. "We haven't even been in the underworld for an hour."

"I don't know how, but they must have known her identity for some time. I had bodyguards around her, but more than half turned out to be the Union's men. They acted just 5minutes after you left with Farid," he said.

Zac was about to continue the line of questions but the sound of disturbed rubble from behind stopped him in his tracks. He turned around to see it was Joanna who had come over, her spear at the ready. Zac quickly deactivated the array, making her almost launch an attack at him in shock.

"Get the others, but just our people," Zac said.

"No problem. The manager started running for his life the moment the fighting subsided," Joanna nodded.

"Wait, help me disarm this guy first," Zac said.

Joanna understood what he meant, and she quickly took off every piece of equipment on Smaug that might have been a treasure. Soon enough a small mound of jewelry lay to the side of the man, and Joanna had even found a few talisman papers stuck to his inner thighs. He was truly a walking arsenal, decked head to toe with treasures. Even Calrin would likely have to admit defeat against that kind of collection.

A minute later the whole Port Atwood party stood hidden within an array, and Zac recounted his exchange with Smaug, whose real name turned out to be Hassan. He was originally from Syria, but had lived in Europe the past years with his sister.

However, it looked like Hassan had completely discarded his old identity, and insisted of being called Smaug.

“What forces do the four Incursions contain?” Mr. Trang asked.

“One looks like humans, though they have vertical pupils,” Smaug quickly said, still stressed even though Zac no longer pointed a sword at him.

Verana’s snake had instead scuttled over to his shoulder and was seemingly napping with its head against his throat. But Smaug was obviously aware of the snake’s power since he had turned extremely pale the moment the snake moved over to him. After that he became even more cooperative, and it felt like he couldn’t spill all the secrets of the underworld quick enough.

“One has literal demons, it’s pretty crazy. Horns and everything. These two are the ones who have bought the most slaves. They keep mostly to themselves, relentlessly mining. The third has some odd walking fish or something, they look pretty scary. I don’t think the Union works with them, they attack everything,” Smaug explained. “The fourth is the fire golems, and they are the strongest. But there is actually a fifth incursion”

“A fifth?” Zac asked with surprise. “The guard earlier said there was only four.”

“I only know about them because of a leak in the Union. They have never appeared and they are even more holed up than the first two incursions. I have no idea what they are up to, but I guess they’re busy mining as well,” Smaug shrugged.

Zac didn’t care too much about there being a fifth incursion. The fact that they kept to themselves hopefully meant that they didn’t feel confident in their strength to expand, and instead opted to gather as many resources as possible from their area.

“Do the Underworld Council work with the invaders as well?” Joanna asked next.

“Not really, though they are indirectly benefitting from them. They buy things from the Union that they, in turn, have gotten from the invaders. And they almost exclusively fight with the fishmen and the fire golems, so I’m pretty sure they know about the dealings with the other incursions,” Smaug explained. “It’s all pretty muddy down here, no clear black and white.”

Zac slowly nodded, not feeling the actions of the Council was too big of a deal. They had their hands full as it was, and if they could get resources from the one incursion to fight another it was making the best of a bad situation. It wouldn’t be too late to turn their attention toward the demons and invading humans after the more dangerous invaders were dealt with.

He felt the actions of the Union to be far more troublesome. He had seen the treatment of slaves on the surface, and he knew that almost no force would treat them as well as Verana had. To profiteer from something like that in a time of crisis was beyond reprehensible.

He could have looked the other way if the Union just traded normally with the invaders, but since they decided to use their own people as currency he knew he would have to act. If it was true that the Union sells people as slaves to the invaders they didn’t need to continue existing.

When they had gotten all out of Smaug that they could Zac suddenly flashed forward and knocked Smaug out cold, giving the rest some privacy.

“So what do you guys think?” he asked.

“That Union seems even more shady than the New World Government,” Joanna said with disgust. “If they are into the slave trade I’m sure they’re doing all kinds of evil stuff.”

“I think it’s a good target for a take-over,” Verana said, drawing skeptical glances from the others.

“Let’s not kid ourselves,” the Beast Master said with a roll of her eyes. “Getting our hand on the resources for our war efforts is one of the main objectives of this expedition. If we kill the leaders of this Merchant Organization and put our own people there we’ll have a working infrastructure for everything from Teleportation Arrays to Mines to personnel. We will even gain their intelligence which is likely invaluable.”

“Will their people even work for us?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“The rabbits in the forest do not care which wolf is the pack alpha. They just want to survive,” Verana said with a shrug. “We can simply cleanse the arm of the organization that dealt in slavery if it bothers you, and claim the rest.”

“I agree. You have so much to deal with as is,” Joanna said. “This will save a lot of time, allowing us to focus on what’s important.”

Mr. Trang nodded in agreement as well, essentially meaning the matter was decided since Zac felt it was the most convenient method as well. But there was still one issue remaining.

“Fine. We’ll confirm what Smaug said about the slave trade. If what he says is true we’ll take control of the Union, taking out everyone at the top” Zac said before motioning at the unconscious man on the ground. “What do we do about this guy though?”

“I say keep him,” Joanna said. “He might seem like a helpless victim, but he must be hiding some secrets. He has been on the top of the Wealth ladder all this time, even eclipsing people like Thea Marshall and Billy who both have closed Incursions. Besides, he attacked us so he owes us restitution, but there is no way his real wealth is on his person”

“I think we should help the sister if possible,” Mr. Trang added. “The child was captured because of our arrival, after all. She’s innocent in all this.”

“Fair enough,” Zac agreed. “Wake him up.”

Joanna took out a bottle of water and poured it over his face, making him wake up sputtering and disoriented.

“We will help save your sister,” Joanna said. “And we’ll also take care of the Union if what you’ve said is true. Of course, if it turns out that you’ve been lying we’ll remove you and Dragonwing Enterprises from the underworld.”

“My words are as true as gold!” the man hurriedly said. “But the Union must know something is wrong by now. We’ve been here for a while, they must wonder what’s going on. I have an idea, but you must trust me.”

“Trust you?” Zac snorted, but the next moment his eyes widened in alarm as Smaug produced another crystal from nowhere.

Zac’s mind blanked out for a second when he saw the pitch-black ball in Smaug’s hand. The first thing Joanna had looked for on his body was a cosmos sack, but there was nothing like that on him. They had assumed he simply left it behind before going into battle because he was afraid of losing his wealth. But they were obviously wrong since he still was able to produce objects from nowhere.

If it was just another fire-spewing crystal Zac wouldn’t be too worried, but he was actually quite familiar with the thing in Smaug’s hand. It was a **[Void Ball]**, identical to the one Zac found during the hunt, and something he still kept on his person as an ace. If that thing went off in this close proximity then even he would perish, since it would release an onslaught of spatial tears destroying everything in the area.

Verana seemed to realize the danger as well, and energy blasted out from her as she started to activate some protective treasure. Zac was much more straightforward and aimed to kill Smaug before he could set the thing off. But before Zac's swing could reach the man the world lurched, making Zac lose his balance and fall to the ground.

He sprung right back up, but he froze when he realized that the surroundings had completely changed. Everyone was there, but they clearly were no longer in the ruins of the Dragonwing complex. Instead they found themselves in some hidden chamber illuminated by a few Day Crystals.

Zac's eyes immediately snapped to Smaug and he was relieved to see that the **[Void Ball]** was nowhere in sight. But he was still infuriated by that brush with death, and he immediately resumed his advance on him as killing intent started leaking.

"Wait! I needed to make the Union think you were dead, or at least unsure what happened! Otherwise they might have harmed my sister!" Smaug hurriedly explained as he scrambled away from Zac. "So I activated the bomb and used a teleportation treasure to move us to my predesignated spot."

"And you are aware that a **[Void Ball]** disrupts space, making teleportation an extremely dangerous venture even before it sets off?" Verana said with a voice that could turn water to ice. "We are lucky to not arrive here in a dozen pieces."

"Uh..." was all that Smaug said in response, a sheepish smile spreading on his face as he shrunk further back from the four murderous stares. "Well, there was no instruction manual when I got that thing. My bad, truly."

"The bomb should have destroyed everything in the area where we stood. Hopefully, the Union thinks I took most of you out before escaping. This place is my hidden compartment beneath the Underworld Nexus. I have a private Teleportation array here," Smaug continued, clearly wanting to change the subject.

A minute later the group arrived at the hidden teleportation array, with Smaug sporting swollen lips, a crooked nose, and two black eyes giving him the fabled panda-look. Joanna and Mr. Trang immediately stepped through the teleporter after shooting a last glare at the man, leaving the trio of Zac, Verana, and Smaug behind.

Just moments later battle-hardened warriors of three races started to stream through the teleporter, filling the spacious hall that the teleporter was placed in.

"What is going on?" Smaug stammered as his swollen eyes stared at the demons and the Tal-Eladar all emitting powerful auras. "Those are invaders!"

"They were invaders," Zac corrected him. "Now they fight for the Super Brother-Man."

"Shit, that guy must be a real monster," Smaug muttered with some awe in his voice. "If he can even make those bloodthirsty demons fight for him."

"You have no idea."

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 329 - Negotiations**

As Zac oversaw his people streaming out through the teleporter a thought suddenly struck him, and he motioned for Harvath to join him. The demon captain walked over, throwing a curious glance at Smaug and his wretched appearance.

“We’ve learned that there is a second demonkin Incursion in the underworld,” Zac explained after covering them in a sound-isolating array. “Will it be a problem for you?”

Harvath thoughtfully furrowed his brows before he looked at Smaug.

“Does this one possess information about our cousins?” he asked, getting a nod from Zac.

Smaug himself gaped when he stood in front of the demon, making Zac realize the man had never stood face to face with one of the invaders before. It looked like he was hovering between fear of being eaten and fascination with the unknown.

“Do these demons look like us?” Harvath asked, pointing at his face.

“N-No, not really,” Smaug stammered. “Well, they have horns, but I am told that they look a lot bulkier, and don’t have hair?”

“Big black horns?” Harvath probed, “And they are over two meters tall?”

“Yes!” Smaug hurriedly nodded. “And tails.”

“Abyssal Demons,” Harvath said with a grimace before turning to Zac. “Can we speak privately?”

Zac nodded and had Verana take over the task of keeping a watch on Smaug. He still didn’t understand how he could take out items when he was stripped of his possessions, and Zac didn’t want him to take out something else and cause even more trouble.

“What’s going on?” Zac asked when the two were alone.

Harvath hesitated a bit before speaking up.

“Do you know how Demon society works?” he asked.

“Isn’t it a feudal society? Your former clan controls a certain area, but you are part of a larger kingdom. That kingdom ultimately reports to the planet’s leader, though they are largely independent,” Zac asked with some confusion.

“That’s true for our planet, but our planet is just a backwater member of something larger,” Harvath said.

“The Azh’Kir’Khat Horde?” Zac ventured, remembering Verana mentioning the odd name.

“Exactly,” Harvath nodded. “I am not too sure about all the details since clan Azh’Rezak was the lowest rung of what could be called a noble clan, and our information was somewhat limited. But the horde consists of hundreds of demonic species.”

Zac nodded, still not sure what he was getting at.

“The position of the races in the horde depends on their respective powerhouses at the top. The Abyssal Demons has a terrifying leader who controls one of the top ten clans, making them one of the most prominent demonic species in the horde. These Abyssal Demons are likely not part of that clan, but they still hold some sway back home. I fear that if we rout them it might have dire implications for clan Azh’Rezak,” Harvath said with some hesitation.

Zac nodded with a sigh. It was as Zac had feared. He hadn’t expected running into a second demonkin Incursion on Earth, and he knew it might cause trouble for the demons of Port Atwood, or rather their former clan.

Even if they left their clan behind many still had people they cared for back home. Even Ogras had his grandfather. Everyone had friends or relatives who were still part of the clan, and while they chose to cut ties to forge their own path they didn’t want to bring trouble down on the head of Azh’Rezak.

“So what do you think we should do?” Zac finally asked.

“I cannot make this decision for our people,” Harvath finally said. “I think we should call the young master.”

Zac agreed with the demon’s assessment. Exploring the Mystic Realm was important, but they had other pressing matters. It would be for the best to call Ogras over now that it turned out that there were four other Incursions in the underworld that weren’t fire-attuned.

“Fine, I’ll have someone get Ogras,” Zac agreed.

Zac had one of the Valkyries head over to the mystic realm to look for Ogras. Most people still didn’t know that the realm was already being explored, though scattered rumors had started to spread about its existence. But he wanted to keep the details vague, so only the Valkyries and a few other core personnel were allowed close to the center of Mystic Island. It had turned to a restricted area just like his own zone in Port Atwood.

Since he knew it would take some time before Ogras arrived he decided to deal with some other matters. First he went over to Calrin, who seemed extremely impatient to get going.

“I hear we’re taking over a rival business?” Calrin said with excitement in his eyes. “It’s quite exhilarating, all that free money. It’s a lot harder to do something like this when mercantile licenses are involved. We truly should consolidate all budding enterprises before people manage to get their hands on licenses.”

Zac understood what Calrin meant. His own consortium was targeted by a mighty C-grade Clan, but even they had been forced to use trickery and bribes to steadily whittle down the Thayer Consortia for an eventual takeover. Brute force was not an option when mercantile licenses were involved.

“I’ll consider it,” Zac said with a smile. “Do you know if Cosmos Sacks can take different shapes than actual sacks?”

“High-grade spatial tools can look like rings or other jewelry, or anything for that matter,” Calrin said. “But it’s usually not worth the trouble unless you’re a true magnate. That kind of spatial tools requires actual insight into the Dao of Space to create, making them over a thousand times more expensive. Why do you ask?”

“That guy over there managed to take out an item from thin air. I am trying to figure out how,” Zac said as he glanced at Smaug.

“Oh,” Calrin said thoughtfully before a small dagger suddenly appeared in his hand from nowhere, without touching one of his Cosmos Sacks. “Like this?”

“Yes, exactly like that,” Zac said with surprise. “How did you do it?”

“He has a mercantile class or at least a hybrid class. We get actual skills that work like Cosmos Sacks, allowing us to hide and protect our wares as we travel. A Cosmos Sack can be stolen, but our personal space can’t.”

“Makes sense, he’s the second-place holder on the wealth ladder,” Zac nodded. “Is there any way to prevent it?”

“Sure, if you have energy shackles,” Calrin nodded. “If he can’t circulate his energy he won’t be able to activate his skill.”

Zac’s eyes lit up and he immediately produced the chain that he stowed away when he saved Thea from the Medhin clan.

“Will this work?” Zac asked as he handed it over to Calrin.

“It’s not a high-quality restraint, but it should suffice against someone like him,” Calrin nodded. “I’ll handle it. I am a bit curious about him anyway.”

Zac nodded and let Calrin walk away with the chain. Soon enough everyone had entered the Underworld, but Zac chose to wait for Ogras to arrive before deciding on the next course of action. He instead erected an array and sat down to absorb a few Miasma crystals to restore his energy reserves and rest.

He didn't know how long he had rested when he sensed a person close-by, and he saw the familiar form of Ogras when he opened his eyes. He temporarily deactivated the array and let the demon enter. Ogras looked annoyed for some reason, making Zac look at him curiously.

"Not making headway with the Mystic Realm? It's only been a day," Zac said.

"I can't believe those Abyssal assholes got placed in the middle of a mountain of resources with no enemies in sight while I got stuck with you," Ogras muttered, obviously having been appraised of the situation in the underworld. "The Ruthless Heavens is truly playing favorites. I say we take down that incursion first."

"And that is your unbiased opinion?" Zac snorted.

"Not really, but it makes sense. The sooner we kick those people out of here the sooner the demons will be able to act in the open. Most demons would be hesitant to show their faces with them lurking in the area," Ogras shrugged.

"Agreed. We'll keep the demons hidden while we deal with the Union," Zac said.

"How will we split the profits?" Ogras asked.

This was something that Zac had thought about earlier. He was currently the de-facto owner of pretty much everything in Port Atwood, but that wasn't a long-term solution. He didn't plan on becoming a tyrant with people toiling under his hegemony.

"All matters related to the underworld will be considered a separate company from Port Atwood and the Thayer Consortia. Port Atwood will own half and the Academy will own 10% to become self-sustaining," Zac said. "You, Verana, and Calrin can figure out what to do with the rest."

"Isn't it a bit early to start giving those people a bunch of benefits?" Ogras said with a frown as he nodded at a clump of Tal-Eladar close-by. "Furthermore, Calrin should be a trading partner rather than a shareholder."

"As I thought, you are up to no good the moment you arrive," a frosty voice said as Verana walked straight through the array.

"No manners, spying on a private conversation," Ogras retorted with a straight face.

"Wait, where's Smaug?" Zac said with a frown.

"I knocked him out when I saw this demon approach you with greed in his eyes and deceit in his heart," Verana said. "I had no choice but to listen in to make sure he didn't do anything stupid."

"Be careful, I don't want to turn the guy into a vegetable. I've already knocked him out once, it can't be good for you for that to happen over and over," Zac said with a shake of his head. "What's your proposal?"

"Twenty percent to my clan, ten each to the demons and the merchant," Verana said.

"Negotiation comes from a place of power. You're barely bringing anything to the table and want twenty percent?" Ogras snorted.

"Do you?" Verana retorted. "Your people won't fight against the demons. My people are arguing about who gets to be the vanguard."

"But the beasts of your soldiers will be limited in the underworld. Besides, this isn't just about how much effort each party exerts in the underworld. The citizens of

Port Atwood has slaved away for months with hundreds dying. The resources of this place will be used to repay those who have bled for our force,” Ogras retorted.

Zac sighed as he listened to the two bicker, and things only got more chaotic when the Sky Gnome joined in. In the end the Demons went victorious from the battle, largely thanks to Zac’s support. They would get 25% of the shares, with Verana getting 10% and Calrin 5%.

Calrin wasn’t happy, but he would still make a lot of money from the Underworld since he would become the sole trading partner for the Underworld Venture, while also setting up a network of Thayer Consortia shops through the Underworld to rid all the wealthy Cultivators of their Crystals.

Verana was less than enthused with the results as well, but what Ogras said was true. The demons had risked their lives for Port Atwood over and over without any payment apart from getting to pick a skill. They were long overdue to reap some benefits for their work.

“So, what’s the plan? Are we heading straight to this Union?” Verana asked.

“Get Smaug first,” Zac said.

Soon the merchant was dragged over, and he sat down opposite Zac after throwing Verana a sullen look.

“Isn’t it a bunch of merchants without a license to protect them?” Ogras said after throwing Smaug a dismissive glance. “Just kick down the front door and kill everyone who disagrees with the change in management.”

“No! They might kill my sister if you storm their headquarters like that!” Smaug shouted with worry. “Their Arrays will be able to hinder you for a minute or two, who knows what they will do in the meantime?”

“Fine. I’ll save the girl first, then Mr. Black and Snake Girl will kick in the front door,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes.

“Snake girl?” Verana said with a frosty tone. “Just, keep it up.”

“We need proof what you’ve said is true,” Joanna cut in before the two leaders started bickering again. “Do you know where they keep slaves, and where your sister is kept?”

“Yes to both!” Smaug nodded enthusiastically. “I have created a private network, I can bring us within an hour’s travel from one of their transit camps where they keep slaves before they are sold off. My sister is likely kept at their headquarters.”

“Fine, we’ll take a look at the camp before taking down their headquarters. This group is enough for that, no need to bring the soldiers. They’ll be sent to stabilize the various mines and subsidiaries after we’ve made our move,” Zac said. “Agreed?”

The others nodded in agreement, with Ogras and Verana adding a few suggestions. Zac closed down the array and the group immediately walked toward the teleportation array. Suddenly their group grew with three people as Emily and two helpless Valkyries joined in. He down looked at the teenager for a second, and only got a stubborn look in return. He sighed and nodded slightly, drawing a wide grin from the girl.

Less than an hour later the group stood in a cave mouth, overlooking a large encampment twenty meters below them. An illusion array had already been installed by the exit, obscuring it from the people walking along the streets in the transit camp.

“Animals,” Joanna growled as she looked at the scene with wide eyes.

Zac slightly nodded in agreement, anger burning in his heart as he listened to the cries from the shackled people below.

“We proceed. The Union will cease to exist today.”

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### **Chapter 330 - Transit Camp**

The scene below was even worse than Zac had feared when he first heard Smaug mention the slave trade. There were long rows of people kept in place by fetters, placed like cattle in small enclosures. All four races could be spotted amongst the slaves, though humans were by far the most common.

Groups of slavers patrolled the area, and there were robust fortifications at all the exits to prevent any slaves from escaping from the cave. There was also a pile of corpses lying in plain view in the encampment, just a few meters from the pens where the slaves were kept. Perhaps they were left there as a deterrent, or perhaps they simply hadn't had time to throw the corpses out to the beasts in the open Underworld.

The Underworld was quite different from how Zac had imagined it, and it was only after traveling for the last hour he realized that the Underworld wasn't an intricate network of tunnels and caverns. Most of the Underworld was actually an open expanse.

The prevalent belief amongst those who were teleported here was that the underworld was between two layers of tectonic plates or just between two rock sediments. It created a continuous subterranean landscape that sometimes had a ceiling height of thousands of meters, and sometimes it was so narrow that one had to crouch to move forward.

There were even forests and arable farmland, though the things that could be grown were generally different types of edible moss or mushrooms. Rivers ran across the hilly grounds, and it if wasn't for the utter lack of sunlight, one might have forgotten they were underground. Instead, everything was illuminated by luminescent plants, creating a mesmerizing display of colorful spots that lit up the boundless darkness.

Most towns were constructed in caves like the one they were spectating through, as the open world was quite dangerous for most people. Enormous packs of mutated bats roved in the sky, and all kinds of subterranean beasts walked the ground.

Even the insects had mutated and turned into monstrous creatures in the underworld, perhaps due to the massive amount of Nexus Crystals boosting the energy in the atmosphere. Getting caught in ten-meter tall spiderwebs or skewered by a scorpion pincer were both real risks in the underworld.

The extremely solid rock walls of the caverns made for a natural defense against the horrors of the underworld, and people only had to fortify the cave exits to create a safe space. Top tier caves were the ones who possessed a natural ecosystem to sustain them, like the cave the Underworld Nexus was built inside, with its own lake.

It was this reliance on caves that the Flame Golems exploited in with their ruthless tactics. They simply blocked up the few exits in the town before flooding it with lava. A few of the citizens had time to rush to a teleportation array, but most towns didn't possess one and could only helplessly wait to get swallowed.

The tunnel they stood in was something that Smaug himself had created to spy on the slaving activities of the Union. It ran for hundreds of meters from a hidden spot in the open underworld, with both sides hidden by arrays. The walls of the tunnel looked oddly melted, and Zac guessed that Smaug had used some treasure to somehow melt the extremely hard stones.

Being reminded that the mysterious fellow might be useful during the fight Zac released the energy restraints that shackled Smaug. Of course only after giving him a stern warning to not mess around.

But any interest in finding out Smaug's hidden means was long pushed to the back of Zac's head as he looked down at the misery beneath them. He was just about to jump down and start a rampage when the energy in the camp started to fluctuate.

"The teleportation array just activated," Ogras commented as he looked down with curiosity.

This transit camp was located close to the human incursion since the invaders they traded with weren't able to use teleportation arrays. This also meant that whoever was arriving was not an invader, but rather someone from the Union. The fluctuations soon ended and a small group of people emerged from a building not too far away.

"Here, use this," Smaug suddenly said, producing yet another ball from nowhere.

"A temporal destabilizer?" Ogras said with surprise. "Where did you get your hands on this?"

"A what?" Zac asked with confusion as he looked down on the thing in Smaug's hand.

"The teleporters transport people through subspace or whatever the fantasy equivalent is," Smaug said. "If you crush this ball within 50 meters of the teleporter subspace will be made unstable and safeguards in the array will make it impossible to activate for 10 minutes."

Zac shot a glance at Ogras who nodded in confirmation.

"Can you get your hands on more of this?" Zac asked.

It was an extremely convenient item that could change the course of a battle. It would make sure that his target wasn't able to escape, or that his activities wouldn't leak.

"This is my last one, I got it as a reward for a quest," Smaug said with a shake of his head.

Zac looked into Smaug's eyes for a few seconds, but he couldn't tell if the man was lying or not. In any case, there would be time to find out more after the situation in the underworld was stabilized. So he grabbed the ball with a nod, and Zac leaped straight out from their hiding spot immediately after, with Emily throwing a fiery axe into his back.

Zac soared straight toward the large stone building the group of people emerged from. It was likely the place that housed the teleportation array, as it was guarded by a squad of soldiers armed to their teeth. With Zac's power, he had no problem jumping all the way to the structure, and he ripped through the air toward the soldiers like a falling star.

"Attack!" one of the guards shouted with panic in his eyes as he spotted Zac in the air, but the next moment he was crushed by the massive weight of Zac's shield as it slammed straight into him.

Zac's landing killed three of the guards and threw the others in the air from the kinetic energy in his landing. He immediately crushed the orb in his hand before taking out his sword. **[Hunger]** keened as it turned into a grey streak, dismembering the remaining seven guards in a flash.

With his attributes, it didn't matter that he barely possessed any offensive skills in his current class. Against random warriors on Earth he was essentially an unkillable monster. The commotion alerted the soldiers stationed in the camp, and they streamed

toward his location. There were actually over a hundred of them, most having stayed out of sight.

Zac didn't mind that as he instead turned his attention toward the group who had just arrived. It was two middle-aged men dressed in some sort of defensive gear, but it was clear they were not warriors. They had no weapons and they did not emit any dangerous aura, making Zac believe they were businessmen from the Union.

This belief was only strengthened by the four bodyguards who accompanied the two. The moment Zac had arrived they created a protective barrier in front of the merchants, and they didn't care in the slightest that Zac dismembered their presumptive allies. They were only interested in protecting the two VIP's.

"Yet another idealistic fool trying to rescue these wretched people?" one of the merchants sneered.

Zac didn't answer, instead unleashing both his aura and **[Fields of Despair]**. The insidious energies from the splinter in his mind were already magnifying the rage in his heart, and it somehow entered his aura as well. It made his killing intent almost palpable, and a few soldiers actually started to bleed from their noses or ears when they were buffeted by his aura.

The soldiers were obviously not part of some elite force, and the hastily erected line the warriors just formed immediately collapsed, with over half heedlessly fleeing from the towering killing intent that radiated from Zac. The four bodyguards were better off, but they still slowly backed away, likely looking for an opportunity to escape as well.

"Activate the array!" one of the merchants screamed in fright, the arrogant demeanor replaced with abject horror.

An immense weight immediately descended upon Zac, but how could some random restrictive array stop his onslaught? He had ripped through even stronger arrays when he was looting summit palaces during the hunt, and since then he had only grown even more monstrous.

He took a step forward with a grunt, and a loud snapping sound could be heard as a shockwave was released from his body. The sound came from the array collapsing from brute force, and the sight was so shocking that one of the merchants fell to his knees in despair.

"Wait!" the still standing merchant screamed when Zac started to approach them. "We can pay you! One hundred million Nexus Coins! Just let us leave with our lives!"

Zac was completely indifferent to the pleas, and he steadily took step after step toward the group. The stationed soldiers of the town had given up any idea of sticking their noses into the battle, and one after one they started to flee toward the various exits.

But long before anyone managed to escape through one of the tunnels they fell over with large holes in their bodies, caused by some unseen attacks. Zac noted the shadowy spears that appeared and quickly disappeared though, and he realized that Ogras and the others were containing everyone.

He didn't care that Ogras killed these soldiers at all since they had been complicit to the horrors of this place. If he had been in his human form he would have already mowed down that rabble with a few fractal edges. But he was currently out of ranged attacks since his shield's spike attack still hadn't recharged.

"Two hundred million! And precious cultivation pills!" the merchant screamed when Zac ignored him.

“You forfeited your lives the moment you betrayed humanity,” Zac said a hollow voice. “I do not need your blood money.”

The four guards disappeared the moment Zac finished his sentence, but they immediately appeared all around him. Their weapons were already sailing toward his body the moment they reappeared, and it looked like they tried a surprise attack as a last-ditch-effort.

The four guards were likely around level 40 to 45 from their auras, just a handful of levels shy from entering the ladder. But Zac also sensed that their auras were, for a lack of a better word, hollow. He hadn't sensed anything like it before, but he had learned from Alyn that it likely meant their levels were mostly propped up by pills and crystals rather than battle.

All four of them were sword wielders, and it even looked like they possessed the same skill. The swords lit up in blue flames as they sailed toward Zac's body from four different directions, but Zac opted to not even respond to the attacks, instead only activating the Dao of Hardness across his body.

Four specters appeared and launched attacks the moment the swords landed on his body. It was **[Deathwish]** that activated, starting the dance of death. Zac could easily have intercepted the attacks with his sword, but he wanted to see the effect of his skill against cultivators since he hadn't sensed any real danger from the attacks.

The results were surprisingly different even though each attack was the same. One of the guards was taken completely by surprise and didn't even react when a spectral sword slit his throat open. He fell down on the ground, and Zac knew the man would bleed out in less than a minute unless he got immediate medical attention.

The second guard managed to react in time and angled his body as he was being attacked, changing the trajectory of the blade as it entered his body. Instead of getting his heart pierced he only got a lung punctured. It was still a pretty bad wound, but not lethal with the existence of healing pills.

A golden shield appeared around the last two warriors, completely blocking the reflected attack. The shield came from a bracer they both wore. They originally had four crystals inlaid, but one of them cracked when the shield blocked the attack.

Pleased with the result of **[Dethwish]** Zac killed the man on the ground with a stomp as he decapitated the wounded guard with a swing of **[Hunger]**. His own wounds were negligible, and he only needed to pat his robe a few times to snuff out the flames. A small amount of black ichor ran down his throat from one of the swords hitting his neck, but the swing had barely managed to break his skin.

The remaining two guards looked at Zac with despair, knowing that they never would be able to kill Zac even if he didn't put up any resistance. Zac's body was already far sturdier than that of the Corpse Lord he fought during the beast waves, and only the strongest warriors on Earth would be able to wound him by now.

The two immediately started to run away, they were soon rebuffed by two lightning-quick stabs from a long spear. It was Joanna who had joined the battle, and Nenotheop's spear was a blur in her hands as she unleashed a barrage of attacks at the two guards.

Zac stopped in his tracks when he saw the Valkyrie take over, and he looked with interest at how deftly she handled her weapon. The two bodyguards assaulted at her like rabid dogs since she was standing in the way of their escape, and flames danced around them as they tried everything to cut her down. However, she was like an impenetrable spear wall, not budging an inch.

The remaining defensive charges on the guards' bracers were expended in less than 20 seconds, and a few seconds later the last guard fell, his throat torn open by a

quick stab from Joanna. The Valkyrie's skills weren't flashy but they were direct and lethal, without any frills or unnecessary motion. Every move she performed was to kill or maim with as little energy expenditure as possible.

When the last of the elite guards fell a suffocated silence spread through the camp, with no one daring to speak up. There was a small group of soldiers who stood rooted at their spot, neither daring to retreat or advance, and the merchants looked like their souls had left their bodies, blankly staring at their downed bodyguards. Even the slaves were completely silent, peeking at the proceedings with sunken eyes.

But suddenly the silence was broken by a shocked scream from Emily.

"Millie!"

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**Chapter 331 - Truths and Lies**

Zac, who was about to head over to interrogate the two terrified merchants stopped in his tracks when he heard Emily's cry. He turned over with confusion to see the teenager clawing at the manacles binding a malnourished teenager.

"Don't let those two move," Zac said to Joanna, who nodded in confirmation.

He walked over to Emily and with a tug ripped the chains apart, freeing the young woman.

"What's going on?" he asked as he turned to Emily.

"This is Millie, Camilla. She went to the same school as me. She's from Allentown!" she said with some panic in her eyes.

Zac understood the thoughts running through her head. If one of her schoolmates had found herself captured by the Union, then it wasn't a great sign for the well-being of her siblings. They might even be in the large pile of corpses.

"Calm down, we'll get to the bottom of things," Zac said as he took out a healing pill.

Millie wasn't truly wounded, but she was clearly malnourished and it looked like she had been whipped judging by the tears in her tunic's back. But mostly she seemed to have shut down from trauma. She looked at Zac with a blank stare and only took the pill when he directly put it in her hands.

"This is a healing pill," Zac said before taking a step back, aware of the immense pressure he had just released across the whole town.

"Millie, it's me, Emily Larkin from Southfield High," she said as she handed Millie a canteen. "Hurry and take the pill to regain your strength."

The mention of the school seemed to wake the girl out from her stupor, and she rapidly blinked at Emily.

"Emily? From class B? I never saw you in the tutorial, what's going on?" the girl asked, making some of the close-by slaves surreptitiously look over.

"I was too young to enter the tutorial. We come from the surface," Emily explained after receiving a nod from Zac. "We work for the Super Brother-Man, and we have come to close the incursions in the Underworld. But when we arrived we heard about the Union capturing people and selling them to the invaders, so we came here first to free you."

The words were like a match igniting a fire, and a wave of clamors for help rose from the captives. The situation felt a bit annoying, but when Zac looked around he couldn't find the demon or Verana anywhere. Both were keeping a low profile as to not spread any rumors about invaders before their position was completely solidified.

"What about the other cultivators of Allentown? Where are they?" Emily pressed on. "Do you know where my siblings are? Oscar and Johanna."

"The town we were dropped off in was destroyed by the flame golems four months ago," Millie said with a sigh. "But most of us managed to flee since it had so many exits. Some of us settled in various towns, others joined the Union or the Council. I think your sister joined the Council to fight the invaders."

"And my brother? Do you know what happened to Oscar, Oscar Larkin?" Emily hurriedly asked.

"He... Died..." Millie said, looking down at the ground. "He joined the town guard after the tutorial ended. The flame golems killed all the guards to cause chaos and slow our response."

Emily slumped down on the ground when she heard the news, a blank stare in her face. Zac sighed with a pang of sadness in his heart. He knew had been the most likely outcome from the start with how few that were still alive after the integration.

"Let's find your sister. She'll know what happened for sure," Zac said as he crouched down next to Emily.

The teenager quickly perked up, desperately grasping on to his words.

"You're right! Millie, you never saw Oscar die, right?" she said, getting a hesitant nod in response. "He might have survived!"

Zac personally wasn't so sure, especially considering the actions of her sister. Joining the Council to fight the invaders sounded like something a person looking for revenge would do. But he didn't say anything, not wanting to dash her hopes. After giving the teenager a comforting pat he walked over to Joanna, who still kept guard over the terrified merchants.

Emily's words had been heard by quite a few people in the camp, and the clamors from the slaves were getting louder and louder. Conversely, the guards had turned even more subdued, looking like they wished they could simply sink into the ground.

"Can you handle this?" Zac asked with a wave toward the ruckus when he came back.

"Sure, but could you silence them first?" Joanna said.

Zac nodded, and another burst of his aura erupted through the camp, immediately cutting all conversations short. Joanna winked at him before jumping up at a rooftop, making her visible to all the captured slaves.

"I am Joanna Thompson, Ranked at the 96th spot of the power ladder," she said, her voice echoing across the camp. "As some of you heard, we come from the surface. Zachary Atwood, also known as the Super Brother-Man is currently busy closing the Incursions on the surface, leading humanity in the battle against the invaders. But after hearing of the plight of the Underworld he spared no expense to find a way to reach this place. We have come to liberate you all, and rebuff the underworld invaders."

Another wave of exclamations immediately erupted in the crowd. Some were jubilant while others were confused. There were also a decent number of people who suspiciously looked at the proceedings, perhaps not trusting such a fantastical tale.

"You might be skeptical, but let me show you something," Joanna said, and the next moment a System screen appeared in front of her.

It was the quest that she and the other Valkyries received after closing three Incursions, where they were supposed to assist in closing as many Incursions as possible within a month. It already showed the progress of four, meaning that golem incursion she assisted in closing before she received the quest was counted as well.

“As you can see I have personally assisted the forces of Port Atwood in closing four incursions, just one shy of the total number of Incursions in the underworld. The Super Brother-Man has closed even more, sometimes only relying on his own power,” she explained. “I only show you this to prove the truth of my words.”

“However, when we finally arrived at the Underworld we quickly learned of the despicable acts of the Union, enslaving our people and siding with our enemies. The Super Brother-Man wouldn’t stand for such a thing, so from today forth the Union will cease to exist,” Joanna said, looking like a heroic general with the spear in her hand.

“So please be patient. We will help everyone here, but it will take some time,” she finished.

Zac felt a bit embarrassed by the grandiose speech, and he didn’t really know what to say when the Valkyrie jumped back down on the ground.

“Lord Atwood works so hard, but never claims any credit,” Joanna said as she pointedly looked at Zac. “Someone needed to speak up for him.”

He coughed and nodded in thanks before turning to the merchants.

“You- The Union are no traitors! We have worked hard to protect the people in the underworld!” one of the men said, but his eyes were skittering and the fear was clear on his face.

Zac didn’t bother responding only taking a pointed glance at the rows upon rows of captured slaves.

“We are facing an extinction event,” the merchant said. “If we didn’t provide people to the incursions they would start raiding our settlements, resulting in a far larger loss of life. Besides, these people are convicted criminals!”

“Lies!” one of the slaves roared in anger. “We were only too poor to pay the protection fees of the Union.”

After calling over Smaug and questioning both the merchants and a few of the slave’s Zac finally got a full understanding of the situation. In the beginning, the Union truly only sold murderers, rapists, and other heinous criminals to the Incursions. It was a simple solution to get rid of dangerous people while also appeasing a very strong enemy.

But the Incursion’s demands for slaves were insatiable, and the Union ran out of criminals soon enough. So eventually they started to capture anyone that didn’t provide any benefits to them or was unable to pay the fees to live within their cities, convicting them with fabricated charges.

When that wasn’t enough they started to target whole settlements that wanted to relocate to the Union for safety. The slaves in the transit camp, including Emily’s schoolmate, were almost all of the latter type, with a few enemies of the Union thrown in.

Both of the merchants were just middle-management sent to inspect the latest batch of slaves before delivery, and they knew nothing of the inner workings of the Union or the situation of Smaug’s sister. They were also only level 35, their strength completely propped up by Crystals.

Zac knew just how many crystals were needed to reach such a high level. The Nexus Crystals were a good boost for recovery, but they were only really useful for leveling right at the beginning of a stage. Even the E-Grade crystals he got his hands on

were only enough for a scant few levels, and Zac had already confirmed that E-Grade crystals were still quite rare in the underworld as well. They were not something that these two people could get their hands on.

Soon enough there was nothing else the two merchants could divulge, and Zac ended their lives with two quick swipes of his sword before turning to Smaug. The merchants had already been doomed the moment they started to dabble in slavery, and the kills didn't even register in Zac's mind.

"How do we get to New London?" Zac asked Smaug who looked down at the two lifeless bodies with some shock.

"I own another hidden outpost an hour's travel away," Smaug quickly explained after he roused himself. "We should hurry. They have likely already realized that this place has been conquered. Hopefully they'll assume the invaders got tired of paying for the slaves and raided the place."

"Couldn't you have placed your teleporters closer?" Zac muttered with some complaint.

"It's not possible, don't you know? If I placed it any closer a quest would start where only one town could remain within a month," Smaug said with a shake of his head. "Towns of competing factions can't be too close."

"Oh, there's such a thing?" Zac said with some surprise.

"It's true, and the distance only increases as the rank of the town is upgraded," Verana said as she walked over. "Lower-ranked towns can be pretty close, but capitals requires over a week of travel, limiting the number of kingdoms on a planet."

Zac nodded in understanding before dragging Smaug over to the building with the teleporter. The spatial disruption had already dissipated, which allowed Zac to bring a squad of soldiers over to handle the situation in the camp. Of course, the demons still stayed behind as to not expose their identities.

The slaves would be transported to the Underworld Nexus for now, since staying at the transit camp wasn't an option. The camp was placed extremely close to the Incursion, and the invaders could come knocking at any moment. Zac felt there was no need to expend resources to defend it either since it held no strategic value.

The group of Ogras, Verana, Joanna, Smaug, and Emily once again joined Zac and left through the teleporter after the soldiers had taken charge of the slaves, quickly freeing them and sending them away. And thanks to Smaug they managed to quickly and effortlessly infiltrate New London. Smaug clearly had all kinds of contacts and confidantes, as they entered the large city through a hidden passageway that led into the cellar of a bar. When the owner noticed the group walking up the stairs he pretended to see nothing and simply went about his day.

Soon the group stood in an alley some distance from the sprawling headquarters of the Union. It was actually the Admiralty House of London that had been randomized to the Underworld along with a large section of downtown London.

New London was the central hub of The Union, and it was one of the few large settlements that were placed in the open Underworld rather than in a town cave. This had benefited the Union quite a bit when the Flame Golems went on the offensive, flooding one cave after another. Hundreds of thousands of settlers had wanted to relocate to New London, rather braving the Underworld beasts than the Fire Golems.

The large conglomerate had claimed a large number of former Government buildings and turned them into their own. The old world government itself had quickly fallen with the return of the cultivators, and after a couple of tumultuous weeks, the Union became the premier force in the town. And with the help of the resources they got from the slave trade their grasp of the town was rock solid.

“I’ll go fetch the girl,” Ogras said without any preamble, holding a picture of a young girl in his hand.

“Are you sure you can do this?” Smaug said with worry as he took out a handful of things from his hidden space. “I have a few items-“

Ogras immediately snatched all of the treasures, though Zac suspected that the demon wouldn’t need help to infiltrate some old-world structure with no real powerhouses standing guard. And just as Zac suspected the demon was back just twenty minutes later, with a squirming sack over his shoulder. Smaug immediately ran over to release his sister, but Ogras suddenly summoned his black spear and used it to keep the man at bay.

“We need to have a little chat. This brat has been a captive for weeks, not a few hours as you said.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 332 - New Management**

“We’ve been used as a tool from the start,” Ogras snorted as he glared at Smaug, some killing intent leaking from his body. “I knew something was off about this brat.”

Zac glared at the young man as well, quickly putting two and two together. Smaug had mixed truths and lies in order to push Zac and his group into a collision course with the Union. The fact that the conglomerate sold people as slaves to the invaders had already been proven, but whether they ever pressured Smaug to attack his party was another matter entirely.

“Why?” was all that Zac said with a cold voice, somewhat regretting they had removed his shackles so that he would be able to keep up with them as they traveled.

“My sister is innocent in this. I saw an opportunity. I couldn’t be sure how you would act in the underworld, so I needed to create a conflict with these assholes. But they deserve to be run to the ground,” Smaug said, some ruthlessness flashing in his eyes before his face returned to that of a hapless youngster.

“You asshole!” a muffled voice came from within the sack. “You’ve been tricking people again? You’ve already got me kidnapped, now you’re going to get me killed.”

Ogras glanced at the sack with some humor before putting the girl down on the ground and untied her cover. A beautiful girl in her teens emerged, and her energetic emerald eyes were an obvious sign she was related to Smaug. She had long black hair with a thin braid running down her side, and she wore a hipster ensemble from the old world. A glance with **[Inquisive Eye]** showed that her name was Rima and that she was level 25.

She was a completely different sight from the dirty and bedraggled slaves they had just emancipated, and it looked like she hadn’t suffered any injustice in captivity. She glared at Smaug for a second before pushing closer to a bemused Ogras.

“I’m sorry about my useless brother, Mr. Knight. He’s an idiot and a liar, but he’s a good guy,” she said, looking up at the demon with adoring eyes.

“Mr. Knight?” the demon echoed with confusion.

“Well, you’re my handsome knight in shining armor. You broke into the stronghold of the bad guys and saved me,” she explained, showing no inclination to walk over to her brother.

“Sorry girl, you’re a bit young for my taste,” Ogras said with a snort, but after a brief pause looked her up and down once more. “Come back in five years.”

“Animal,” Joanna and Verana echoed in unison, but the demon was completely unaffected by their ire.

“Rima, don’t be like that,” Smaug entreated, looking a bit embarrassed. “I did what I had to do to keep us safe.”

“Stop using me to justify your shady business practices,” Rima said with a roll of her eyes. “Do you know how it feels to be mentioned as the reason for you turning into a drug lord?”

“You’re a drug dealer?” Zac said with a frown. “Is that why you’re so rich?”

“I worked in, uh, pain management before the integration,” Smaug said with a cough. “I haven’t dabbled in that since the world turned crazy though, even though there is a massive demand from people who want to escape reality.”

“Mr. Mask, is it true you work for the Super Brother-Man?” Rima said, looking at Zac with interest. “I heard from Mr. Knight.”

“I’m Mr. Black,” Zac said. “And yes.”

“Mr. Black? How is that any better?” Rima muttered, before perking up again. “Is the Super Brother-Man handsome? How old is he? Is he single?”

“Already abandoning me, girl?” Ogras grunted, though he clearly was just messing around.

“Enough,” Zac said and knocked the girl unconscious with a burst of his aura before taking out **[Hunger]**. “You attacked us, using arrays that would kill most people. I was already considering what punishment you deserved when I thought you acted under duress. Why shouldn’t I kill you right now?”

“I am useful!” Smaug hurriedly said, some fear appearing on his face. “I can provide all sorts of information on the Underworld. I possess riches, and know where to find more.”

“We can get information from the Union and the Council and we already possess more wealth than you,” Ogras laughed. “Try again.”

“I… I’ll work for the Super Brother-Man as well!” Smaug said. “You should understand I’m good with money from my Ladder ranking.”

“People willing to work for The Super Brother-Man would be able to fill a country. Why should we risk letting a shady person like you close to our business interests?” Joanna asked.

“I’ll sign a contract of servitude! I’ll make you money to the best of my abilities for 50 years!” he said, finally starting to panic.

“Sounds annoying to have you around. Who knows what hidden troubles you would cause,” Zac shrugged, lifting his sword as if he wanted to decapitate him just like the two merchants.

“Wait! I have an incomplete license with a limited product line!” Smaug screamed as he backed away.

“Five hundred years,” Zac said, the sword frozen mid-swing.

“Wh-“ Smaug was about to exclaim, but forcibly stopped himself. “Five hundred, happy to be on board.”

“Good. Joanna will be your handler,” Zac said, “She is under a contract of servitude as well, so signing with her will be like signing with the Super Brother-Man.”

Smaug sighed, and soon enough he had entered a 500-year contract with Joanna. Smaug clearly had a complicated relationship with the truth, and Zac didn’t want the

man to know of his real identity. Having Joanna sign the contract still counted toward his contract limit though, and with all the Valkyries he only had four spots remaining.

Luckily the contracts to keep silent about his identity was a simple agreement between two parties, and those one could enter as many as one pleased. However, since it was a contract of reciprocity he needed to give something in return, which in his case was a monthly stipend for as long as the contract was active.

Zac looked at Smaug's forlorn figure with some humor, knowing things were not really as they seemed. It might have appeared as though the man was forced to sign the contract, but that was simply impossible.

Unless the man wanted to form a contract and work for him the contract wouldn't even materialize, proving that it was all a ploy. Zac guessed that the only thing that Smaug hadn't planned was to share the fact that he had an incomplete license.

In the end, he got his hand on a helper that he sorely needed. He had wanted to find someone to manage his business interests while he focused on cultivation. As time passed his ventures only got more numerous, and someone needed to take charge. Zac himself didn't know exactly what he owned any longer as his empire kept expanding through conquest and development.

"What's an incomplete license?" Zac asked when the contract was signed.

"I have a mercantile class as you already know," Smaug shrugged, his sad demeanor already gone. "I got a quest to rise as high as possible on the Wealth ladder, and the license was the reward. I think I would have gotten a real license if it wasn't for your boss keeping the first spot for himself. Uh, our boss."

"What's the difference?" Zac asked, and even Ogras perked up in interest.

Calrin had been pretty fleeting in his explanations about the mercantile system since the start, likely wanting to keep details vague so that others wouldn't know when he was scamming them. Ogras had no idea either, only knowing it enabled intergalactic trade as long as you fulfilled certain criteria.

"The Mercantile System is like a hidden website where you need to unlock every ware one by one. A Mercantile License is your login to the main website, but it is only the start from what I understand. You still need to perform various tasks to upgrade the license to give access to better wares and rates. My license is limited, meaning that it only lasts for 100 years, and I can only buy wares from a corporation called **[Stumpbugle Bombs]**," Smaug explained.

"That's some name," Ogras whistled.

"It's a goblin company, and they make weird arrays, like the ones I... presented to you earlier," Smaug coughed. "They only sell consumable weapons, from simple arrays to weapons of mass destruction. I can't access those though."

"We'll find some work for you. Remember, if we find you're working against the interest of Port Atwood..." Zac said, lifting **[Hunger]** again.

"I know, I know," Smaug said with a disarming smile.

Zac would look further into that Smaug could bring to the table at a later date, but for now he wanted to focus on the Union. He saw no reason to change his plan just because Smaug had been lying. The Union still needed to be stopped.

Ogras had already made some preliminary reconnaissance while scouring the Union headquarters for Rima, and as luck would have it the top brass of the Union was holding an emergency meeting in response to suddenly losing the transit camp.

Since the hostage was saved Zac felt there to be no need for any subversion as he walked toward the main gate of the newly erected wall that ran around the

headquarters. It was guarded by over twenty cultivators, and the Union had even got their hands on some nasty-looking turrets placed upon the wall walk.

“Halt! This is a restricted area,” a guard shouted as the large mounted weapons turned toward Zac.

“The Super Brother-Man has judged the Union to be working with the foreign invaders. Stand down and you will not be hurt. We are only interested in the leaders,” Zac said as his aura billowed out.

The guards were shocked by the unexpected turn and looked at Zac like he was a primordial beast. It was no surprise since the strongest warriors of Earth could barely release an aura by now, whereas Zac’s aura was heavy enough to almost feel like solid matter. Worse yet, it was rife with killing intent he had accumulated through his constant battles.

A few of the cultivators immediately ran away, not giving their companions a second look. But a few stood still with indecision on their faces. Seeing the guards not stand down Zac rolled his eyes and took out two metal balls from his cosmos sack, and threw them at the two turrets in quick succession. The balls ripped through the air and the weapons instantly turned to scrap metal.

The display of might was all that was needed to sway the last few guards who remained, and Zac was able to push open the gate without having to kill anyone. But a shimmering wall suddenly stopped him in his tracks, and Zac frowned when he realized someone had activated a defensive array.

Zac quickly realized it was just a standard array bought from the Town Shop, and his right arm started swelling from infusing it with **[Unholy Strike]**. He didn’t even deign to push the skill to its limit before he punched out with enough force to make the air distort around his fist.

The barrier shuddered and large cracks started to spread, but the barrier held fast. However, Zac only snorted and punched out again, making the shield completely crumble this time. Ogras, now completely shrouded in shadows, and the others walked through as this was the most normal thing in the world, leaving a shocked Smaug behind.

“Monster,” Smaug muttered from behind as he carried his unconscious sister.

The group ripped through the building without any resistance. Any time a guard or an employee saw their approach they needlessly ran away, no one even pretending to muster a resistance. It proved how fragile a force like the Union was in the face of true power. There were many weaker forces around, but many would put up a far fiercer resistance against invaders.

Zac followed Ogras’ directions, but it was barely needed as he could sense a clump of weak auras gathered together at the same spot. With their superhuman speeds, it took them less than 20 seconds before they barged into a large hall, where almost forty people were seated.

These were the leaders of the Union, and behind them stood just as many warriors with somewhat impressive auras. But both hesitation and unwillingness to act was clear on their faces as Zac, Verana, and Ogras all released their auras. It submerged the whole building in oppressive might, and most immediately threw their weapons on the ground in hopes of being spared.

A few tried to unleash desperate attacks on Zac’s group, perhaps knowing their sins were too heavy to be spared if they were captured. But they were quickly and ruthlessly dealt with, leaving a dozen corpses on the ground.

Some of the seated leaders tried to flee in the commotion, but between Ogras’ shadow spears and Zac’s oppressive aura they found themselves trapped. Zac looked

over the group of fearful people, noticing that people from all races apart from Zhix were represented.

“Is this them?” Zac asked with a sighed as he turned to Smaug.

“Yes, a few people are missing, like Little Treasure and Copperfield, the Ishiate at the 11<sup>th</sup> spot of the wealth ladder,” Smaug said as he looked across the room. “But this is over 80% of the top brass of the Union.”

It was a bit disheartening to Zac to see this diverse ensemble. This group represented some of the best and the brightest of the underworld, bringing together not only strong warriors but skilled non-combat cultivators. The group even transcended the racial barriers, something the surface still hadn’t accomplished. But instead of working together to rebuff the invaders, they had sold their souls for riches.

“Starting today, the Union and all its subsidiaries are under new management.”

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### **Chapter 333 - The Underworld Council**

Things went quite smoothly after the bodyguards were subdued. The leaders of the Union were swiftly captured and imprisoned as the forces of Port Atwood were called over. Ogras wanted to summarily execute everyone to make an example, but Zac decided on a proper investigation and trial.

The Union was a huge enterprise, and it soon became obvious that not everyone was aware of the slave trade, even at the top. In fact, in the meeting that Zac interrupted, it wasn’t obvious that it was a slave camp they lost, but it was rather called a mining camp. Everyone had known about the trade with the invaders, but many thought they were using raw materials rather than people as a currency.

When Zac explained the situation with the slaves, everyone professed their ignorance of the matter, staunchly arguing that they only dealt with traditional business ventures. But as the days passed Calrin and his gnomes easily unraveled who was guilty and benefitted through the revenue streams, and with the interrogations that a shrouded Ogras led they soon had a full picture of what was going on.

As for the normal employees of the Union, things went even smoother than Zac could ever have expected. Verana had been proven right. The moment they started to release the news that they only wanted to deal with the brass because of the slave trade, the normal workers quickly calmed down.

There were a few that fled and disappeared among the large population, either for fear of the unknown, or perhaps because they had done something they were afraid would be unearthed. But most happily went about their days, especially after Zac increased the general salaries by 25%.

But taking charge of the sprawling entity that was the Union wouldn’t take just a day or two. There were so many businesses with complicated relationships, and dozens of strategic resources to inspect. Luckily they had the whole network in their hands already.

The Union had used the same type of system as the New World Government, with one Lord creating a hub for all the mayors in the network. It wasn’t clear who the true Lord was, but many believed it to be Little Treasure who had fled before Zac made his entrance. And since he even didn’t stay behind to defend his domain when their

headquarters was assaulted the whole system was immediately awarded to Zac as the assaulting Lord.

Zac himself was mostly uninterested in the practical proceedings and rather focused on the massive archives of intelligence that the Union had gathered the past months. Their secret intelligence dossiers on the demonkin and human Incursions were probably even more thorough than the Council's due to their frequent encounters.

He knew he had to deal with the Demon Incursion as quickly as possible, but he was a bit unsure of what to do. The reason he came here in his undead form was to level up his Undead Class, but after his recent battles he felt there were some clear limitations to his Undying Bulwark Class as it currently stood.

Most of his skills were aimed at keeping himself alive, with **[Deathwish]** being his only offensive skill along with his learned skill **[Unholy Strike]**. He still kept training his utilization of the Dao every day with the trinket, but it would be some time until he could activate **[Cyclic Strike]**.

The lack of offensive and movement skills made his impact on a battlefield limited. It was not like a video game, he didn't have any taunt skills that forced all enemies to attack him. The moment the invaders realized he was a tough nut to crack they could simply assault his allies, completely circumventing both **[Deathwish]** and **[Immutable Bulwark]**. His whole plan was for naught if his gained levels came at the cost of the lives of his friends.

But as he read through the stacks of intelligence of the Underworld he found a possible solution to his problem in one of the scouting reports. But before he had time to send for the person who submitted this report a Valkyrie knocked on the door to the office he had commandeered for himself.

"I am sorry to disturb you," the Valkyrie said after entering. "Some ambassadors from the Underworld Council is here, what do you want to do?"

"So they came after all. Took them longer than we expected. Have Joanna and Sap Trang join me in Conference Room C," Zac said as he donned his mask.

He had kept his modified appearance throughout the visit, but he only wore the mask when in public. As he walked through the richly decorated halls he sighed in wonder. Most of the original interiors remained, but most electrical functions had been swapped out with day crystals. It was an interesting mix of the old old world and the post-integration era, and it actually meshed quite well.

The old fisherman and Joanna joined him soon after he sat down at the ornate table, and just minutes later three warriors entered the room. It was two humans and one of the molemen, each of them radiating even stronger auras than the bodyguards of the union. And it was clear that this power came from battle rather than absorbing crystals and eating pills.

The female moleman especially gave off the aura of a powerhouse, and Zac realized that she might be at the same level as someone like Thea. It was to the point that he was a bit tempted to use **[Inquisitive Eye]**, but he knew that it would likely fail or even backfire. The other two were likely rankers as well, or at worst just shy of making the cut.

One of the humans was a middle-aged man that was built like a bear with a large sword on his back. With his large bushy beard he gave off the aura of a brute, but an intelligent light in his eyes indicated he wasn't all brawn. The other human was an old lady with graying hair. She didn't have any distinguishing items on her, but two snowballs slowly rotated around her, meaning she was likely some sort of ice mage.

The moleman had two large daggers fastened to her waist, and from the aura they emitted Zac realized they were actually one Spirit Tool. Spirit Tools that were

split into dual items were far harder to create from what Zac understood, making them as rare as defensive Spirit Tools, or perhaps even rarer.

That this rogue had gotten her hands on such a good item proved once more she had survived some trials and found her lucky encounters, just like him. The only way she could have gotten such a good item was if she completed some harsh quest from the system.

It was clear that the Underworld Council hadn't sent some middlemen to meet with him, but rather some of their core warriors.

"Welcome," Sap Trang said with a kindly smile. "I am Sap Trang, ambassador of Port Atwood. This is Joanna, leader of the Valkyries, and lastly Mr. Black. We apologize for not getting in contact with the Underworld Council sooner, our time down here has been a bit hectic."

"I'd say," the large man said with a wry smile. "I am—"

"Wait," the moleman interjected, looking at Zac with animosity. "You are no human. You are not one of the four founding races. You reek of death, and not like a warrior."

Zac was a bit surprised that his origin was immediately exposed by the moleman. Not even the people of Port Atwood knew he wasn't human. They just thought he had gotten some odd class like Death Knight, which gave him such a spooky aura.

After hesitating for a second he removed his mask, exposing his deathly pale skin and pitch-black eyes. The burly man couldn't stop himself from twitching when he saw the eyes that seemingly led into an endless abyss, and the old woman frowned in consternation.

"Your senses are sharp," Zac said, not surprised about the reactions. "I am undead."

"So The Super Brother-Man gobbles up the Union because they work with the invaders, while himself working with invaders," the moleman said, some anger burning in her eyes.

"Lara-," the man said, but was stopped by a glare.

Zac smiled slightly at the accusation, not angry at the questioning. If anything it proved that at least the Council hadn't gotten their priorities mixed up, and truly tried to stop the invaders.

"Lord Atwood recognizes that the world is not black or white," Sap Trang explained. "The Incursions are a problem that needs to be dealt with, but it doesn't mean he can't recruit talents from the various factions that have invaded our planet. It helps us to gain all sorts of information, allowing us to adapt to this new reality much faster. Just like the Council have benefited from the Union's trade with the invaders."

"But what we're doing is different from the Union. The aliens working for Lord Atwood have already had their Incursions closed, making them dependent on Port Atwood. Lord Atwood would also never sell or sacrifice our own people," Joanna added. "You should understand, the moment an invader uses a teleportation array, it means they have truly given up on invading Earth, meaning everyone here works for Lord Atwood."

The moleman didn't seem completely satisfied with the explanation, but she didn't press the issue further as she sat down with a harrumph.

"I am sorry about the questioning," the man said with a smile. "We have been isolated down here, constantly fighting the invaders for months. I am Gregor, and these two are Oksana and Lararia. We are three of the 11 seats of the Underworld council."

"What brings the Underworld Council here today?" Joanna asked.

“First we simply wanted to make your acquaintance, but we also wish to inquire about your future plans,” Gregor said.

“We cannot divulge any specifics, but suffice to say our goal is to close the incursions of the underworld, which would allow us to focus on the real enemies of Earth,” Joanna said.

“Real enemies?” Gregor said with confusion. “Who would that be?”

“You should have heard of two of them. Inevitability and Harbinger, the two top positions on the ladder for the hunt,” Joanna said. “But what you might not know is that those two are under command of someone far more dangerous.”

From there Joanna proceeded to explain the situation about The Great Redeemer and the impending threat he posed. The trio mostly listened silently, sometimes interjecting with incisive questions.

“We learned about the existence of these people from the Zhix down here even before the hunt,” Gregor said with a frown. “And we have heard about the Dominators from their old world as well. But who would have thought that was just the beginning of the conspiracy?”

“Not even Lord Atwood is ready to fight against the Dominators just yet. They are monstrously strong and possess hidden means provided by their master. But he’s desperately cultivating to gain the power to stop them, and we hope the Council will join us in that battle when the time comes,” Joanna said.

“This topic is far beyond our expectations, and we cannot speak for the whole Council on this matter. But I joined the battle to protect Earth and secure a position in the multiverse. I won’t shy away from any battle to protect our home, no matter if it’s invaders or Dominators,” Gregor said, and the old lady nodded in agreement.

Zac internally breathed out in relief, as one of the most important goals of the Underworld was somewhat accomplished. The discussions went on for a while, and it became clear that one of the biggest worries of the Underworld Council had been that Zac wanted to gobble up the whole Underworld. That he was only using the fight with the Invaders as an excuse to get his foot in the door.

But the fact that they could easily prove that they had closed multiple incursions through Joanna’s quest quickly warmed the council members, and discussions rather moved to the topic of cooperation. Zac eventually decided to send over a group of ambassadors to get a better understanding of the battle with the Fire Golems. The squad would also act as Emily’s protectors while she looked for her sister since he didn’t have time to go himself.

A large problem with the golems was that they were the only force seemingly unencumbered by the extremely hard rock in the Underworld, allowing them to freely create new paths, and flood the ones the Council used with Lava. The council could only perform quick raids against the golems nowadays, afraid that their path of retreat would be cut off.

So the fact that a group of extremely powerful people had entered the Underworld brought hope for the Council that they could finally launch a decisive strike against the core of the Golem Incursion, Stopping the threat for good.

“Can we ask when Lord Atwood plans on moving against the Fire Golems? They are the largest threat to the survival of the Underworld,” Gregor finally asked.

Neither Joanna or Sap Trang dared to speak up regarding this subject, as Zac still hadn’t made his decision on how to proceed. There was the issue of the demon Incursion, and also that report that had caught his eye. After mulling it over for a few seconds Zac looked up at Gregor.

“There are some things we need to deal with before we turn our eyes toward the Fire Golem Incursion. But we hope to launch an all-out strike within three weeks at the latest.”

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**Chapter 334 - Hidden Wealth**

“You wanted to see me, sir?” the young woman said with a shaky voice, clearly afraid to enter the large room where Zac had been training with his shield the past day. “I’m Emma.”

Zac looked over with some confusion, not recognizing the girl by the entrance. But he quickly realized who it was, and stowed away his shield.

“Are you the scout I asked for?” Zac asked, trying to not sound threatening.

“Y-Yes. I was in charge of a scout team looking for valuable veins within the Unio- ahem, Lord Atwood’s domain,” Emma hastily explained, keeping her eyes at the ground.

“Great. Come with me for a bit,” Zac said, leaving the training room and the group of Valkyries who had been his sparring partners.

The councilors from the Underworld Council left yesterday along with a group of ambassadors led by Tylia and Joanna, taking the impatient Emily with them. Zac himself had decided to follow up on the idea he had while waiting for things to get sorted out, and called for the person who had written it up, which was the girl currently following him.

Unfortunately she had been out on a mission and it looked like she only returned just now. So since Zac had some time to spare he decided to work on some of his undead skills. All of them were still at the Early Stage, and he hoped that one way to improve his battlefield impact if he upgraded them.

**[Bulwark Mastery]** was the easiest, as it only required him to learn and incorporate the movements with the shield. It took him less than an hour to upgrade the skill to Middle mastery, and another 10 hours to reach late mastery. But just like with **[Axe Mastery]** he found that there were something missing to push it toward peak mastery, so he could only stop there.

Upgrading **[Bulwark Mastery]** did not improve his attributes or allowed him to unleash some new power, but it did help a lot in utilizing his shield, and the fractal equivalent in **[Immutable Bulwark]**. It even showed him how to properly fight with a weapon in one hand and shield in the other.

Until now he had been a bit clumsy and limited in that department, but he quickly learned how to use both his weaponry to their full potential. The shield was not only a large plank to block out damage, but it was a tool that would also create the opening for him to finish his enemies with his weapon. His other skills, unfortunately, weren’t as easy to level up, but he didn’t despair. Hopefully he would be able to push some of them forward in the following weeks.

“Don’t worry, you’re not in trouble or anything like that. I have read some of your reports. You were the one who wrote this, correct?” Zac wanted to confirm after the two entered his office, handing Emma the report he found the other day.

He could understand Emma’s nervousness. She had worked in the department under one of the leaders who were found guilty of human trafficking just this morning.

Almost two-thirds of the leaders of the Union had been found complicit to the slave trade, and they were executed as punishment. It wasn't unthinkable that the minions would suffer for the sins of their boss as well.

"Wha- Oh? Yes!" she stammered after glancing over the first page. "I was the one who wrote it. I am the only survivor from that excursion."

"Large vein deposit. Unknown resource. Quality - Highest. Danger level - Highest," Zac said, listing the main points from his memory. "Infested by, and I quote you, an insane number of mutated bugs. But no location?"

"Leonard, the department head, did not want us to write the location in the reports of very valuable things. He was afraid competing departments was spying on him. I only told him in person," the scout said.

"Tell me about this place," Zac said.

"The vein is three day's travel from a remote outpost, hidden in a huge cave system at the bottom of a lake. We found it by accident when looking for valuable resources underwater. When we entered we realized there was some odd crystal that was emitting a really mysterious light, but we didn't have time to excavate even one before we were overrun."

"By what?" Zac asked.

"Insects, each about as large as a large dog. But they were so strong! We barely managed to harm them, but they slaughtered everyone in seconds. I only managed to use my identification skill once before I fled. The insect was level 68. That was one month ago," the scout said with horror in her eyes.

"Have you seen anything like that before?" Zac probed.

"No, there are really some strong insects down here in the Underworld, but they are usually solitary. We saw thousands of peak F-Rank beasts, and we didn't even really enter the vein. I'm sure it's teeming with E-Grade beasts further down, especially now that so much time has passed," she said.

"How did you survive?" Zac asked with some suspicion. "You're only level 42, and I am sure you were lower at that point."

"I have a good movement skill," she said, "and the beasts stopped when I jumped into the water to get back to the surface."

Zac slowly nodded. He wasn't disappointed when he heard how dangerous the mysterious cavern was, but rather the opposite. A place crawling with extremely strong beasts was exactly what he needed.

His plan was simple. He wanted to throw himself into the thick of it, and with the help of **[Deathwish]** and **[Fields of Despair]** grind all the way to level 60. Normally such a thing might have taken over a month, mainly because beasts strong enough to provide a nice boost of energy were few and far between.

But this cavern was for some reason overflowing with powerful beasts that would each be able to control their own region on Mystic Island, turning the cave into a cultivator's paradise as long as one was strong enough to survive. Not even the rabid beasts in the hunt would be able to compare to the massive amounts of beasts in there.

Depending on how much stronger the beasts had become in the past weeks it would only take a week or two to get to level 60. If the skill he got at that point would allow him to confidently fight the invaders in his undead form without risking the lives of his people, great. If not, then he would turn into his human form to fight, even if that would result in a loss of cosmic energy.

Besides, there was undoubtedly something interesting in that cave if it had turned its inhabitants so powerful.

“Why do you think the insects are so strong at that place?” Zac asked.

“I don’t know... But if I had to guess? I think it’s those rocks somehow evolving the insects,” she said with some hesitation.

Zac nodded and asked some follow-up questions about anything that might be useful in his expedition. When he felt confident in finding the place he excused the scout after having her sign a temporary contract of confidentiality.

Personally, Zac believed there was another possibility to the one Emma provided. There might be a great natural treasure at the bottom of the cave, which was the source of both the mysterious crystals and the powerful beasts. He already knew that the planet was given a handful of great treasures by the System, items that normally shouldn’t appear. His Tree of Ascension was such an example, and the Abbot’s lotus was another.

Each such item could bring a great boost to the one who managed to seize it, but so far Zac had only gotten one even though he was so far ahead of the others of earth. The odd place in the report might be his chance at a second one.

Since he had everything he needed he didn’t waste any time. He immediately set out after informing Mr. Trang about his decision. Zac knew this somewhat messed with the quest the Valkyries received, but he needed to focus on his own development at this point. He needed to improve as quickly as possible to be able to match the Dominators.

He immediately teleported over to the small town cave that the scout mentioned and immediately rushed out into the open Underworld. The scout had mentioned three days of travel, but Zac didn’t want to waste almost a week on travel for the round trip.

Instead, Zac changed into his human form for the first time in a while and rushed across the subterranean landscape with **[Loamwalker]**, and he found himself at the lakefront in less than a day. The fact that he didn’t have to skirt around the domain of powerful beasts saved him one day, while his movement skill saved him another.

When he stood by the shore of the crystal clear lake he once again changed his race with the help of his transformation skill and quietly entered the depths when his change to his Draugr form was complete. Remembering the scout’s description he swam down twenty meters and ripped apart some moss at the wall to expose the entrance to the cavern.

He swam in the pitch-black water-filled tunnel for almost five minutes before finally finding air, and he couldn’t believe that the scouting party dared to enter a scary place like this. Even with his massive pool of Endurance he felt it was a bit unsettling, like a beast of the depths could crop up at any moment to swallow him whole. But he managed to exit the tunnel without any problem, finding himself in a massive cave system.

The cave itself was a large and open area illuminated in green, but not by the usual luminescent moss and fungi. It was rather some crystals embedded in the walls that seemed to have green fireflies fluttering around inside. Zac immediately understood those crystals were what Emma was referring to, but he couldn’t sense any special energy from them.

Zac wanted to excavate one of the crystals to take a closer look, but incessant clattering echoing in the cave stopped him in his tracks. It looked like he was getting the same reception as the scouts, as a tidal wave of insects frenziedly rushed toward him.

All of the insects looked the same, though they were of slightly varying sizes. They most closely resembled a giant Weta or cricket, with three pairs of legs where the hindmost set was extra long. But they also possessed enormous mandibles that looked

strong enough to bite a human in two. Finally they had a pointy stinger at the back, though the scout didn't know if these things possessed any venom or not as she had to immediately flee.

Their bodies were covered in layered shell, but they looked much thinner compared to the Ayr ants that he fought during the best waves. But in return they were much quicker, jumping toward him with greater speed than a charging Barghest.

Each one of them looked like a decent foe for any cultivator, with their combination of natural weapons and a pretty high speed. But what was truly intimidating was the wave of killing intent that pushed toward him upon their approach. Zac quickly used his eye skill before things got too hectic.

#### **[Lower Crust Battleroach - Insect - Level 73 - Strength]**

The result of **[Inquisitive Eye]** proved that the beasts had improved a couple of levels in the short month since the scout was here, making Zac even more confident there was something in the cave that pushed these things to evolve.

However, there was no time to do an in-depth analysis as the tidal wave of insects was upon him. He took out **[Verun's Bite]** as the miasmic haze from **[Fields of Despair]** spread through the cave. The change in energy made a few of the insects stop in confusion, but they were quickly overrun by frenzied brethren.

A fractal shield materialized behind Zac as his axe turned into a blur. Green liquid splattered in all directions as Zac felt a steady stream of energy enter his body, both through **[Fields of Despair]** and the quick kills from his swings.

The shells of the insects barely hindered the upgraded **[Verun's Bite]**, and even **[Deathwish]** steadily killed one insect after another as they threw themselves at him from every direction. Specters kept popping up around him to retaliate any strike against him, his shield, or the fractal bulwark protecting his rear.

Mists of miasma rose from the air as the corpses started to transform into fuel for the fight, and Zac started to slowly push forward as to not get buried in insect corpses. His whole body was already covered in green goop, but he didn't care as he saw every disgusting insect as a burst of energy to progress his levels.

Zac resolutely kept moving downward in the cave, and between the increasingly thick haze of miasma and the constantly appearing specters, it looked like an Undying Legion was trying to break into the underworld. And in the middle of the carnage a system prompt appeared, telling him he had received a quest.

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#### **Chapter 335 - Ascension Breaker**

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Zac froze in the middle of his rampage when he noticed the screen in front of him. The momentarily lapse in concentration allowed one of the animals to leap up at him, clenching its mandibles around his throat while trying to scratch open his chest.

The bite wasn't anywhere near strong enough to cut off his head, but it did draw some black ichor with its bite. The pain woke Zac up and he destroyed the Battleroach with a swing of his axe. Battle lust roared in his mind, but he forced himself to stop in his tracks and curl down on the ground with **[Immutable Bulwark]** covering his whole body.

It was his self-invented turtle stance that allowed him a breather in return for an increased expenditure of miasma. The roaches kept their assault going, desperately trying to claw or bite through the thick shield, which only got them whittled down by the specters of **[Deathwish]**. Zac didn't hunker down to catch a breather though, but rather to be able to read the quest without interruptions.

**Ascension Breaker (Unique, Limited): Stop the Battleroach King from Evolving into a Primordial Warroach. Reward: [Primordial Breath Amanita], Death Attuned Skill [03:06:23:54].**

Zac slowly read through the quest to not miss any details, but it seemed quite straightforward. Somewhere in the cave the insect boss was located, and it seemed that it would evolve in three days. It reminded Zac of the image of the monkey Herald silently cultivating under the Tree of Ascension. But Zac's eyes were mostly glued to the rewards, both of which were quite tempting.

He had no idea what a **[Primordial Breath Amanita]** was, but it surely wasn't anything useless. Anything referring to the Primordial Chaos probably had a great origin. This was because it was generally accepted that the two great Daos of Creation and Oblivion were born from the Primordial Chaos, meaning primordial items might have a connection to the highest of Daos.

Of course, sometimes things were named after the Primordial Chaos simply to sound overbearing or more valuable than things truly were.

The Death Attuned Skill was an even greater lure for him, and he knew what it was a reward tailored to his current needs. The whole reason he entered this den was to gain another skill, and with the help of the quest he might actually walk away with two skills rather than one.

He had already been meaning to explore the depths of this place for any potential reward, but this made him even more eager to head down. Besides, if things proved too dangerous he could always jump into the water and swim to safety. However, as if hearing Zac's thoughts another line of text appeared next to the quest.

**[Note: Exits closed. Exits will remain sealed for 1 year upon failure of quest.]**

"That's the System I remember," Zac sighed with some helplessness.

It looked like he had no choice but to give it his all to stop the battleroach boss from evolving, and he had a decent idea of what that meant. By traveling with Verana and the beastmasters of the Tal-Eladar the past days he had learned quite a bit about beasts and their cultivation system. While titles and classes were the two largest factors for differences in power between two warriors, the deciding factors for the power of a beast were their bloodline and its purity.

Something that had confused Zac for a long time was the fact that pretty much all the beasts he had met, from the Barghest to the wolf waves, were equally strong as their brethren. This was because beasts didn't have any titles, and they didn't possess classes either.

Their bloodline was their class, and their levels came with a higher number of raw attributes to compensate for the lack of titles. A strong bloodline would give more attribute points, whereas a weak bloodline would give fewer. Greater bloodlines would also provide a greater number of bloodline skills, like the terrifying beam the Star Ox released at him during the hegemony trial.

But the type of bloodline was not the only important factor to consider. There was also the purity of the bloodline. As generations passed the bloodline of a race might get diluted, pushing the race further and further from their powerful ancestor. In fact, Vul, the Barghest Herald, was not a different race than the other Barghest even though it was far more dangerous. It was simply a talented Barghest whose bloodline had been purified by Clan Azh'Rezak.

Beasts could also purify their bloodline on their own, by slowly rotating their energy to expel impurities. This process could be drastically sped up if the beasts stayed close to natural treasures. The herbs or metals continuously emitted excess energy while they grew or evolved, which was why almost all treasures had beasts guardians close-by. They were using the treasures to essentially cultivate, and losing the treasure would mean losing their chance to evolve.

A skilled Beast Master spent most of their wealth and efforts on purifying the bloodlines of their contracted beasts. It would not only drastically increase their power and longevity, but the bloodline also dictated how far the beast could reach on the road of cultivation. Some of the more intelligent beasts even voluntarily entered contracts with Cultivators in order to get help with improving their bloodline.

But apart from purifying the bloodline there was another, but far rarer possibility; bloodline evolution. It was possible to ascend to a higher tier of being, which usually brought a tremendous boost in power. It was akin to a housecat evolving into a saber-toothed tiger. This was something that might happen through mutation, but it mostly required a great treasure or some other rare opportunity.

Zac was suspecting that this was the type of evolution he needed to stop, rather than simply stopping an F-Grade to E-Grade evolution. Since the weakest beasts at the edge of the hive were almost at the peak of the F-Grade, there was no way that the Battleroach King hadn't already evolved to E-Grade. Since it was much too early into the integration to talk about evolving to D-Grade, then Bloodline Evolution was the most likely scenario.

Zac closed the menu with a sigh as he got back up on his feet, and with a wide swing created some space from the densely packed battleroaches. He had initially planned on pushing downward step by step, grinding for over a week if need be, but now he felt the clock ticking.

Zac also couldn't stop some worry from creeping in, making him second-guess his decision to come to this place. His experience with most quests so far was that he had been pushed to his limit, barely surviving the trials. That was simply how the System worked. If it was too easy the System wouldn't provide any good rewards. If it was impossible it wouldn't give out the quest since its purpose was to train, not to kill.

Before he kept descending any further into the cave system he first fought his way back to the water. It was the waterline that had allowed Emma to return alive, but when Zac arrived he noticed with some helplessness that a shimmering shield covered the water. It was the System blocking any escape, and he knew better than to try to brute force it.

Instead, he turned back and started making his way down the cavern. The onslaught of battleroaches was relentless, and Zac had killed over a thousand by the time his area was wiped clean. There were still swarms of the roaches remaining further down judging from the incessant clattering echoing from the depths, but it didn't look like they were interested in coming up to his floor.

Cleansing the first floor had taken a bit over an hour, and the short burst of intense carnage had almost given him two full levels. The speed would shock anyone else, but Zac was actually a bit disappointed. While killing the battleroaches provided

a steady stream of energy, each kill provided just a fraction of what he would receive from killing a cultivator at the same level.

But the situation was still pretty great since the roaches were completely berserk. They didn't try to avoid the insectoid specters at all, making it possible for **[Deathwish]** to continuously kill targets even with its limited power. The battle had proven pretty easy, with the only issue being the somewhat high energy consumption. Less than half his miasma remained, as the returns from **[Fields of Despair]** couldn't match the expenditure from constantly utilizing multiple skills.

He initially wanted to head straight down to his next floor as to not waste any time, but since he needed to rest up he first walked over to the wall with the shimmering crystals. Inspecting the wall proved he was correct that there definitely was some relation between the crystals and the insects.

At a closer look, he saw that there were quite a few holes where crystals had been extracted, and scratch marks around a few other places indicated that some insect had tried, and failed, to rip out crystals. It only increased his curiosity about the green energy inside, because no matter how he looked at it he didn't sense anything special.

He gingerly touched one of the crystals, and after nothing happened he ripped it out of the wall for further study. The lights kept buzzing inside the crystal even after getting extracted, but no matter what Zac did he couldn't figure out the purpose of these things. However, when Zac accidentally held the crystal close to **[Verun's Bite]** the slumbering spirit inside stirred.

Zac felt some hope that he had finally found something else that Verun wanted to absorb. One troubling realization after he had evolved the axe to E-Grade was that it no longer used blood to evolve. It still consumed the blood of evolved beings to charge up it's fractal, but it didn't do anything to unlock the other four fractals on the haft. Zac had a feeling that he needed to find treasures that would unlock each of the five fractals before evolving it to D-Grade.

Truthfully he had been worried that the axe had become such a picky eater that it would only drink D-Grade blood to evolve, but perhaps Zac simply hadn't found the right materials. If the axe liked these crystals he would evolve Verun in no time, since there were thousands of them in just the room he was standing in. But unfortunately the axe grew disinterested after a few seconds, no longer giving the shimmering crystal any attention.

It was disappointing, but Zac knew he was still on the highest floor. Perhaps the crystals around him were something that Verun wanted, but they were F-Grade when the axe needed crystals of a higher grade.

Greed shimmered in Zac's eyes as he looked at the crystal-studded walls. He truly wanted to pick each one since the crystals were something good enough that even the picky Verun woke up. But he was currently working against the clock, as getting locked inside this place for a year would spell disaster for not only himself but Earth as a whole.

The crystal was put into his Cosmos Sack since Verun wouldn't eat it, and Zac headed over to the entrance to the next floor. It was a large hole straight in the ground, and looking down into it was like looking down into the abyss. There were no crystals in the hole, and the only clue there was something beneath was the incessant susurrus of innumerable insects moving about.

Zac sat down next to the hole as he took out two E-Grade Miasma crystals. Luckily he had stocked up on crystals through Calrin before entering the Underworld, and he would be able to fight non-stop for weeks with the help of his reserves of Miasma Crystals.

His stores of death-attuned energies were filled up in four hours, and Zac stood up to look down into the abyss. Nothing ventured nothing gained, so Zac simply jumped down into the hole, placing his shield beneath himself as he imbued his body with the Dao of Heaviness.

The air screamed around him as he shot downward like a bullet, reaching the next level in just a few seconds. The whole cave shook from the shockwave of Zac's landing and even the impossibly hard foundation showed some cracks. A surge of energy also welcomed his arrival as at least fifty battleroaches died from the impact.

Zac got up to his feet and shook his head. His ears were ringing, and even he was a bit discombobulated by slamming into the extremely hard ground. But his axe was already moving through muscle memory, and the sounds of pitched battle erupted once more.

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**Chapter 336 - Refined Skills**

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As Zac once again started up his slaughter he shot a glance at his surroundings. The second floor looked mostly the same, though slightly larger. The same green crystals studded the walls, and the same frenzied critters were already charging him. He even noticed the same type of hole leading to the next floor on the other side of the cave. It almost felt like he was in an illusion world because of the similarity, but the fact that he kept gaining energy was undeniable.

The miasmatic haze once again spread out as Zac methodically killed one battleroach after another. He had three days to complete the quest, and he believed the easiest method was to simply rush down and kill the Roach King. But he had no idea how strong it was so he wanted to gain as many levels as possible before confronting it.

He also had no idea how many floors this place had, but if he started to run out of time he would skip killing the beasts and jump down one floor after another until he reached the bottom. Worst case he would have to fight a bunch of extra battleroaches along with their boss if they jumped after him, but better that than getting locked in this cave for a year.

As he kept fighting Zac started to enter a rhythm, almost a dance based on the moves he had recently learned from **[Bulwark Mastery]**. His feet moved across the cavern following a precise pattern as he weaved a trail of carnage with his axe. His shield was quickly becoming an extension of his body, allowing him to control where and when he was attacked by the rabid beasts.

Order was quickly being forced upon the chaotic swarm of battleroaches and Zac realized that he was steadily decreasing his Miasma consumption without lessening the pace that the insects died. As he started to incorporate the teachings of his skill in battle he also started to more actively work with **[Deathwish]**.

It was possible to simply keep the skill running, but Zac realized his way of using it had been too wasteful. Not every strike against him warranted a retaliation, as the reflected attack would sometimes bring fewer benefits than the cost of Miasma warranted. So he started to control which strikes to counter, and which one to simply endure. It reduced the number of specters appearing around him by half, but the number of kills was almost the same.

Efficiency was something that Zac once excelled at, something forced upon him due to overindulging on cosmic water before he knew any better. But as his powers grew he had slowly forgotten this important lesson, instead opting to fight like a brute because of his massive pool of attributes.

But Zac realized that such a mindset stifled growth, and stopped him from pushing himself to the limits. It also wasted a lot of time. Perhaps not through the battle itself, but most of his time on the last floor had been spent recuperating his expended Miasma. He was not a Cultivator who could rapidly restore his reserves, so he needed to make use of every smidgeon of Miasma in his body.

He slowly got the hang of splitting his attention between striking the weak spots with his axe and manually controlling **[Deathwish]**. But he felt his work still wasn't done. He started to change the way he moved slightly, forcibly stopping the impulses to avoid getting hit in certain spots. Slowly the attacks from the battleroaches started to center on his belly or his head more and more.

Zac's idea was simple. The spectral projections from **[Deathwish]** assaulted the attacker in roughly the same area that Zac was attacked in. That meant if he made sure to get hit in the areas that were weak spots of the roaches the lethality of the projections would increase without any increase in Miasma consumption. It did require more precision though. He needed to make sure his thick skull was hit rather than his vulnerable throat or eyes for example.

More wounds dripping ichor soon adorned Zac's body, but he was slowly getting hang of it. And his efforts were quickly rewarded as a prompt told him that **[Deathwish]** just reached Middle mastery. The effect was immediately obvious, as the continuously appearing spectral projections turned slightly more corporeal, and hazy fractals adorned their bodies.

They had also become stronger, noticeably so. Zac had already measured that the power of the specters from **[Deathwish]** was roughly around 10%-15% of the original strike's power, meaning that it usually took a couple of tries until they managed to kill or grievously wound their enemies. Zac couldn't be sure exactly how strong the specters were now, but after using the skill for a few minutes he felt that the power had increased by at least 50%.

But that wasn't the most interesting change in the skill. After upgrading **[Deathwish]** he realized that he suddenly had limited control of the specters as they appeared. Each time a ghost was summoned he felt as though he had grown a new appendage, and with some effort he managed to manipulate the specter.

The effect was extremely limited at the moment though. He only managed to slightly alternate the trajectory of their retaliatory strike. But that slight adjustment could be the difference by hitting a thick chitinous plate or a weak joint, and if Zac could learn to naturally control the specters as they popped up he would truly increase the lethality of the skill by a notch.

Flush with success Zac immediately started to investigate means to improve his other skills as he whittled down the number of battleroaches in the cave. But finding other quick upgrades didn't come as easy. He didn't have any control over **[Fields of**

**Despair**], so he couldn't figure out any means that might help him move to a higher mastery.

The same went for **[Indomitable]** that he kept running just in case something down here could use mental attacks. That only left **[Immutable Bulwark]**, the fractal wall he currently used to block out all attacks from behind. He knew that he wasn't using it to its full potential since currently it only worked as a blockade, rather than utilizing the large spikes that covered its front.

During his rampage in the caverns beneath the Eastern Trigram Sect he had used the bulwark like a bulldozer, putting it in front of his body as he rushed forward. The more vulnerable of the beasts had been crushed into meat paste from his charge, turning the skill into a competent offensive Skill.

But after a few tries he had to give up on that approach against the battleroaches. While the shells of the insects weren't as sturdy as some other species, they were still quite durable. That's why **[Deathwish]** rarely finished its enemies in one swing, and why he had to utilize **[Verun's Bite]** to properly cut the critters apart.

The large bulwark slowly swirled to Zac's front, and with a grunt he started running forward. The roaches screeched in rage as the large shield slammed into them, and nothing they did could stop his progress. Dull thuds started echoing through the caves as the roaches slammed themselves into the incoming wall.

Sadly the collisions of **[Immutable Bulwark]** proved insufficient, and only a scant few of the insects actually died on the spikes. The rest bounced off the shield to the sides, immediately getting back up on their feet to assault Zac from the sides. But Zac suddenly got a burst of energy when he rammed straight into a wall, crushing all the roaches between the bulwark and the cave into a wet mess.

But even when he used the bulwark as a meat press the speed that he killed the beasts was worse when utilizing the combination of his axe and **[Deathwish]**. Zac soon gave up on that tactic, even if it might be the key to upgrading the skill, and once again returned to methodically decimating the roach population with the combination of **[Deathwish]**, and his axe. His bulwark was once again relegated to stay behind his back to block any strikes from the rear.

But Zac suddenly had an idea, and the wide fractal wall rose into the air as it started to turn until the spikes were pointing at the ground. Since there was no longer anything blocking the roaches that tried to attack Zac from behind they immediately flooded toward his back to claw at his neck and legs. The moment Zac felt a painful swipe on his back the bulwark fell down like a trap roof in an old movie.

He had gotten the idea after witnessing how easily the bugs were crushed against the wall. Since he had control over the fractal shield he could move it around in any direction as long as it wasn't too far from his current position. That gave him the idea to use the large thing as a hammer, crushing everything dumb enough to walk beneath it.

Unfortunately, the bulwark shared an annoying similarity with the movies. The falling bulwark was too slow, to the point that most of the frenzied roaches managed to scuttle out of the way just before they were crushed.

Zac glanced at the large fractal wall with some reluctance, and it once again rose into the air. This time it started emitting a mighty pressure, to the point that the air around it shuddered. Zac had imbued it with his peak stage Seed of Heaviness. The Bulwark once again slammed into the ground, this time with almost three times the speed.

The whole cave shuddered from the impact and the unlucky roaches that were caught beneath were turned into a paste in an instant. Zac was elated with the result

and started to move the shield up and down as he focused on the enemies in the front. Loud thumps started to echo through the cave every 5 seconds, making it sound like an industrial press was constantly running.

Using **[Immutable Bulwark]** like a huge hammer was a bit stupid, and it certainly wouldn't work against an intelligent opponent, but it did increase his killing speed while only consuming some mental energy. Another downside was that some quick roaches occasionally reached his unguarded back to attack his neck.

Luckily he had enough control of the situation in the front to give him the freedom to avoid most attacks from the rear any time his danger sense warned him. But wounds still started to accumulate at a higher speed, making the layers of green goop on his back get intermixed with black ichor.

Soon enough the fighting abated, and Zac stood amongst the sea of destroyed battleroaches. A quick inspection showed that the crystals that studded the walls were no better than the ones on the floor above, so Zac immediately sat down to absorb Miasma as he went over the results of the battle.

The second floor had housed roughly 20% more battleroaches compared to the first, yet he had taken less than ten minutes longer to completely decimate everything. This was a decidedly better grinding speed, especially considering that he had spent quite some time adjusting to his more refined fighting style and experimenting with **[Immutable Bulwark]**.

He had also reached level 57, meaning that he had already gained three levels in one short day. Even his optimistic calculations had him taking at least a week to reach level 60, but as it looked now it might only take two days unless he ran out of battleroaches to kill.

But the most exciting difference in clearing out the second floor was that he had consumed even less miasma than the floor above. This was even though he both utilized **[Immutable Bulwark]** more actively and killed a lot more roaches. It was a testament to the fact that he had wasted too much energy the way he originally fought.

The restoration took a bit over four hours, at which point his mental energy had completely restored itself as well. He had spent over 10 hours in the cave already, so Zac immediately headed down to the next floor.

The sounds of battle kept echoing as Zac turned into a stoic killing machine, knowing no retreat or surrender. He kept working on perfecting his battle coordination, constantly trying to kill the roaches faster and faster without wasting any unnecessary energy.

The roaches on the third floor were a bit larger than the second, with many proving to be level 75, true peak F-Grade beasts. But apart from a decent boost in power and speed they didn't have any new abilities, so Zac kept fighting as usual. Soon enough the third floor was cleansed, and he only kept going resting as short a time as possible between fights.

After completely decimating the sixth floor Zac realized had been constantly fighting for over 30 hours, and the results were astounding. He had already reached level 60, and as expected he received his next Class Quest.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 337 - Profane Dominance**

## A note from TheFirstDefier

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Zac's leveling speed was shocking, taking just over one day to push from level 54 to 60. But he also knew that his way of going about things would only be possible for someone extremely overpowered like himself. The roaches didn't pose any real threat to him, but he was still covered in shallow wounds from their sharp mandibles and serrated legs.

The fact that the insects were able to hurt him even though his effective endurance was over 1000 proved that almost everyone else on Earth would be ripped to pieces in seconds from the rabid assault of the beasts. Even he was feeling the strain, so he quickly ate a healing pill before opening his status screen.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**60**

**Class**

**[F-Epic] Undying Bulwark**

**Race**

**[E] Draugr**

**Alignment**

**[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step**

**Limited Titles**

**Frontrunner**

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - Peak, Seed of Trees - Peak, Seed of Sharpness - High, Seed of Hardness - Middle, Seed of Sanctuary - High, Seed of Rot - High**

**Core**

**[F] Duplicity**

**Strength**

**718 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 140%]**

**Dexterity**

**320 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]**

**Endurance**

**827 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 140%]**

**Vitality**

**432 [Increase: 50%. Efficiency: 140%]**

## Intelligence

174 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

## Wisdom

248 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

## Luck

140 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]

## Free Points

6

## Nexus Coins

[F] 295 264 610

Zac hadn't bothered to allocate his free points while pushing down the tunnels, but now he put them all into Strength before opening up the quest screen. The Ascension Breaker quest showed that he had just under two days remaining, but he was more interested in the new quest he had just received.

**Profane Dominance (Class): Kill 1000 peak F-Grade beings within 3 hours OR Defeat 1 being at least 30 levels above you. Reward: [Profane Discharge] OR [Profane Seal]. (0/1000 - 0/1)**

Zac was surprised to see that it was a forked quest, just like the time he received [Nature's Punishment]. At that time he had the choice of whether choosing a nurturing path or a path of destruction going by the quest requirements, and this time there was a clear indication of what he would receive as well.

It was quite clear that no matter which option he chose, it would still be an offensive skill that he would get. [Profane Discharge] was likely an area skill that would help him kill large packs of weaker enemies, whereas [Profane Seal] was meant as a skill to take down powerhouses.

Indecision plagued Zac as he sat down to restore his depleted reserves of Miasma, and he went over the options over and over. It would be effortless for him to complete the first option, as he had killed battleroaches at a far higher rate until now. But it would have been an extremely daunting task if he didn't have his massive pool of attributes given by his titles and second class.

In fact, if he kept going as he did he wouldn't be able to avoid getting [Profane Discharge] even if he wanted to since there were more floors beneath with more battleroaches. The only way was if he drastically slowed down his killing speed, but that might cause trouble with his other quest.

The other skill, [Profane Seal], more troublesome to complete for the current Zac, but not because of the difficulty. He had confidence in defeating most level 90 beings in his current form. It might take some time to whittle it down with [Deathwish], but he was sure he would be able to outlast almost anyone in his current state.

The issue was whether he could even find a level 90 being apart from the Dominators. All the E-Grade beasts he had encountered so far were between level 75 and 80, a far cry from level 90. His only hope was either the Warroach King or the Leaders of the incursions.

Furthermore, if he wanted to aim for this skill he couldn't gain too many levels either. Each level he gained would push the required level of the kill forward as well. Finding a level 90 enemy was hard enough, but if he grinded another ten levels he might not find a target for months.

Both skills were things that he wanted for his current class, and they would help him tremendously during the underworld incursions. This would be the first truly offensive skill for his Epic Class, and he couldn't imagine the skills were anything but

amazing. The hours passed as Zac restored his miasma, and he slowly decided on how to proceed. When he was finally topped off, he jumped down to the next floor and was immediately greeted by another wave of battleroaches.

This time there were actually several battleroaches that were over twice as large as their brethren, and their outer shell had a mysterious pattern the same color as the lights in the crystals adorning the walls. Zac immediately realized these were battleroaches that had reached the E-Grade and received a large boost in strength.

Zac would normally have been elated to see the even juicier targets, but he couldn't help but frown in irritation when he saw the battleroad captains. He only shook his head with a sigh as the large wall of **[Immutable Bulwark]** appeared.

Enraged screeches echoed through the cave as Zac steamrolled everything in his path toward the hole leading to the next floor. Insects were thrown in all directions, and even the larger evolved roaches could only stop Zac for a second before he inevitably kept pushing forward.

There was a simple reason he didn't unleash another wave of destruction on everything around him. He had chosen to go with the second skill, **[Profane Seal]**. Since he didn't know whether the Battleroad King had a swarm of underlings surrounding him he didn't dare to kill any beasts to inadvertently get the other skill.

He had briefly considered killing the E-Grade roaches at least, reaping the huge amounts of energy from killing evolved beings, but in the end he decided against it. He immediately realized that one or two swings wouldn't kill those sturdy-looking insects, and he didn't want to waste too much energy on a bunch of underlings.

He was confident to complete the Class quest without any hiccups, but the quest called Ascension Breaker was another matter. Zac had a feeling that the system wouldn't award him the quest with such nice rewards if the Battleroad King wasn't a formidable foe. He would probably need everything in his repertoire to take that thing down.

Since there were no other exits in the cave system he would head down to the bottom floor to fight the boss. Afterward, he would slowly work his way up through the battleroaches he had passed. That would allow him to get the skill he wanted while wasting almost no time.

There was a simple reason he chose to go for **[Profane Seal]**. Getting the area skill might be more convenient for the current him if he wanted to farm out his levels, but Zac looked at it from a longer perspective. The choices he made would perhaps affect what Class choices he would get when upgrading his class, which made him think of Yrial's tips.

He would no doubt try to get a more offensive class when evolving, one that fit better with his personality and set of Dao insights. But that didn't mean he needed to get an identical class as his human side. His hatchetman had already proven to provide great area skills, especially with the addition of **[Deforestation]**. There was no need to head in that direction for his undead class as well.

Perhaps it would be possible to get one class that excelled at large scale battles, and another that would allow him to fight powerhouses and survive. That was at least the goal of Zac. Hopefully it would also allow him to quickly kill, or at least occupy, any Incursion leaders before they could set their sights at his allies.

Zac was unstoppable with the help of **[Immutable Bulwark]**, and with a final push he soared out over the large pit. A dozen screeching battleroaches were also pushed down, and they all fell toward the next floor. Zac landed with a thud, and crunches could be heard around him from legs and shells cracking when the battleroaches landed all around him.

A glance up at the hole proved that apart from a few overeager battleroaches the others stayed on their floor, impotently screeching down at him. Zac sighed in relief as he kept pushing forward to the next pit and he kept moving further and further down, only killing when absolutely necessary. Each floor had stronger and stronger enemies, with the evolved battleroaches taking up a continuously larger share of the population.

This many E-ranked beasts would spell disaster almost anywhere on earth, but they only served as bowling pins at this moment. But even Zac was shocked by the sheer number of evolved targets, and he knew that he would be able to gain at least five more levels in this place after dealing with the battleroad king.

There was finally a change when Zac reached the 11<sup>th</sup> floor, as there was no new pit to jump into. Instead there was a tunnel leading into the dark, out of which a green mist slowly emerged. The tunnel entrance was completely crammed with E-Grade battleroaches, though none of them dared to enter the tunnel itself.

It looked like they were inhaling the green haze, meaning it was probably something beneficial to their cultivation. Zac looked around the room and saw there were more than a thousand battleroaches in total, with at least 200 of them being evolved. He hesitated for a bit before taking out his axe.

He slowly started to take down the roaches on the last floor one by one, forgoing to use **[Deathwish]** completely. He instead only used his axe to finish off the beasts and his shield to block out attacks, trying to perfect his coordination. But even then he was forced to slow down his speed by quite a bit to not inadvertently complete the wrong quest.

Frustration started to well up in his heart, and he felt the urge to go on a rampage, cutting down everything in his path, feasting on the blood of his enemies. But a shake of his head soon had him back in reality. It was the splinter acting up again, pushing him to unleash hell in the cave.

Zac forcibly ignored the violent impulses, but as the minutes passed he started to feel worse and worse. It was as though his whole body was itching, and he felt like he was starting to go crazy. His mind screamed for blood, and every second he felt like he was about to lose control. Zac's muscles shivered as he desperately held himself back from activating all his other offensive skills.

It was a shocking realization, how big of an impact the splinter had on him. When he went all-out it was just a small whisper in the back of his head cheering him on, but now he felt just how large the impact was. It made him wonder just how much the thing was affecting his actions and personality without him noticing.

Finally, the head of the last battleroad in the cave was crushed with a slam of his shield. Zac had repressed his urges for over four hours, and he slumped down on the ground more exhausted than from all his other battles combined. Every cell in his body was screaming at him to rush into the pitch-black tunnel to unleash a storm of violence at whatever was hiding inside, but he instead took out a Miasma Crystal with shaking hands and started to absorb it.

He had kept **[Indomitable]** going through the whole ordeal, but the mental defense skill seemed to be completely ineffectual against the insidious urgings of the Splinter of Oblivion. The effect slowly ebbed over the next hour though, finally allowing Zac some peace of mind.

Zac got up on his feet after another hour, finally completely back to normal. At least he hoped he was. His Miasma was topped off, and he hadn't expended any mental energy cleaning out the last floor, so he was ready to press on.

He quickly opened up his status screen since he had gained another two full levels from the cave. He put his free points into Strength again before walking toward the tunnel. The green mist was still floating out from the tunnel, and now that there wasn't a swarm of battleroaches to gobble it up it started to spread through the cave.

Zac hesitantly entered the mist and stopped, but he didn't feel anything bad was happening, and his danger sense didn't warn him either. He even felt a bit energized from staying in the mist even though he didn't breathe at the moment.

Since the mist didn't seem to be poisonous or have any adverse effects he immediately entered the tunnel. But Zac only walked two steps before he stopped in shock, as he was blinded by a blazing emerald light. No matter where he looked he saw huge crystals that were radiating a dazzling luster.

Zac frowned and looked back toward the cave where he came from, but it still looked completely normal. The only answer Zac could arrive at was that something was blocking the sight from outside.

But who would have erected an array at such a place?

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 338 - Breaking Out**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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"What's the status?" Alea asked with a tired sigh, looking over at Ilvere.

The rugged warrior didn't have his usual boisterous attitude after entering the town hall that had been turned into a temporary command center for the war efforts of Port Atwood. He rather looked a bit helpless as he scratched his hair, with multiple new scars adorning his arms.

"They keep pressing forward," Ilvere said. "They'll be here in a day or so if they keep their usual pace. No matter what we do they won't be deterred."

Alea shook her head and looked down at the map with confusion. The last week had been a true exercise in futility.

Initially, everything had gone as planned. The combined forces of Port Atwood and Sino-Indian Alliance met the sea of zombies at the predetermined location and slowly started to whittle down their numbers from the flanks.

The horde didn't seem to care about the losses and kept stumbling forward in the direction of the Zone rife with human and Ishiate settlements. For every ten meters they progressed they left dozens of destroyed corpses behind as the living continuously peppered them from the sidelines.

Of course, the horde wasn't completely helpless. Now and then large groups of elite Zombies would break out of the swarm of low tiered undead, charging straight into the ranks of the two armies. These Zombies were not intelligent like humans, but they weren't like the braindead zombies that only mindlessly stumbled forward.

They were like a pack of wolves, and their bodies were extremely durable. They shot into the ranks of Port Atwood and the other humans, causing some murder and

mayhem before rushing back into the safety of the horde. Port Atwood was generally able to rebuff these raids with the help of the powerful demons and superior equipment. But losses were unavoidable, with hundreds of soldiers already having fallen.

Of course, that was nothing compared to the losses of the Sino-Indian Alliance. They possessed large squads that mainly relied on their old world weaponry, so when the elite zombies pounced them they were like foxes let loose in the hen house. The alliance suffered disastrous losses until they rearranged their ranks to protect the normal soldiers with cultivators.

But even Port Atwood was starting to feel the pressure. Gear was getting destroyed and defensive treasures expended at a rapid rate. For now, only recruits had fallen, but their core warriors would start dying soon as well unless they turned the situation around.

But the most baffling thing had happened two days ago. The large horde suddenly changed course and was currently heading in a direction that would lead them dangerously close to their base camp. When such a thing had happened until now there would always be a swarm of zombies that splintered off from the main horde to cull the population of the nearby town. It was a way to bolster their numbers while they marched, or perhaps just have an outlet for their blood lust.

She didn't believe the reason was to bring the fight to them. They would teleport out long before the slow-moving horde managed to reach them. Besides, even if they managed to take down this place there were mostly non-combat personnel and logistics based here. Most warriors were already trailing the horde.

That wasn't the only odd thing. While the horde that the Marshall clan fought kept their original direction apart from a few odd detours, the third horde had veered off-course as well. It was now heading into a mountainous region that was almost completely devoid of people.

That whole sector had long since become a haven for strong beasts, and there weren't just one or two evolved beast kings prowling those mountains. Heading there with a bunch of dumb Zombies would simply turn a large number of them to food for the animals.

Their scouts had also spotted dozens of smaller hordes of one to five million zombies leaving the Dead Zone, and their initial fear had been that they moved to bolster the larger swarms just as they started to reduce their numbers. But the smaller hordes moved in irrational patterns as well, and less than a fifth of the smaller hordes had joined up with the three large ones.

"Start packing up. I don't know why they want this place, but let them have it. We'll relocate to basecamp two," Alea said.

Ilvere nodded in confirmation, leaving the command center to make preparations. Alea stayed behind and looked at the map as though she was in trance. She needed to figure something out to turn things around. If they just kept nipping at the sides of the swarms they would slowly expend their people and resources, creating a pyrrhic victory.

So far no matter how hard they had pushed the horde just wouldn't splinter, and they unhesitatingly sacrificed any small groups that were separated from the flock. If things continued in this manner they would never be able to starve them out, since the innumerable zombies kept spewing out a storm of miasma that tainted everything and obscured their vision.

That cloud of miasma, in turn, stopped them from daring to push too deep into the hordes for a decisive blow. They still had no idea what lurked in the middle of the

sea of Zombies. If they cut too far into the horde they might find themselves without a path of retreat.

Her lithe fingers slowly ran across the map as the minutes passed, following the paths the hordes had taken during the past weeks. When her finger reached the small wooden soldiers representing the separate horde's current positions she started again with a different group, over and over. But suddenly she froze, and she quickly got a thick marker to draw out the paths they had walked.

"They're drawing an array!" she blurted out with some terror in her eyes.

It was still in the early stages, but judging by the paths of the hordes the Undead Empire was drawing a massive fractal with their pathing. The three larger hordes were the main veins of the fractal, with the smaller parties creating assisting pathways.

Her thoughts immediately went to the fact that the huge horde stopped for an hour or two every now and then. They had assumed the leaders of the hordes let the weaker Zombies rest, but what if they only stopped to plant array flags into the ground under the cover of the miasmatic cloud. With millions of zombies stomping the ground afterward there would be no way to tell that they had dug up the ground and left something.

She blankly looked down at the map for a second, her mind reeling at the concept of just what kind of effect such a monstrous fractal would have. If it was completed it would span a greater area than most kingdoms, its lines running thousands of miles.

She needed to report this to Lord Atwood and Ogras immediately. This was too terrifying a prospect, something of this magnitude could never be allowed to be unleashed on a planet. She was no expert on arrays, but judging by their pathing she guessed that they would have drawn out the whole fractal in just a month. There was no way they would be able to grind down the main horde within that time.

The worst thing was that she had a pretty decent idea of what the goal of the undead was. The Undead Empire always aimed to take full control of any planet they encountered during an incursion, turning the world into a land of death. But how would that be possible when they faced the constant oppression of the planet itself, which was constantly generating new Cosmic Energy?

Perhaps the goal of the massive array was to kill the very planet itself.

Alea hurried out of the town hall and immediately headed for the teleportation building. But she stopped in her tracks when she saw the large group of people standing in line outside with confused faces.

"What's going on?" Alea asked the nearest demon with a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Something is wrong the array," the demon warrior said with a slight frown on his face. "We got the instruction to start moving the base, but the array suddenly shut down again just a few minutes after it was activated."

Alea immediately nodded in thanks before she hurried into the building to find out what was going on. She didn't have Lord Atwood's supernatural sense for danger, but she grew up fending for herself, which awarded one an instinct for survival. And her instincts were currently screaming at her that something was terribly wrong.

"What's happening?" she asked when she found Ilvere, standing together with a few non-combat personnel.

"I was just about to call you," Ilvere said with a somber face before he walked closer and continued with a soft voice that only she could hear. "Our array is being blocked."

“How is that possible?” Alea said with shock. “Those siege tools shouldn’t be available on a baby planet. We haven’t prepared any countermeasures.”

“I have no idea. What do you want to do?” Ilvere asked.

Ilvere was a strong military leader, always fighting in the vanguard to bolster the troop morale. But he wasn’t the best-equipped demon to handle this sort of unclear situation. Alea bit her lip for a second, before looking up with determination.

“Get everyone ready and immediately recall the army. Have them return within 6 hours even if they have to run until their feet bleed. Also, send out scouts to investigate in all directions,” she said. “We need to get away from here, something is wrong. If the teleporters are down we can only leave on foot.”

Ilvere nodded and walked out, immediately starting to bark new orders to the gathering crowd. Alea also left the teleportation room after asking the stationed guards to keep trying. They had no experts in arrays so there was no one that she could ask to figure out a work-around or a way to dispel the blockage. They were currently at the mercy of whoever was running interference.

Various thoughts swirled in her mind as she walked back to her own residence. She quickly put away all her possessions before walking down into the massive room in the basement. It had once been a luxurious spa with two pools, but Alea had turned it into something else completely.

The larger pool was half-filled with a deep green liquid that emanated small puffs of smoke at regular intervals. Alea sighed when she looked at her creation. She was lacking time, and the purification wasn’t completely done. But her specially modified [**Corpserot Poison**] should at least be concentrated enough to make most of the elite zombies fall apart in seconds.

Her mood improved noticeably when she walked over to the smaller pool, whose jets kept the liquid inside in constant motion. The electrical pool was truly a marvel, and she had already decided to get her hands on one of these things for her house after the war was over. Imagine watching the stars in one of these things, perhaps even with a companion.

Alea quickly snapped out of her daydreams and put her hand into the warm golden liquid. It was as though her hand was a vacuum or tear in space, as the potent poison rushed into her body without leaving a drop behind. After the first pool was cleared out she did the same with the second pond.

The hours passed as a subdued atmosphere spread across the small town and its 3000 temporary residents. The human barkeep had tried to enliven people’s spirit by offering his energized concoctions, but it barely helped. They all knew that something was truly wrong.

The teleportation array was still out of order after four hours, proving that it was not just some odd coincidence. But worse yet, their scouts had recently found out that their retreating army was harried by a swarm of almost a million elite zombies. The undead had kept pace with them since the soldiers of Port Atwood left the main horde of the zombies.

“Have everyone returned?” Alea asked as she stood in the command center once more for a final meeting.

“Three scouts haven’t returned. They were all supposed to scout northwest so I fear they have met some trouble in the passage,” the scout leader said with a sigh. “There’s nothing else in the other directions, apart from the beasts.”

Alea looked down at the map with a frown. Northwest was the direction that she had wanted to move in. Northwest had a reasonably safe path between two mountain ranges that led to a large settlement after a week’s travel.

If they moved north or east they would have to travel twice that distance in extremely hostile terrain before reaching any town with a teleporter. And even if managed to get through to the towns they would face catastrophic losses during their flight. Alea and the other leaders weren't like Lord Atwood. They couldn't keep the whole army safe from the continuous onslaught of rabid beasts.

South and southeast were right in the direction of the Zombie horde, and that was to head straight into the maw of the beast. Especially now that the undead seemed to actively fight back for the first time since the conflict started.

"We'll head northwest," Alea said as killing intent started to leak from her body. "Someone wants to trap us here, but the people of Port Atwood are not so easy to contain. Prepare for all-out war, we're breaking out by force."

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**Chapter 339 - Battleroach King**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac stared at the mouth of the entrance with confusion, not understanding who could have placed an array there. He couldn't imagine anyone managing to sneak all the way down to the bottom of this roach-infested cave system in one piece and not leave a single trace behind.

The effect of the array wasn't limited to simply blocking out the light from the crystals, but it was also hindering most of the green gas from escaping. Judging by the density of the green mist in the tunnel Zac guessed that only 10% of the gasses escaped through the array, if even that.

He carefully looked around the entrance for any array flags, hoping that the design would give a hint of the origins of whoever had placed it there. However, no matter where he looked he couldn't find a hint of the source of the array, making him wonder if this thing might actually be one of the natural formations he had read about.

But a clattering from further inside the tunnel quickly caught Zac's attention, and he slowly moved forward with his axe and shield at the ready. The radiant tunnel turned out to be less than 50 meters long, and he immediately reached another large cave after turning around a bend.

The whole cavern was filled with a green mist, reaching all the way to the ceiling tens of meters in the air. But even with the thick haze he had no trouble seeing what was going on inside. The cave was blasted by the emerald light of the large crystals, and the light pierced through the mist without any trouble.

His eyes only lingered on the surroundings for a fraction of a second as there was something that immediately commanded his attention. A huge hulking battleroach lay unmoving close to the center of the cave, seemingly asleep. The layered carapace along its back slowly moved up and down as though they were fans, but Zac noticed that green mist was continuously being sucked into the gaps beneath the shells.

It was the Battleroach King that commanded the center of the cave, and there were quite a few differences between the king and its subjects. The Battleroach King

was completely emerald for instance, rather than the brownish-black of the normal battleroaches. It was also huge, spanning over five meters in length.

Its long legs looked a lot sturdier compared to its brethren, and short serrated blades ran along their length. A casual swipe would likely bisect most people without effort. Its mandibles were enormous, spanning over a meter as well. Finally it even had a large horn, reminding Zac of some beetles.

The presence of the huge battleroach was so intense that Zac didn't notice the other object in the cave for a few seconds. But soon enough he spotted the large stubby mushroom that grew just a few meters away from the large beast.

It was almost a meter tall and had a fat bulbous stalk and a spherical cap. All in all, it looked a lot like a supersized fly agaric, apart from its colors. The stalk was a deep purple while the cap was emerald and studded with black spots. It looked extremely toxic, though Zac had a feeling that actually wasn't the case.

It was the first plant that Zac had seen inside the cave system since entering. More interestingly it looked like the mushroom was the source of the massive clouds of green mist. After putting two and two together he quickly realized that the mushroom was the **[Primordial Breath Amanita]**.

Zac frowned when he saw that the treasure was out in the open. A battle at his level would cause pretty massive shockwaves if he went all out, and he was afraid that the precious mushroom would get ruined.

Then again, the cave was quite massive, a few times larger than the outer caves where thousands of battleroaches had been crammed together. He would simply have to move the battle away from the Amanita. Seeing how close the beast was to the mushroom it should be quite important to it, so it would hopefully comply immediately.

There was nothing else for Zac to do at this moment apart from getting on with it, so he stepped out into the cave and immediately used **[Inquisitive Eye]**. Zac breathed out in relief when he saw that the beast was level 94, just 2 levels above the minimum required to complete the quest.

Luckily he had only cleared out the last floor to avoid any reinforcements during the battle. If he had slowly made his way down while killing the roaches on each floor there was no way he would have been able to finish the quest for **[Profane Seal]**.

A piercing screech suddenly echoed through the cave as the roach king woke up. It had noticed the prying and it was enraged that someone had encroached upon its domain. Zac wasn't surprised that he had been exposed because his observation skill was truly basic. He immediately ran into the cave, wanting to move as far away from the mushroom as possible.

Zac only had time to take a few steps along the edge of the cave when his danger sense screamed at him. He quickly summoned **[Immutable Bulwark]** to protect his front, but the next second a huge force lifted the bulwark with lightning speed. The battleroach king used its horn to wedge beneath the shield, and had yanked it up with superior power.

It was the first time his skill had been so effortlessly circumvented by a beast, and Zac barely had time to move his real shield as well before the beast slammed into him with tremendous force. Zac was thrown into the wall with enough momentum to make his head spin, and a few of the crystals embedded in the wall painfully dug into his back.

The attack wasn't over though as the enormous mandibles closed in around him, aiming to split him in two. Zac's brows rose in alarm as he quickly pushed his large shield upward to use it as a wedge, and he immediately infused it with the Dao of Hardness.

But Zac's couldn't believe what he was seeing when the top of the sturdy E-Grade shield was being slowly pincerred, the metal starting to twist and bend as the large mandibles cut into it. Seeing that the shield wouldn't be able to hold for much longer he ducked down and forcibly twisted the shield with all of his power.

The move allowed him to drag the shield out of the battleroach's grip before it was ruined, but ducking down put Zac in clawing distance of the front legs and their sharp blades. A burning pain erupted in his shoulder as one of the legs raked a bleeding gash with its first swipe. The other leg tried to cut open another wound as well, but Zac slammed into it with **[Verun's Bite]**.

A sharp clang echoed across the cave as axe and leg met, and Zac looked with dismay when even his axe barely left a mark. This was a swing empowered by his huge Strength and the Dao of Sharpness, not a random swing from some middling cultivator. At least the collision allowed Zac a breather as the leg was pushed back.

Zac didn't want to stay in such a place surrounded by bladed legs, but he had a feeling that the belly was his best bet if he wanted to cause any real damage to this thing. Miasma surged in his arm as he rushed forward two steps. He blocked another swipe from one of the beast's legs as his arm kept swelling from **[Unholy Strike]**, and with a roar swung upward in a ferocious swing.

The air screamed as **[Verun's Bite]** went in for the kill, but the huge target above Zac's head suddenly disappeared. Zac looked in all directions, but the roach was nowhere to be seen. But the roaring mists quickly gave a hint as to where the huge beast had run off to; the skies.

A set of huge magical wings spread out from the back of the emerald battleroach king. Their span was only a few meters, but it was obvious the set of wings didn't follow the laws of nature to keep the huge beast afloat. The wings were made from pure emerald energies, looking extremely similar to the lights in the crystals.

"What the fu-" Zac groaned, but he suddenly had to jump out of the way as the flying roach dove for him with terrifying speed.

The ground trembled and gravel shot in all directions when the battleroach king slammed into the ground where Zac had just stood. The shockwave from the collision threw Zac a few meters away, and he shot a glance at the mushroom with alarm.

Sometime during the battle a golden shield had encapsulated the natural treasure, and Zac recognized the System's handiwork immediately. He nodded in relief, knowing that nothing would harm the Amanita even if the two tore the whole cave apart.

The fact that the battleroach managed to crack even the rocky foundation in the cave was a testament just how powerful it was. A level 94 beast was closing in on the level that Inevitability had when he fought it during the hunt, and Zac really felt the pressure. But constant battle had turned Zac's nerves into steel, and he unhesitatingly rushed toward the beast as it tried to extricate its mandibles from the ground.

The green mist swirled around him as he jumped forward, his axe swinging down with terrifying momentum. The weapon was once again infused with the Dao of Sharpness as Zac aimed down at a joint in the beast's neck. But a green radiance flashed as a shield appeared right above the joint, stopping Zac's swing in its tracks.

Zac couldn't believe what a cheat-like existence the battleroach king was, even possessing defensive skills on top of its abnormally hard shell. But he refused to give up and jumped up on the back of the beast as he stowed away his shield to grab hold to a shell for balance.

Terrifying swings rained down on the head of the battleroach king, and Zac alternated between the Dao of Heaviness and Dao of Sharpness to crack open the thick

plating to kill the beast. If that didn't work he hoped that he would at least be able to cause some blunt force trauma with his powerful attacks.

The roach roared in rage, but no matter how many swings Zac unleashed he couldn't seem to break open its head. But it did start to stumble around, proving that the force was starting to have an effect. Zac resolved to keep slamming down at it, sure that his Spirit Tool would last longer than the brain of the beast.

Suddenly a searing pain erupted in his side, and Zac looked down to see green beam shoot straight through his body and into the wall beyond him, causing a huge scar. Zac screamed in anguish, feeling like his insides were boiling. But he forcibly ignored the pain and quickly looked back to see that the massive wings had changed form to instead form two large arrays, one of which had released a massive beam at him.

The attack had been instantaneous, and not even his danger sense had been able to give a warning in time. Worse yet, it looked like the second array was charging up a similar beam. Zac knew he wouldn't be able to dodge in such close proximity, so he quickly took out his shield and summoned **[Immutable Bulwark]**.

Just a fraction of a second later another terrifying beam hit the bulwark, causing a tremendous impact. Luckily the shield held, but a large amount of Miasma was expended from the blast. But since he had taken out his shield for protection he had let go of the beast, and between the bucking battleroach king and the shockwave he was thrown off from the beast.

A spectral projection looking like the battleroach king bit down at the emerald array hovering above beast's back as Zac was flung away, but it was as though **[Deathwish]** tried to strike a cloud and it ripped right through. Zac sighed in disappointment when he saw the specter slam down on the extremely thick backplate instead. It looked like destroying the arrays was not an option either.

Zac groaned in pain as the wound in his side made itself reminded from the impact of landing on the ground, but Zac forcibly got back up on his feet. He was unwilling and unable to give up, knowing that if he didn't destroy is insectoid tank he'd be trapped down here for a year.

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**Chapter 340 - Battle of Attrition**

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Just as Zac was unsure of how to proceed against the seemingly impenetrable battleroach king the two arrays above the beast lit up once more. Zac immediately moved the bulwark to his front again, but his brows rose in alarm when he saw dozens of small emerald embers rush out every second, each flying toward him as though they were alive.

The moment he saw the quick turns and amazing speed of the small motes of light Zac realized that he never would be able to block them all, and he wouldn't be able to flee either. Instead, he could only infuse himself with the Dao of Hardness while getting his defensive treasures ready just in case.

The first ember flashed around the large bulwark to slam into Zac's chest, and Zac was relieved to realize that while it was painful the attack only caused a superficial wound that would heal by itself soon enough. Another specter appeared again in response to the attack, once again swinging down at the tough back carapace, though with far less power compared to the last one.

Zac realized that his skill considered the array as the source of the attack, rather than the battleroach. Otherwise it would have aimed for the softer belly instead. But as he saw **[Deathwish]** once again failing to cause any damage he had an inspiration.

The next moment one light after another slammed into him, each causing a small wound on his body. The area above the battleroach was immediately filling up with scores of specters that charged its impervious back plating. However, the appearance of some of the specters soon started to change, taking on a murky green tinge.

Elation flashed in Zac's eyes as he endured the energy barrage. His idea had proven successful. While **[Deathwish]** was still in early mastery he had no connection to the projections that were created, but now things had changed. Since there was a connection Zac realized he might be able to infuse the ghosts with his Dao to empower the strikes.

His idea had proven correct, though Zac only managed to infuse some of the rapidly appearing ghosts. His control of mental energy was still not too impressive, and the window to imbue the ghosts seemed to be shorter than a second. He tried to utilize his earlier lesson about only retaliating to some of the attacks, but his mind was already too occupied with the Dao infusion, so he could only let the skill keep running.

The reason the ghosts turned a murky green was that Zac had chosen to imbue all the specters he could with the Dao of Rot. He realized that if he couldn't even break through the shell while wielding **[Verun's Bite]**, then there would be no way to do it with the far weaker attacks from **[Deathwish]**. But what if he could whittle down the beast in another way?

Zac had already learned that the effect of the Seed of Rot was stacking, and he hoped to accumulate enough rot on the shell to affect the beast. The rapid-fire attacks of the arrays were luckily an excellent way to apply the Dao of Rot over and over, and in just moments the emerald mists around the battleroach had turned a shade darker from Zac's Dao.

Of course, this didn't come without a price. His whole body was covered in flesh wounds and black ichor, and his Miasma was getting drained at a terrifying rate. It was starting to get to the point that Zac was getting unsure whether he would still be standing before his plan would even come to fruition.

However, the exchange seemed to not only drain Zac's reserves. The two arrays soon dimmed down and sank into the body of the battleroach king again. Zac's eyes tried to glean any change in the beast's demeanor, but from what he could tell it was the same as before. The shell still looked as imperious as before, apart from having a slightly darker tint.

The beast looked at Zac as well and its layered protection once again started to slowly fan up and down. Zac glared back at the beast before taking out a healing pill. The two reached a stalemate of sorts, each party perhaps surprised at the power and resilience the other exhibited.

But the stalemate only lasted for a few seconds before both once again exploded into action. Zac slammed his shield into the ground, causing a wave of sharp spikes to erupt in a wave toward the incoming beast. The battleroach didn't falter the slightest, and rushed into it headfirst, crushing the spikes without any trouble.

A few spikes managed to topple its balance, but it was soon upon Zac once again. This time Zac didn't try to block its mandibles with his shield, and instead weaved beneath the beast. The legs' razor-sharp blades flashed all around him as he desperately blocked as many attacks as he could while retaliating with a rot-infused axe over and over. Now and then he tried a surprise-strike at the joints, but the emerald energy shield kept appearing to block any damage.

The brutal melee kept going for minutes as the two unleashed a storm of blows at each other that would render most people crippled. But Zac had truly met his match in endurance this time. The glistening emerald carapace held steady against Zac's assaults, even though Zac mostly tried to hit the same spot over and over.

Soon twenty minutes had passed Zac and was forced to consider means of escape. He was running dangerously low on Miasma, and his head was already pounding from constant use of multiple Dao Seeds. He was even considering using his **[Void Ball]** in a bid to end the fight, even if he was certain that would mean failing his class quest.

But a change finally took place in the battle as the battleroach king wildly swung its head to impale Zac on its horn. But the aim was completely off, and Zac was surprised to see that the beast started to stumble as though it was drunk.

His gambit seemed to finally have taken effect. The Dao of Rot might not have worked very well against the inorganic carapace of the battleroach, but mists of putrefaction still covered the area around the strike. This mist got mixed up with the emerald haze stemming from the treasure mushroom, which the beast constantly absorbed. It looked like the compounding effect of Zac's rot finally eclipsed the beast's natural regeneration.

The battleroach screeched in anger as its legs buckled and it desperately tried to get back on its feet. But the effect was only getting worse, and soon green liquid started to leak through the gaps in the shell as the beast's innards were rapidly rotting away.

Perhaps this was enough to kill the beast in due time, but Zac ran out of patience after waiting another 10 minutes. He walked over with his axe as his arm slowly swelled to ridiculous proportions. The battleroach feebly tried to bite down at Zac, but its coordination was completely ruined by now.

Zac easily passed its large head to reach the insect's neck, and with a roar swung down his axe with all the strength he could muster. An emerald shield appeared above the joint as before, but it had lost its luster and was incessantly flickering. The white head of **[Verun's Bite]** ripped through the shield like dry wood, and Zac finally managed to land a true strike.

A flood of energy entered his body almost immediately, and Zac sat down a few meters from the killed beast in exhaustion. He immediately took out two Miasma crystals, too tired to even move. He sensed the impartment of a new fractal on his body, but he was in no state to look into it at the moment.

It was only two hours later he opened his eyes. He was still extremely tired, but a somewhat pressing matter had interrupted him. The large carcass of the battleroach king kept leaking a nauseating goop through the cracks, and by now it had created a fetid pool around it that almost reached Zac's resting spot. Zac put the large carapace away with some disgust before moving over to the mushroom.

He still hadn't received his reward from Ascension breaker yet, but he guessed it would complete when he harvested the mushroom as it was still protected by the System's defensive shield. Just as he expected the golden shield disappeared when he got close, but Zac's eyes widened in alarm when there was nothing inside. The spot

where the mushroom had been rooted was empty, apart from a hole reaching into the ground.

But Zac soon breathed out in relief when he saw the two boxes right next to him. They had appeared completely noiselessly without a single energy fluctuation just like his rewards from earlier quests. The larger of the two boxes was made from light-grey stone and inlaid with golden fractals, and it was almost as tall as Zac was.

There was no doubt that the box contained the mushroom, and Zac was more than happy that the System had packaged it for him. Properly harvesting and storing spiritual herbs was a skill in of itself, and he was afraid that he would ruin the mushroom if he simply ripped it out of the ground.

The other box looked like a small jewelry box made out of pitch-black wood. Zac stored the larger box in his Cosmos Sack, instead focusing on the smaller one. As he expected a small crystal was placed inside and Zac immediately took it up to scan its contents.

Zac had been worried that the System would award him something that didn't suit his needs, but it looked like he had been too suspicious. The skill was called **[Winds of Decay]**, and Zac didn't hesitate to learn it. It sounded like something that would be a nice addition to his current class, and perhaps he even got this specific skill because of the way he managed to take down the battleroach.

The fractal found a position at the top of his lungs, right below the area that was being occupied by **[Thousand Faces]**. Having already gotten a few skills from outside sources he could tell that while the fit wasn't amazing, it wasn't too bad either. He believed the new skill should be able to display at least 70% of its true power when he used it.

Zac had restored less than a third of his energy the past two hours, but he couldn't stop himself from trying out the skill. Miasma effortlessly entered the fractal, but there was no effect apart from the miasma changing somehow. He tried to move the energy to his arms to release the skill, but the energy wouldn't budge. Zac frowned as he looked down at the small crystal in his hands until he had an idea.

Fresh air entered his lungs for the first time in days, as he took a deep breath even though he didn't need to breathe in his undead form. The energy from **[Winds of Decay]** entered his lungs as well, making Zac certain he was on the right track. A dark gust billowed out when he exhaled, immediately covering an area of over fifteen meters in no time.

Zac was happy that the skill worked, but he couldn't stop himself from grimacing. Did the System really give him a bad-breath skill? Zac shook his head with a wry smile and instead turned his attention to his class skill, **[Profane Seal]**. He needed something to cleanse the proverbial bad taste in his mouth after getting the last skill. A burst of information entered his mind when he focused on the other fractal, but Zac didn't even have time to celebrate before a change occurred in the cave.

A sudden sound threw any thought of experimenting with his other skill into the back of Zac's mind, and he whirled around with his axe ready. What entered Zac's sight wasn't one of the remaining battleroaches having found it's way down from the floors above. It was something else entirely.

A small humanoid stood in the inner corner of the cave, almost on the opposite side of where Zac entered. It was roughly a meter tall with large two black eyes on a head that looked pretty large for an otherwise lithe frame. If it wasn't for the small horns and the tail Zac would have classified the being as a traditional alien, for lack of a better name.

There were other strange things with the alien apart from the fact that it had somehow found its way down into the cave without him noticing. Two small drones of clearly technological origin hovered above its head, and it looked like he was holding some sort of device in his hand that was more akin to a tablet than some system-approved weapon. Its clothes also didn't follow the style of most battle-gear, and it looked a bit like a modern Chinese Tang suit.

Zac was frozen in shock seeing the unexpected arrival, but the same could be said about the alien. It stood unmoving a few meters into the cave, looking back and forth between the center of the cave and the battle-worn appearance of Zac.

Finally the silence broke as the two spoke up at the same time.

“Draugr?”

“Technocrat?”

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**Chapter 341 - Firmament's Edge**

Zac wasn't too surprised that the alien could identify his origins. He hadn't worn his mask during his time in the cave, which exposed his pallid skin and signature pitch-black eyes.

“Technocrat is imprecise and reductionist. I am a member of Firmament's Edge, something greater than what a miscreation like you can ever imagine,” the alien arrogantly exclaimed. “Were you the one that ruined my experiment? More importantly, how did you get here?”

Zac mutely stared at the arrogant little alien, unsure of what to make of the situation. He had never heard of Technocrats participating in invading newly integrated planets, yet a member of them stood in front of him. He had no idea what Firmament's Edge was, but he guessed it was one of the many factions within the Technocrat Alliance.

The appearance of a true Technocrat caused a storm in Zac's heart as it dragged up the subject of his mother. Was the appearance of this thing linked to her? Or even worse, was it linked to the item in Kenzie's mind? But Zac forcefully calmed down his fraying emotions and gave the alien an impervious stare. He needed to act the part if he wanted to get some information.

“The Undead Empire goes where it pleases,” Zac said with matching arrogance. “I'm here because there were a lot of things to kill.”

“You! My poor roach. I spent so much money to infuse it with the genes for energy control! It might have caused an unseen evolution with the help of the Amanita, but you ruined it all!” the alien said with gnashing teeth.

Zac shrugged his shoulders without a care, though he was internally boiling with rage. Was this little prick the reason that the battleroach king had such annoying skills like the energy wings and the defensive shield? It made his life a lot harder than it needed to be. But he pushed down his annoyance since he truly needed to know what was going on.

“Your kind should know better than to encroach a planet under the Undead Empire. What are you doing here?” Zac said.

“Pah, Firmament’s Edge doesn’t fear you. Even if a few of your old undyings crawl out of their sealed cultivation graves we have people to meet them head-on,” the alien snorted, but he suddenly froze in alarm. “Wait, what do you mean under your control?”

“We came to this baby planet through the Incursion, so naturally the planet belongs to The Undead Empire from now on,” Zac snorted, stilling his fraying nerves.

The fact that the Technocrat wasn’t backing down against a monstrous existence as the Undead Empire was pretty telling that Firmament’s Edge wasn’t some backwater faction. His thoughts went to the story that Karunthel told about the Technocrat who had no problem blowing up planets. Even Earth had the technology to ruin their world before the integration. What about a faction of hyper-advanced aliens?

“Shit, have you lunatics already started the terraforming?!” the alien gasped. “We need to speak with your leaders immediately. And how the hell did your people find your way down here so quickly? We have been drilling for months.”

“Why would I arrange a meeting like that?” Zac asked with feigned disinterest, ignoring the question of how he got down to the Underworld.

“We have no interest in the planet, kill all the natives for all I care. But we need to do a quick sweep of the planet before you terraform it,” the alien said. “We are even willing to compensate you for the trouble.”

“What’s so important that you came all the way here?” Zac probed.

“That’s private,” the alien immediately responded with a frown.

“Well, if you don’t tell me what it is you’re looking for, I don’t see a reas-,” Zac pushed the alien, but he was suddenly interrupted mid-sentence.

For some reason his Cosmos Sack had started to vibrate, making Zac look down with confusion. When he infused his mind into the sack he was horrified to see that it was his mother’s necklace that was moving around in the bag’s subspace, something Zac thought was impossible.

He quickly looked up at the alien again, since what happened clearly wasn’t a coincidence. The amulet had been completely inert until now, and it only started to act up the moment he got close to a Technocrat. And as he expected the little alien had taken out some ball that emitted out a barely discernible wave at regular intervals.

“You have it! It’s on this planet! We actually found it!” the Alien screamed in shock and excitement as his eyes were glued to the ball. “The traitor has been found!”

A towering killing intent suffused Zac’s mind as he glared at the exhilarated alien. He had been wary of the Technocrat’s stance since he learned of his mother’s origin, but the alien’s last comment seemed to cement a disappointing reality that he had been dreading for months.

The Technocrats were enemies.

If his mother had been branded a traitor there was no way that things would end well if his and his sister’s origins were exposed. They were barely holding on as it was when the largest threat only was a vagrant D-Grade cultivator. They couldn’t handle being in the crosshairs of one of the universe’s most powerful factions.

This alien could under no circumstance be allowed to live. The danger to his sister was just too big.

A storm of energy swirled around Zac as he immediately activated almost every skill in his repertoire. He wouldn’t take any risks against the Technocrats, especially not when his sister’s safety was at risk. A large swathe of miasma billowed out from him in an instant as **[Fields of Despair]** activated, but Zac held off on summoning the large barrier.

The alien immediately noticed the change, and he looked up at Zac with a scrunched-up face.

“So you have already found it! You should never have meddled in the business of Firmament’s Edge,” the alien growled, and the two drones above the alien’s head started to hum as they shone with a sinister red light. “Die!”

Zac couldn’t sense any energy fluctuations from the increasingly blinding weapons, but he knew that they were charging some extremely strong attack. However, Zac still wasn’t worried as he kept the alien within his sight until the moment his danger sense warned him of something bad was about to happen.

Zac stomped down into the ground just before two huge beams shot at this position, causing a wide path of destruction. Even the air itself seemed to be immolated by the terrifying beams, and they even managed to carve holes in the walls that were so deep that the ends of the newly created tunnels couldn’t be seen.

But Zac suddenly appeared straight in front of the alien, completely unscathed, as waves of death radiated all around him. The little grey man looked up in shock at Zac’s sudden appearance, but he immediately started to disappear through some unknown means. However, Zac still wasn’t worried as he once again stomped down his foot.

“Seal” Zac growled, and the area around him drastically changed once again.

The miasma from **[Fields of Despair]** congealed into five large towers that formed a circle with Zac as the epicenter. On the top of each tower an azure fractal shone like a cursed lighthouse, and hazy fractals ran along the length of the spires.

The towers weren’t truly corporeal like the hand that Zac summoned with **[Nature’s Punishment]**, but they were much more real than the specters from **[Deathwish]**. They were slightly reminiscent of the Unholy Beacons, but they emitted a far more arcane aura, as though they had been summoned from the true Underworld.

The sudden appearance of the towers wasn’t the end of the skill, as each tower shot out a ghastly chain that moved like a lightning bolt to converge at the same spot. A shrill shriek echoed across the cave as the alien appeared twenty meters away from Zac, completely chained down.

Four of the chains had fettered his hands and legs, and the final chain snaked around his neck. The technocrat desperately tried to break the chains with all his might, but it was like they were wrought from divine iron and didn’t budge the slightest. A bracer on the alien’s arm even shot out two radiant beams at the restraints, but it only left a small mark.

The technocrat only had time to unleash one attack before he started to howl at the top of his lungs as his whole body spasmed uncontrollably. At the same time a haze started to pour out from the chains, once again filling the area with miasma. They were currently forcibly converting the energy inside the small alien into miasma, just like **[Field of Despair]** did with corpses.

Zac grimaced as he looked upon the horrifying torture, but he made no move to stop it. This was, after all, a person who not only had tried to kill him, but also one that had been completely indifferent to the death of his whole planet.

But soon enough the alien managed to focus enough to command the two drones to help out, and they started to charge up new blasts. Zac couldn’t let that happen, so immediately hurled two daggers at them. But a red shield sprung up to protect them, making Zac remember the extremely durable forcefield that had protected Kenzie at King’s Crossing.

He couldn’t allow the two drones to attack the chains or the towers, as even they wouldn’t be able to last too long against the terrible blasts those small machines

could unleash. The technocrat saw his approach, and he glared at him with hatred. Zac ignored the stare and got ready to destroy the two things with a swing of his axe, or at least make them miss their targets.

Blinding light suddenly stole Zac's vision as a blast hurled him into the distance, almost knocking him unconscious. But Zac refused to let his mind fill with darkness, not when the stakes were so high. He shook his head and immediately got back on his feet with a groan, and looked up at the fleeing form of the technocrat.

The small alien had actually sacrificed a hand and a leg while the self-detonations of the two drones had destroyed the three other chains. He was currently flying away in the opposite direction of Zac, somehow ignoring gravity. But his escape was immediately stopped the moment he tried to escape between two of the towers as an azure wall appeared to block him.

The alien screamed in frustration and launched a beam of light at the wall from his remaining hand. Zac couldn't tell whether it was a skill or another gadget, but he quickly got his answer as an alien ghost appeared behind the technocrat and gored him through his chest.

Zac wanted to run up and take down the technocrat before he could do anything else. But his legs stopped listening to him after a few steps, making him fall over once more. Luckily Zac wasn't out of cards just yet and took a deep breath.

This time he didn't simply exhale, but rather blew out a gust empowered by **[Winds of Decay]** with all the force he could muster. A black storm expanded from his mouth like a hurricane, and the whole cage created by the five towers were completely engulfed in a second. Screams could be heard from the other side, but Zac didn't stop and kept blowing and blowing, drowning the area in decay.

But even a minute later the screams didn't abate, and Zac frowned as he took out a healing pill and started to drag himself over toward where the screams came from. His sight had been blocked by the dense cloud he released, but when he finally reached the location even he couldn't help but blanch. The state of the Technocrat was beyond pitiful, and Zac almost instinctually killed him to take him out of his misery before stopping himself.

Half the alien's body was in a state of putrefaction, looking like a corpse dragged out of the sewers. But a mysterious force continuously restored his body and expelled the dead cells in a form of rapid regeneration. Zac couldn't see any machines, but he guessed it was some advanced technology at play.

But this process was clearly extremely painful judging by the alien's screams, and worse was that the moment his new cells were formed they immediately started to rot again due to the lingering effect of **[Winds of Decay]**. The alien was constantly dragged back and forth in a tortuous cycle of life and death, being both and neither at the same time.

It looked like he had lost all body functions since he couldn't move a muscle, he only looked up at Zac with despair.

"Kill me," the alien cried when with a shaking voice.

"Give me answers first," Zac said, fortifying his heart. "What are your Firmament's Edge after?"

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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## Chapter 342 - An Easy Gig

"I am not really part of Firmament's Edge," the alien wept. "My company was just one of many contracted by them to scan newly integrated planets. I just wanted to use their name to make you back down."

Zac couldn't help but shake his head at the Technocrat's bad luck. Perhaps Firmament's Edge was a terrifying existence in the multiverse, but unfortunately for the alien Zac was perhaps the only Draugr who had never heard of them before.

"Who is the traitor you mentioned? What were you looking for?" Zac asked.

"I don't know," the Alien wheezed, but his eyes widened in horror when black smoke started to emanate from the corner of Zac's mouth. "I swear, I don't! We were all given scanning equipment before being transported. We were simply supposed to immediately report back if the equipment found whatever they were looking for."

It was a huge relief to Zac that it seemed as though the true leaders of the Technocrats hadn't been warned off by the silver ball that was lying next to the alien. Zac gazed at it for a second before he reached over and crushed it in his fist, twisting it beyond redemption.

"Then why did you mention a traitor?" Zac asked with a scowl after turning back to the dying Technocrat.

"It's a rumor my boss heard. A top person in Firmament's Edge stole something extremely valuable and fled to unintegrated territory. But small people like us have no way of finding out the details. If we did, our home planets would get incinerated in a heartbeat," the alien winced.

Zac kept pushing for more answers, but the alien started to become rambling and incoherent in less than a minute. His brain was breaking down like the rest of his body, and Zac ended his life with a merciful swing.

He did, however, manage to find out a few more tidbits. The hidden incursion in the underworld was truly a Technocrat Incursion, and it was controlled by a small corporation attached to the Technocrat faction. They only possessed five E-grade warriors, the foreman of the company along with four cultivator bodyguards.

Better yet, it seemed that The System truly had it out for the Technocrats because it essentially confiscated any and all advanced technology that they tried to sneak to Earth. Only minor items without destructive capabilities or components that needed massive amounts of refinement were allowed through, but at exorbitant cost.

Most of their time had been spent building their base since they essentially needed to produce everything from scratch. Of course, the Technocrat's name wasn't just for show, and they already had production lines for all essentials they needed for their mission.

They had created an arsenal of weaponry with the help of the plentiful minerals and crystals in the underworld, creating an impervious defense. Even the two dangerous drones had been created almost from scratch on Earth, proving how great their capabilities were. Luckily they required a few hard to make components that limited their number. But still, rooting them out would be far harder than their low levels indicated.

He also learned that time was of the essence. The technocrats had been arduously digging toward the surface the past three months, not resting a second after they finally managed to manufacture a monstrous machine that was strong enough to rip through the reinforced ground. They expected to be able to reach the surface in less than two weeks, at which point they would set up some massive scanning device they had brought.

Zac couldn't let them reach the surface. His amulet was spotted even though it was inside a Cosmos Sack, proving the quality of the scanning devices Firmament's Edge possessed. Unfortunately, the alien had no idea how the tools worked or the limits of their capabilities.

He only knew that they couldn't send transmissions through space since the System blocked them. But they might be able to find anything that Leandra had ever touched. Or even worse, they might find Kenzie even if she stayed within the Mystic Realm.

The Technocrat company that had arrived on earth hadn't expected to find anything and only saw the Incursion as an easy gig. They would arrive at the planet, scan it with the items, steal some resources, and then return to get paid by Firmament's Edge.

They had only brought a small crew of mostly non-combat personnel, wanting to keep their costs as low as possible. But that would all change if they found signs that Earth actually was the planet that Firmament's Edge was so desperately searching for. The Great Redeemer would be the least of Zac's problems if that happened.

Zac looked down at the dead body of the technocrat, but he still held off on deactivating **[Profane Seal]**. Keeping the towers around did drain a decent amount of miasma, but there was a good reason for keeping it. A towering aura billowed out from Zac's body, causing the air to shudder as Zac kept changing between infusing it with the Dao of Heaviness, Sharpness, and Rot.

It was his Dao Fields, and he unleashed them to the fullest in hopes of catching and destroying any hidden machines. The technocrat turned delirious before Zac had the opportunity to ask anything about the items he possessed, so Zac was afraid to release the cage. What if a hidden spycam found its way back to the technocrat incursion?

A smattering noise drew Zac's attention, and he looked over in the direction of where the sound came from. Dozens of small detonations took place in the air, looking like flies getting zapped by electricity. Zac looked at the spectacle with confusion until he managed to snag one of the flies as it exploded nearby.

The thing was as small as a grain and seemed to be made from platinum, but Zac couldn't be completely sure of its original form since it was pretty torn. It was covered in cuts so minute that Zac could barely see them, and bent and twisted as though it had been subject to extreme pressure.

It appeared that the thing was immune to his **[Winds of Decay]** skill, but it was helpless against the Dao. It wasn't surprising since the Dao wasn't simply increasing the power of skills, it was attacking with the fundamental truths of the universe. It was hard to block out and even harder to heal from when wounded.

Zac's mind was pounding like he had a bad headache, but he pushed himself to the limit to drown the area in his Dao Fields for a while longer. With his current level of insight the area turned into a field of death, something far beyond the area around the Fiend Wolf during the first beast wave. Even cultivators who had already got their class would likely be turned to mincemeat if they came within 50 meters of Zac at this moment.

Luckily it only took a few seconds before the smattering stopped, meaning all the microscopic machines in the air were destroyed. He didn't know what the purpose of the small machines was, but leaving them intact couldn't possibly end in anything good.

All the gadgets on the alien's body had been destroyed as well, and the two drones were beyond salvaging. But Zac wasn't disappointed by that since he doubted

he could do much with them in any case. While he was somewhat tech-savvy for an earthling he could only be considered a caveman by the standards of the far more advanced Technocrats.

Zac couldn't be sure whether there were still some machine spying on him, but by this point there was simply no way for him to be sure. But between his Dao Fields and **[Winds Of Decay]** the area had gone through multiple sweeps, allowing Zac to finally relax somewhat.

Since there was nothing else to trap he could finally unsummon the five majestic towers. They immediately started to dissipate, once again turning into miasmic clouds. Zac gave the towers one last marveling look, completely satisfied with his first test run of the skill.

His new skill **[Profane Seal]** had been beyond anything that Zac had hoped, and he felt he still hadn't discovered all of its marvels. It was comprised of two parts. The first part was a short-distance teleportation, allowing him to move even faster than when using **[Loamwalker]**.

If Zac wanted to the skill could be ended at that point, meaning it would only act as a movement skill. But there were limits to that since the skill seemed to have a cooldown. But it would allow either escape or a rapid charge if needed.

The second half of the skill was the cage he just dissolved.

Zac could create a sealed space the size of which he could control to a certain degree. The only ways to get out was to either destroy the towers through brute force or to kill Zac. But any attack against the towers would be met with the retaliation of **[Deathwish]**, meaning the cage protected itself from attacks. It was a flexible skill that could let him trap a group of powerhouses or even lock down a large section of an army.

There were still some details he needed to figure out through experimentation, but Zac was completely satisfied with his choice. He had a feeling that **[Profane Discharge]** would have worked in a similar manner, where the first half of the skill was the same teleport, with the second part being a large scale eruption of force.

But Zac much preferred the cage. With his massive pool of attributes he would be able to whittle almost anyone down before they managed to break out, especially now that he had **[Winds of Decay]** to turn the whole cage into a field of death. He only needed to figure out a way to imbue the breathing skill with the Seed of Rot to turn it even deadlier.

Unfortunately, he had tried that in the heat of battle, but there was no response. Perhaps the skill needed to be upgraded before it could carry the Dao, just like how it was with **[Deathwish]**.

All these things together had immediately spelled the end for the Technocrat.

Of course, he knew that **[Profane Seal]** wouldn't always be as effective as it was this time since it wasn't without its weaknesses. The alien had actually only been level 48, mostly relying on his gadgets for survival. A stronger opponent would be able to not only largely resist the drainage of the chains, but might even be able to rebuff them completely.

The cage also wasn't impervious to interference. People from the outside could destroy the towers with enough force, allowing their allies to escape. So when he managed to trap his target he had to act quickly before it all was for nothing, because he would only be able to use the skill once or twice during a battle.

Zac sighed and looked down at the half-rotten corpse of the Technocrat before taking out a vial with a green substance inside. He poured the viscous liquid down over the body, and a cloud immediately rose to the sky. Less than a minute later the body was completely gone, not even leaving the bones.

The liquid was a common item among vagrant cultivators in the multiverse. It was all too common that you were left with a corpse you didn't want to explain, so the best thing was to make it go away. The liquid completely destroyed any remnants, which would hopefully erase any evidence of what you had done.

One item that had withstood the corrosion was a cosmos sack though, and Zac was a bit surprised that a Technocrat even used an item like that. Perhaps spatial devices were still out of reach through technology even for the Technocrats. But Zac didn't immediately pick it up, rather opting to take out an inscribed box to put it in inside.

The box was used to isolate treasures that emitted strong auras, but Zac hoped it would be able to block out any potential distress calls from the items the alien possessed as well. He would bury the box later, only picking it up again when he had a better grasp on the Technocrat's capabilities. For now, it would have to stay in a backpack that Zac took out.

The cave was once again starting to become visible as the mists from **[Winds of Decay]** and **[Fields of Despair]** were dissipating. The emerald smoke originating from the **[Primordial Breath Amanita]** had already mostly dissipated between the battleroach king's absorption during their battle and the mushroom getting sealed away.

The dispersion of the haze left the cave in full display, allowing Zac to finally grasp how the alien managed to sneak inside.

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**Chapter 343 - Priorities**

Just a few meters away the gem-studded wall was flickering in and out of existence, intermittently displaying a well-lit tunnel leading into the distance. Zac wasn't too surprised the alien was able to create a back entrance. If the technocrats possessed the capability to drill through the fortified rock in the Underworld all the way to the surface, then this was a cakewalk.

The alien that Zac killed had been one of the researchers for the Incursion, responsible for finding and identifying valuable resources. The two drones he commanded were likely able to get the job done.

Parts of Zac just wanted to rush through the tunnel into Technocrat territory, killing everything in sight. But he knew he had to act smarter, so he instead sat down to replenish his once again depleted reserves. He wasn't too worried about being interrupted by another Technocrat since what the alien had done down here was a private experiment he hoped would pad his own pocket.

While Zac slowly absorbed the death-attuned energies from the crystals he tried to go over the battle with the battleroach. It had truly pushed him to his limits, and he hoped that he would be able to use the battle to push his insights forward.

But any time he tried to ponder on the Dao the splitting headache only got worse, and he had to give up any idea of improving his Seeds for the time being. Zac wasn't too disappointed though as there would be time for meditation later. Besides, there were other gains to go over.

The battle with the battleroach king had awarded him another three full levels, pushing him all the way to level 65. It felt a bit crazy, but he would have possessed both the first and second spots on the Power Ladder if it listed both his classes.

There was no comparing his own leveling speed with that of the average cultivator by now. Each battleroach in the cave would have been able to push most rankers to their limits, but Zac had killed them by the thousands, gaining more in a few hours than most would in a month.

But Zac knew that the final ten levels would be tough. He had gotten most of the final levels for free through the hunt last time, but this time around he would have to grind them out himself. Luckily he would face a lot of high-levelled enemies soon enough.

Most notably there were the caves teeming with battleroaches above that would give him a good start.

Zac opened his status screen and allocated all his free points into strength. He also checked the quest screen for any changes, but it was now empty of any tasks. After that there was nothing for him to do apart from calming his mind while restored his energy. He still felt some of the effect of the splinter as it had acted up a bit during his last two battles again, but by now it was fully under control.

Five hours later half his Miasma had been restored while all the wounds in his body apart from the one in his sides were completely healed. His head was still pounding a bit, and he knew he would have to avoid using his Dao for a day or two. But it wouldn't be needed for what he was about to do, and Zac didn't want to sit around any longer.

He got up on his feet with a groan and started walking toward the tunnel he came from, leaving the passage the technocrat used where it was. Zac had no idea what waited for him if he entered that path of the unknown, and he feared there would be some hidden surveillance in the cave.

Zac even considered using his **[Void Ball]** to destroy the passage, but he decided against it in the end. There was not much to gain from doing so, and he was afraid that the spatial chaos would destroy the whole cave with him inside.

Instead, he chose to go back the same way he came from in order to return to New London. But before he left he extracted the most radiant crystals of the final cave. It didn't take long as he only needed to rip them out of the wall after slightly boosting his strength with **[Unholy Strike]**.

**[Verun's Bite]** once again shuddered and woke up when presented with the radiant crystals, but Zac realized something was wrong after half a minute. Verun hovered between hunger and confusion as Zac held a crystal to the axe head, but the Tool Spirit eventually gave up on absorbing it.

It looked pretty odd, making Zac unsure whether Spirit Tools were unsure themselves what they needed to evolve. Or perhaps Verun had confused itself with an actual beast, believing that the crystal would help improve its bloodline just like it helped the battleroaches. Zac could only stash away the crystal and refocus on farming the best two hundred or so crystals.

As for the less precious gems, he would figure something out later depending on their value. For now he left them where they were as he slowly climbed up toward the 10<sup>th</sup> floor. He knew he would have to waste some precious time fighting his way out, but it was better than using the trap door who might lead in the wrong direction. But Zac started to frown as he climbed through the hole in the roof.

It was way too silent.

There had always been a constant clatter of the battleroaches during his time in this cave system, often intermingled with aggressive screeches. But now there was a

dead silence, where the only sounds came from Zac himself. After dragging himself up to the crest of the tunnel he quickly saw the reason. A sea of corpses littered the whole floor. The carapaces of over a thousand battleroaches were dismantled and destroyed almost beyond recognition.

Zac quickly crawled up on the floor, readying himself for another battle. But he breathed out in relief when he saw that the wounds weren't caused by any energy weapons or the like, but it rather looked like they had been caused by the other battleroaches. The only explanation that Zac could find was that the roaches had whipped themselves up in a frenzy for some reason, entering an all-out melee.

Perhaps they could sense the death of the battlerroach king and immediately started to fight for the role of the new alpha. Or perhaps they had never been a pack species and were only kept in check by the much superior roach on the bottom floor. In any case, it saved Zac a lot of time, though he sighed in disappointment in the missed opportunity. The corpses on this floor alone would probably have given him another level.

A sudden clattering in the distance drew Zac's attention, and he spotted a wounded E-Grade battlerroach getting to its feet. It was far larger than any battlerroach he had spotted on his descent, making Zac unsure what was going on. Had it grown almost to twice its size simply by killing the competition?

Unfortunately there time to ponder before the beast was upon him. It frenziedly tried to grab Zac with its mandibles and rip him to pieces, but Zac effortlessly slammed its head to the side with a swing of his shield.

After fighting the battlerroach king in a pitched melee for almost half an hour it felt like a joke to fight against this large, but ultimately common, battlerroach. Its carapace had become a lot sturdier, but after a few well-aimed strikes the beast lay dead with brain leaking out from a deep cut.

However, just as he downed the supersized battlerroach a few more rose as well, each of them sporting various degrees of wounds. Zac realized they probably were playing dead to recuperate, but perhaps felt forced into action from Zac's arrival. Altogether there were 8 more of them, all of them E-Grade.

During the fight Zac had ample time to use **[Inquisitive Eye]**, and he found out that the beasts were only around level 79, which was perhaps one or two levels higher than they were before. So it seemed that the increase in size hadn't come from levels, but rather a purified bloodline.

It took less than a minute before the 8 battleroaches lay dead on the ground, their heads either broken or missing. Zac quickly stowed away the enlarged bodies before heading toward the next floor. The carapaces were nowhere near as good as the emerald shells of the king, but Zac thought they might be worth keeping since they were definitely a step above the Ayr Hivebeast shells.

The same scene played out in the next couple of floors where there were a few surviving battleroaches, each of them substantially larger than they were before. Zac made short work of them all, which wasn't too hard as all of them were pretty wounded. Some of them were even at death's door already, requiring only a simple swing from Zac to end their lives.

Unfortunately their ragged state also meant that they only gave a small part of their original energy, but Zac didn't care in the slightest as he rushed up the floor at the highest possible speed. Fighting his way to the bottom almost took him two days, but getting back up required less than half an hour.

The shimmering barrier was gone as expected, allowing Zac to effortlessly swim through the pitch-black water and resurface in the secluded lake. He was back in New

London a day later, once again donning his signature mask. He had dug down the box just outside the small outpost he teleported from, giving him some peace of mind.

Zac's initial instinct was to head back to Port Atwood before rushing the Technocrat Incursion, but he quickly realized that he might need help. So instead of teleporting away again he rushed over to the former Union Headquarters and went to the secluded chambers that Ogras had made his own.

The demon had kept his identity secret all this time as well, always donning a large hood and obscuring his features with a shroud of shadows. But Zac hadn't made any effort of hiding his arrival, so the demon hadn't bothered with his disguise when Zac entered his quarters.

"Good, you're back early. There's a problem," Ogras said the moment Zac entered his office.

"I was just about to say," Zac sighed as he sat down opposite the demon. "What's going on?"

"We've lost contact with the Port Atwood army," Ogras said.

"What?" Zac said with shock. "They're dead?!"

"No, calm down," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. "They're probably alive. But two days ago the whole sector of the Dead Zone where our army was stationed went dark. All the teleportation arrays in the area, including the one where our war outpost was, have been disconnected from the network."

"How is this possible? Is someone targeting us?" Zac said, scrambling to get a grip on the situation.

Zac had been keyed up to launch a scorched-earth assault on the Technocrats as soon as he got back, but it seemed that the universe had once again thrown a wrench into his plans.

"No, I think it is the Undead Empire that's finally rearing its fangs," Ogras said with a sigh. "We have underestimated them. The resources needed to do something like this is unimaginable. I think they are making a statement because three of their generals have already fallen."

"Can Thea's people help us?" Zac asked with a frown.

"They have their hands full, the Zombies are pushing hard, and they are too far apart to send scouts," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "Besides, all neighboring arrays that we know of have gone dark as well."

"Do you have any ideas?" Zac asked.

"You have the flying disk. We can use it to scout a much broader area than running on foot, so we should be able to find them within a week or two if we leave immediately. It only seats a few people, but the two of us are enough to handle most things," Ogras said.

"One or two weeks..." Zac muttered, blankly staring ahead.

Spending one or two weeks to scour the wilderness for his people would mean that the Technocrat incursion would manage to reach the surface. From the way the alien made it sound they would send out some drones that moved with extreme speed at that time, and those drones would scour the whole planet with their scanners. It would be too late to stop them at that point.

It meant that he would have to choose. Either let the Technocrats dig to the surface, which would have unknown consequences. Or ignore the plight of his people until he could close the Incursion.

Kenzie or Port Atwood.

"I... I can't go," Zac sighed, unable to meet Ogras' incredulous stare.

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### **Chapter 344 - Heretics**

“You can’t take time to rescue your people? Most of our elites are in that army. My three generals are there. What the hell is going on?!” Ogras growled causing the shadows in the room to shudder.

“I can’t go until I close an Incursion,” Zac said as he shored up his resolve.

“The flame golems? They might be a problem, but not to the point you should abandon our army. Worst case we can simply make our surface teleporter public, allowing everyone to escape. Besides, there’s not enough magma in the core for the golems to flood the entire Underworld, so they can only slowly destroy town after town,” Ogras said in disbelief.

“It’s not them. It’s the hidden incursion. It turns out it’s the Technocrats,” Zac sighed. “I met one of them while grinding in that cave I found.”

“What? The Technocrat heretics have joined the fight for baby planets? They usually stay clear because the Ruthless Heavens is more hands-on with places like this,” Ogras muttered before he suddenly froze and looked up at Zac with thinning eyes. “Wait. Technocrats as in the guys whose insignia you just happen to walk around with? The one you ‘accidentally picked up’?”

Zac didn’t answer, but he knew that that the demon had figured out at least half of the story already. If he hadn’t then he wouldn’t be Ogras any longer.

“And the only reason you’d act this obstinate is if it was about your sister,” Ogras continued, proving Zac’s hunch. “Don’t tell me?”

Zac scratched his neck with some helplessness. He hadn’t planned on cluing in Ogras to this secret, but it looked like he had left too many breadcrumbs to the truth. But at least he could which parts to expose and which parts to keep hidden to protect Kenzie.

“I don’t know the truth either. But my mom might have been one of them, and these Technocrats might be looking for her. I am afraid Kenzie, and even this whole world, will be caught up in something that has nothing to do with us. Leandra disappeared twenty years ago, probably leaving earth,” Zac said. “We can’t get caught up in whatever mess she created.”

Ruthlessness flashed in Zac’s eyes as he looked up at Ogras, who frowned then he sensed the killing intent leaking out from Zac’s body. Just the thought of his sister getting caught by the Technocrats because their mother forced Jeeves into her head made Zac furious.

“So I can’t go to the Dead Zone yet. I cannot let a single one of the Technocrats leave this planet alive,” Zac said with finality.

Ogras silently looked at Zac for a few seconds, before sighing with a shake of his head.

“Fine, let’s go kill some heretics.”

Zac was surprised at the ease of which Ogras agreed, and he couldn’t help but feel a bit suspicious. The demonkin army and his generals were half his claim to power in Port Atwood, and if they fell he would be almost isolated apart from his friendship with Zac.

“How about you take my disk and head to the Dead Zone while I deal with the Incursion?” Zac probed to see his response.

“No point,” Ogras said with a wry smile. “As much as I hate to admit it I am not sure if I’ll be enough to change anything in the face of the Undead Empire. We need the human netherbeast to mow through the zombies like you did with the silver puppets.”

Zac slowly nodded his head, feeling it was a good enough reason.

“I have to go prepare something back at Port Atwood first. We’ll meet back up in an hour or so at the border town I came from,” Zac said before hurrying out of the office toward the teleporter, leaving a befuddled demon behind.

Zac made his way through the chain of arrays before finding himself in Port Atwood. He didn’t find Kenzie in either the cultivation cave or his compound so he hurried over toward the Mystic Realm instead. However, he did change to his human form and clothing first, because he might run into some people who didn’t know about his Mr. Black alias.

There was a new array in the network that led straight to the center of Mystic Island. It wasn’t too long since he came here last time, but it had undergone drastic changes. The chaotic swirl of spatial tears was gone, and in the desolate space that they occupied a small encampment stood instead. The array he arrived at was placed some distance away from the small town, likely as a safety precaution.

There were less than fifty structures, but it had a wall that was even sturdier than the one he had around his own wall. Not only that, but there were also multiple arrays creating a thick layer of defense, stopping any possibility of sneaking inside. Zac was suitably impressed as he walked toward the encampment

“Lord Atwood!” someone called, making Zac turn toward a vaguely familiar woman.

On a second look, he realized it was one of the more recent additions to the Valkyries, a girl who had joined after the first round of casualties during the final beast wave.

“Kaitlin, right?” Zac asked with some hesitation.

“That’s right,” the girl said, some worry evident in her eyes. “I’m sorry, but have you found our people yet?”

“Not yet,” Zac said, guilt welling up in his chest. “We’re working on it. Is my sister in the Mystic Realm?”

The Valkyrie nodded in confirmation before Zac hurried away. He couldn’t look the girl in the eyes, considering the decision he had made. Because it was an undeniable truth that he had chosen his sister over the rest of Port Atwood, even though it wasn’t even sure that she was in any danger. He could make all excuses in the world, but that was the gist of it.

But keeping his sister, his sole surviving family member as he saw it, safe had been his main goal since the start, the reason why he fought so hard. She was the only reason he had erected Port Atwood. If that meant that people would die, so be it. Zac would have to live with those sacrifices. Besides, everyone knew that they risked death when they joined the fight against the Undead Empire.

He stepped through the teleporter in the center of the settlement, and the next moment he stood in a cave, peering out into the supersized garden that Ogras mentioned. As he walked out he saw the majestic trees lining the horizon and the silver borders crisscrossing the sky, but he didn’t have time to marvel at this place. He would have to explore its mysteries at another time.

Beneath the small hill another walled settlement stood, looking almost identical to the one outside. Zac hurriedly looked around until a demon warrior pointed him toward one of the larger buildings, which turned out to be a study filled with books and crystals.

“You’re here?” Kenzie said with surprise when she noticed Zac’s appearance. “I thought you were in the Underworld.”

She had been sitting on a comfortable sofa with an information crystal in her hands.

“I had to go back quickly,” Zac said with a smile as he sat down next to her.

“Is it about the arrays stopping working?” Kenzie asked with worry in her eyes.

“That too,” Zac sighed. “There’s a lot of things to do. How are things on your end?”

“You know, I am pretty sure that this place has something to do with the Technocrats! We went to the gate Ogras talked about, and Jeeves said that the wall is definitely of Technocrat origin!” Kenzie excitedly blurted out, clearly having waited for the opportunity to share the news. “I didn’t enter like you said, but I’m sure there are a lot of things Jeeves can find out. Zac, perhaps mom is here!”

“Don’t touch anything yet, we aren’t strong enough,” Zac said with worry, reiterating the severity of the situation. “You might trigger an alarm or something, leading mom’s enemies here. And I don’t know about mom being here. The people in this place seems to have been isolated for thousands of years, and mom disappeared only twenty years ago.”

Kenzie’s face went from exuberant to downcast in a second, and Zac felt a pang in his heart as he patted her head. He knew just how much Kenzie wanted to find Leandra.

“But perhaps I’m wrong. We will find out sooner or later,” Zac acquiesced. “I actually came back with some news about mom, though I am not sure about all the details.”

Kenzie once again perked up, but as Zac retold his encounter with the little alien in the underworld her face started to scrunch up in a frown.

“So you think that mom is this high-ranked person from the organization Firmament’s Edge,” Kenzie concluded. “Which means that the thing they’re looking for is Jeeves?”

“Well, it can all be a coincidence,” Zac ventured, though his face betrayed what he truly thought. “But their targeting device did react to the amulet. I will leave it here for now so it won’t happen again.”

“What will you do?” Kenzie asked.

“Well, if they’re mom’s enemies I can’t let them stay on earth. Ogras and I will kick them out of here before they can perform the scan. Who knows what else mom has left on earth. Things are crazy enough without a bunch of technocrats arriving,” Zac said with a wink as he handed over the amulet.

“See if you can find anything about mom, please,” Kenzie entreated.

“I will, though you should know that these people only seemed to be hired thugs. They didn’t seem to know a lot,” Zac shrugged. “Please stay inside the Mystic Realm until I’ve dealt with the Incursion. Who knows how strong their scanners are.”

“Okay, okay I will stay in here. Perhaps a few will choose to stay behind like the Tal-Eladar. It might us help understand the Technocrats and mom better,” Kenzie said.

“Perhaps,” Zac smiled, though he knew that would never happen.

“I’m making some headway on my formation studies anyway. It’s pretty interesting stuff,” Kenzie added.

“Oh?” Zac asked with interest. “Anything on the thing we found on Salvation’s body?”

“Well... Maybe?” Kenzie said with some hesitation. “Jeeves have looked at it for quite a while and made some deductions. I think I can break its lock so to speak. But I still have no idea what would actually happen when I did that. Perhaps the Origin Dao trapped inside will flood out around us, but perhaps it will simply disappear? Or perhaps the whole thing would explode?”

Zac was surprised that Kenzie had made progress so quickly with the thing. He would have thought it might take months to figure out the details of such a complicated item. It was no wonder the Technocrats wanted Jeeves back.

“Well, there’s no stress. Take your time with it. Remember, stay in the Mystic Realm,” Zac said as he made to leave.

“Wait,” Kenzie said Zac before he could leave. “Please bring any technology you can find. Jeeves wants to eat it.”

Zac stopped in his tracks and looked back with surprise.

“He needs Technological items to evolve, rather than high-grade materials?” Zac asked with confusion as it was completely different from how Spirit Tools evolved.

“Jeeves isn’t sure, but probably,” Kenzie said. “Jeeves is a combination of technology and magic, so I think I will need both. I have already found a few ores he liked.”

Zac thoughtfully nodded. Bringing any gear to the AI might not be a bad idea even if he couldn’t eat them. Perhaps Jeeves could also help them understand the equipment, allowing them to use the things for themselves. And if not he might at least be able to make sure they didn’t send any signals to the Technocrats hiding in outer space

“I’ll bring it over after we’ve closed the incursion,” Zac agreed. “Take care.”

“Be careful!” Kenzie said. “And look after Ogras. He isn’t as sturdy as you.”

“What he lacks in sturdiness he makes up for in slipperiness,” Zac smiled. “We’ll be fine.”

He left Kenzie’s study and took one last look at the artificial sky before entering the teleporter. Zac was back in the Underworld soon enough, appearing in the isolated outpost where he told Ogras to meet him. He couldn’t see the demon anywhere, but a dancing shadow in the distance told him that Ogras had already arrived.

“What’s with the cloak and dagger?” Zac asked with confusion when he found the demon hiding a few kilometers outside the town.

“The demons are still around. I have probably caused enough problems for grandpa already without adding hatred from the Abyssal Demons.,” Ogras shrugged. “I scoured all intelligence regarding the Technocrat incursion while you were gone, and I think I know the path. It will take us two days to get there if we push it.”

“Great, let’s go. The sooner we destroy the Technocrats the faster we’ll be able to head to the Dead Zone.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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## Chapter 345 - Drones

Zac was ready to go, but Ogras held up a hand to stop him before he rushed out into the wilderness.

“You should know that this mission has a pretty decent risk of failing. The Technocrats possess all kinds of tools that don’t really conform to the conventional grading system,” the demon said.

“What do you mean?” Zac asked with confusion.

“I mean that their technology can be pretty hard to predict. For example, their shields might be way stronger than the arrays we have encountered, or we might be immediately spotted even if we try to sneak in. I have no idea whether my shadows can fool their detection devices,” Ogras explained.

“We’ll just have to see how it goes,” Zac sighed. “I guess I’ll swap over to my Draugr form before we go.”

“Uh, I think your other class might be more useful in an all-out assault,” Ogras said with some skepticism in his eyes. “This might not be the time to look for more levels.”

“I am afraid their devices will detect that I might be part Technocrat, so better that I use my Draugr body,” Zac explained.

“Paranoid, I like it,” Ogras nodded in appreciation. “Well, in any case. I’ll fight with you, but I am not throwing my life away for your vendetta.”

“I know, just do what you can,” Zac agreed.

The two started to run through the dour landscape, both pushing themselves as much as they could while maintaining combat readiness. As they ran Ogras took the opportunity to update Zac on what had been going on in the underworld during his days of training.

The wealth that the merchants had amassed was extremely impressive, but unfortunately it looked like many of them had chosen to hide their wealth rather than carry it around. None of them were powerful fighters, so a common fear had been that their Cosmos Sacks would be snatched without them being able to fight back.

A few of the burrows had been found, but a lot of wealth was still unaccounted for. It had turned into somewhat of a treasure hunt, as whoever found a cache would be handsomely rewarded. Ogras had also received word that Emily finally found her sister, who turned out to be a captain under one of the Councilors. The teenager was staying with her for now, catching up on the lost months.

Their day was pretty uneventful otherwise. Between Ogras’ stealth and Zac’s towering aura, the wildlife left them alone, allowing them to keep running in peace. It was only after running for almost 40 hours straight did they stop and made camp in a small cave.

“The reports stated that there have been signs of activity in this direction. The resources in the area have been excavated, and scouts have gone missing. There haven’t actually been any sightings of the Technocrats, apart from a mention of a red light in the distance,” Ogras explained as he took out a map. “But it this can only be the place, especially considering that heretic you killed had time to visit the cavern.”

“That some parties managed to walk unencumbered through the area should mean that they haven’t bugged the place. Those who got killed probably just got unlucky and encountered the Technocrats,” Zac deduced.

“Probably,” Ogras agreed. “Or that they ventured too far. In any case, these reports are over a month old. Hopefully the heretics have finished draining the resources in this area, allowing us to get close to their base without them noticing. But

that leaves the matter of how we'll deal with the Incursion itself. There's only two of us and you're using that class."

"I can take care of the five E-Grade warriors as long as they are close to each other," Zac said "I have a new skill that's pretty convenient for such a scenario. But you should make sure to keep some distance from me."

Ogras looked over with interest, slowly nodding in agreement.

"What about the rest of the Technocrats?" the demon asked.

"Leave no one alive. Kill everyone as quickly as possible. Let no one contact their homeworld," Zac said.

A ruthless grin spread across Ogras face when he saw Zac's resolve. It looked like he couldn't wait to start fighting, which was a bit surprising considering the demon's earlier misgivings.

"Why are you so eager?" Zac asked with confusion.

He was more than happy that the demon seemed motivated to help out with this problem, but he was a bit skeptical about it. The demon never threw himself into danger unless there was something in it for himself.

"You should know that most forces in the multiverse, including the demons, are in a passive state of war with the Technocrats," the demon smiled. "But do you know why?"

"Isn't it because they want to destroy the System while you want to keep it?" Zac answered with a raised brow.

"Well, it's part of the reason, but the Technocrats are crazy powerful. Normally people wouldn't want to mess with them. However, there's another reason from what I've gathered. The technocrats hate the Ruthless Heavens, but the Heavens hate the Technocrats just as much it seems," the demon grinned.

"What? Isn't the System like an unfeeling program?" Zac blurted out in confusion.

"Well, The Ruthless Heavens at least have some sense of self-preservation I guess," Ogras shrugged. "According to rumors it brings all kinds of benefits if you take out the Technocrat heretics. For example, it counts as great achievements, which will help with Class Evolutions. I'm sure taking out one of their Incursions will bring amazing benefits."

Zac could only gape in response. It was truly a ruthless move by the System if what Ogras said was true. A lot of people were ready to do almost anything to push themselves forward on the path of cultivation. There were innumerable people stuck at one bottleneck or another, so it was no surprise that many forces would fight the Technocrats tooth and nail if it could help them break through.

It would also explain why they didn't expose themselves while in the underworld. They could have gained a lot more resources if they started raiding some settlements. But perhaps the Technocrats were afraid that the other invaders would drop everything to hunt them for merit.

"So I guess there's nothing good that can come from pissing off the System," Zac said with a shake of his head.

"Well, I don't think The Ruthless Heavens has time to listen in on ants like us in any case," Ogras grinned. "In any case, I squeezed some things out of the hands of Smaug. I have two of those balls that disrupt teleporters. I am not sure whether they work on Nexus Hubs though."

"Nice. Anything to blow any shields open?" Zac asked.

"Unfortunately, no. I have a few offensive trinkets that should cause widespread carnage though," Ogras said. "If nothing else works we'll have to use your [Void Ball],

though avoid it if possible. Even if we break the shield we might not be able to pass because of the spatial tears.”

The two discussed various strategies for a bit longer until they finally came to a decision. They would try to sneak inside the Technocrat territory relying on Ogras’ shadows. After the battle ensued Zac was responsible for taking down the powerhouses, whereas the more mobile Ogras would be responsible for taking care of the others.

The two immediately set out, keeping to the shadows as they started to traverse the area that was presumed to be claimed by the Technocrats. Thirty minutes into their travels Zac saw clear signs of excavation, with the ground having multiple symmetrical holes leading into the darkness. However, there were neither men nor machines active in the area, allowing the two to breathe easy.

Another hour passed as the two started to move slower and slower, carefully scouring the shadows and the sky for any hints of Technocrat activity. Their carefulness was finally awarded as they spotted a small hovering ball in the distance.

It was the size of a tennis ball and pitch black, almost seamlessly blending into the surroundings. It didn’t move or make a sound, only silently floated in the air. Neither Zac nor Ogras had seen such a thing before, but it was easy to assume it was either some sort of surveillance drone or a floating mine.

Ogras looked over questioning at Zac, who motioned the demon to keep going. This would be a test to see if they could pass the sentry unnoticed, or whether it could see through the shroud of darkness. It would greatly impact how they would act in the rest of the assault. The two crept forward, with Ogras completely covering them in dense layers of shadows. They slowly moved closer and closer, making no attempt to avoid the drone.

The drone seemed completely oblivious to their existence until they came within a few hundred meters of it. At that moment it moved with shocking speed to stop right above them, and a mesh of red beams started to run over the ground. Zac’s eyes widened and he immediately indicated for Ogras to destroy it.

A beam of shadows, almost completely invisible in the darkness of the Underworld, shot up and ripped a hole through the small ball. It immediately fell out of the air and some unknown energy inside it caused a few flickering discharges. But by the moment it thumped into the ground it looked completely dead, which wasn’t a surprise since only its shell remained after getting impaled.

“So much for stealth,” Ogras muttered, looking down on the drone with some interest. “Perhaps it would have worked if we had Janos with us, but a moving blob of shadows won’t fool the machines.”

“It looks like it covers the area of a square kilometer or so,” Zac added thoughtfully.

“Perhaps we can circumvent the others with distance, but they should already know this thing is broken,” Ogras said as he poked the destroyed ball by their feet. “What now?”

“We’ll keep going as earlier,” Zac said. “They might not care too much about one destroyed drone. It might have been a beast for all they know since we never exited the shadows. But if we meet more of these things we’ll have to rush it.”

“Yeah, one or two might be okay, but any more than that they’ll definitely understand that something is up,” the demon agreed as they kept moving forward.

Just a few minutes later they spotted another ball in the distance, though they were able to avoid its detection by taking the long way around it. But that orb was just one of many and they soon found themselves stuck. If they wanted to keep moving

forward they would either have to enter the field of vision of one of the orbs or start destroying them.

“There’s no way we’ll get to their base unannounced,” Ogras said with a shake of his head.

“Then we’ll have to speed up. Destroy all the orbs so they at least don’t know what’s coming,” Zac sighed.

The demon nodded and the two immediately sped up. Any drones that came within Ogras’ reach was instantly destroyed, causing one subdued explosion after another. Zac started to feel a bit shocked as they ran, as there were just so many of them. Ogras had destroyed close to a hundred after running for just a few minutes, but that was only a fraction of the inescapable net that the Technocrats had created. A conservative estimation by Zac put the number of drones at five thousand at the minimum.

Soon enough the behavior of the drones started to change, as the unmoving sentries by the sides started to fly toward them one after another. It looked like the Technocrats had finally realized something was up and started to control the movements of the flying scouts. The two of them had still avoided getting scanned by the red lights, but their path of movement could easily be plotted by following the destroyed machines.

“Something’s coming,” Ogras suddenly said, looking into the distance with a frown.

“Shit!” Zac said when he saw what Ogras was talking about.

It was four machines that were suspiciously similar to the two drones that accompanied the Technocrat in the battleroach cavers, with the notable exception that they were twice as large.

“Dodge!” Zac shouted, as even he didn’t want to block four of those beams at the same time.

Ogras grabbed Zac by the arm, and the next moment the two disappeared in a sea of shadows, only to appear fifty meters away. Just a moment later the four beams converged at their earlier spot, and the effect of the four beams was terrifying. Each lance of energy was powerful enough to incinerate the air, and even space itself seemed to be unable to handle the four attacks converging. The area where the beams had ripped through kept twisting and distorting even after the attacks, only stabilizing a few seconds later.

“What is that?!” Ogras spat when he saw the power of the beams, clearly starting to regret accompanying Zac on this venture.

“That’s the Technocrats for you,” Zac sighed as he got ready for battle.

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**Chapter 346 - Heaven’s Path**

Ogras only grunted in an exasperated agreement before taking out his large spear with one hand while he threw an offensive array at the drones. The crystal sphere ripped through the air, but the machines seemed to understand it was dangerous. They immediately started to spread out, but they didn’t have time to move too far before the ball cracked, unleashing a sea of electricity in the sky.

Two of the drones managed to dodge the offensive array, but the other two were swallowed by the dense lightning bolts. Zac briefly saw a red shield enclose the two submerged machines, but they flickered and petered out in just a second. Zac was relieved to see that the technological shields weren't without limits and that they would sooner or later break under pressure. In fact, they seemed only slightly stronger than an ordinary defensive treasure that Zac found dozens of during the hunt.

He took out a clump of steel from his Cosmos Sack that essentially looked like a cannonball, and he hurled it at one of the surviving drones after infusing it with the Seed of Heaviness. Another red shield appeared to protect the drone, but the attack contained enough momentum to push the machine into the ceiling hundreds of meters above. It caused a large explosion when it hit the rock, and scrap pieces started to rain down from the impact zone.

Zac had long ago replaced the small hill of rocks in his Cosmos Sack with something that could better take advantage of his huge attribute pool. Any time he threw rocks or boulders to test out his enemies lately, the stones would break long before his enemies did. However, a steel ball weighing almost a hundred kilos contained terrifying kinetic energy, especially when it was infused with the Dao of Heaviness.

Only one Drone remained, but it was soon taken care of by Ogras who had appeared up in the air. He stabbed straight through the energy field with his spear, and the speartip entered the drone through a joint. A second later the drone expanded until it exploded in a shower of shadows and metal.

Zac nodded, feeling that the Technocrat Incursion might not be too dangerous after all. But when he relaxed he finally realized something odd. He had gained a small surge of energy for destroying the drone just now.

"Why are these things giving cosmic energy?" Zac asked with confusion. "They're not alive."

"No idea," Ogras shrugged with some disinterest. "The Ruthless Heavens provides the energy I suppose."

"Perhaps the other ones were too weak," Zac said hesitantly.

"No, there is a need of a soul to gain energy," Ogras disagreed. "That's why living golems who cultivate give cosmic energy when killed, but destroying a battleship does not."

"Then what is it?" Zac asked with confusion. "Are these machines alive?"

"No, check your quest screen," Ogras said with a smile spreading across his face.

**Supremacy of Heaven's Path (Limited, Area): Close Incursion of the Followers of the Boundless Path. Reward: Merit. (0/1) NOTE: All destruction of inanimate combatants will reward energy while quest is active.**

"It's an area quest," Ogras explained. "I think that anyone that gets close enough to the heretic's Incursion will be automatically awarded this quest as an incentive to destroy it."

"What's merit though?" Zac asked.

"I would guess it would boost our available class choices when evolving, like eating a Fruit of Ascension," the demon said, not able to hide his excitement.

"Truly a VIP-treatment," Zac said with a wry smile. "I wonder if I should start to worry about my own safety."

"I think we would have noticed it by now if The Ruthless Heavens wanted you to die," Ogras said, though there was some hesitation in his eyes.

"Like how? Dropping me off all alone on an island with a bunch of demons?" Zac snorted.

*'And having me roll for survival instead of just moving me a few meters,'* Zac internally added.

"Uh..." Ogras said. "I'm sure that was just a coincidence."

However, Zac did notice that the demon took two subtle steps away to distance himself from him. Zac only rolled his eyes in response and kept going.

"If we got the quest the incursion shouldn't be too far. Do you know if the other incursions are out in the open or if they are in town caves?" Zac asked.

"Both it seems. The fish people are in a large town cave that's partly submerged, and I think the humans have a large one as well. But the demons are out in the open," Ogras said.

Zac nodded and the two kept going, destroying any machinery that tried to impede their approach. Another set of drones tried to stop them a few minutes later, but they were turned into scrap in short order. Their offensive capabilities were pretty terrifying, but their defensive strength left a lot to desire. Even without the assistance of any offensive arrays the shield only needed an attack or two before they broke.

Soon enough they got their answer as they saw something odd in the distance. Another pack of drones appeared out of thin air, though the background started to wobble when they appeared, as though there was a wall of water.

"Illusion array, or whatever their equivalent is," Ogras muttered. "There's likely a grand reception awaiting us on the other side."

Zac took out another cannonball and used it to destroy one of the drones. Soon enough all four were blown to bits, at which point Zac finally activated his real skills. A shroud of miasma spread out from his body as the large spiked wall appeared in front of him.

"You go ahead," Ogras smiled. "I'll be right behind you."

Zac only snorted in response as he started to run forward, putting his bulwark as close to his body as possible to protect from attacks from any angle. Just as he was about to pass through the illusory wall a sense of danger erupted, but Zac only grit his teeth and imbued his bulwark with the Dao of Hardness.

"Jump," a roar suddenly came from behind, and Zac didn't dare to hesitate as he pushed off as fast as possible, causing him to soar tens of meters into the air.

Zac suddenly felt a weight on his shoulders and glanced behind to see that Ogras was actually standing on his back as though it was a surfboard. But before he had the opportunity to tell the demon off an enormous explosion erupted beneath them, pushing a pillar of fire right in their direction. Zac was about to move his bulwark to cover them, but Ogras quickly interjected.

"I'll handle the fire, keep protecting the front," he shouted to be heard over the ruckus as he threw down a crystal at the flames.

The crystal cracked the moment it came in contact with the inferno, and the next moment the flames were simply gone, replaced by a thick haze. Zac was shocked by the rapid change, but he quickly realized that Ogras had prepared some tools to counter his newfound weakness to fire.

But Zac didn't have time to think about that as his danger sense kept screaming in his mind, just as two thick beams of pure energy ripped toward them. The attacks slammed right into Zac's bulwark, but they were so immense that the beams continued around them, enclosing them in a relentless sea of chaotic energies.

It felt as though he were stuck inside the sun as he held on for dear life against the limitless powers of the two beams. The heat rose to an unbearable degree just from being next to the scorching rays, and he couldn't even keep his eyes open during the

onslaught. Only after a few seconds did the beam relent, and Zac sighed in relief since his Miasma had been depleted at a shocking rate to protect them from the brunt of the attack.

The two fell down on the ground after the attack, and Zac finally had a chance to see what was going on. A large line with hundreds of aliens stood with weapons at the ready, many of them appearing quite shocked that Zac and Ogras were still alive. Interestingly enough the Technocrats were comprised of all sorts of races, where the grey little aliens only accounted for a quarter of the full numbers.

Most of the Technocrats held various types of guns, but some were unarmed apart from small drones hovering around them. A few even donned a sleek exoskeleton as they gripped some sort of energy weaponry.

Accompanying the living Technocrats were almost a hundred four-legged drones and various other mechanized weaponry such as the flying machines. There were even two huge robots that stood over twenty meters, smoke coming out of their right arms. Zac almost drooled at the sight of all the awe-inspiring technology, but he soon cooled down when he realized that the things were there to kill him. He tried using **[Inquisitive Eye]** on the robots, but nothing popped up.

Just a few hundred meters behind the row of warriors the large Nexus Hub hovered, emitting a silver glow that illuminated the whole area. There were rows of simple structures behind the crystal, looking like warehouses and containers of various sizes. It was clearly a temporary encampment, a simple means to an end. It gave a clear indication that the Technocrats truly had no interest in staying on Earth. They simply wanted to complete their mission before returning back home.

It wasn't very hard for Zac to spot his main targets; the four bodyguards and their ward. They stood together in the center of lineup, two people at each side of a stocky alien that was equipped with one of those exoskeletons.

Excitement filled Zac's heart when he saw that all his targets were clumped together, but he didn't dare to pull the trigger and activate **[Profane Seal]** just yet. There were too many robots around, and Zac was afraid that the towers he summoned would get blasted apart in no time.

He needed to reduce their firepower before trapping the others, and taking care of the huge mechas felt like something that should be prioritized. The two attacks they launched while he was airborne stole almost a fifth of his Miasma, so he couldn't take too many such attacks.

"I think we need to destroy the two big guys first," Zac muttered. "Do you feel confident in taking on one of them?"

"I have no idea," Ogras said while scratching his chin. "Who knows what other capabilities they have? There's no way I can take them down if they can keep spewing out such beams"

Zac nodded with a grimace, realizing they were lacking information.

"Let's head into the thick of it. They shouldn't be able to release those kinds of beams if we're in the middle of their army. Stay clear of the clouds I'll release. It will melt your skin right off," Zac said.

"It will what?" Ogras shouted, but Zac was already running toward the defensive line of enemies.

The ever-careful Ogras didn't want to lose the protection of staying close to Zac, so he soon reappeared right behind him as he ran forward. Various weapons started firing at them, and the large cave lit up as though it was a laser show.

Beams kept slamming into **[Immutable Bulwark]**, and Zac frowned at the expenditure. He was losing at least a percent of his miasma every second from the concentrated fire, meaning that he would be all out of energy within two minutes if this kept up.

“Can you teleport us inside? I can’t keep this up for too long,” Zac growled, and Ogras placed a hand on his shoulder with a nod.

The two disappeared, but Zac frowned when he saw that they didn’t reappear within the Technocrat ranks, but rather right in front of it.

“I got blocked somehow,” Ogras said with a frown.

“I’ll open a path,” Zac sighed as his arm started swelling, and he rushed forward to cross the last stretch between themselves and the Technocrats.

Explosions and beams filled his whole vision, but Zac didn’t care about that nor the energy expenditure as he arrived in front of the Technocrats. A resounding crash reverberated through the area when **[Immutable Bulwark]** was forcibly stopped by a red translucent shield that appeared right in front of them. The shield shuddered when it was stabbed by the spikes on the shield wall, but it held true.

Of course, Zac wasn’t planning on breaking through with his defensive skill and pushed the bulwark to the side as he jumped forward, **[Verun’s Bite]** already slashing in a horizontal arc with enough power to cause the air to scream in protest. Zac imbued the axe with the Dao of Heaviness just before the edge slammed into the shield, and it cracked like a broken window.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 347 - Enemies Ahead**

“Persistent bastards,” Alea muttered with displeasure as a poisonous cloud billowed out from her hand, causing one zombie after another to stumble before they fell down into a rotting heap.

Her skill **[Gift of Talasa]** only possessed limited effect against the undead, but it was one that did not require an actual compound to empower it. After the past few days, she knew she would need to ration her basin-sized stockpiles because it was becoming increasingly obvious that the Undead Empire wanted their army dead even if they had to sacrifice a terrifying number of their low-tiered undead.

“Every god damn hour,” Ilvere agreed as he led a squad of warriors to mow down dozens of Elite Zombies every second.

His weapon, the huge ball attached to its chain, ripped through the air, creating a circle of death around the demonic general. Any zombie unlucky enough to get hit by the wrecking ball was instantly turned to paste, but those closer to Ilvere weren’t much better off as they instantly got bisected by the chain.

The demon wasn’t using any skills at the moment, only taking advantage of the reach of his weapon while occasionally infusing the ball with his Dao to increase the momentum. He was conserving his Cosmic Energy in case another powerhouse hid inside the Zombie wave. Unfortunately Alea herself didn’t have such a luxury, as her only physical weapon was a thin rapier she used to decapitate any Zombie that got too close.

There were also the **[Wailing Spikes]**, but controlling those cursed objects cost too much, and wasn’t something that she would use unless she was out of options. So she was stuck wasting Cosmic Energy, desperately circulating her cultivation manual to

restore her constantly depleting reserves. But there was no choice, the undead were completely relentless in their pursuit of the bedraggled forces of Port Atwood.

The 15 000 man strong group had kept a rapid pace northwest to outrun the horde of elite zombies on their tail. They hadn't stopped moving since they fled their temporary base, moving through the wilderness at a rapid pace to get away. But the zombies seemed to have no trouble keeping up, with raids assaulting their rear constantly.

There was no rest for the warriors of Port Atwood. Even Alea herself and Ilvere were forced to occasionally defend the rear to avoid too many casualties. But neither of them ever dared to go all out to clean out a larger swathe of the attacking undead.

Alea was constantly on guard against a pincer strike from ahead. She had thought it would come almost immediately after they fled the small town due to the missing scouts, but so far they hadn't even seen the shadows of any threat at all. That did not instill any confidence though, but rather the opposite.

It appeared the undead were taking a page out of her own playbook, and they seemed willing to slowly grind them down. Normally the constant raids from Zombies wouldn't be a too large concern as Port Atwood lacked neither experts nor gear. But the fact that they were constantly on the move made it hard if not impossible to properly rest up after the battles.

After a full day of fleeing they had tried to take a short rest while the rear guard protected their camp, but just moments after their large group stopped the undead turned crazy, heedlessly rushing their position. Only after a frantic one hour escape did the undead relent, resuming their pattern of constant, but manageable, harassment.

"Enemies ahead! Golems and beacons!" a blaring warning came from a command crystal in Alea's hand, and she immediately gathered a number of the elites fortifying the rear.

Ilvere and his squad also retreated, leaving the task of defending against the elite zombies to the regular army. Some demons would stay behind as well to help out, but the lack of elites would no doubt cause some deaths. But there was nothing to be done since the true threat came from the front.

On a hill a few kilometers ahead a small army stood ready. Their numbers were less than 500, but Alea could sense the powerful energies from the members even from this distance. Their lines were orderly and well-armed. A few of the gargantuan Corpse Golems were present as well, proving this was not another group of rabble. Even two large monoliths were erected, constantly spewing out miasma in the surroundings.

"It's finally here," Alea muttered, before turning to Ilvere. "We need to go all out on this one."

Ilvere somberly nodded as he looked out over the elite army barring their path.

"Can you find the leader?" Alea whispered as her eyes scanned the army over and over.

"No, but I think that's a good thing," Ilvere hesitantly said. "If there was a true powerhouse there he wouldn't bother to hide within the ranks, right? I think there's no general spearheading this army."

"It also means we won't be able to complete our quest just yet," Alea sardonically smiled.

Soon enough the elites of Port Atwood stood ready, but their numbers were less than half of that of the Undead Army. Of course, Port Atwood was able to augment their lack of experts in various ways.

"Get the lunatics as well," Alea said after some deliberation.

“Are you sure? We can only use them a few times,” Ilvere asked from the side, but Alea nodded without hesitation.

She honestly didn't feel confident against this small but intimidating force in front of them. It would be one thing if they had Lord Atwood or Ogras here, but there was no one to hold down the fort for them. They would need to use every weapon in their arsenal.

Soon enough ten ragged Ishiate rushed over. They looked wrung out from the last day's march, but a manic gleam could be seen in all of their eyes. It was the tinkers that had created the terrifying cannons that utilized Nexus Crystals. They had been working on improving their inventions since their last field test. Alea hadn't used them in the war so far, wanting to keep their extremely destructive weaponry as a hidden ace.

“Are you confident in blowing up those two pillars over there?” Alea asked a one-eyed Ishiate.

“Mistress, I'd say we need four shots to be somewhat sure. But even the shots we miss would cause some mayhem,” the maimed Ishiate said after spying on the Undead squad through a brass binocular. “Of course, if they possess shielding that's another matter.”

“Good. We'll sound them out and hopefully break their defensive array. Try to destroy those beacons no matter what. If it seems impossible, maximum carnage,” Alea said.

“Maximum carnage,” the Ishiate agreed, a wide smile spreading across his face.

Ideally, she would have wanted to prepare longer before assaulting a pure core squad from the Undead Empire, but the Elite Zombies were putting immense pressure on their rear. She could only start the assault prematurely as they truly needed to move forward. A thousand man strong army rushed forward until they created some distance from their non-combatants.

Hundreds of the Atwood Academy recruits immediately started to infuse crystals with energy, creating a wide shimmering wall in front of them. They would be the defensive line protecting the non-combat classes and the ranged strikers such as the Ishiate craftsmen.

At the same time a smaller force pushed forward, including just the strongest warriors. Ilvere was already spinning his weapon in the air above them, accumulating a terrifying momentum. Janos was there as well, and energy surged around him as the area was suddenly filled with demonic warriors storming the front while a haze spread over them. All of it were illusions of course, but it would improve their survivability while hiding their actions within the mist.

“Are you ready?” Alea said to one of the demons with a ranged class, and he nodded as he took out an extremely oversized crossbow from his Cosmos Sack.

The demon was peak F-Grade, but he was barely able to carry the monstrosity. It was more apt to call it a ballista going by its size, and that was just what it was before the craftsmen of Port Atwood got their hands on it. It was over three meters long, and the slot for its bolts looked large enough fit a young tree. It was part of the arsenal Clan Azh'Rezak brought for sieges, and it had served well during the final battle against the beast waves.

But Alea had required something portable since they knew from the start that the war against the Undead would be a continuously moving skirmish, so the craftsmen modified it for such a purpose. Unfortunately, the modifications led to a loss in power, but it was still an extremely mighty weapon. The ranger expertly loaded the crossbow with a densely inscribed bolt that was as long as he was. The number of such a munition

was quite limited, but they weren't in a situation to hold back against an army of this level.

But a wail from behind made her snap her neck around just as Alea was ready to give the command to start the operation. Her eyes widened in shock to see a hundred translucent ghosts appearing out of nowhere, assassinating one soldier after another. The soldiers were quick to respond, but most attacks just passed right through their incorporeal bodies.

Only a few of the demons were able to harm them with the help of their Dao, but it was clear that even most Daos were ineffective against them.

"Divine Array!" a captain under Ilvere roared from the defensive line, and the next moment the whole army lit up in golden radiance.

It was an array that Calrin had managed to purchase after a lot of trouble. It didn't make warriors any stronger, but it turned all attacks inside Life-Attuned. The one-sided slaughter quickly turned around, and two-thirds of the ghosts were cut down in rapid succession before the rest managed to slink away. Alea could breathe out in relief when she saw that the Ishiate tinkers were fine and ready to go.

"Now," she nodded at the ranger, who immediately got down on his knee. The inscribed cross-bolt was released with a powerful twang that caused a small shockwave as the projectile soared toward the Undead army.

An azure shield sprung up in front of the army, and the bolt got stuck as it started to release a tremendous amount of lightning that tried to rip open the barrier. However, the defensive array was empowered by not one but two Unholy beacons, and the extremely expensive bolt was only able to cause some hairline cracks that let a few errant lightning bolts inside.

Ilvere let out a resounding roar as he pushed the chain forward with enough power to make his whole body shake with strain. The large wrecking ball that had been accumulating a terrifying momentum immediately changed course and soared toward the undead army, its chain magically elongating as it sped forward.

The huge ball was thrown with such force that a few explosions took place in the air as it broke the sound barrier, until it slammed straight into the lodged cross-bolt with pinpoint accuracy. It was like a hammerhead hitting a nail, and the bolt pushed straight through the array. It unleashing a final burst of lightning inside, causing chaos even among the elite soldiers.

Most importantly the attack managed to crack the array, exposing the whole army beneath. A couple of deep thumps erupted from behind, sounding like primordial drums of war. It was the Ishiate tinkers who shot their extremely unstable payload at the exposed army with the help of their comically large cannons. The large projectiles soared above Alea's head like four miniature suns, a mix of splendor and terror waiting to erupt.

The undead warriors clearly understood the threat of the incoming bombs, and a storm of attacks rose from their camp to intercept. But the insane Ishiate hadn't been lazing about the past months, and thick green shields sprung up around the projectiles, blocking out the attacks lucky enough to hit. They had managed to incorporate a few defensive treasures into each of the bombs, effectively creating a defensive coating that would allow them to reach their target.

The power of the undead army wasn't anything to scoff at though, and they soon managed to destroy one of the bombs. Its explosion created an enormous fireball up in the air that threw Alea and her party into the ground, and it also dispersed Janos' illusions in an instant.

A second detonation followed soon after to submerge the heavens in an even greater conflagration, making it seem like the end of days were approaching. A third explosion followed after a brief pause, but Alea breathed out in relief to see that it detonated just above the undead army.

The shockwave slammed all the warriors apart from the mighty corpse golems into the ground, immediately stopping the persistent attacks toward the air. Better yet, hidden defensive arrays around the two unholy beacons flashed into being before they got destroyed just as quickly, leaving the towers defenseless.

It allowed the final bomb to sail into the enemy camp and explode just in front of one of the beacons. It looked like a sun erupted, swallowing a third of the army. A second detonation followed soon after, causing an azure wind blade to rip through the firestorm and cause even more mayhem in the undead ranks.

It was the Unholy Beacon getting destroyed by the bomb. The second beacon still stood, but the results were still above Alea's expectations. Those crazy beastmen had made the detonations far stronger than they let on. The hair on her head stood at end when she remembered that those lunatics had repeatedly taken the bombs out to fiddle with the runes, even while running along with the army.

She looked back at their camp with incredulity, seeing the group dance around their cannons in glee, some of them sporting obvious burn marks.

"One fight at the time," Ilvere laughed as he spat a bit of dirt out of his mouth. "Hopefully we won't need to enlist their help again. I'm sure your boyfriend is on his way."

Alea rolled her eyes in exasperation, but a sense of sweetness welled up in her heart. It was true, Lord Atwood was surely on his way by now.

"Just shut up and help me destroy this army."

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**Chapter 348 - Man Versus Machine**

"Defend!" one of the Technocrat warriors screamed, and battle drones pushed forward to block the rapidly closing hole in the shield.

"I'll go right," Ogras said from behind before swirling forward in his shadows and effortlessly passed the machines.

Zac grunted and pushed forward as well, though missing the demon's grace. He stomped forward like an angry bull, tanking a few beams the drones launched at him as he squeezed through the regenerating shield.

The main weapons of the landbound war machines were energy beams just like the drones, though they were able to rapidly attack in exchange for a far weaker power. Getting hit left smarting scorch marks on Zac's body, but it would take a whole lot of attacks of that caliber to take him down.

A black storm heralded his arrival as Zac unleashed [**Winds of Decay**] the moment he got through the shield. The corrosive cloud did not only cloud the enemies' vision, but pained screams echoed in the vicinity as some of the warriors fell down in anguish. It was the Technocrats who did not possess any corrosive protection, and Zac felt streams of energy starting to enter him in just a few seconds.

“Stand down! We work for Firmament’s Edge. If the two of you don’t back down this instant we’ll be forced to report your actions to our superiors,” a shout came from the distance, and Zac looked through the haze to see the Technocrat leader staring at him.

“The Undead Empire goes where it pleases,” Zac shouted back. “You heretics of the Boundless Path can never live under the same sky as us.”

Zac didn’t know if his words would ever reach Firmament’s Edge, but he felt it was prudent to throw the blame on the Undead rather than the people of Earth just in case. As for the Boundless path, he had no idea what that actually was. But if that was what the System called the Technocrats, then it could only be accurate.

Zac asked Ogras during their earlier approach, but the demon wasn’t sure either. Perhaps Heaven’s Path and the Boundless Path were things that ants like them weren’t qualified to know about just yet. Of course, that was why Zac used those words rather than calling the Technocrats invaders or something similar. He wanted to act as a Draugr elite to sow some confusion.

The technocrat kept shouting for Zac to stand down, but he didn’t personally take action just yet. Zac chose to ignore him after the initial exchange, instead using his mouth to keep drowning the area in corrosive clouds.

Unfortunately quite a few of the Technocrats seemed to possess some sort of defensive gear that created a personal barrier that kept the mist at bay, and the clouds were kept at arm’s length. Almost all the machines were fine as well, with their durable hulls completely sealed to protect the more vulnerable innards.

The skill was just a means for Zac to cause some chaos though, and he was surprised that it managed to melt a few of the machines at all. He instead relied on his axe to cut down anything in his path. Neither the Technocrats nor the machines could last more than a hit or two, allowing him to gain a steady stream of miasma through **[Fields of Despair]**.

Zac’s rampage started to put the fear of God into the Technocrats, and no one seemed willing to get within melee range any longer. The humanoids donning the exoskeletons could only stand to the side and spectate Zac and Ogras dismantling their mechanized military.

The machines were going completely berserk though, and tens of them rushed forward to heedlessly throw themselves at Zac. He didn’t mind at all and crushed all the machines as they came. But he only had time to deal with half of the frenzied assault when his mind screamed of danger.

Zac didn’t hesitate and immediately entered his turtle-stance by jumping down on the ground with **[Immutable Bulwark]** forming a protective layer above him. The next moment his whole vision turned white as something bombarded him from above, turning all the nearby machines into shrapnel in its effort to take Zac down as well.

Luckily it only cost him some miasma and caused some ringing in his ears since he reacted in time. Zac immediately jumped up to his feet and ran through the inferno to see one of the two large robots standing in the distance, streams of smoke rising from its back. Zac couldn’t be sure, but he had a feeling that the mecha had launched some sort of sneak attack while he was occupied with the smaller war machines.

The ground cracked under Zac’s feet as he started to rush forward, his bulwark once again paving the way by mowing down everything in his path as he targeted the huge robot. It seemed to have anticipated Zac’s approach, as it calmly raised one of its arms toward him. Its forearm started to transform with a clinking sound, rapidly turning into dozens of pipes aimed in Zac’s direction.

Zac frowned when he saw the sight, and another gust of black mist covered Zac and his surroundings as he unleashed some more corrosive clouds. The moment he was covered he slightly changed his approach, wanting to flank the robot instead of rushing head-on.

The robot didn't seem to care in the slightest, and the concentric circles of barrels steadily started to light up, each one of them shuddering with power. The air twisted around the arm of the robot until an enormous shockwave blew Zac's [**Winds of Decay**] far away, cleanly exposing his position. A second shockwave erupted as tens of glowing lights were launched toward Zac.

They looked extremely familiar to the attacks that the Battleroach King had utilized with the help of its arrays, making Zac wonder if one was influenced by the other. The Technocrat had mentioned that he had infused the beast with certain capabilities after all. Perhaps those were based on this robot. However, there was one clear difference apart from the fact that the incoming lights were black instead of green.

They looked like miniature black holes as the air around them twisted and distorted beyond recognition, warning Zac of the terrifying power they contained as they rushed toward him in parabolic arcs. Zac desperately tried to dodge the ballistics, but they possessed the same type of homing capabilities as the battleroach king.

Zac felt there was no option except to once again hunkering down to withstand the assaults. The projectiles were approaching him from all directions by this point and he saw no other way to block them all. He rolled forward and placed both his shield and bulwark above him to endure the blasts. The large mecha immediately pointed its other arm toward him and shot a beam at him from an attached gun.

Luckily it wasn't the same weapon as the huge barrel that had fired at him while he was launched into the air. That barrel was over five times wider and was mounted instead of a real hand at the end of his arm. The weapon the mecha used now was instead the same type as the ones that the flying drones from earlier used.

Such a beam wouldn't be able to break through his turtle defense, so Zac didn't worry too much about it. But before he knew what was happening he was suddenly flailing about almost ten meters in the air as the black holes closed in on him. The beam hadn't been aimed at his shield to crack open his defense, it was rather shot in front of him.

The blast had launched him up in the air, circumventing his defense against the other attacks. Zac saw no option to infuse his whole body with the Seed of Hardness as he tried to cover as much of his body as possible with [**Immutable Bulwark**] and his shield. But he could only block some of the strikes and a burning pain erupted in his back as one of the black holes slammed into him, causing a deep wound dripping ichor. His Miasma was rapidly depleted as well from the tens of balls hitting his bulwark.

The large tower shield wasn't faring much better, as parts of it got bent and twisted when blocking the attack. The shield still hadn't completely recovered from the bout with the battleroach king, and this put it dangerously close to falling apart completely. Anger burned in Zac's chest from the pain of the multiple impacts, and he roared as he rushed the final stretch.

A huge metallic foot ripped through the air toward Zac as the mecha tried to kill him with a kick. But whatever was controlling the robot had underestimated Zac's strength as he met the kick head-on. The kick slammed into him and pushed him backward, but Zac pushed back with all the power in his body as he imbued himself with the Dao of Heaviness.

His fingers dug into the thick plating as he stopped the kick with his superhuman strength. However, Zac wasn't done there. His muscles strained as **[Unholy Strike]** was used to its limit, and Zac was actually starting to drag the huge machine. It tried to fight back, but Zac was relentless. His mind was telling Zac to fling the machine into the horizon, or slam it into the ground like an enraged caveman.

But, unfortunately, reality wouldn't comply with his rage, and he only managed to topple it. The thing was extremely heavy, and even with his Strength he wasn't able to toss it around like a ragdoll. But at least it was down on the ground, and Zac pounced on it like a rabid beast before it could get back on its feet.

All its limbs were equipped with various weapons, such as battle knives and ranged weaponry. But that arsenal was of no use against Zac who had managed to climb up on its chest with his axe ready to cause some real damage. But a flash of greed suddenly overcame his rage, and he peered down at the machine with interest.

He slammed his hand down on the mecha as he infused his Cosmos Sack with energy, but he growled in annoyance when nothing happened. He had wanted to both neutralize the threat and make some money by stealing the whole thing. But if he couldn't take it then it didn't need to continue existing. A storm of corrosion blew around him as Zac started to hammer down on the chest plate of the machine.

A blue shield managed to block the first round of attacks, but Zac wouldn't give up. Even when he started getting shot by some Technocrats down on the ground he wouldn't relent, and shockwave after shockwave exploded from the top of the robot until the shield broke and Verun's Bite bit into the robot. There was actually a cockpit inside, and a small green alien peered up at Zac with horror when he finally managed to rip apart the chest plate.

A beam flashed as Zac peered down into the cockpit, but he managed to dodge the blast from the pilot's rifle at the last moment with the help of his Luck. Zac growled in anger as he reached into the cockpit and grabbed the alien by the neck. A nasty crack echoed out from the robot as Zac got a huge stream of energy. It looked like killing the pilot also counted as killing the robot itself.

Zac was about to start demolishing the mecha in his towering rage, but he suddenly froze as he tried to put the robot in his Cosmos Sack again. This time it worked without issue, and he fell into the ground with a thump. He took a gander at the state of the battle, and he felt everything was mostly under control.

Most of the battle droids were destroyed by his and Ogras' efforts, and quite a few of the actual technocrats were dead or dying as well. The demon was currently whittling down the second robot, and he had managed to tear off one of its arms somehow. Ogras had activated his ultimate state, and he was currently in the skies circling the landbound mecha. His large wings kept him out of harm's way as he struck the robot over and over with lightning speed.

The foreman and his four bodyguards were still on the battlefield, but they still hadn't done anything. He already knew from questioning the Technocrat earlier that the four cultivators were there to serve as bodyguards for Syvas, the leader of the Incursion. Whether the rest of the Technocrats lived or died didn't matter in the slightest to them as they were just hired hands.

There was no way they would involve themselves in the battle unless they got paid extra or if Zac attacked Syvas himself. But it didn't look like the Technocrat boss had any interest in joining the battle. In fact, the group of 5 seemed to be inching toward the Nexus Hub behind them.

Zac had no intention of letting the leader go, and it looked like it was time to go all-out. But before he assaulted the five E-Grade warriors he needed to make sure his back was protected from the remnants of the Technocrat army.

“It’s time buddy,” Zac said as the huge form of Verun appeared with an earthshattering roar.

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### **Chapter 349 - The Final Five**

The crimson fractal on [Verun’s Bite] had long been recharged, and he didn’t want his battle with the E-Grade powerhouses to be interrupted by the remaining forces. Verun understood his thoughts and immediately stormed into the thick of it, its oversized maw snatching up Technocrats and drones alike.

If the Technocrats equipment could be seen as a counter to Zac, with his inability to activate [Deathwish] against attacks that relied on technology, then the opposite could be said for Verun. Some of the drones tried to fire at the large beast, but its intangible form was the perfect counter to the laser beams as they harmlessly passed right through it.

Zac had already guessed that the Tool Spirit was a bit like the ghosts of the Undead Empire. Normal attacks didn’t work, and they needed to be empowered by the Dao to be able to reach him. Perhaps only the cultivators would be able to harm it at all, which gave it free rein on the battlefield. Miserably screams echoed across the Underworld as the beast reveled in its uninhibited carnage.

Satisfied that his back was protected by Verun, Zac could finally target the leaders of the Incursion without worries. He stomped into the ground with tremendous force, and the next second he appeared right in front of the Technocrat with one of the spatial crystals in hand. He immediately threw it at the Nexus Hub in the distance, hoping to seal any communication or escape while he was occupied.

“Protect me!” the foreman screamed, and four powerful strikes flashed toward him almost as soon as he arrived.

Zac was inundated in a sea of lightning, and even with his tremendous Endurance he felt his consciousness slipping. Luckily the attacks only lasted less than a second, and Zac immediately slammed his foot into the ground again before they could launch the next attack. The five large towers rose into the air as Zac unleashed another cloud of corrosion in the cage.

The moment the towers appeared the ghastly chains immediately shot out, but this time each chain targeted a different person. Unfortunately, things did not go as smoothly this time. The four cultivators immediately backed away from Zac while they started to fight the chains, launching powerful strikes to rebuff them. The chains acted like snakes, slithering around and trying to pass their defenses, but the cultivators kept them as bay as they looked for means of breaking out.

The technocrat wasn’t as lucky though. He had a personal shield that stopped the chain a few times, but after a few slams the chain managed to create a large enough crack to pass through. The technocrat tried to clumsily defend himself with his expensive-looking exoskeleton, but a wide swing left his whole side open for the chain to sneak up and wrap around his neck.

Zac couldn't believe how weak the man was. It looked like he had never been on a battlefield before, just asking for death by being here. Perhaps he was just a businessman or an owner of the company that had taken the mission to scan Earth, and never even planned to enter a battle.

The brief pause allowed him to scan the five with **[Inquisitive Eye]**. The foreman was actually only level 76, not having improved the slightest since breaking through. The four cultivators were a bit better though, ranging between level 83 and 86. But Zac still didn't feel there was any need for alarm since he had fought far stronger enemies until now.

"Help me you buffoons!" the Technocrat screamed to finally regain the attention of his guards.

"Transform!" one of the guards screamed as he unleashed in an enormous discharge of lightning that pushed the special chain far away.

The next moment the sky above the cage darkened as thick clouds formed in an instant. It was the first time Zac had seen any clouds in the Underworld, and it was obvious that they were created by the four guards. They were almost as dark as the mist Zac created with **[Winds of Corruption]**, but they were teeming with wild energies as it continuously lit up by lightning bolts.

Zac guessed the four bodyguards came from the same Sect or Clan since they all possessed lightning-attuned classes. Perhaps the foreman had hired them since they would be efficient in protecting him from other Technocrats and their machines.

Of course, lightning attacks were just as effective against humans as well, and Zac's eyes darted between the bodyguards and the foreman, unsure of who to deal with first. But the decision was made for him as the four powerhouses simultaneously charged him. Zac got ready to defend, the world turned white for a second as four massive lightning bolts slammed into the cage.

However, the lightning did not target Zac, but rather the four guards. It slammed into all of them simultaneously, completely hiding them inside the blinding light. Of course, Zac knew they weren't about to kill themselves, so he wasn't surprised when they emerged unscathed. The lightning had helped them transform into another shape.

Crackling white armor covered their bodies, and they all held weapons that seemed to be wrought out of frozen lightning bolts. Two of them were holding spears whereas the other two held broadswords. They had even gained wings made from electricity, making them look like gods of thunder.

Their looks weren't the only thing that changed with the lightning strikes. Their speed almost doubled as they zoomed toward Zac like four streaks of lightning. He barely had time to prepare his defenses before they were upon him, all stabbing toward his vital spots.

Zac blocked two of the strikes with the help of **[Immutable Bulwark]**, one with his shield while he met the final strike with **[Verun's Bite]**. Two ghosts immediately appeared behind the two who stabbed his bulwark, while a crack resounded as the sword wielder who Zac met head-on broke one of his arms in the clash between weapons.

The two ghosts only managed to cause minor wounds, but the surprise strike was enough to distract one of them enough for the chasing chains to lock around his throat. Zac felt a shock run through his body from the massive amounts of electricity the four warriors released, but he forced himself forward to follow up on his strike.

The sword wielder with the broken arm tried to create some distance between them, but he was attacked by the relentless chain when he tried to flee, forcing him to stop in his tracks. Zac wasn't about to give up on the opportunity, so he slammed

the shield into the ground, causing a wave of spikes to push the final bodyguard away as he pursued the wounded one.

A shield erupted around the guard as Zac's axe swung down with ferocious force, defending against the strike. But Zac only refocused his efforts and **[Verun's Bite]** once again fell down with finality. Zac suddenly felt a blazing pain in his side as a lightning spear tore into his body, and a jolt of electricity caused such a shock to his system that he accidentally dropped his weapon.

His muscles spasmed and flinched, but Zac forced himself to throw his body onto the guard who had narrowly escaped being bisected by the swing of his axe. Tens of lightning bolts hit him as he gripped the horrified cultivator, but Zac refused to let go. A fountain of blood rose to the skies when Zac managed to forcibly rip the warrior in two, ignoring the lightning armor completely.

Steam rose from his body, and Zac felt as though he was half-roasted from the barrage of lightning bolts. The constant shocks also aggravated the multiple wounds he had accumulated in the earlier fight, and he felt his steps starting to become unsteady. Every part of his body hurt, but he refused to stop.

He still had some fuel in the tank, even though his expenditure up til now had been massive. It was partly due to the stream of Miasma he was receiving from the spectral chains that had started to absorb the lifeforce of their captives. Since one of the warriors had died the final chain rushed toward the Technocrat on Zac's command.

The Technocrat leader was unleashing a barrage of attacks on the chain around his neck with a power that belied his earlier embarrassing display. It was the exoskeleton that was showing it's worth, even though it could only turn a turd into a more powerful turd. Cracks were already starting to show on the chain, and Zac was afraid he would be freed soon enough unless he was bound tighter.

The sky suddenly rumbled as the area was drowned in a thunderstorm as the clouds started unleashing bolt after bolt in the area. The five towers got the worst of it as they essentially acted as lightning rods. As Zac looked at the chaos he realized that the remaining time was limited, so he forced his exhausted body to exert even more power.

Two unfettered bodyguards remained, one of which had a light wound from **[Deathwish]**. Zac targeted the wounded one first and immediately pounced on him. The guard wanted to keep some distance as he launched a storm of lightning at Zac, but his movements were restricted due to the harassment of the ghastly chain assigned to him.

Zac forcibly ate a couple of strikes as he kept the other guard at bay with **[Immutable Bulwark]**. He finally managed to get close to him, his axe already on its trajectory of death. The cultivator looked unreconciled and glared at Zac with hatred.

"Die!" he roared as his whole body started crackling with berserk powers.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm and he activated both the defensive rings on his hands, causing two barriers to appear around him. The next moment he was blasted into the air once again from a thunderous explosion. The guard had chosen to self-destruct in an effort to bring Zac down with him, but his layered defenses were enough to take the brunt of the strike.

The good news was that the desperate strike didn't only affect Zac. Even the other guard who was trying to flank him was swallowed in the explosion, scorching half of his body and throwing him up in the air as well. The chain acted quickly and captured him as well, which meant that everyone inside the cage was finally captured.

However, one of the fractals atop the five towers started showing cracks from the barrage of lightning strikes coming from the sky, and a few Technocrats had

managed to sneak away from Verun's frenzied carnage to try to break out their leader. Zac's vision was turning blurry from the constant shocks, but he forced himself to run over toward the remaining guards.

The first one was screaming on top of his lungs, already looking a bit shrunken from the incessant drain of lifeforce the chain subjected him to. It didn't look like he had any means of resisting it, in contrast to the Technocrat who still seemed full of energy as he tried to free himself from his fetters. Zac wasted no time and cut off the guard's head in one swift motion. There was no resistance as the guard was completely consumed by the pain and completely oblivious to the surroundings.

The final guard put up a feeble fight, but he was all alone against an enraged Zac, so he was quickly cut into pieces as well. Only the Technocrat leader remained, and he was currently bound by three chains, as he had managed to destroy two others while Zac fought the guards. Luckily new chains replaced those that the Technocrat destroyed, keeping him in bondage during the whole fight.

"You can't kill me! Firmament's Edge won't tolerate it!" the Technocrat wheezed as he saw Zac approach with murder in his eyes. "Not even the Undead Empire or the Demon Legions are safe from their wrath."

"That's not my problem," Zac growled as he lifted his axe.

A wet thud could be heard as the axe almost cleaved the Technocrat in two, but Zac frowned when he got no energy to confirm the kill. The Technocrat was somehow clinging to life, staring straight into Zac's eyes with hatred and what looked like glee.

"I... Warned... You," the Technocrat wheezed with a sneer as blood poured out of his mouth.

The next moment a terrifying change took place in the technocrat's body started to twist and deform as he grew with shocking speed.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 350 - Despair**

In just the blink of an eye the diminutive leader turned into a huge monstrosity reaching over 3 meters, whose bulging muscles would put even Billy's constitution to shame. Even the large wound from [Verun's Bite] was gone, the axe pushed out of its body as the wound closed in an instant. Even the expensive-looking exoskeleton had been discarded as it was bent into scrap metal from the alien's expansion.

Odder yet he had turned into an amalgamation of metal and flesh as parts of him had turned into that of a robot. Zac didn't understand how, but the dying Technocrat had turned into a cyborg teeming with immense power. Even Zac felt threatened from just standing in front of the hulking figure, something he hadn't felt for a long time. Something told Zac that this wasn't some ultimate technique by the Technocrat himself, as his face lilted listlessly to the side and his eyes were empty.

The foreman had warned him about reprisal, but Zac didn't expect it to be so direct. He felt the situation was turning bad, and he immediately unleashed a round of attacks on it, holding nothing back. But metallic clangs and deep thuds were all that could be heard when the axehead hit the Technocrat's muscled torso, only leaving scuff marks behind. Zac couldn't believe it was so durable that he wasn't even able to leave a shallow wound.

He didn't give up though and unleashed one ferocious strike after another across the brute's body in hopes of finding a weak spot. But danger suddenly screamed in Zac's head as a fist as large as a wrecking ball slammed into him with such speed that he didn't have time to even blink.

The power of the punch was enough to shatter all the spectral chains still binding the Technocrat in an instant, and Zac was launched into the air with such speed that it looked like he was teleported away. The enormous shockwave swept all the corrosive mists in the area away as well, exposing the decomposing corpses of the cultivators on the ground.

It felt like his whole body was broken, and it only got worse when he slammed into one of the towers from **[Profane Seal]** with enough power to cause a large crack running along its whole length. Black ichor ran down his mouth as Zac desperately crawled back to his feet only to see the monstrosity treating his entrapment as a joke.

Alarm bells were going off in Zac's mind, and every fiber of his being was telling him that this was not something he could contend with. He frantically tried to figure out what to do next, but the cyborg wasn't waiting for Zac to come up with a strategy. A huge shockwave exploded out from where it stood as the cyborg disappeared from sight, only to appear right in front of Zac once again.

This time Zac was somewhat ready and he barely managed to duck out of the way from another world-ending fist that instead tore the miasmatic tower apart. It almost looked like the extremely sturdy structure was made out of styrofoam as it shattered and dissipated into churning mists of Miasma.

The destruction of the tower was the straw that broke the camel's back, and **[Profane Seal]** started to crumble. All the chains were already broken which had damaged the other towers as well, and with one tower utterly destroyed the shield was already down for the count.

Luckily the fight outside had mostly ebbed out as well, with Ogras dismantling the last remnants of the Technocrat army. The demon seemed to be in good vigor, though his clothes were completely burned and the side of his face was covered in a large scorch mark. Verun was nowhere to be seen though, but that quickly changed as the large beast appeared out of nowhere and chomped down on the towering cyborg.

Verun didn't have much better luck than Zac did though despite its furious attempts to rip his master's enemy to shreds. The Tool Spirit's large fangs couldn't even break its skin. The cyborg only stoically stood there acting like it couldn't feel a thing until it slammed its hand in a ferocious overhand slap that hit Verun's head.

The Tool spirit Yelped in pain and was forced to let go, at which point the cyborg unleashed yet another of its terrifying punches. Verun was utterly helpless as it turned into motes of light that fled into Zac's axe. Thankfully Zac could still sense the Tool Spirit in his axe, though it immediately entered hibernation after getting destroyed.

If Zac's heart had been beating in his current form it would have been hammering away at this moment as he gazed upon the Cyborg. Something unfathomable was happening with it. It was as though the monster had gained over 20 levels in just a few seconds, and its towering aura had more than doubled since it attacked Zac the first time.

Futility threatened to consume him as Zac scrambled for any idea of getting out of this mess. The cyborg didn't seem to possess any skills or Dao Seeds, but it also didn't need it due to its ungodly power. It was like a supercharged version of Zac himself, a true testament of the horror of superior attributes.

There was a small remnant of the technocrats sticking close to the Nexus Hub. They had likely tried to escape Earth but was blocked due to Zac's interference. But

the group seemed emboldened from the turnaround in the battle and they rushed toward Zac in an effort to assist their foreman in taking him down. Zac had no time to bother about them, so he could only infuse his body with the Seed of Hardness as he kept his eyes trained on the true threat.

Another apocalyptic punch soared toward Zac who desperately activated **[Immutable Bulwark]**. An earthshattering explosion echoed out across the area when the fist connected, and Zac realized the power was well beyond that of the first strike. He wasn't sure he would still be in fighting condition if the first fist contained this amount of force. Even the extremely hard stonebed cracked all around them from the attack, a testament to its immense power.

The unlucky Technocrats who had wanted to fish in muddy waters were rendered into meat paste just from the shockwave. They died without knowing what happened, likely thinking that the foreman was still on their side. But Zac knew that this thing had no such alliances. The former foreman had turned into an emotionless tool of slaughter upon his death.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm as the punch caused massive cracks across the bulwark. Neither Salvation's self-detonation nor the laser beams of the two enormous mechas had been enough to cause a crack in his defensive wall, but one simple punch from this thing was all it took. But just as Zac despaired a huge form materialized and punched into the chest of the cyborg.

It was **[Deathwish]** that activated, and the force was tremendous even though it only contained a part of the original strength of the attack. This became especially true after Zac managed to imbue the spectral projection with the Dao of Heaviness with some quick reflexes. The Cyborg was launched into the air, flying tens of meters away before slamming into the ground with a large bang.

"What the hell is that thing?" a shocked voice asked from the side.

Zac looked over to see Ogras standing there, staring at the cyborg with horror in his eyes.

"A cyborg, a mix of man and machine," Zac sighed. "The foreman turned into this thing just as I was about to kill him."

"Mix of man and machine? That's Impossible," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "The heavens won't allow such a thing."

Of course, it was hard to refute the evidence as it stood up again as if nothing had happened. Its chest was completely fine, with not a single blemish from the retaliatory strike. The air around it was crackling and twisting from just standing still, and it looked as though it had once again powered up.

"I can't harm it, and I can't defend against it, and it keeps getting stronger," Zac sighed. "Do you have any ideas?"

"Throw things at it," Ogras said, immediately taking out a handful of offensive arrays.

Hope reignited in Zac's heart as he took out all his offensive treasures as well.

The next moment the Underworld lit up in a cacophony of chaotic energies as over ten powerful offensive arrays exploded at the same time. Everything from fires burning so hot it the flames were white to poisonous mists and crackling lightning caused a both beautiful and terrifying display as the cyborg was submerged in a conflagration of their most powerful arrays.

Zac even went so far as to throw out his one and only **[Void Ball]**, his ultimate tool of destruction. The ball plunged the whole area into spatial chaos far worse than what he had seen over by the entrance to the Mystic Realm. That time he was even

thrown inside while fighting the tiger, but he managed to get navigate his way out in one piece.

This time the zone was jam-packed with spatial tears, some as large as two-three meters. Some of the largest tears even combined to form large sections of void space, looking like windows into outer space. Those were even more terrifying than the tears, as one could actually fall into such a thing. What waited on the other side depended on one's luck, but it was most likely a horrible death.

Zac didn't think he could throw a stone through the area unscathed, let alone passing through it. But the hulking form of the cyborg seemed completely unbothered as it stood inside the blast zone, only a few scorch-marks and slightly melted metal the proof that he had been inside radius of the attacks at all. Even the spatial tears were crushed against its body, though they did leave somewhat deep cuts. But the wounds didn't bleed at all, and it didn't look like the cyborg even noticed them.

Zac and Ogras only looked at it with dismay, unsure of what to do next. Its enormous fist suddenly slammed into the ground with impossible speed, causing a huge shockwave to erupt. It looked like an atomic bomb had erupted beneath the ground they stood on, causing crushed stones to blast upward in a circle of hundreds of meters.

Zac and Ogras stood over a hundred meters away from the center of the impact, but they were still pushed back another hundred meters, barely able to keep their footing. The demon also suffered multiple cuts from errant pieces of stone hitting him with the speed of bullets. The remaining power of the offensive arrays were blown away in an instant as well, with only a few spatial tears remaining.

"Is it D-Grade?" Ogas screamed in alarm. "We need to flee!"

Zac had to agree with Ogras' assessment. This thing was just too powerful. Zac could barely cause a few cracks in the extremely hard rocks around them, but this monster could suddenly cause widespread damage with a simple punch, something Zac wouldn't even be able to replicate on the surface. There was no way that the Cyborg had less than 2-3000 Strength by now judging from that slam alone.

The two immediately started to run away, but the monster was just too fast. One moment it was still standing in the distance, but in the next it was right next to Ogras, shrouding the demon in darkness. Its fist ripped through the air at the demon, foretelling of impending doom. Ogras roared as torrential amounts of shadows erupted from beneath him, completely submerging the cyborg in darkness.

The cyborg froze and shuddered in response, which caused the shadows to get ripped into pieces and Ogras to cough out blood from the blowback. But the brief pause allowed Zac to once again summon [**Immutable Bulwark**] and place it and himself in front of the demon for a final stand.

But the cyborg had grown too powerful in this short time, and the bulwark only managed to absorb some of the force before cracking like brittle glass. Zac only had time to erect all his other defensive treasures before the herculean fist rammed into his shield, causing both Zac and Ogras to sail hundreds of meters away until they slammed into a wall with a resounding crash.

Zac almost blacked out from the pain as black ichor flowed like a waterfall from his mouth and nose. At least thirty bones in his body were broken, and the demon seemed to be even worse off when the two crashed into the ground. His shield was completely destroyed as well, well beyond salvaging. Zac desperately tried to get back on his feet to meet the oncoming enemy, but he barely managed to get up to a sitting position.

He was almost all out of Miasma in any case, and using any skill was off the table. He would likely turn to his human form in minutes unless he managed to restock on

energy. He briefly considered trying to transform to his human class, but he knew that it was a fool's dream.

There was no way to finish the transformation as the cyborg had already appeared right in front of them with the help of its tremendous speed, a series of crashes in the ground exploding behind it. Its hollow eyes stared down at them without a shred of emotion, which in a sense was even scarier than a glare full of hatred.

The transformation skill required ten seconds to finish, but those seconds were the difference between life and death. Besides, Zac knew that there was no way he could harm the thing, even if he unleashed his most powerful moves from his Hatchetman Class. The monstrosity wasn't even hampered by the spatial tears, and those were far more dangerous than his skills.

"I'm sorry," Zac sighed as he shot a look the demon who helplessly lay in a heap next to him. "This is all my fault."

"This is the life of the cultivator," Ogras wryly smiled with a blood-filled mouth. "The road has to end sometime. Shame I never got to finish my movie."

Zac's snorted before his thoughts wistfully went to his sister as he closed his eyes, ready to meet his maker.

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### **Chapter 351 - Out of Control**

The enormous fist of the three-meter humanoid slammed down with tremendous force, aiming to finally end everything. But just as it was about to reach its target the air shuddered, and the arm was cleanly cut off. The ground shook slightly as the arm that seemed to weigh over a hundred kilos fell, but not a drop of blood escaped from the huge wound.

Of course, the Corpse Golem didn't even flinch from losing an appendage and immediately tried to attack Thea with its remaining arm. But **[Petalstorm]** had already returned to her side after saving the lives of one of the squads that had veered too deep, and the towering humanoid was bisected into ten pieces in short order.

Not that Thea wasn't able to take out the undead in other ways. But using skills instead of her weapon would cost her more Cosmic Energy, a resource that had turned into the most precious treasure the past days. She shook her head and activated **[Gale Step]**, disappearing from the area as she rode turbulent winds of the battlefield.

Since she managed to gain insight into the Seed of Lightness to support her other seeds her speed had gained a huge upgrade. Combining the Seed of Gust with the Seed of Lightness for her movement skill turned her into a mirage, flittering across the battlefield with almost impossible speed.

She couldn't be bogged down in this seemingly unending war of attrition, she had her goals to accomplish. Normally she wouldn't have stopped for one of those macabre constructs, but she destroyed it by convenience since it was guarding one of her targets.

Thea had already spotted her next prey, a zombie of a young Asian woman who was no taller than 155 centimeters. What set her apart from the rest of the zombies was her enlarged skull and the thick veins throbbing across her forehead. This one didn't seem to be protected by a guardian, but it rather tried to hide through blending in with the rest of the zombies for safety.

But Thea had become an expert at spotting the zombie captains over the past weeks, and she flashed over, completely ignoring all the Zombies beneath. She still got a constant stream of cosmic energy though, as her invisible weapon mowed straight through the undead horde as it accompanied her in her hunt.

While Thea was extremely hard to spot due to her speed she hadn't activated **[Skyshroud]** to turn herself almost completely invisible. The shroud cost too much to be worth it since it also added a defensive barrier. The normal zombies didn't even notice her presence as it was, but the large-headed zombie immediately spotted her and released a shriek that made the air shudder.

"Another mid-tier," Thea muttered with a small smile as an amulet around her neck lit up to block out most of the mental attack contained in the scream.

Between her amulet and **[Calm Seas]** the attack that would have turned most cultivators' brains into mush was effortlessly deflected, not even able to delay Thea a second. She was right in front of the control zombie just a second later, and Cosmic Energy entered the fractal on the top of her hand as she activated **[Windblade]**.

It was just a basic skill that she got inside the Tutorial, but it had been raised to peak mastery recently, giving it a substantial boost in its efficiency. With the addition of the Seed of Sharpness and Seed of Lightness it turned into a large scythe of death that swept across the area for a very small amount of Cosmic Energy.

Cosmic Energy surged into her body as the blade killed over a hundred elite zombies before they managed to exhaust its energies, but Thea frowned when she saw that the control zombie exploded into a mess of flesh and viscera before the blade even struck her. Thea quickly looked in all directions, and thankfully spotted an engorged zombie slowly walking away in the distance.

The large zombie looked as though he had a huge tumor on his stomach, and he was shaking as he shuffled toward the core of the sea of zombies. Thea only snorted and **[Petalstorm]** shot out with blazing speed, blasting a large hole through its torso. Rotten innards spilled out from the zombie as it fell over, but that was not all that fell out.

The maimed body of the control zombie fell out of the stomach of the zombie as well, and it was already dead from the pass-through of the invisible Spirit Tool. Thea had already seen this type of macabre escape tactic before, where the zombie leader somehow transported into the body of a larger undead like a parasite, and ordered their hosts to flee from the battle.

The moment that the control zombie was killed by the strike chaos took hold of the whole sector of the zombie army around her. The tens of thousands of Zombies that were once under the large-headed zombie's control immediately splintered off from the horde, veering straight for the army that radiated with life-force in the distance.

Thea wasn't worried though, as that was all according to plan. The zombies would be dead even before they reached the defensive line.

Since Thea still had quite a bit of energy remaining she stayed in the sea of zombies for another twenty minutes, allowing her to kill a handful of more control zombies and thousands of the normal undead before she started to make her way back toward her camp with plenty energy to spare. Staying any longer might draw the ire of that terrifying being in the center of the horde again.

She had barely made it out with her life in one piece the last time the Corpse Lord tried to kill her, and she wasn't ready to contend against it just yet. The undead general was simply too strong to defeat within the undead horde, which was likely the reason she stayed over there rather than joining the constant raids. It would require huge sacrifices to bring that woman down, but they hadn't reached that point just yet.

Thea quickly closed in on the million-man-army sending out a handful of [Windblades] to cull some dense groups of zombies on the way. Of course, the army didn't actually consist of a million people, but after the forced conscription there were at least 400 000 people that maintained a constant battle against the tide of zombies in this sector.

And this was only one of the five sectors going all out against the zombies, though only the Zhix horde was larger than her army. She didn't love the fact that they were forced to push unwilling people to the front-lines, but the very fate of their planet was at stake.

"Good job. You killed enough controllers to keep us occupied for over an hour," Mark said while handing Thea a water bottle as she entered the command tent.

Controllers were what they called the zombies that kept the enormous sea of braindead zombies in line. Normally they shouldn't have been able to constrain themselves with so many living targets nearby, but they had always kept a semblance of order even when the armies tried everything to trick the undead to splinter from the main horde.

But they finally managed to find some clues, partly with the help of Big Blue, and through chance encounters with the controllers. They finally learned that every single zombie in the horde was controlled by a stronger zombie. However, it didn't seem there was a single undead strong enough to control over a hundred million zombies, so they had created an efficient hierarchy with the help of the mutant zombies with improved mental capabilities.

One low-tier control zombie was able to give simple commands to roughly a thousand normal or elite zombies. It was thanks to them that they didn't simply run off to hunt for something to bite. These low-tiered control zombies were in turn controlled by mid-tier captains, such as the ones that Thea just killed.

One of them could control between ten and fifty low-tier commanders, meaning that one mid-tier zombie could control up to roughly 50 000 zombies depending on their strength. And things followed that pattern with high tier controllers, though Thea had only managed to find and kill one of them. Presumably, some peak controller was keeping the whole army in check, or perhaps it was the Corpse Lord herself holding the reins.

In either case, they soon learned that targeting the mid-tier commanders was the most efficient tactic to destroy the cohesiveness of the zombie horde. Killing a low-tier commander would only let a thousand zombies loose, and that wasn't worth the trouble. Thea could personally kill that number with a couple of windblades.

Killing a high-tier commander wasn't really efficient either, as the mid-tier controllers were usually smart enough to stay put and wait for orders. But when a mid-tier commander was killed their subordinates almost immediately turned to small raiding parties that unhesitatingly rushed the waiting armies of the living in the distance. Only when another commander reined them in fast enough would they stay put within the zombie horde.

"How are things going at the main front?" Thea asked as she took a swig from the canteen.

"It's pretty desperate," Mark said with a grimace. "If those insectoids didn't bolster our numbers we would have been overrun by now. But the constant bombardment is rapidly depleting our cache of old-world weaponry. Over a thousand tanks have been destroyed just over the past day. The undead truly refuses to give up on their chosen path."

“Well, that would ruin the array they’re making,” Thea nodded. “How long can we keep going?”

“Three days, perhaps four,” Mark sighed. “A few days longer if our searches for military bases are successful. But sooner or later the constant barrage of the undead will reach a tipping point where our line breaks and all hell breaks loose.”

“Maybe I should head over there?” Thea hesitantly ventured.

Things were rough on their end, where over a thousand people died every hour, but it was nothing compared to the mayhem at the front. Those people were tasked with contesting every step forward the undead took, by any means necessary.

“No point,” Mark said with a shake of his head. “Our work here is helping them as well. This army killed almost three million Zombies yesterday even though our elites are at the main army. We’re stealing their momentum and making sure that the leaders of the horde doesn’t send all their powerhouses to the frontline.”

Thea sighed and nodded with some helplessness. It just felt bad that she stayed here in relative safety while her family members were risking everything to stop the horde in their tracks. But she was the only one who was able to constantly hunt the control zombies to splinter the horde.

“What about the other hordes?” she asked.

“Nothing new,” Mark said. “Port Atwood’s people are still missing. The Sino-Indian Alliance is fighting a losing war, only nipping at the heels of the army. They will not be able to stop the advance of the horde unless something drastically changes.”

“And the movement from the invaders?” Thea asked.

“They are staying clear of us and are focusing on the minor undead hordes. There seems to be an implicit agreement where all the armies avoid each other, targeting only the undead. The zealots are quite terrifying according to our reports, turning every battlefield to hell on earth.”

Thea mulled over the information, though it seemed not much had changed the past hours. Everyone was desperately struggling to stop the Undead Empire, but they were powerful enough to take on the combined powers of all forces without even revealing all their cards. Almost no one would be able to stop them if their leaders joined the fight.

“What about Zac? Any word from him?” Thea asked.

“Nothing. There has been no sighting of him for two weeks. Some believe he is in closed-door cultivation since reaching level 75, that he’s aiming to break through to E-Grade. But our informants believe he has found the Underworld and is busy taking control of its riches,” Mark said with some dissatisfaction.

Thea frowned as well, not understanding what Zac was thinking. The idea was for him to quickly close the other incursions before joining the battle against the undead, but he only closed a handful of them before disappearing. He hadn’t even gone to help his own people from what they could tell, since he would have to have used their network to get close to the Dead Zone.

She truly hoped he could appear sooner rather than later. Things were turning pretty bleak, and the world needed a hero.

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## Chapter 352 - The Three Paths

The seconds passed but the darkness of true death never arrived, forcing Zac to finally look up to see what was going on. The cyborg still loomed above them like a mountain, completely unmoving. But the terrorizing aura it emitted up till now was gone, making the thing seem like a hollow shell.

“Is it dead? What did you do?” Ogras soon ventured with a weak voice, also realizing something was up.

“I didn’t do anything,” Zac croaked, confusion filling his mind.

He wasn’t sure what to do since he hadn’t received a shred of cosmic energy, something that usually entailed that his enemy was still alive. He was afraid that any sudden action would rekindle the life of the thing, which would end with their death without a doubt. Ogras didn’t have any such compunctions as a blast of shadows hit the cyborg right in its head.

Zac groaned inwardly as he scrambled for anything to use to protect them in case it responded, but the hulking humanoid simply toppled over. It slammed into the ground with a thud that launched Zac a few centimeters up into the air, but that was it. His body was wracked with pain but he still lunged at the humanoid, putting it into one of his Cosmos Sacks.

The demon sighed in relief as he immediately took out a handful of array disks before eating a healing pill. Zac followed suit, and he also took out two E-Grade Miasma Crystals. He still didn’t want to transform into his human form, just in case some scanning device remained in the area. The Nexus Hub would only be blocked for a couple of more minutes, after all.

Normally he would have completed a sweep to look for such a thing, but there was simply no way. His right arm was broken in at least 5 different places, and most of his ribs on the side that tanked the last punch were broken as well. Luckily he didn’t need his organs in his current form. Otherwise he would likely have been in a far more critical situation.

Neither of the two spoke for over thirty minutes, both focusing on restoring themselves from their critical states. Thankfully the battle against the other Technocrats was over, and there was no movement at all in the area.

“What the hell is going on?” Zac finally muttered with incredulity, still not believing he had survived that thing.

“Perhaps it ran out of lifeforce? Or perhaps the Heavens wouldn’t allow for its continued existence,” Ogras ventured.

“How was that thing even allowed though the Incursion in the first place? High Tech was supposed to be confiscated?” Zac complained, still rattled from being so close to death.

“Heaven’s rules have always been negotiable. If the cost outweighs the benefits it will usually back down. The Technocrats might have directly paid for the Ruthless Heaven’s to look the other way. Or they might have paid by hiding the seed from Heaven’s Eyes. Either way, bringing a thing like this through the Nexus Hub would no doubt bankrupt a clan like Azh’Rezak,” Ogras said with a shake of his head.

Zac slowly nodded, suddenly remembering how Greatest was able to keep the System at bay to allow him to have a conversation. Besides, while the Cyborg was closing in on D-Grade power by the end it didn’t start out that way. Its first attack could conceivably come from a peak F-grade being if it was using its life-force to empower its strike.

Perhaps the machine or parasite that was put inside the Foreman was just peak F-Grade at the start, but rapidly pushed the host to greater heights by draining its life force or something. It would explain why it only lasted less than a minute before shutting down.

“A hybrid of the Dao of Technology and Cosmic Energy,” Ogras muttered with a raspy voice, echoing Zac’s thoughts. “It’s was not a true fusion, but it’s not too far off. These heretics are something else. Perhaps they can only keep such a thing alive for a few strikes, but it is still a terrifying accomplishment.”

Zac nodded in agreement, but the small movement made him grimace in pain. It was truly a scary thing put inside someone. There likely were no more than 5 people on Earth, including the invaders, who would be able to survive that thing’s onslaught. The two of them would have turned into mush if he didn’t have **[Immutable Bulwark]** and the Seed of Hardness to drain enough of the final strike’s momentum.

“Isn’t this something common among the Technocrats?” Zac asked as he ate another healing pill. “I thought blending technology and cultivation was just their thing.”

By now he started to feel strong enough for a short battle in case it was needed, so he kept his eyes trained on the Nexus Hub. There might be other Technocrats who were waiting for an opportunity to reach the Teleportation Crystal. Some might have been sent away on missions or handling the enormous drill that was digging toward the surface. He needed to defend the Nexus Hub for another 8 hours to make sure that there were no escapees.

The cyborg’s punch had thrown them a few hundred meters away, and they had fallen onto an outcropping that overlooked both the battlefield and the small Technocrat outpost. No one would be able to reach the Hub without them noticing unless they possessed some sort of cloaking technology that could move.

“A true integration of technology and cultivation is impossible since the Dao of Technology is not accepted. The Technocrats always has to work around this inviolable fact, and the way they do this differ. It’s generally known in the multiverse that there are essentially three main paths of the Technocrats,” Ogras explained as finally got up to a sitting position from lying down on the ground like a dead fish.

“The first is the Machine God Faction,” Ogras said. “They go all-in on technology, avoiding the System as much as possible. Some of them might be level 1 but still possess the capability to kill B-Grade hegemons. You can’t consider them mortals though, as their lifespans have been prolonged through technology rather than Race upgrades.”

Zac nodded as that was his original impression of the Technocrats after reading about them.

“The second group are the Technomancers. They use a mix of both systems. They might get a ranger class but use technological guns, like the rifles we took during the Auction. It’s a slightly annoying path since they still would have to exert twice the effort to improve. Their kills with their technological weapons would give no energy or merits,” the demon continued. “But they usually have destructive capabilities that are far stronger than normal cultivators. Just look at the weapons that these things used.”

“The final group are the Transcenders. They use technology to augment themselves, but they fully utilize the class- and cultivation systems of the Ruthless Heavens. But they might swap out their body parts with those of a dragon, or forcibly instill themselves with rare and powerful bloodlines. They are mad scientists using their own bodies as laboratories,” Ogras said.

“How is that possible? Does the System allow such a thing?” Zac asked skeptically. “If it’s possible to become stronger like that, won’t everyone do it?”

“From what I hear that such modifications are in defiance of the Heavens, and it enacts a terrible price that most would say supersedes the gains. I don’t know the details, but such modifications are banned in most Empires. There are unorthodox sects who walk similar paths though, but they work fully within the bounds of the System,” Ogras said hesitantly.

“The goals of the factions are also different. The purists want to destroy the Ruthless Heavens altogether by pushing the Dao of Technology to the point that they create something even greater than the so-called System; The Machine God,”

“The Technomancer and Transcenders on the other hand partly work somewhat within the rules of heaven, and their goal is to change it rather than destroy it. They want to force the Ruthless Heavens to accept the Dao of Technology through raising an Apostate or forcing the creation of technology-based races,” Ogras explained. “Judging by this ugly thing I’d say this Firmament’s Edge is part of one of the latter factions.”

“Are the Technocrat factions enemies with each other if their goals differ?” Zac asked.

“No idea, but when the whole multiverse is their enemy I would guess that the three factions would stick together. The three factions are something most people in the multiverse know of, but I have no idea about the specifics. This is my first time actually seeing technocrats in the flesh,” Ogras said with a shake of his head.

“For one they wouldn’t deign to come to my homeworld, and secondly they wouldn’t enter the territory of the Horde unless necessary. The multiverse is filled with old monsters stuck in bottlenecks who are ready to risk their lives for a chance at breaking through.”

Zac nodded in thanks after Ogras explained the situation further. He had pretty much avoided the subject since he learned of his mother’s origins, but he knew that he couldn’t stay ignorant for much longer. That became doubly true when remembering the Abbot’s words. The Mystic Realm was the key to the fate of Earth, and it might be of Technocrat origin.

But all that would have to wait for later, and Zac opened his status screen instead of mulling on the topic any further. The results of the battle were above expectations. He had gained 5 full levels in the short but intense battle, even more than when he fought the extremely powerful Nenotheop who was a far larger threat than the four bodyguards combined. It put Zac at level 70, just a short bit away from the peak of F-Grade.

The four bodyguards gave a good boost, but Zac remembered that the largest source of energy actually came from the enormous robot earlier. The surge he got when he killed the alien in the cockpit was at least twice that of killing one of the lightning cultivators.

He put the free points into Strength before checking his other gains. Shockingly enough he had upgraded his Dao of Hardness in the heat of battle, though he wasn’t sure exactly when. Perhaps it happened when he tried everything in his arsenal to block the final strike of the Cyborg.

**Hardness (High): Endurance +50, Wisdom +10.**

Zac gained another 25 Endurance and 5 Wisdom from the upgrade, effectively doubling the boost from the Seed of Hardness. He wasn’t surprised at all that the seed still almost only gave Endurance since his definition of Hardness was pretty much solely about enduring strikes.

The good news didn’t end there, and he noticed that [Immutable Bulwark] had evolved as well, pushing it to Middle Mastery. He wanted to check out the differences, but he didn’t want to cause any energy fluctuations while they hid within the illusion

array. But one thing hadn't gone according to plan. Zac was surprised to see that the quest was still active even though he had got the prompt telling him that he had conquered the area.

"Is your quest active as well?" Zac asked the demon who nodded after a second.

"We might need to wait until the hub is closed. Or perhaps more Technocrats are hiding in the area," Ogras mused, echoing Zac's earlier thoughts.

"Will you be able to heal up in 8 hours?" Zac asked.

"I am afraid not," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "But I'll be able to walk at least. I will need a couple of days to reach prime fighting condition."

Zac grimaced, knowing his situation wasn't much better. But at least they would be able to rest up while looking for the missing army. They would need to travel for over a week since such a large sector was blocked off by the interference.

"I'll stay here and recuperate until the hub is closed," Zac said and arduously got up to his feet. "I am not able to scour the area just yet, but perhaps we can catch some people trying to return through the hub. Are you staying or do you want to go back? I could buy the teleporter for you."

"I'll go back as soon as the quest is complete," Ogras said after mulling it over. "My Daos aren't optimal against the undead, so I'll have a talk with the dragonling again before we set out."

"Dragonling?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Smaug, apparently it's the name of an old dragon on your planet?" Ogras snorted. "Gutsy to name yourself after a primordial species. They'll rip him into pieces if they find out. But you could buy the teleporter over by the Hub. It might make any late arrival believe that we have left."

Zac nodded in agreement and got out of the hiding spot to place the teleporter in a conspicuous location before scurrying back. Just that quick walk made him shake with pain, so he hurriedly sat down again with a groan to refocus on healing up.

His state was still quite horrid, but he slowly got better as the hours passed. No one had come or gone while the two waited, and Zac started to worry that any remnant Technocrats had fled the area, making them nigh impossible to find in the short run. But a small movement in the distance the two freeze.

It was one of the inconspicuous scouting drones that were used for keeping watch over the perimeter of the Technocrat Incursion. It had appeared straight out of a solid cave wall on the other side of the settlement, as though it was a ghost.

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**Chapter 353 - Production Lines**

Zac immediately realized the same cloaking technology was being used in the settlement as down in the battleroach cave. The camouflage of the technocrats was truly amazing to completely trick one's eyes while not emitting a speck of cosmic energy.

The drone moved about the desolate town, scanning the buildings one by one. Soon afterward it flew over to the battlefield and scanned the hundreds of corpses that Zac and Ogras had left where they were. Finally it flew over to the newly bought

teleportation array and scanned it. Zac frowned and took out [**Verun's Bite**], readying himself for battle.

"Be patient," Ogras whispered as his eyes were trained on the hidden spot the drone came from. "What do you want to do if people show up?"

"Kill everyone, I don't want anyone escaping through the hub," Zac said without hesitation.

The drone passed around the area a few times, but luckily its scans didn't reach their secluded ledge. Their patience was soon rewarded as a group of Technocrats finally emerged from the cave wall and rushed straight toward the Nexus Hub. Only when the group was half-way there did Zac and Ogras appear in a blast of shadows.

The Technocrats were shocked to see two cultivators appear right in their midst and barely managed to put up a resistance before they all lay dead on the ground. Ogras still had trouble moving about and was forced to fight sitting down on the ground while blasting shadow spears in all directions. Zac was a little better off, but he had to use the axe with his off-hand since his right arm was unusable.

"The quest is completed," Ogras said with excitement after the battle group of Technocrats was finished off.

Zac breathed out in relief since that most likely meant that there were no more invaders around. But he still wanted to make sure.

"Can you keep watch while I check things out?" Zac asked, getting a nod in response.

Zac slowly walked over toward the cloaked entrance in the wall, and he activated the upgraded [**Immutable Bulwark**] just in case as he stepped through the illusion. The shield soon passed right through the wall, and Zac stopped in his tracks to see if anything happened.

Luckily everything seemed completely fine, so he walked through as well. As expected no Technocrats were lying in wait, and he was only met with silence as he stepped into a large empty space. But he still kept the skill active to see what changes there were since it got upgraded.

The size of the bulwark was pretty much the same as before, but after some testing he realized he now was able to change its size. He could make it almost ten meters wide and four meters high, making it look like a proper rampart, but he could also shrink it down to the size of his tower shield. He was also able to move it within fifty meters of himself, allowing him to use it to defend others with greater ease.

There was no change to the shield itself though. It didn't get thicker or gain any new fractals, making Zac guess that its defensive capabilities were still pretty much the same. Of course, it wasn't the end of the world since only the cyborg had been able to crack its defenses so far. Zac only played with the skill for a few seconds before refocusing on the scene inside.

The hidden structure was shockingly different compared to the outside, and it felt like he stood inside a hangar of a spaceship. The floor, walls, and ceiling were all made in metal, with electrical lights rather than mushrooms and moss illuminating the area. There was not much to see in the surroundings apart from a few rows of containers full of raw materials, but there was also the tunnel.

The tunnel that the Technocrats had arduously worked on for months could truly be called a marvel of engineering. It was hexagonal with a diameter of roughly twenty meters, and it was also clad in the same metallic walls as the hall. It was completely symmetrical, with not a single blemish or aberration, but most importantly it was long. Extremely long.

Zac felt as though he was looking at an optical illusion when he peered into the endless tunnel that had a straight 45-degree incline. It looked like when one placed two mirrors in front of each other, creating the appearance of an endless tunnel. There was no way for him to see the end, but he guessed a tremendous excavation machine was at the other side, somewhere close to the surface.

There was also a large platform at the entrance of the tunnel, silently hovering a decimeter above the ground. Zac guessed that the platform was a lift that could take one to the top, but he saw no console or buttons to steer it. Besides, he had no intention to enter the tunnel at this juncture, as it would take hours to get to the surface with this thing.

He finally understood what happened after going through the area. The Technocrats who just arrived had most likely been working on the mining rig at the other side of the tunnel when they suddenly got the alert that their Incursion had fallen. They took the lift back down, and only just arrived to see a desolate battlefield and a hill of corpses outside.

Zac took a final look around before returning to the demon's side. There was still a bit over half the time before the Nexus Hub would shut down, so Zac once again sat down to wait it out while recuperating.

Ogras was well enough to get back on his feet around two hours later, so he left for New London to gather provisions and prepare for the rescue of the Port Atwood Army. Zac himself stayed on, and only stood up the moment that the Nexus Hub was inactivated, finally quenching any chance of any unwelcome surprises. The connection between the Technocrats and Earth was finally broken, which would hopefully keep his sister safe for at least a century, perhaps forever.

However, Zac didn't immediately leave the area but instead hurried back toward the battlefield. He had already looted the Cosmos Sacks belonging to the four cultivators and the foreman, but there were still hundreds of bodies lying on the ground with all kinds of precious items scattered about.

Apart from the Technocrats there were also the droves of broken-down machines. Some were destroyed beyond salvation, but a few were somewhat intact. Perhaps some engineers back at Port Atwood would be able to piece together a couple of whole robots from the scraps.

The drones had fallen pretty easily to Zac's assault, but that didn't mean they were weak. A single one of the battle droids would likely be able to defeat the average peak F-Grade warrior. Not only that, but their hulls were also extremely sturdy, and Zac had been forced to sometimes swing twice before destroying them.

Getting a handful of these things to guards his towns would be a huge boon since he was spreading his personnel thin as it was. It was one of the more glaring problems with Port Atwood at the moment; they were lacking people. They had liberated quite a few islands by now, but there were only so many people placed on the remote archipelago.

Zac was also pretty sure he wouldn't be finding too many more citizens stranded on the remaining islands that had yet to be scouted out. The beasts were too strong by now, and the average people would have long been killed. It was the same on the mainland, where fewer and fewer towns remained standing. But the people on the mainland at least had the opportunity to cooperate with others in the area to form larger settlements for protection.

Besides, even if Zac didn't manage to turn these robots into competent footsoldiers they would still be worth salvaging. The machines were made from either

some high-grade materials or some impressive composite alloys that the Technocrats created. In either case, he might be able to recast the robots into armors or weaponry.

Zac noted with some annoyance that he actually wasn't the first to scour through the battlefield since he only found a handful of cosmos sacks. The large mecha that Ogras defeated was gone as well, already snatched by the demon. Ogras had most likely looted while fighting since he had been mid-battle up until the cyborg made its appearance.

Luckily there was a lot of ground that the demon hadn't been able to pillage. Neither Ogras nor Zac had entered the structures in the small base camp, and Zac swept through them one by one like a locust. He first hit a warehouse that was filled to the rafters with tens of thousands of ingots of all kinds of metals.

It seemed that they kept a lot of the resources ready on hand for the production lines in the neighboring structure since there was some sort of gravity-defying conveyor-belts connecting the buildings. Zac didn't care about that though and swept all the materials clean.

The next building housed enormous rectangular machines that just looked like large metallic blocks. They reached over ten meters in the air, and their sides were roughly four meters. However, they seemed to be somewhat hastily put together, and not one of them was exactly alike. It looked like they were something the Technocrats had scrounged together to start production as quickly as humanly possible.

Zac didn't understand the function of the large machines, but he guessed that they were some sort of molds that created the robots from scratch. They reminded Zac a bit of the first furnace he bought from the system, the one he used to turn his first batch of raw crystals into real Nexus Crystals.

Unfortunately, there wasn't a repository of freshly made war machines, but that wasn't surprising since they would all have been sent to the battlefield. The large constructors themselves were the real prize in Zac's opinion though, and he would definitely have some people looking into setting up a production plant back on Port Atwood.

Of course, he'd make sure to check them for bugs or any other failsafe. These things could be programmed to blow up like a nuclear bomb in case someone unlicensed personnel tried to operate them for all Zac knew. Jeeves would hopefully be able to assist them in that department.

There was also the issue of hidden risks of using technology. The things Zac had seen from the Technocrats had all seemed extremely convenient. Who wouldn't want a few thousand drones keeping their place safe at all times? It made sense if a clan in the multiverse purchased a batch of goods from the Technocrats for this very purpose.

Yet no one in the multiverse utilized this sort of technology as far as Zac could tell. It made no sense to Zac, who had long realized that there were no such things as morals or scruples amongst the warriors of the multiverse. Such things were luxuries that very few could afford, and he felt that the anti-technology sentiment didn't make sense unless there were something more to it.

That meant that there was something else that held all these forces back, stopping them from using these things. Ogras had mentioned some unknown costs that would outweigh the benefits when modifying one's body, and it was perhaps the same with incorporating technology into one's force. He essentially needed to understand the situation better before he started transforming Port Atwood into some future-city.

But he still stowed away all the machines and everything else in the production plants. He did put all technology-based in a spare Cosmos Sack though, not wanting to mix them with his real belongings. Apart from the constructors, there were a lot of

spare parts, and a row of extremely heavy tubes that Zac suspected were some sort of high-tech batteries. Each one of them was only as long as his legs, but they weighed more than a car.

In the rest of the buildings there wasn't much of interest as most were just residential structures crammed full of bunk beds. He did find what looked like a laboratory, but it seemed to have been ransacked. Perhaps it once belonged to the researcher that Zac killed, and his place was searched for clues when he never returned to the camp.

He also found what he suspected was the foreman's house and study, and he made sure to take anything that might be worth something there. He even broke apart the walls and floor in search for hidden compartments, but there was nothing of the sort. It hopefully meant that everything of value was kept in his Cosmos Sack that Zac had already looted.

He had briefly scanned the five Cosmos Sacks belonging to the E-Grade warriors, but he didn't have time to properly check everything out. The Sacks belonging to the lightning cultivators weren't very exciting at least. They just contained a decent amount of Nexus Crystals along with various pills and daily necessities. They would likely have left their real assets back home before entering the incursion.

Zac had hoped that the cultivators would have things that would give him a nice boost when he finally reached E-Grade. But 8 months had passed since the Integration by now, and the four had likely already used all such resources on themselves by now. The foreman's sack was filled with all sorts of things, but most were of technological origin, so Zac didn't understand their purpose.

Content that there was nothing left of value Zac finally got back to New London. On his return he learned that Ogras had already left for Port Atwood, and was asked to meet him there. Zac didn't mind and soon enough he stood in his private Teleportation room in his compound, he immediately found the demon after stepping outside.

"How are you feeling?" Zac asked when he saw that Ogras still looked a bit pale.

Honestly, he didn't feel much better himself, and he just wanted to lay down and sleep for a bit. But he couldn't do that just yet and instead used his transformation skill to change to his human form.

"I'll survive," Ogras muttered after Zac stood up again. "Everything is prepared. Are you ready to go?"

"I'll just head over to the Mystic Realm to tell Kenzie that we're okay but that we're heading out again," Zac said.

The demon didn't object, and the two entered Kenzie's study within the Mystic Realm a few minutes later.

"Wow, the two of you look like walking corpses," Kenzie said with shock when she saw their bedraggled appearances. "Are you trying to blend in with the Undead?"

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**Chapter 354 - Sortie**

"They were a bit stronger than we expected," Zac simply said, not wanting to go into detail just how close they came to dying a few hours ago.

Ogras played along, donning a lackadaisical look as he hid the fact that he couldn't put any weight on one of his legs. Zac obviously wouldn't divulge that his right arm still wasn't working either.

"I just wanted to tell you that we're fine, but that we're heading out again. We're going to search for our people, it might take a few weeks," Zac added.

"Great, I'm coming with," Kenzie said as she stood up, patting her leggings.

"Absolutely not," Zac said without hesitation.

"I'm going," Kenzie said with a glare. "You've kept me on the Island long enough. I am starting to feel like a prisoner, and I need some combat experience to keep improving."

"What about studying arrays?" Zac asked. "And the funnel?"

"I can do that as well. Won't we be sitting on your spaceship most of the time?" Kenzie immediately retorted. "Besides, I've pushed my defensive seed to High mastery and even gotten a Water seed that helps with restoration. I am almost as unkillable as you!"

"Girl, you haven't been using the funnel for yourself, have you?" Ogras probed with suspicion in his eyes. "My head almost got split in two to snatch that thing, you know?"

"I don't need that thing to improve a few Dao Seeds," Kenzie snorted.

"Monster siblings," the demon muttered under his breath, receiving a synchronized eye-roll in return.

"It's great that you've improved your Daos, but the Undead Empire is the strongest force on the planet, we have no idea of the dangers we might face," Zac said. "We probably won't just be fighting the newly turned Zombies this time."

"The girl is pretty good with her spells," Ogras interjected. "She's even better than most of the other girls you bring along everywhere, and we have room on the flying treasure."

Zac shot a murderous glare at the demon, but he acted oblivious to the implicit threat. Soon enough Zac was forced to acquiesce to his sister's demands. Ultimately he knew that he couldn't keep her locked away on the island forever since that would harm her future development even if she had help from Jeeves.

But he was her big brother, worrying came with the job. Of course, with both himself and Ogras there along with the small hill of defensive treasures he had decked her out in she would have a hard time getting hurt even if she was in the middle of a sea of Zombies. And she did not only survive the Tutorial but also staying at a border town for months, so she wasn't some helpless damsel in distress.

"Fine, but don't take any unnecessary risks. Our main goal is to find and eventually save our people, not to have some last stand against the Undead," Zac said before turning to Ogras. "Is everything prepared?"

"The others are waiting by the public teleporter in Port Atwood," Ogras said. "There have also been some odd developments, but I thought I would brief everyone when we're on the move. Don't forget to withdraw a mountain of crystals for the flying treasure from the town coffers."

"I need to get a few things as well," Kenzie added. "I'll join you in a bit."

Zac nodded and the group met up again at the teleportation array in Port Atwood ten minutes later. Zac had gone to take out some of Port Atwood's resources from the Merit Exchange for the trip. He didn't know the state of the army so he brought out a large number of healing pills, Nexus Crystals, spare weaponry, and even food in case they had run out.

Ogras and Kenzie were already there, and they were joined by Tylia and eight Valkyries. Zac was surprised that neither Verana nor any demons were around, and he looked over at Ogras with some confusion.

“Verana will stay in the Underworld and consolidate our gains and start working on dealing with the Incursions there. I let the brat stay as well to be with her family,” Ogras said before nodding at Tylia. “This one has a skill-set that might prove helpful, and the eight girls will be able to form a small War Array for your sister. Room’s limited so I didn’t bring anyone else. I wanted to find the big ox, but it turns out he went fighting with the Marshall girl.”

Zac’s eyes lit up in understanding, and he felt it was a solid enough lineup. Billy would have been a good addition, but he could probably do more good helping in the fight against the other horde.

“So where are we going?” Zac asked.

“We’ll head to Westfort, and a person from the Sino-Indian Alliance there will take us to Erdenet, the closest array that I could find to where we last heard from our people. There was an array just a few day’s travel away from them, but it got swallowed by the interference as well,” Ogras explained.

Zac nodded and didn’t waste any more time, and just a few minutes later they stood in the Mongolian town. The guide bowed and immediately returned through the teleporter, leaving the small group to their own devices. They walked over to a cleared-out field and Zac immediately summoned the flying tool he got from the Hunt.

The Sky Gnomes had long figured out how to activate the large metallic ball and Zac infused some energy into it, making it quickly grow and change shape. It was as Calrin said, it was one of the simplest flying tools imaginable, only forming a simple disk that they would sit on. It was nothing like the sleek spaceship or the magical steampunk flying vessel he had imagined.

This was actually the first time he would use it since he didn’t feel too confident flying it in the Underworld, where the high ceiling could be swapped out by a narrow passage at moment’s notice. He only had the one and didn’t want to crash it.

The group sat down on the large circular surface, and Zac placed a couple of E-Grade crystals into their sockets and placed his hand on a control array. The next moment it floated up into the skies and shot out of the town with tremendous speed.

The air screamed around them, but the group of 12 weren’t buffeted by the winds in the slightest as the flying tool at least possessed some sort of protective array. Zac greatly enjoyed the feeling of flying, and he couldn’t stop himself from making the treasure take some sharp turns as it flew across the hills.

“Is it out of your system? You’re going in the wrong direction,” the demon said with a snort, and Zac hastily changed course with an embarrassed cough.

“Okay, so update me on the situation,” Zac said after the disk started to fly southward.

“Things are turning pretty chaotic in this area,” Ogras said. “I went by the Marshall Spy Agency just before now, and large changes have taken place.”

“Changes how?” Zac asked.

“For one there are dozens of hordes now, though the three initial ones are still far larger than the others,” Ogras started explaining as he took out a tablet from his Cosmos Sack. “They are traveling in irregular patterns, and no one could understand what the hell they were doing until recently.”

“And what’s that?” Zac asked.

“They’re making a mind-bogglingly huge array where the Dead Zone is just the core,” Ogras said with a shake of his head.

Zac was shocked to hear such a thing since the original Dead Zone was almost as large in area as the former United States. Such a massive piece of land was just the core? But he suddenly remembered the words of the Technocrat he interrogated the other day, and some fear gripped his heart.

“Terraforming,” Zac muttered with a frown.

“Exactly,” Ogras nodded with a serious face. “An array this large can only be used for something terrifying like destroying the whole planet. I believe they want to make this planet death-attuned. I don’t know how it works, but all the planets in the Undead Empire naturally produce Miasma rather than Cosmic Energy, and I believe this Array is the key.

“So if they manage to form the array we’re screwed?” Zac asked.

“I am not sure. I’ve asked the blue one to gather information. Such a search might draw some ire from the Undead Empire, but we’ve already passed that point. But I would personally guess that it would take some time to activate such a huge array,” Ogras shrugged. “Also, there’s some good news.”

“Oh? What’s that?” Zac asked, happy to take any good news he could get.

“We’re not the only ones worried about the Undead Empire’s actions. There have been reports of multiple alien armies arriving in the contested area, mainly from the neighboring Incursions,” Ogras said. “Most notably the insane cultists have arrived in full force. Massive battles took place yesterday where a few of the smaller Hordes were eradicated to the last zombie.”

“Makes sense, if the Undead Empire activates that Array it is probably game over for all the other invaders as well. They would have to leave the planet immediately,” Zac nodded.

“Exactly. And they’re not the only ones joining the battle. The insect people have amassed huge armies that have taken down at least three Zombie hordes as well. There are millions of them fighting like they’re possessed,” Ogras said. “They’ve marched for weeks to finally join the war.”

“What about the dominators?” Zac asked. “Are they still banking on us doing the work for them?”

“The Marshall’s are not sure,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “Their network is quite impressive, but it can’t cover the whole area, especially not now when large parts are cut off from teleportation.”

“I don’t think the Dominators can just sit still any longer,” Kenzie added from the side. “If they don’t do anything they will lose everything as well. They need to at least stall the undead until we can battle them.”

“We just assume they are staying in the shadows though,” Ogras said. “No point on basing our plans on our enemies assisting us.”

“Sounds fair enough. So, where are we heading?” Zac asked as he glanced down at the ground moving rapidly beneath them.

Ogras pressed a few buttons and a map appeared on the tablet he was holding.

“Alea’s outpost was in this small town, Hanliun, when the area got blocked. The main army was a day’s march away, harassing one of the main hordes together with the Sino-Indian Alliance,” Ogras started narrating.

“There was such a distance between the camp and the army?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Remember the Zombie horde numbered over a hundred million, and most of it is shrouded in Miasma. They didn’t want to risk the lives of the non-combatants, and having a headquarter that was constantly on the move would become a problem,” Ogras explained. “So they kept a healthy distance and communicated through crystals, though they might have become blocked as well by now.”

“We cannot know for sure what happened after they lost contact, but I believe they would retreat from the area,” the demon continued. “The only path that makes sense is northwest toward the closest teleporter in Baoqui. What they don’t know is that Baoqui’s teleporter is blocked as well.”

“So we head to that town to meet up with them?” Zac asked.

“Yes, though they would likely reach that place a few days before us judging by the speed we’re going. We could try to anticipate their next move, but there’s no obvious direction they could take after reaching Baoqui,” Ogras sighed.

“So if we take the safe route we’ll lose time,” Zac murmured.

“At least a day,” Ogras nodded.

“But if we take a chance we might miss them completely,” Zac concluded.

A full day could make a huge difference depending on their situation. By that point they would have been fending for themselves for almost ten days. He might be able to rely on his extremely high Luck to pick the right direction, but was he willing to bet his people’s lives on it?

“We’ll take the safe route for now,” Zac eventually decided. “But we might adjust as we get closer. Perhaps we can increase the altitude on this thing enough that we can see them far from the distance?”

“I am sure there are restrictions for that,” Tylia said, speaking up for the first time in a while. “I have heard that low-grade flying treasures rely on the energy from the ground. The energy is sparser in the sky, so they have built-in restrictions so they won’t fall out of the sky.”

Zac looked over at the demon, who nodded in confirmation.

“Well, we’ll see how far up it will allow us to go later then. By the way, have you ever seen anything like this?” Zac asked Ogras as he took out one of the top-grade crystals with the green shimmering lights within.

The demon stretched out his arm to take the shimmering crystal with interest, but he was preceded by the Tal-Eladar who snatched it up with shock in her eyes.

“High Purity Beast Crystals!” Tylia blurted out as her eyes widened.

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**Chapter 355 - Baoqui**

“Young lord... The Tir’Emarel clan would be happy to buy any such crystals you have in your possession,” Tylia said, her eyes not leaving the crystal for a second.

Zac knew he had hit the jackpot when he saw Tylia’s reaction. She wasn’t even a Beast Master, yet she had such an overblown reaction.

“Those are pretty good things,” Ogras said with a whistle. “Just the normal purity ones are even more valuable than attuned crystals, the high purity ones are treasures.”

“What are they good for?” Zac asked, though he had a pretty good idea already.

“Beasts can’t use Nexus Crystals for leveling for some reason. They can stay in a mine and benefit from the increased density of energies, but they can’t directly absorb the energy from the crystals themselves,” Ogras said. “But they can directly benefit from beast crystals.”

“But I can’t sense any energy in these things?” Zac interjected.

“I don’t really know how it works, but the beasts eat these things like food and slowly digest them. It helps them gain levels while also purifying their bloodline to a certain degree,” the demon continued.

“High purity crystals even helps with the foundations of creating a Beast Crystal in the future,” Tylia added from the side. “Feeding your contracted beast crystals will essentially help it grow faster, and you can still give it other treasures to help it improve. The two don’t clash. Buying beast crystals is a major cost for most Classes working with beasts.”

“So are they rare?” Zac asked.

“Not exceedingly rare, but far more uncommon than normal Nexus Crystals,” Tylia said. “I’d say the crystal in your hand is worth around a million Nexus Coins. Lower purity Crystals are not worth as much though.”

Zac whistled in surprise, knowing that there were almost two hundred such crystals in his cosmos sack. Better yet, there were thousands upon thousands of crystals left in the mine. Even if the worse crystals weren’t worth as much he was sure the value of the mine was multiple billions. It was a true treasure trove.

The Crystals would also come in handy in case his experiment with the newborn Ayr Hivequeen worked out. The former Pet Shop Employee had already gotten a beast-related class, but she hadn’t been able to form a connection with the queen yet. But with the help of the experts among the Tal-Eladar he was sure he’d be able to groom even more beast masters over the coming years. Perhaps he could trade some crystals for knowledge in beast rearing.

Of course, the real price form that cave was likely the **[Primordial Breath Amanita]**, but Zac wasn’t sure if discussing it with a Tal-Eladar was the best idea. He’d wait until he was alone with Calrin or Khar, the golem in charge of the Merit Exchange back in Port Atwood.

Tylia kept trying to find out where Zac got his hands on the crystals or at least buy them from him, but he ignored her attempts as he focused on recuperation. He was still far from fully restored, with multiple bones broken in his body.

Luckily the flying disk was essentially on autopilot after activating it. A connection had formed in his mind, and he didn’t need to keep his hand on the control array. It zapped through the air with great speed, flying at an altitude of a few hundred meters.

Ogras was even worse off than Zac, so the demon had closed his eyes in meditation as soon as he had explained the situation to the others. He had looked mostly fine since returning from the Technocrat Incursion, but Zac had noticed the small tremors in his hands signaling that he was in great pain.

The others simply spent most of their time cultivating. Kenzie switched between cultivating and reading the crystals on formations. She had already finished the first crystal, but after that her progress had slowed to a crawl. This was nothing odd of course. The 8 crystals held the condensed knowledge on the art of Arrays from a D-Grade sect. It wasn’t something that could be digested in a day or two.

Zac wanted to go through the various things he had looted from the Technocrat Incursion together with his sister, but he knew that now was not the time. Not even

Ogras was completely clued in to the details of their relationship with the Technocrats, so he could only wait until they were alone.

The days passed in silence as they crossed the vast lands of Pangea. The cost of travel would ruin the average cultivator on Earth, but the expense wasn't even noticeable for Zac. Since he couldn't cultivate he instead spent most of his time pondering the Dao. He had been in multiple intense fights lately, and he felt close to improving multiple Daos.

He had gained multiple sources of insight to the Seed of Rot recently, and he felt that he might even push that Dao to the Peak soon enough. The biggest contributor was the skill he gained, but there was also the battle with the roach. Even the final axe from [Deforestation] felt slightly related to his Dao of Rot, though that axe seemed to be based on some higher Dao.

But as four days passed he unfortunately didn't manage to push any of his remaining Daos to the Peak. He did, however, feel that he made decent progress, and if he just got the opportunity to sit down and meditate in peace for a month or two he'd be able to evolve at least one of them. Of course, getting the chance to sit back and meditate with the current chaos was a distant dream.

The silent cultivation ended as the disk was starting to close in on Baoqui. Everyone looked back and forth across the horizon, hoping to find a glimpse of their people. But even if they were hundreds of meters in the air they could only see so far. They would likely only be able to spot the people if they were a few hours away at the most.

The environment around them was still barren though, with neither their own people or the undead in sight. They had spotted quite a few beasts during the past days though. They were even attacked a few times by flocks of supersized birds, but the disk possessed arrays that rebuffed them without a problem.

The fact that there was nothing to see was both good and bad. Good in the sense that there were no undead forces that had reached all this way so far. Bad in the sense that it started to become increasingly clear that Port Atwood's army hadn't gone in their direction after reaching Baoqui.

Zac was eventually forced to decide whether to take the risk of changing course or keep heading straight ahead. He tried to desperately listen to his gut, or rather his Luck, for any advice of what to do. But his mind was just a confusing mess. In the end, he chose to not risk it and kept the course.

A day later they finally reached Baoqui, but there was no sign of movement anywhere. This was not a surprise though, as half the town was completely obliterated, turned into dozens of massive craters. Somber expressions marred the faces of the group as Zac commanded the disc to land inside the town some distance from the destruction.

Bodies lined the streets, and there were signs of structural damage on the houses still standing. It didn't look like those who had died were warriors though, but rather civilians who were running for their lives. Zac shook his head as the group started walking south, and the group of Valkyries split off to scout the area for clues of their people.

What had transpired started to become increasingly clear as they reached the edge of the town. The town had been conquered by the undead some time ago, leaving no one of its original settlers alive. Then another battle had taken place more recently, where the second party was most likely his own people.

"Battle, pretty intense one," Ogras said with a somber face. "Real undead elites like the ones we fought during the beast waves."

“Our people?” Zac wanted to confirm as they stepped through the decimated wall into the battlefield outside.

“Some,” Ogras eventually said as he pointed at two corpses. “Those two bodies are probably ours judging from their equipment. But most of these bodies died over a week ago, probably when this town fell. They likely became cannon fodder in a surprise attack against our army.”

“At least there are not too many bodies,” Zac said as they walked through the corpses, though he was sick to his stomach seeing over two hundred of his own lying on the ground.

There were over ten thousand corpses in the area, but it was clear that almost all of them were undead. Zac also spotted a few broken Unholy Beacons and over a dozen corpse golems who had fallen protecting them. It had been an intense battle, but one that his people won.

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple,” Ogras said with a shake of his head, not sharing Zac’s optimism. “These are just the ones who didn’t turn into zombies after dying. They all have wounds that are too grisly for them to successfully turn. The true number of casualties is likely far larger. Our people might collect bodies to not bolster the undead ranks, or they might have already been turned and joined our enemies.”

Zac’s heart was felt heavy as they looked through the carnage. Clues that Ogras was correct kept appearing. Broken weapons were everywhere, and they kept finding broken array disks. They even found large pieces of metallic shrapnel, and Zac recognized their origin. They came from the huge cannons that the Ishiate tinkers created.

But that was not the end of the surprises. Large pieces of wooden rubble turned out to be the remnants of multiple creator vessels, though Zac couldn’t understand why his army would take out boats on dry land. Only after a few seconds did they realize that Alea and Ilvere likely summoned them to use the offensive arrays. It was likely the Creator Vessels that were responsible for turning half the town into rubble.

Another large swathe of the battlefield was completely void of corpses, and even all vegetation was gone. It was a zone of death, and an acrid smell entered Zac’s nose as they approached it.

“It’s Alea, she was forced to go all out. We should not enter this area,” Ogras commented with a frown.

“The tracks lead west,” a voice shouted from the distance, coming from one of the Valkyries.

“We’ll head out immediately,” Zac said, urgency burning in his chest.

Until now he had forced himself to believe that everything might be fine, that his people were simply cut off but otherwise unharmed. But after seeing the town full of corpses he couldn’t pretend any longer. Even worse was the knowledge that he would have made it in time to this battle if he left immediately rather than head to the Technocrat Incursion. The battle here had taken place two days ago at the most.

Even his decision to farm out his levels while waiting for his people to consolidate their hold over the Underworld Union felt like a shameful display of selfishness at this moment. He had to admit that his own priorities had somehow been eschewed ever since he entered the underworld.

His first instinct was to blame Smaug and his orchestrations to turn their attention toward the Union, but he knew that he himself was the one to blame in the end. He had become complacent after a series of victories, even though he had only closed some of the weakest incursions around. He had pushed back the closing of the

incursions in favor of his own growth, not considering the constant threat the invaders were to the people of Earth.

The group stayed in Baoqui for less than ten minutes to gain a decent picture of what happened before they once again set out on the flying disk. This time they had no difficulty knowing which way to go since the passage of thousands of people left a clear track to follow. If that wasn't enough there was also a constant line of slain zombies strewn along the path like a trail of breadcrumbs.

The group had been mostly silent while rushing toward Baoqui, but after witnessing the aftermath of the desperate struggle the atmosphere on the disk had turned extremely oppressive. It was like a pressure cooker that threatened to explode at any moment.

The hours passed and they had soon enough flown for a whole day, but no one could sleep since they knew they were closing in on their people. The tracks looked fresh, and they started seeing groups of undead rushing in the same direction, seemingly trying to catch up.

An hour later they finally saw activity on the horizon, but no one in the group looked even a bit happy. The reason was simple. What entered their eyes was a vast battlefield, where a group of people desperately defended against two far larger swarms of enemies.

"Ready yourselves for battle," Zac said with grit teeth as days of accumulated bloodlust started to seep out of every pore of his being.

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**Chapter 356 - Final Stand**

Ilvere roared in defiance as the huge ball belonging to his weapon shuddered with power, and its trajectory suddenly turned impossible to predict. One second the chunk of metal looked as though it was so light that it might as well be a mirage, but the next moment it gave Alea the impression she was gazing upon a towering mountain.

The two opposing impressions kept swapping until they superimposed, making the weapon emit a shocking energy. The weapon slammed into the Corpse Golem that was guarding one of the Unholy Beacons that the undead army wanted to move to the vanguard to empower their assault.

Alea frowned when she saw the undead abomination effortlessly catch the ball in its arms as though it didn't contain a shred of momentum. But the next moment the Corpse Golem exploded, its bodyparts flying out like projectiles in all directions.

The wrecking ball started moving again and slammed into one of the Unholy Beacons with enough force to cause a crack, but it wasn't enough for it to break altogether. But it was just enough to topple it, and when the tower crashed into the ground it released a burst of errant energies that killed the nearby Zombies. A few unlucky undead warriors were killed from getting hit by the remaining bodyparts of the 4-meter tall Golem as well, making Alea shake her head in wonder.

"Not quite there," the demon warrior muttered with annoyance, for some reason not happy even though he had managed to destroy one of the Unholy Beacons.

Alea wanted to rebuke the man for experimenting with the skill he got from Lord Atwood in the middle of the battle, but it clearly produced results. She instead focused

on the sea of zombies ahead. Things were getting desperate, and she had no time to worry too much about others.

The ambush at Baoqui had cost them most of their resources, not to mention the 3000 people who fell in battle. The undead had likely planned on ending it all when they finally reached the town, but they had underestimated just how tough it would be to break the warriors of Port Atwood.

Six days of constant harassment had pushed them all beyond what they thought was possible, but many had risen to the challenge and grown tremendously. Hundreds of people died during the death march, but just as many had gained Dao Seeds that allowed them to unleash twice the destruction as before.

Besides, the undead hadn't expected them to carry eight ships possessing sieging capabilities. Over half of their forces fell to the immediate bombardment by the arrays on the ships. Alea hadn't heard of the Allbright Empire that Lord Atwood got his shipyard from, but their craftsmanship was impeccable. Unfortunately, they had run out of hidden cards by now. The ships had been destroyed, over half of them left behind them the past two days as they were beyond salvage.

The Ishiate cannons were all destroyed as well, and only a third of the tinkers remained alive. The undead learned their lesson after the first time the large brass cannons were unleashed, and they mounted a sneak attack to take most of them out. If it wasn't for one of the mad scientists rushing forward and directly detonating one of the bombs to kill all the attackers, along with himself, they would have lost all of the beastmen.

Alea was running out of poison as well. She better understood the mentality of Lord Atwood after this past week, why he had pushed himself to never leave the battlefield during the beast waves. Because every time you stepped back to rest, someone would have to offer their life in return. Such was the burden of the leader.

Alea only had enough accumulated poison for one or two large battles, but there was no point in worrying about the future when it wasn't even sure that they would even survive the next hour. The army in front of them had appeared out of nowhere, dashing the hope that they finally had killed all of the true undead elites hunting them.

The army consisted of over ten thousand elite zombies, but that wasn't the real problem. There were almost a hundred Corpse Golems and two hundred Corpse Lords, each one of them more powerful than her demonkin warriors. She needed to even the numbers somewhat.

She looked over at the shrouded demon in the distance, and Janos nodded as he closed his eyes. Alea wasted no time as she activated **[Odorless]** and unleashed almost all of her stored up toxins she had concocted to deal with the undead. However, even if she had opened the floodgates to release a tremendous amount of poison didn't look like anything happened, and the undead kept pushing forward.

This was Janos' ultimate skill, creating a massive illusion that kept the world going, apart from one hidden truth. In this case, it was the extremely potent poison that rapidly spread among the undead, unwittingly drilling into their bodies. But the Undead were no fools, and it looked like reality cracked after just a second, exposing the vast clouds of poison that had encompassed a fifth of the army.

Four hooded cultivators standing by the ten Unholy Beacons in the back suddenly floated up into the air as they pointed shriveled fingers at the mists of deadly poison. Alea was shocked to notice that she lost connection to the poison as the four cultivators somehow ragged it up into the air. A huge skull appeared as well, and it sucked up the poison in one deep chomp before disappearing.

Alea grimaced when she saw the mysterious cultivators countering her skill so easily, but the damage was already done to a certain extent. An enormous amount of cosmic energy surged into her body as thousands of zombies and dozens of Corpse Lords toppled over, creating a large hole in the undead army. Of course, most of the energy quickly escaped from her body as she had long reached level 75.

But just as Alea breathed out in relief that her attack was mostly successful a specter that radiated killing intent rose out of the ground in front of her. It was a hooded skeleton, but it wasn't corporeal. It was mostly translucent and seemed to be wrought out of a dark-green Death attuned energy.

The fighters of Port Atwood had encountered spectral combatants before, but this one was completely different from the weak ghosts that were quickly rebuffed with the help of Divine Energy. The whole area turned cold when it appeared, and Alea's instincts screamed of danger.

She didn't even let the thing take a single step before six pitch-black spikes appeared in the air, all of them aiming to impale the ghost as quickly as possible. The ghost moved like a gust toward her, expertly dodging the first three spikes in an instant. But luckily she managed to graze the ghost with the fourth spike, and the tremendous pain the attack elicited made the ghost freeze for an instant.

Alea immediately shot the other two spikes into the chest of the ghost, forcibly enduring the searing pain in her own chest as she received the same damage as the one she inflicted. The ghost was clearly in tremendous pain as well, but it only gazed at her as it forced out a snicker as the dead rose all around her.

The eight translucent spears stabbed into her from all directions before Alea had a chance to react, and she couldn't stop herself from screaming in pain even though not a single drop of blood was spilled. It felt as though her very being was crumbling as her soul was getting ripped apart. She had no way to retaliate or even form a coherent thought as the pain stretched into eternity.

A golden sea suddenly washed over the area, drowning Alea and the wraiths in divine splendor. The eight wraiths were badly wounded by the attack, as thick streams of miasma escaped from their bodies as they endured the life-attuned attack.

"Don't force it, she won't survive," one of the wraiths finally grunted. "We'll collect the body later, the Lord wants it."

The others nodded and shrunk into the ground, fleeing the corrosive effect of the divine ocean. Alea couldn't understand what was happening, still consumed by the inhuman torment of her soul rending. But a warm soothing stream soon entered her body, keeping her fracturing self together for the time being.

Alea opened her eyes and saw a small human holding her hands, continuously infusing her with a warm energy that acted as insulation that kept her mind from dissipating. Around them stood a group of Valkyries who slaughtered any errant zombie that got close, but luckily the poison from earlier had killed almost everything in the vicinity.

"You're... Sui...?" Alea vaguely remembered the name of the purifier who somehow had found their army along with a few hundred warriors three days ago.

Apparently, they were a private army run by one of the towns that formerly stood at the edge of the Dead Zone, but it had long been overrun by the undead. Alea hadn't really had time to get to know them better due to the constant battle, but any assistance was a blessing to their extremely wrung out force.

The small girl in front of her had proven extremely helpful, especially after they figured out that she could reach a terrifying power with the help of the combination of the Valkyrie War Array and the Divine Array. She would be useless against the living,

but she was a true nemesis to the undead. She only lacked the ruthlessness to take full advantage of her gift.

“Your soul is in a terrible state,” Sui said with a pale face, as she had the Valkyries carry Alea away from the front line. “I don’t-“

“I know my situation,” Alea interrupted with a sigh, allowing herself to be moved back to the defensive line.

She felt as weak as a newborn child, barely able to lift her own hand. But she kept a strong face, hoping that the scared soldiers looking in her directions wouldn’t understand how bad it was. Their morale was low enough after their ten-day death march, and she did not want to tack on any further.

The group of specters suddenly appeared around the desperately battling Ilvere, who had been forced to take charge of the whole front line after Alea fell. Her heart was gripped in panic when she saw their appearance, but Ilvere did not look worried. He only released a shrill whistle, and he was immediately pelted with attacks.

But shockingly enough he wasn’t attacked by the undead, but rather their own people. Hundreds of arrows fell where he stood almost blotting out the sky for an instant. Rage started to burn in Alea’s heart as she helplessly remained in the care of Sui.

“Don’t worry,” Sui said. “It’s not what it looks like.”

Only then did Alea realize that the arrows had a golden hue, looking like the arrows of a celestial. They had been imbued with divine energy and didn’t pass through the Wraiths as expected, but rather caused small golden explosions the moment they hit the incorporeal bodies. The wraiths wailed in pain and hurried to

Ilvere was actually not unscathed from the arrows, and a few of the projectiles had embedded themselves in his body. However, Ilvere’s armor was pretty strong and the golden explosions didn’t have any effect on the living, so he only received shallow flesh wounds. He had simply used himself as bait to attack the wraiths, and he was ready to bear the small pain.

The Wraiths had taken some damage from the surprise attack, but unfortunately it wasn’t enough to kill them. Luckily they were at least forced to retreat, and they scurried back to the rear of the undead army with shocking speed.

The retreat of the squad of powerful assassins lessened the pressure on Port Atwood to a great degree, but they were still in desperate straits. The air was filled with screams as one warrior after another fell to the relentless assault of the invaders.

The Corpse Lords were just too strong, and three demons needed to co-operate just to keep one them at bay. The recruits were far worse off, and whole squads had been mercilessly slaughtered the moment the elite undead found an opening in their formations. Alea wanted to help, but she barely could keep herself awake, let alone rejoin the battle.

A wrathful roar suddenly echoed across the battlefield from above, making Alea look up with confusion and hope. A large disk was shooting toward them in the sky, and it seemed to be descending like a meteor. One person standing on top of it wasn’t even patient enough for it to land, and he pushed off from the flying treasure with enough force to cause it to almost crash.

The man shot forward through the air like a bullet, crashing into the sea of undead with earth-shattering force. The shockwave caused the whole battle to stop for a second, as only the strongest managed to keep their footing. The zombies unfortunate enough to have stood close to the impact zone were completely gone, turned into mush at the bottom of the large crater. But the man was completely fine, and Alea could finally confirm her suspicion when he stood up.

Lord Atwood had finally arrived.

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### **Chapter 357 - Adriel**

Lord Atwood wasted no time as a storm of energies started to churn around him, and a palpable sense of dread instinctively entered Alea's heart as an extreme killing intent blanketed the area. She wanted to walk up to him, but her body wouldn't listen, so she could only watch him from afar.

A huge woodsman's axe suddenly appeared above him, and the next moment it swung in an effortless motion, drawing a wide arc in front of Lord Atwood. Alea's brow furrowed, not understanding the meaning of the attack, but the next moment her eyes widened in understanding. An invisible wave of carnage spread out from Lord Atwood, destroying everything in front of him in the blink of an eye.

Only the flanks of the undead army were spared from getting cut into pieces, but the vanguard was utterly decimated, not leaving anything standing. Lord Atwood didn't stop at that point, and he flashed forward with his movement skill, almost taking him out of Alea's vision. Her consciousness was blurring, but she bit her lip to the point that it bled, forcing herself to stay awake to witness the miracle.

The fact that the Young Master and a handful of others jumped down from the flying treasure to take down the leftovers in the flank barely registered in Alea's mind. Her eyes were glued to the broad back of the one she had waited for these past days.

Tens of thousands of elite zombies remained, and they hadn't lost too much of their strength as most of their core combatants stayed in the back. The wraiths also stood there, protected by the encirclement of Unholy Beacons and E-Grade Corpse golems.

But not even a second passed before another, even more powerful, axe appeared above the Lord, this one causing the very air to ignite from its scorching heat. It looked like its swing heralded the end of the world, as a towering inferno ripped across the earth, swallowing the whole Undead Army.

There were no screams or wails, just the deafening sound of the crackling fire. But the wave of destruction ended just as abruptly as it appeared, leaving a scorched ground and pieces of flesh burnt beyond recognition. Only a small handful of elites remained, protected by the circle of Unholy Beacons and the hooded cultivators within.

It looked like they had managed to erect a strong enough defense, but doing so didn't come without cost as two of the hooded cultivators had turned to cinders even though they stood in the middle of the group, and smoke rose another one.

Alea wasn't worried though as she and Sui silently gazed at the destruction in the distance. She knew that this wasn't the limit of Lord Atwood's powers. And as expected the air above him shuddered before it shattered to let out the enormous hand that would bring an end to all resistance.

It looked different compared to the last time Alea saw it. It was at least twice as big as before and covered in dense fractals that resonated with the world itself. Shockingly enough the burnt cinders below turned into fertilizer as tall grass frantically rose from the ground, stretching toward the hand in the sky like children reaching for their parent.

The hand moved so fast it looked like teleportation, almost immediately appearing in the sky above the remaining elites of the undead army. A massive fractal appeared beneath the hand and it caused the area underneath to be subject to a tremendous strain.

Only the largest Corpse Golems were able to stay on their feet, while the others were forced down on their knees. The incorporeal specters were even more impacted it seemed as they shrieked while miasmatic clouds were released from their bodies. They quickly tried to enter the ground to escape, but they were rebuffed somehow. It was as though the planet itself was rejecting them.

The next moment something unbelievable happened. The fractal rippled like a pond of water as an enormous mountain emerged from it, its sharp summit pointing straight down at the undead and their defensive array below.

The mountain didn't look like something created by Cosmic Energy, but rather something solid, something true. It emitted an ancient solidity that spread all the way to where Alea was lying. The mountain kept emerging from the array, and the pressure the undead beneath kept increasing, forcing even the giant Corpse Golems on their knees.

Finally, the mountain hit the defensive array, which at this point shone in with almost blinding light as the ten Unholy Beacons poured out a storm of miasma to reinforce it. The whole area shook from the clash of the two powers, but neither seemed able to gain a foothold. Sui sighed in regret from the side when she saw that the mountain was stopped, and its sharp summit unable to pierce the thick shell protecting their enemies.

However, it was clear that the array was barely holding on, as cracks kept appearing before they quickly were mended with the help of the beacons. One small push was all it would take to crack it open.

The enormous wooden hand looked extremely small as it hovered above the mountain, but it still looked like it wanted to help the mountain descend. It floated down and gave a light tap at the array, but Alea couldn't see what happened next as she was thrown back by an enormous shockwave.

Everything turned white for a second from a burst of pain before she felt the warm sensation of the golden light reappearing, and she arduously opened her eyes to see Sui desperately infuse her with divine energy again. People were climbing up all around them, many sporting some light wounds from the terrifying wave that swept everyone off their feet.

“Wha-“ Alea said with a weak voice.

“It's over,” Sui said with shock in her eyes. “The hand pushed the mountain into the ground. The undead... are all gone. He destroyed them in one fell swoop.”

Alea arduously focused her eyes to see what the purifier meant, and the sight was shocking. The hand was gone, but the mountain and the array in the sky remained. The summit had been pushed at least fifty meters into the ground, and that was after having created an enormous crater where the Unholy Beacons once stood. There was not any sign of the undead who had huddled inside either, but their fate was painfully obvious.

No one moved, some even forgetting to breathe, after seeing the terrifying display in front of them. The air was still a chaotic mess after being subject to both Lord Atwood's towering aura and the terrorizing power of his attacks clashing with the undead's final defense. But one thing was clear.

They had made it.

The huge army full of undead elites had been swept away in less than 20 seconds, leaving a scene of utter devastation. Yet no one cheered or celebrated getting saved. Alea gave a weak sigh as she understood their feelings.

The past days had pushed them all beyond what anyone should be able to endure. They hadn't stopped for more than a few minutes for almost ten days. They had been harassed, pushed, and almost broken by the unrelenting zombies. The people around her only managed to keep standing from pure defiance, no one had the energy to celebrate.

So it was with hollow eyes they silently looked at their leader as he quickly made his way back toward their ranks. His aura reached toward the skies as he passed the sea of corpses he had created, but he restrained it as he hurried to Alea's side. He quickly got down on a knee in front of her, and Alea felt a flurry of emotions in her heart as he looked into his eyes.

"I knew you'd come," Alea smiled before the darkness took her.

"Hm?" Adriel said as his hollow eyes turned toward the distance, his eyes moving away from the enormous crystal in front of him.

He was sitting in his large study that was illuminated by thousands of azure lights, giving it a comfortable sheen of undeath. The moans and wails from a few of the still surviving experiments provided a soothing ambiance as the lich followed the progress of his grand array.

Things were progressing as expected, with only some futile attempts to stop the hordes. But the harassment was of no import, as it only cost them a few million of the newly aligned. It had even turned into a decent grindstone that would hopefully birth a few promising recruits among the unthinking children.

But there were always factors beyond one's control, and the battle he just witnessed through the eyes of his clones was beyond his expectation. The lich king scratched the desiccated skin that formed a thin layer over his skeleton as he considered the implications of what he had just seen.

"What is it, my lord?" the hovering ghost attendant asked with worry.

"I finally saw the top human, I was wondering when he would appear... Interesting," the Lich muttered. "He killed four of my clones in an instant."

"What?!" the ghost said with some shock.

"Well, I still haven't really mastered the skill, they contained only a fraction of my strength," Adriel said without a care. "Still, a very impressive specimen to release such power while still at F-Grade. He would make great material."

"Do we need to change our plans, my lord?" the attendant asked.

"No need Triv, he is saddled with a handful of refugees and is stuck a long way from the fault-lines," Adriel said with a shake of his head. "It's a shame. I found a person with a semi-complete poison constitution. I have a friend who would pay dearly for that body."

"Do you want to send one of the Generals after him?" Triv probed.

"No, they have their tasks. Besides, the humans seem to have figured out what we are doing. They will have to come to me sooner or later in any case if they want to stop the realignment. There's no need for us to go out of our way to look for them," Adriel said as a small smile displayed the blackened teeth in his mouth.

"What about the one who visited us?" the attendant probed.

"Void..." Adriel muttered, some hesitation flashing in his eyes. "Very strong."

It had truly been a surprise to see the native insectoid appearing in his own palace, completely calm as though he was taking a stroll in his own boneyard. But the Lich soon found that the man's confidence wasn't without reason. He was extremely powerful, a top tier progenitor with a higher level than himself. Fighting him outside his own domain would be a risky venture, and killing him inside would not come without a cost.

"Should we agree with his proposal?" the ghost asked as he saw his leader fall into silence.

"No need," Adriel said with a shake of his head, waking up from his stupor.

"His aura... It's from that place though. Is it not better to extend some courtesy and delay the realignment? It shouldn't affect our goal too much," the ghost said.

"It's true, the insectoid is connected to that family, but not as you expect," Adriel said with a small smile. "My teacher found out some more details. His connection is to an exiled bastard who has not been part of the family for tens of thousands of years. He turned to the unorthodox path, so no one in the family will stand up for him. In fact, they have tried to kill him on numerous occasions out of embarrassment."

The ghost nodded in understanding, no longer worried about the implications. That family was a bit troublesome, but it was no problem if the one called The Great Redeemer was long excommunicated. His Lord might even stand to gain a new friend by making things hard for the so-called Redeemer, as the iron-clad rules of the old families were not just for show.

"On another note, Threzz has requested permission to fight the Church. Four of his subsquads have been decimated by them," the attendant added, taking the opportunity to go through the docket now that his master was out of his revelry. He hated being interrupted while watching his crystal, and many had paid dearly for ruining his fun.

"No. Let them prance around for now. Activating the array comes first. But give him three new hordes, and promise him the vanguard when we conquer the entrances," Adriel said.

"Should we not focus on taking control of one of the entrances?" Triv said with confusion. "We are still not in control of a single one, while the Church has three."

"The treasure has yet to mature. It is still absorbing the Origin Energy of this infant planet. There are a few months before the realm closes its doors to protect the treasure as it comes into being. The world will have realigned before then, allowing us to fight with an advantage," Adriel snickered. "The efforts the bodysnatchers are going through now will only benefit us in the end."

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**Chapter 358 - Catharsis**

Zac looked down at the unmoving form of Alea. He had seen her getting attacked by the group of wraiths while he stood on the flying disk, unable to do anything to save her. The feeling of impotence had quickly turned into rage. But his smoldering rage was finally overcome by a sense of panic as he saw her close her eyes in his arms. His mind was a mess, and he didn't know what to do.

"Alea? Alea!" he said with horror, before quickly turning to Sui. "Can you heal her?"

Zac didn't understand why Alea and Sui were together, as she was on the other side of the Dead Zone the last time he saw her. But right now wasn't the time to ask.

"She... Her soul is wounded, almost to the point of crumbling altogether," Sui said, not daring to meet Zac's burning gaze. "It's beyond my power to heal something like this. I am sorry."

Zac took a deep breath to calm down and collect his thoughts. He knew just how terrible wounds to the soul was. He remembered the small wound he got when he tried to clash with the Splinter of Oblivion. It had almost killed him, and that was nothing compared to the soul failing altogether. But he refused to give up like that.

"Can you keep her stable for now?" Zac asked.

"I... My power is limited..." Sui hesitantly said.

Zac immediately took out most of his Divine Crystals, all of them E-Grade. The miasmic haze in the area was immediately pushed away, replaced with a refreshing atmosphere. Even the furrowed brows of the unconscious Alea smoothed out slightly, indicating that the crystals helped a bit at least.

"How is she?" a voice asked from behind, and Zac looked over to see Ogras standing behind him, the metal casing around his missing arm taken off, allowing a large tentacle shadow slither around the area.

"Her soul's wounded, it's bad," Zac sighed.

"Shit," Ogras spat and looked up in the distance. "I'll go kill some dead things in the rear. You should send her back on the disk. Perhaps the blue one can get his hands on something to salvage the situation."

Zac perked up at the idea and immediately called for his treasure. It had essentially crashed into the ground after he jumped off it, but it was sturdy enough to take a hit or two. All the passengers were fine as well since all of them were powerful enough to easily jump off in time.

He wouldn't need the disk for the time being since he would have to lead the army back to the closest Teleporter to make sure there were no more losses. He quickly broke his connection to the disk after it arrived and called over the squad of Valkyries who arrived with him.

"Escort Sui and Alea back to Port Atwood as quickly as possible. Have Calrin get his hands on treasures that would help heal or at least stabilize her soul," Zac said.

He knew that it was far from certain that the Sky Gnome would be able to get his hands on a treasure that could heal a badly wounded soul. Healing the soul was far more complicated than healing a broken body, and the requirements on the pill were on another level entirely. There was one such item among the treasures Yrial had inside the trial, but he wouldn't be able to get back inside for a decade.

The lotus in his cultivation cave would perhaps be able to help as well, but it was still just a sapling and didn't generate any energy so far. It would be years before it grew to sufficient size, even if it was constantly nurtured by the Cosmic Water and the Nexus Vein.

"Wait, my people," Sui hesitantly said.

"I will clean out the undead and allow everyone to rest before returning to Port Atwood. We'll join you in a few days," Zac said before nodding at the Valkyries.

They immediately moved the Divine Crystals to form a bed on the desk, and gingerly placed Alea on top of them. Sui hesitated for a bit before she stepped on top of the disk as well.

"It seems I keep owing you more and more," Zac said with a tired smile as he looked at her.

“This is just what I should do, you do not owe me anything,” Sui hurriedly said as she started

“Wait,” a voice suddenly echoed from behind, and Zac turned over to see Tylia hurrying over.

Zac’s eyes lit up when he saw the Tal-Eladar. He had forgotten that she wasn’t a beast tamer like most of the people in her clan, but rather a healer. She differed from Sui who had a purifying class that was especially adept at healing Death-attuned wounds though. She was actually closer to his own attunement, having a class related to nature.

But even importantly, she had already evolved to E-Grade, and her means should be superior to Sui’s.

“Can you help her?” Zac hurriedly asked as he indicated the Valkyries to not set out just yet.

Tylia sat down next to Sui and closed her eyes while her hand started to radiate a green light while touching Alea’s forehead. The small purifier gawked at the unfamiliar form of the Tal-Eladar, but she didn’t say anything. Zac didn’t even dare to breathe loudly as Tylia performed her inspection, but his heart started to rattle when he saw her frown. A few seconds later she removed her hand with a shake of her head.

“I cannot heal her either I am afraid. I can only help keep the pieces of her mind together,” Tylia explained.

“Is there nothing that can be done?” Zac desperately asked.

Tylia seemed to consider the question before a few seconds before answering.

“Well, luckily she’s only F-Grade, so her soul is relatively small. It would be much harder if she had evolved already. A D-Grade healer should be able to slowly piece together her soul. A healing treasure that could mend souls would be even better,” Tylia said. “It’s just...”

“It’s just what?” Zac pressed.

“I am not sure she’ll even survive the trip back to Port Atwood. And even if we manage to keep her stable during the trip, then what? A treasure that can mend a fractured soul is not something you can get through normal channels,” Tylia said.

“Please do what you can,” Zac said with grit teeth. “If you can’t find a means to heal her, try to stabilize her condition at least through any means necessary. I’ll figure out a way to get a healer or a treasure.”

Zac turned to the squad captain among the Valkyries who would take them back, and immediately transferred 200 million Nexus Coins to her. The woman’s eyes widened in shock, but she quickly understood that it was to make sure Calrin had the resources to buy a treasure if it popped up. Zac nodded to the squad captain, who controlled the disk to fly away at top speed.

“Die!” a sudden shriek erupted from just a few meters away, and Zac looked over with confusion.

A ghoul that was just skin of bones were rushing toward him with a sword in hand, his eyes radiating endless madness and killing intent.

Zac frowned, unsure how an undead was able to make it all the way to the center of the army. His first instinct was that the undead was an assassin, but the ghoul seemed frail enough to topple over from a gust of wind. Zac’s danger sense was also completely unresponsive. Still, just seeing an undead made his rage flare up again, and he immediately took out his axe again.

“Wang Fang!” another voice shouted from nearby. “Stop!”

The name sounded vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place it as he swung down his axe, its range increased with a fractal blade from [Chop]. The ghoul shrieked as he tried to defend from the defending strike, but he was completely helpless and was immediately bisected from the attack.

A trickle of Cosmic Energy entered Zac's body, making him shocked how low leveled the undead assassin was. It even doused his reignited anger a bit, replacing it with confusion.

"Ai," the voice from earlier exclaimed, as a young Asian man ran up to the ghost. "You fool."

"What now?" Zac muttered in annoyance as he looked at the man running toward him.

"Wang Fang wasn't a saint, but you did not need to kill him," the man sighed. "He was ill, both in body and mind."

Zac blankly looked back and forth between the zombie and the man, until he finally spotted a familiar flask attached to the zombie's belt. Only then did things click in his mind. Wang Fang, the man who had snatched his flask of Cosmic Water in the Dead Zone.

He didn't know what to think when he looked down at the malnourished form of Wang Fang. Zac had truthfully thought that the man would have died long ago from Cosmic Water Poisoning, but he had somehow held on until now. From the rage in his still-open eyes Zac could only assume that the man had already figured out his real identity as well.

Zac shook his head in bemusement before turning to the man who had tried to stop him. He didn't recognize him and curiously enough he didn't wear the standard gear of the Atwood Army either. The young man wore a similar battle-gear as himself, though the arms of his green robe was a lot wider.

But the most striking thing about him was the countless scars on his face and sloppily mended tears in his clothes. His state was even more wretched compared to Zac's before he was able to improve his race and remove most of his scars. This was clearly someone who had lived in constant battle since the integration, though his power was a bit above average at best.

"Just who are you?" the man asked with a frown. "What gives you the right to execute one of my citizens and send away the only Purifier when we're in the middle of a sea of the undead?"

"I am Zachary Atwood," Zac simply answered. "And her skills were needed to keep Alea alive."

The man froze when hearing Zac's response before he calmed down with two deep breaths.

"Lady Alea has saved quite a few lives, perhaps more so than anyone else here. It's good that Sui's helping her," he finally said. "I am sorry for my response, we have many wounded and I lashed out. I am Ling Tian, and it is an honor to meet you."

"Ling Tian?" Zac repeated with surprise. "The Ling Tian of Eastern Hills?"

"Yes, have we met before?" Ling Tian asked with confusion.

"No, but I passed through your town once while traversing the Dead Zone. I heard good things. Do you know John from your town? I forgot his last name," Zac asked, feeling the world was pretty small after all.

"Yes, he's here. He's still defending our rear," Ling Tian nodded. "Thanks to your intervention the main threat is dealt with, and Lord Ilvere is rounding up the

stragglers. But there are still some of the weaker undead harassing us from behind. Normally they wouldn't be a problem, but our people are wrung dry."

"How many zombies are there behind us?" Zac asked.

"Hard to say, there were a million at the start. Your army killed hundreds of thousands, but the undead have also gotten reinforcements. I'd say there's three hundred thousand of them remaining unless there are more in hiding," The young man said after thinking it over.

"Not too many..." Zac mumbled before looking up at Ling Tian. "We'll destroy that horde before giving the people here a well-deserved rest. How's the stock of healing pills and food?"

"Destroy?" Ling Tian blurted in shock. "That's a sea of zombies over there!"

"The pills?" Zac only repeated.

"We ran out two days ago after the battle at Baoqui," Ling Tian sighed.

Zac nodded and threw Ling Tian a Cosmos Sack.

"Could you do me a favor? Distribute the pills in this sack to help our wounded. I'll go help my friend with the Zombies," Zac said and stood up.

"Wait, I can help as well! I can still fight!" Ling Tian said, looking up from the Cosmos Sack in his grasp.

"No need. Healing our people is the most important," Zac said with a shake of his head before some anger flashed in his eyes. "Besides, I am still pretty pissed off. I need the targets for myself."

Unbridled bloodlust started to seep from Zac's whole body as he spoke, blanketing the area. Ling Tian took a step back in shock, and even his own people looked over at him with fear in their eyes.

It was true what he said. He had kept it together as best he could, but seeing Alea's pitiful state had ignited a furious fire in his heart that threatened to consume him. If he didn't get an outlet for this wrath soon he felt he would literally explode. So he wasted no more time before rushing over to the rear, where a thick sea of darkness had created a line of demarcation that the zombies were unable to pass.

Any Zombie foolish enough to enter the sea of shadows was immediately stabbed by multiple shadow spears, giving the defenders a rest from their desperate defense. But Zac had no intention to play it safe, so he simply leaped over the large shadow and landed in the middle of the elite zombie horde with a crash.

The rotting zombies shrieked and immediately threw themselves at him with reckless abandon. Teeth and claws tried to rip him to pieces, and Zac let them try their best as he closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

He didn't know who he was angry at. Was it himself, for delaying the rescue? At the Undead for pushing his people to such a pitiful state? Or the System that set the stage these blood baths just for the off-chance that someone worthwhile would rise from the mountain of corpses? He had no answer, but then again he hadn't jumped into a sea of zombies in search of answers.

He was looking for catharsis.

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**Chapter 359 - Evil Stars**

Zac wasn't actually in great condition after unleashing his three strongest attacks in short succession. He had used almost two thirds of his Cosmic Energy and his body hurt all over. The upgraded **[Nature's Punishment]** was responsible for the largest part of the cost, whereas **[Deforestation]** was the source of the strain.

He had barely managed to heal up his body while he traveled on the Flying Treasure, and using the first two swings of **[Deforestation]** had caused a few of his old wounds to open up again. But with his massive Vitality he would sooner or later get back in shape, and the pain wasn't something that would hinder him in dealing with some weak Zombies.

The fact that **[Nature's Punishment]** had reached Peak mastery had shocked him somewhat. It was the second skill to reach the apex, and Zac would have thought that he would evolve **[Loamwalker]** or **[Axe Mastery]** before he pushed that skill to peak mastery. He did use his movement skill almost constantly in his human form, whereas he had barely used **[Nature's Punishment]** more than ten times.

Truthfully he barely remembered jumping off from the Flying treasure. His wrath pushed through the roof upon seeing his significantly smaller army getting harassed, and yet it managed to increase even further when he saw Alea getting ambushed. He had barely managed to restrain himself from unleashing the third strike of **[Deforestation]** in his fury, instead opting to finish the elites with **[Nature's Punishment]**.

Thinking about a skill reaching peak mastery made Zac remember that he hadn't actually tested **[Chop]** and its extra blade. So Zac finally started to curtail his churning emotions even though he just wanted to go crazy, and instead opted to see the capabilities of the skill. So he summoned **[Chop]** and grew a five-meter blade to clear out the area around him. The next moment the blade detached, and started to hover by him like a silent sentinel.

The zombies didn't care in the slightest about their fallen brethren, and they unhesitantly stepped over their corpses to get to the source of the life force. This forced Zac to keep summoning new blades and shoot them off into the zombie horde, each blade causing a tunnel of carnage before it ran out of steam. But he mainly focused on the permanent blade, and he was currently using it to constantly sweep the zombies that were lucky enough to survive the thinning out of his other blades.

He quickly realized that he could both choose to control the fractal edge by splitting his attention or to simply let it float in his proximity and attack any enemy that got close. His limit was roughly fifty-meters, and it was almost as quick as the blades he shot out like projectiles. If he wanted to he could have it spin around him at a rapid pace, killing anything that got too close.

But Zac eventually let it guard his back autonomously as he kept pushing through the Zombie horde. He didn't want to rely on the flying blade alone, as the battle caused his rage to resurface. He knew it was to a large part the splinter manipulating him, but he didn't care at the moment. He let the rage flow through him as he became a tool of slaughter.

Constant roars of the zombies echoed across the area as Zac flashed around with **[Loamwalker]**. Any time he appeared he would release a couple of blades with **[Chop]**, each attack clearing out over a hundred Zombies. He wouldn't immediately leave though, but instead launch a furious assault with **[Verun's Bite]** at melee range at all the surviving zombies in the area.

He was long covered in bile and rotten flesh, but he didn't care. He just kept swinging his axe, not thinking, not feeling. He didn't know how long he fought or how

many Zombies he killed, but he finally stumbled, realizing he was running dangerously low on Cosmic Energy.

“You once asked me to remind you that you were becoming a bit murderous. I think this would count. Got it out of your system?” a voice reached him from the side when he finally slowed down his rampage.

Zac blinked and took a look around, and found that Ogras had appeared amongst a clump of shadows. There were still Zombies around, but it could no longer be called a horde. There were rather islands of zombies in a sea of destroyed bodies, with perhaps 10% of the original number remaining.

“I did all this?” Zac muttered with some confusion.

“Don’t flatter yourself. We took care of more than half of them while you went on your rampage,” Ogras snorted. “But you seemed disinclined to cooperate so we stayed out of your path.”

“Let the others deal with the remainders. Some people still have some fight left, and these things give a decent amount of Cosmic Energy and money for the recruits. Don’t hog it all for yourself,” Ogras said with a smile.

Just as Ogras spoke he spotted a familiar figure effortlessly fighting against a clump of a few hundred undead. Kenzie was killing them at an impressive speed as she shot out various skills at a rapid pace. Each skill seemed to be quite basic and something that cost next to no Cosmic Energy, yet the elite zombies kept falling to never stand up again. At her current pace she would need less than a minute to clear the pack.

“It’s quite odd,” Ogras muttered as he followed Zac’s gaze.

“What is?” Zac asked, afraid that the perceptive demon had found a clue of Jeeves.

“It’s hard to explain,” the demon hesitantly said. “But her fighting style is odd.”

“Odd how?” Zac asked as he looked at his sister downing one zombie after another.

It was efficient, but nothing too impressive to be honest. He would personally be able to turn that whole pack to goop with two swings of his axe.

“Don’t you see the flow? She is never in danger. It almost looks like the undead are cooperating with her, trying to get themselves killed,” Ogras said with some incredulity.

Zac initially didn’t understand what Ogras was talking about, but he almost immediately got an explanation of what the demon meant. While Kenzie was focusing on the zombies ahead of her with a flurry of attacks two more undead tried to rush her from behind. She didn’t even look back though, and carelessly waved her hand above her head, shooting out two small fireballs toward them.

The aim of the first spell was perfect and it hit one of the zombies straight in its throat, but the other one was unfortunately aimed toward the ground, and wouldn’t be able to do any damage. But just as Zac considered throwing a rock to kill the other attacker something shocking happened.

The first zombie fell backward from the attack, felling the second one who was a few steps behind. Both the undead fell down on the ground, and the unharmed zombie coincidentally fell into a position where the second fireball hit it straight in its head. The two struggled for a while, but Zac could sense that the fireballs were infused with the Seed of Tinder, and there was no way they would survive.

The remaining zombies ahead were soon killed by Kenzie’s real attacks, and she moved on without giving the two zombies behind a single look. It all looked like a great

coincidence things worked out, but Zac knew better than to believe that. It was no doubt Jeeves who helped her out.

At least he hoped that was all it did. If it was actually taking control of her it was a whole different issue. It was something that had bothered him ever since they fought the cyborg. Jeeves and whatever was planted inside the foreman might have come from the same people, and they had no idea if there were some failsafes in the AI that would turn Kenzie into a monster.

“Do you see what I mean?” Ogras said as he slowly shook his head, clearly having a hard time believing what he just witnessed. “That girl is another type of monster. What kind of scary woman was your mom to give birth to evil stars like the two of you?”

“Well, Kenzie was always the smart one,” Zac coughed, not sure how he would lie his way out of that one. “I guess she got pretty good at fighting zombies during her time at the Dead Zone.”

Kenzie noticed the attention soon enough and stopped her onslaught, instead opting to walk over to the two.

“Are you ok?” she said with worry in her eyes. “I’m sure Alea will be fine. I bet she will be back on her feet by the time we get back to Port Atwood with these people.”

“I’m ok,” Zac smiled, but he wasn’t sure how he really felt.

His rage had subsided after exhausting himself against the zombies, but he was choked up by a feeling of impotency. There were too many things to do, and it felt like he was spread so thin that he would fall apart. Worse yet was that his people kept dying and there wasn’t much he could do about it.

“How are the rest?” Zac finally asked, even though he was afraid of the answer. “How many did we lose?”

“Half,” Ogras sighed. “Just above half of the people who set out from Port Atwood are still alive. Most of the casualties happened two days ago, but there were constant losses during their escape.”

“Half,” Zac numbly repeated.

“The good news is that our fighting capabilities haven’t decreased nearly as much,” Ogras said. “Most of the casualties were the recruits and the non-combat classes. Only 12 of your Valkyries and 17 of the demon warriors died. And you know that the most effective way to get stronger is by pushing oneself beyond one’s limits. The survivors can no longer be considered recruits, they are a true army now.”

“Still,” Zac sighed. “Thousands of our people have died. And for what? The Undead Empire didn’t even lose a general, and their horde is currently on its way to finishing the array.”

“People fall against the invaders every minute all around the globe,” Kenzie said with a shake of her head. “We can’t let it weigh us down. We do what we can and the cards will fall where they will. It’s not your duty to save the world alone, we’re all in this together.”

Zac looked with surprise at his sister, not expecting such a viewpoint from her. He would have thought she would be even more broken up about it, as many of those who fell were people that Kenzie socialized with during her stay at the Academy. Meanwhile Zac hadn’t even met most of them.

But he soon realized that while Kenzie hadn’t battled nearly as much as himself she might have lost even more. He knew she had been forced to witness one person after another dying around her. First the Tutorial where less than half survived, then being dropped off right next to the Dead Zone.

She never spoke much about her time there, but her occasional comments had pictured a pretty bleak existence even before that old dog started to lust after her. Most of the friends she had made the last year had already died. Zac was much better off in that regard. He hadn't really lost anything so far, which might be why these deaths felt so heavy on his shoulders.

"We'll let everyone rest for 8 hours," Zac said, changing the heavy subject. "After that we'll change course and head for Erdenet."

The army of Port Atwood hadn't known about the much closer teleportation station owned by the Sino-Indian Alliance, and they were currently heading for an array that was weeks away. Zac couldn't spend that much time protecting the army, so he would change course. The return trip would still take over twice as long as it did while he zapped here on his flying treasure.

He didn't have the time to divert his attention too long, and he needed to get back to closing Incursions. Whittling down millions of low-leveled zombies was a waste of his time, and his strength was better spent on putting out the other fires on Earth that others were unable to deal with.

Ogras and Zac went back to the army, but Kenzie wanted to help out with cleaning out the remaining undead in the area so she stuck around. When the Port Atwood Army heard that they finally would be able to rest most of them simply crumbled down on the cold ground, not even bothering to take out anything to sleep on.

In just seconds snores echoed across the area, while a small group kept watch in all directions. Normally there would also be a group responsible for looting the army, but the zombies carried nothing of value. Zac and Ogras stayed in the middle of the army, each taking out a few crystals to regain their spent Cosmic Energy as quickly as possible.

"That was in the nick of time," a rough voice came from close-by, and Zac opened his eyes to see Ilvere and Janos walk over.

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**Chapter 360 - Dangers of Technology**

Both Ilvere and Janos sported a new collection of scars, but it looked like both of them would be fine after some rest.

"Not quick enough to prevent Alea from being wounded," Zac sighed after hearing what Ilvere said.

"That lass is strong, I believe she will be able to overcome this," Ilvere said as he thumped down on the ground in front of Zac and Ogras.

Zac only nodded, though he knew that the situation, unfortunately, wasn't that easy. Being strong-willed wasn't enough to survive a fractured soul.

"Just what happened here?" Zac asked.

Ilvere grimaced as he recounted what the group had encountered since the teleporters went dark. Zac frowned when he heard how arduous their past days had been, and pangs of guilt once again rose in his heart. He knew that he couldn't be responsible for all ills of the world, but he still felt that he was somehow to blame.

“I guess we’re lucky we weren’t deemed important enough for one of the true generals to act,” Ilvere said with a depreciating smile. “Otherwise we would never have made it this far. They have a lot of strong guys in their ranks.”

“It’s still amazing you managed to hold on this long,” Zac said with genuine appreciation.

“The lass was a large factor in our survival, as was the barkeep,” Ilvere said.

“The Barkeep? Ryan?” Zac asked with confusion.

“That boy is a real hero.”

Zac blankly looked at Ilvere for a few seconds, having great trouble reconciling the young man who had been hiding out in his apartment with the epithet ‘Hero’. Did the Barkeep class possess some hidden and amazing attacks against the undead? Or did it allow him to become the fabled drunken fist?

“We have been constantly fighting without stopping for over a week. Some people we had to carry for a while since they were truly out of energy, but we normally would have no way of marching for 9 days without sleep. Luckily his brews helped us stay conscious up till now. Of course, many will be in a weak state for a while,” Ilvere explained.

“That’s okay,” Zac nodded. “We should be fine unless the Lich King himself comes knocking.”

The two demon generals soon excused themselves though, as they desperately needed to sleep as well. They were amongst those who hadn’t slept a wink for the whole duration, and they had always stayed in the frontlines to keep their people safe. Zac and Ogras didn’t speak much either, instead opting to recuperate in case another wave of attackers arrived.

Thankfully they were completely unaccosted, and the army set out without trouble 8 hours later. A lot of people were sporting various degrees of wounds and traces of exertion on their faces, but they no longer seemed like zombies themselves. Between the healing pills Zac brought and proper rest they were in far better shape compared to before.

The army kept the highest pace they could through the wildlands, but there was no way such a large group could move as quickly as Zac was able to proceed on his own. So he spent his time going back and forth around the army, killing anything that might prove a threat to them. They had already lost so much, so he didn’t want to lose a single man on the final stretch of their return.

Thankfully it quickly became clear that the Undead had given up on taking out his army, as Zac couldn’t even find the shadows of a single elite undead in the vicinity. There were still a few zombies and quite a few beasts, but nothing that indicated an army in the area.

Zac could only guess that some of the ghost scouts had seen the final battle, and the generals felt the price was too high to keep targeting them. Besides, the death march over the past 10 days had created quite some distance between themselves and the three main hordes.

Since there was no immediate threat he could relax somewhat, and he took the chance to figure out various things. His first idea to save time was to find a town, or at least the ruins of one, to see if he could gain control of it to buy a teleportation array.

Unfortunately there was no response after finding three abandoned towns, and he wasn’t able to find a populated one either. This whole area seemed to be made from former tundra, either from eastern Russia or Mongolia, and there were barely any people in these regions even before the integration. Now with strong beasts walking

the plains it was no surprise that the few places of civilization he found were long deserted.

After a day's travel it started to become increasingly clear that they might just have to walk the whole way back, but that didn't mean that they couldn't utilize their time efficiently. So Zac took his sister some distance away from the army, and after looking around placed down a few array disks to isolate themselves from prying eyes.

"What's going on?" Kenzie asked with interest when she saw how careful Zac was.

"Here," Zac said as he took out a few of the Technocrat items. "Are these of any benefit to Jeeves?"

He had taken out one of the scout drones and one of the laser weapons that had been attached to a battle droid. Kenzie gingerly picked up the two items and curiously looked at them. Zac was about to explain what they were when a red light shot out of Kenzie's eye and quickly enveloped the two items.

"Wha-" Zac exclaimed as he took a step back.

"Pretty cool, right?" Kenzie said with a wide smile.

"You looked like a cyborg just now," Zac said with a stern face. "What's going on?"

"Well, you told me to avoid showing off my skills yesterday, right?" Kenzie said with a shrug. "So we have been trying to figure out ways to make Jeeves abilities to look more like normal skills."

His sister was referring to the fact that he warned her of relying on her AI too much. Her performance against the left-over zombies had been a bit too eye-catching, and people had started to talk. Luckily his own power was enough to justify Kenzie's skills for most people, as they assumed he had given her various treasures and help. But he still didn't want to take any risks where the secret about Jeeves would leak.

Using a beam that shot out of her eye to scan items felt pretty damn far away from the goal of staying incognito, so he didn't understand what she meant. She had looked like a robot when the red light exited her pupil. But Zac realized on second thought that he had actually sensed a bit of Cosmic Energy in the ray, something that never was the case with technology.

But Zac didn't have time to ask how she made that happen, as the drone suddenly started to hover above Kenzie's hand.

"Wow, so cool," Kenzie said as the small drone made a few turns around her.

"Is it you controlling it?" Zac asked.

"Yeah, or well, it's Jeeves who controls it," Kenzie said. "Do you have more of these?"

"Yeah, a whole lot of them. What are you pla-" Zac said, but his voice got stuck in his throat.

The drone started to disintegrate, turning into lights as they entered Kenzie's forehead. In just a second it was completely gone, not even leaving a speck of dust behind.

"Jeeves ate it," Kenzie explained, though the comment felt a bit superfluous. "It seems he gets smarter the more types of technology he eats. Do you have more stuff?"

"I do, but this doesn't feel safe," Zac asked with some hesitation.

Jeeves was probably stolen technology from Firmament's Edge, and feeding it to make it stronger came with very real risks. It was not like Jeeves followed the Three

Laws of Robotics. The AI might turn against Kenzie when it was strong enough, killing her before returning to its creators.

“I know what you are thinking, but I think we are bound for life,” Kenzie said after some hesitation. “We are fused in a way, my soul gives it life. If I die Jeeves will cease to exist. But perhaps the only way to know how he works for sure is finding mom.”

Zac slowly nodded, but he couldn't help but have a bad feeling in his heart. He could only hope there would be some answers inside the Mystic Realm since there was no way that place had no connection to Leandra. He handed over part of the things he looted from the Technocrat Incursion for Kenzie to go through in the end. He also made sure that she wouldn't absorb things that might be crucial in operating the large forges or the mechas.

Unfortunately it seemed that he had made a mistake in not looting the corpses of the Technocrat Incursion. According to Kenzie's preliminary findings it seemed that a lot of the technology relied on subneural chips to act as interfaces between the Technocrat's brains and the drones and such.

Kenzie would still be able to control the items with the help of Jeeves, but it would be difficult for others to handle Technocrat technology in the short run. Perhaps they could refit some things to be controlled by normal computers instead, as implanting chipsets into one's brain seemed like the kind of modifications the System frowned upon.

After handing over the Technocrat items to his sister he resumed his vigil around the army. Ogras sometimes joined him, and they mostly discussed their next step after dropping off the army at a usable Teleportation Array.

“What do you think, can I take him down?” Zac asked during one of their discussions.

“Hm... It would help if we could fight his top general,” Ogras mused, understanding that Zac was referring to the Lich King. “Seeing his strength would give us a hint of the power of the Lich himself. But truthfully...”

“What?” Zac probed as the demon trailed off.

“You have accumulated far more power than is the norm for an F-Grade, and taking down most Incursions will be easy,” Ogras said. “But the Undead Empire is endlessly vast, and we don't know their means. You will not only be fighting a true undead elite, but also his army and defensive arrays. There is no way he'll leave the safety of his base as things stand. They can just wait it out until they kill this planet.”

“So you think I need to evolve first?” Zac sighed.

“Well, at least go to the tower and get that title. We might also find other useful items there that will help us,” Ogras said, once again bringing up the Tower of Eternity.

“The tower?” Zac frowned. “There is no time for that. Honestly, I'm thinking of skipping going altogether and instead push for as quick an evolution as possible.”

“What? No!” Ogras shouted. “Don't be crazy! Remember, getting the title is not the only reason we're going. You're supposed to find a patron force as well, in case The Great Redeemer finds his way here.”

“The terraforming might be completed any day now. I can't gallivant off-planet for weeks while our planet is collapsing!”

“Visiting the tower does not take that long,” the demon said with a roll of his eyes.

“How long does it take then?” Zac asked with confusion.

He had already heard that there were 81 known floors, and Ogras had once divulged that he was stuck on a floor for a month before passing it.

“Between one day and a year,” Ogras said.

“A YEAR?!” Zac shouted. “There’s no way we have time for that!”

“Just listen,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. “The tower itself only takes one day at the most. But you are not transported directly to the Tower.”

“What?” Zac asked with confusion.

Zac hadn’t really delved into the subject of the Tower of Eternity before, as he had expected Ogras would go over it before they set out. But it seemed it was time to get a better picture of how that place worked.

“You get teleported to the Base Town. Or at least the Base Town of your sector,” Ogras said. “It is a huge town that extends around the tower itself. After using the token you will be able to stay a year at the longest, though you can leave early. The tower itself takes up to 99 days, but it is in a special space, so only one day will pass in real time.”

“So we could be back just one day after activating the tokens?” Zac asked with intrigue.

“Yes, but we should stay longer if time allows it. Entering the tower itself can only count as half the benefit of that place.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 361 - An Overdue Meeting**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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“What’s the point of delaying the stay?” Zac asked with a frown.

“There are all kinds of reasons. The Tower of Eternity is the gathering place of young elites and a way for forces who would never be able to contact each other to interact. It’s a great opportunity for trading or making connections. Some of the larger forces have a permanent presence there, hosting auctions or the like,” Ogras explained with excitement glimmering in his eyes.

“Auctions?” Zac said, his eyes lighting up. “You think we might be able to find a soul-mending treasure for sale?”

“Perhaps,” Ogras said with hesitation. “But you should know we’re just country bumpkins compared to most people that are there, and there are no restrictions on the wealth they bring. Some bring tens of billions in spending money, and soul-mending treasures are always in demand. I brought a billion nexus coins I got from my grandpa last time, yet I was only a small fish over there.”

Zac frowned in realization. It was true that his net worth was a few billion even excluding the shipyard and the repository, but a lot of it came from the mountain of gear that he looted from Rydel and the hunt. If he easily could convert all that to real money he would have long done so.

There was a significant pile of Nexus Crystals accumulated from the mining operations, but that would make up less than a Billion Nexus Coins even if he sold it all at Calrin’s. A C-grade powerhouse might make more than Zac’s whole net worth in a

day or two from exploring a Mystic Realm. So the financial prowess of old established forces was something that Zac couldn't even dream of matching up against.

He remembered how Average offered a Billion Nexus Coins just for Zac to back off and let him fight the Star Ox. If he encountered such a scion who wanted the soul mending for himself there was no way he could compete. Zac suddenly felt quite impoverished for the first time in a long while.

"Don't look so glum," Ogras snorted. "We'll figure something out. Besides, auctions are not only about spending strength. If we gather enough funds to seriously overspend we'll most likely win the treasure in an auction. Even most rich scions would stop at a certain point unless they really need the item, as they would look like wasteful idiots who are only good at spending their parent's money otherwise."

"Can we rob people over there?" Zac suddenly asked. "In case we get outbid."

He didn't relish the idea of turning to robbery, but if it came down to it some thievery was nothing compared to what he had already done. If snatching a Cosmos Sack would save his people's lives, then he would do so. Of course, stealing was the last possible solution if they truly ran out of options.

"Rob people?" Ogras said as his eyes widened, clearly not liking Zac's idea. "Don't even think about it. There's technically no laws over there, but it's very uncommon for daylight robbery to take place."

"Why not? A bunch of rich targets from another side of the cosmos. It seems like a pretty good place to rob someone," Zac said with confusion. "Chances are you'll never see them again afterward."

"It's not that easy. The Ruthless Heavens will restrict you if you attack someone," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "You can't just snatch the Cosmos Sack and disappear, teleporting out will get a one minute delay. I've heard that even a quest might be created to take you down, depending on what you did. Besides, there's the issue of treasures."

"What do you mean?" Zac frowned.

It sounded like the System didn't directly stop you from robbing people, but you needed the strength to survive the ordeal. It was almost like a quest for the robber as well. You can rob someone, but you needed to survive for a minute to keep your spoils.

"The Ruthless Heavens restricts what treasures you can bring to the Tower of Eternity," Ogras explained.

"Like the hunt?" Zac asked with a frown, not wanting to leave behind all his stuff again.

"Not exactly. You can bring as many items as you want, but defensive and offensive treasures are limited to E-Grade. Raw materials and other types of treasures can be D-Grade, likely since the Ruthless Heavens wants to give young elites a chance to trade valuable items that can help them grow," Ogras said.

"So what's the problem then?" Zac asked. "I already have E-Grade defensive gear and an E-Grade Spirit Tool Weapon."

"Yes, but both are at low stage," Ogras snorted. "Made for Peak F-Grade warriors and the recently evolved. But what if someone takes out a peak E-Grade defensive treasure to block your attack, then a peak E-Grade offensive array to attack you. Mind you, the [Void Ball] you threw at the Technocrat monstrosity was a High E-Grade item, not peak."

Zac frowned, finally understanding what Ogras was getting at. If some rich guy snatched the soul healing treasure out from under his nose it was also possible that he brought some extremely strong defenses, since he was already wealthy.

“How is that fair?” Zac muttered with annoyance. “So some rich guy can just rip through the tower with the help of his family’s wealth? Just throw out thousands of offensive arrays at everything around him?”

“Having a rich family or strong friends is a strength in of itself,” Ogras smiled. “The Multiverse was never fair, and neither is the Ruthless Heavens. Just look at yourself with all your Progenitor titles or the other Earthlings with their Tutorial title, how is that fair? But the tower tests potential in the end, and external strength gets more and more restricted the further up the tower you progress.”

“But those restrictions don’t apply to the town outside?” Zac asked, understanding what the demon was getting at.

“Exactly,” Ogras nodded. “That’s why there’s so little violence outside apart from the occasional village idiot who doesn’t understand the immensity of the heavens and earth. No one knows what hidden tricks the other people are carrying around. Starting a fight might kill you, even if you’re the young master of a large clan.”

“Okay, you’ve sold me,” Zac finally said with a nod. “We’re heading to the tower as soon as we’re ready. I just want to reach the peak of E-Grade in my second class to get the quests, and we need to figure out the Dao Funnel as well.”

“Agreed,” Ogras nodded. “But we’re truthfully running out of time. We can only delay these hordes from completing the Terraforming Array for so long. We will probably need a week or two in the tower to accomplish all our goals, so we can’t just go at the last minute either.”

“I know,” Zac sighed, all too aware of the constraint of times.

Where was the peak quality Clone Technique when he needed it? Splitting up into ten people to hit all his targets at once would make his life so much easier. But he knew he was stuck in the middle of the wilderness for the time being, so he could only make the most of it.

Since Zac had figured out his next steps there was nothing much else to do. He asked his sister to pause on the Technocrat research, and instead double down on the Dao Funnel. Meanwhile the two returned to switching between pondering on the Dao while riding in one of the cars and keeping watch for enemies.

But Zac’s mind was unable to properly calm down, and his brain was constantly churning in an effort to solve all the various issues that plagued him and his people.

On the sixth day since setting out Zac was making some small talk with a couple of the Valkyries and John, the American expat he once met outside Eastern Hills. John had initially been a bit awkward around Zac after reuniting, even apologizing for trying to recruit him into his small zombie hunting party back when Zac went under the alias David. But he soon calmed down after seeing that Zac didn’t carry himself like some Emperor or ruthless warlord.

It was a nice break to just hang around a bit. He needed a break from constantly running back and forth to make sure the world wasn’t ending. But his a small spike of danger suddenly appeared in his mind, and Zac instinctively looked in the distance, trying to find the source of the feeling. The Valkyries looked at him in confusion, proving that they hadn’t noticed anything amiss.

“Is something wrong?” Jenna, one of the Valkyries, asked.

“It’s nothing,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “Thought I heard something. I’ll check it out just in case.”

“Do you need us to come with?” another Valkyrie asked with a frown.

“No, that’s okay,” Zac smiled. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

With that he activated [**Loamwalker**], disappearing in a flash. He quickly moved toward a small hill in the distance, each step moving him dozens of meters forward.

When he saw the person on the other side of the hill his eyes widened in alarm as a storm of leaves erupted around him. His axe had already appeared in his hand as Zac was mentally preparing for a fight for his life.

It was a Zhix warrior who was sitting on a chair, clearly waiting for him. Zac instantly knew the insectoid was bad news because he was completely unable to sense it even the thing it sat just ten meters away from him, leisurely inspecting him with interest. It was just like with his meeting with Inevitability, though this clearly wasn't the same person. This Zhix looked older, and it emitted a cultured aura.

There were no weapons that Zac could see, but that didn't mean he was unarmed. He was wearing a robe that was a bit similar to Zac's own get-up that he got from Yrial, but the Zhix's went in a maroon hue. It made the insectoid emit a slightly sinister aura even though its otherwise refined appearance.

"Do not worry, I am not here to fight you. I am not as prone to violence as my daughter," the Zhix smiled. "Our meeting was long overdue, so I thought we should have a chat."

"Void's Disciple?" Zac said as he kept his distance, not daring to sit down in the empty seat.

"So cautious. Well, it makes sense after your meeting with my child," he smiled.

"Daughter?" Zac couldn't help himself from confirming since that wasn't nomenclature that should exist among the Zhix.

"Well, that's how I see those two. They were the last survivors of a branch that was almost completely eradicated during the War of Emancipation. I raised them from ignorant children scurrying in the darkness to great warriors in service of our Lord. I am not sure if they see me as a father though," the Zhix smiled. "I only learned the name for it after arriving here, since we have diverged from the old to embrace the new."

"So, what do you want?" Zac asked instead of delving further into Zhix pronouns or genealogy.

"I have come to talk to you about the Undead Empire," Void's Disciple simply said.

"I guess you want me to take care of them for you so that you don't get your boss in trouble?" Zac snorted, not bothering to hide his disdain.

"Did Salvation tell you?" the Zhix asked with a shake of his head. "It's an embarrassing story that one. He somehow found the inheritance that the Lord left for us. Unfortunately my ancestors underestimated the power of the Zhix legions, causing us to lose the war. Our Holy land was lost as well, and along with it much knowledge."

"And you're not here for revenge?" Zac said with suspicion.

"No, his talent was high but his mind was already broken before he found the opportunity. He mixed up our grand undertaking with the religion of your old world, making him inadvertently work against his own master," Void said with disdain. "Perhaps him joining his so-called Unity was the greatest outcome."

"In any case, does my reasoning matter why I want to assist you? You have your path to follow, as do I. I can see it in your eyes and through your actions. You carry the hopes of your people on your shoulders, and only you have the strength to fulfill those dreams. You are nothing like that crafty little beastman who cares more about profits and image than his people," Void said. "He is currently working toward getting his hands on a teleportation token rather than fighting the invaders."

Zac stared at Void's Disciple for a few seconds, not sure what to say. Honestly, what he was saying was true. He knew he had to close the Undead Incursion as soon as possible, even if it helped the Dominators as well. The alternative was to let the whole planet get terraformed, and that was not something he would allow no matter what.

"I met with the Lich controlling the undead incursion not long ago," Void suddenly added, making Zac's eyes widen in shock. "He is quite strong. Taking him down will not be easy."

"We're aware," Zac tersely said.

"I'm sure," the Zhix smiled. "But are you aware that the array they are building is already functional?"

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 362 - Time Pressure**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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"What?" Zac couldn't help but blurt out. "Impossible, the array is far from finished."

"It doesn't need to be finished to work, but it will charge much faster if it is," Void's Disciple said.

"Changing the alignment of a whole planet is an enormous undertaking for people at our level, so all hope is not yet lost," Void continued, throwing over a crystal. "The information is there. I guess that you have between one month and two to take the undead down. When the process starts you have a week at best to stop it before the damage becomes irrevocable."

"And you expect me to believe you will stand down and let the Undead go through with the transformation?" Zac asked. "That would ruin your lord's plans as well."

"If the undead succeed we will stay as long as possible, and hopefully our Lord will take mercy on us and pick us up. If not, then that's our fate," Void said with equanimity as he stood up. "We will not be the source of causing new enmities for our Lord, especially not with a force like the Undead Empire. We are not the only seeds as you are no doubt aware of."

Zac's thoughts flashed to the Medhin Royals, immediately understanding what he was referring to. There were at least two worlds that The Great Redeemer had planted his seeds of Karma on, and perhaps there were many more of them. It was both a relief and troubling that The Great Redeemer didn't place all his bets on this planet alone, because that meant that he might still manage to evolve to C-Grade even if Zac saved Earth. Forming a grudge with a C-Grade Hegemon would result in all kinds of trouble.

"And when do you expect your boss to come and pick you up?" Zac asked though he wasn't really expecting a truthful answer.

"Some mysteries are best left unanswered," the Zhix smiled, confirming Zac's guess.

Zac tried to figure out what other information he could try to weasel out of the insectoid now that they stood face to face, but he was dragged out of his musings to once again get ready for battle when he saw the Zhix move. Energy churned around Zac's body and he was ready to unleash everything he got at moment's notice.

"I've said what needed to be said. The rest will depend on you," Void's Disciple said as he calmly looked at Zac. "Of course, if you want you're welcome to try your hand against me. Killing me will solve one threat to your planet instantly. My children are strong, but they are not able to rein in their bloodthirst. Their carnage would sooner or later result in their demise."

"So how about it?" Void's Disciple his eyes even showing some anticipation as the space behind him shuddered.

The next moment it looked like a window to the cosmos appeared behind the Zhix.

Zac squeezed the handle of his axe, a pearl of sweat running down his forehead. This truly was an opportunity that was hard to come by. They still had no idea where Void's Disciple hid, and they didn't have any special sight like Abbot Everlasting Peace to track him down again if he disappeared now. The Dominators had been elusive since the integration, only appearing when they wanted.

But as much as he hated to admit it, Zac was afraid. The fight with the Cyborg had utterly crushed his sense of invulnerability, and he wasn't ready to take on the Dominators. Especially not Void's Disciple, who felt like a far larger threat than Inevitability and Harbinger, even if those two had passed Void's Disciple in levels after the hunt.

Zac eventually he lowered his axe, and silently shook his head slightly.

"Another time then," the Zhix laughed as he threw something at Zac. "I will not assist you directly, but you emerging victorious against the Lich King would be in my best interest, so I will help out a bit. This array is specifically designed to interrupt the arrays in the Lich King's castle, though the effect will only last for a second or two. Perhaps it will create an opportunity."

"Is this why you visited him earlier?" Zac asked with a frown as he looked down at the black crystal in his hand.

He was unsure whether to trust the Zhix, but he couldn't find any reason he would lie at this juncture. The best thing for Void would truly be if Zac won, at which point the Dominator could simply stay hidden until his boss arrived and culled the planet. The Zhix didn't answer the question, and he only smiled as he turned around to walk into the cosmos he had opened a door into.

But Zac wasn't ready to just let him go. The whole meeting had been on the Dominator's terms, and Zac only knew what Void's Disciple wanted him to know. He needed to get something more out of him, and his mind immediately turned to one matter that so far eluded them.

"I thought you wanted to talk about the Mystic Realm since you came all this way," Zac said, throwing out a hook open for interpretation.

The Zhix immediately stopped in its tracks, and a monstrous aura rife with killing intent blanketed the whole area in an instant. It was far beyond what he encountered when fighting Inevitability, and Zac unhesitantly activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**] since he was afraid he would get instantly killed if he didn't go all-out from the start.

But the aura disappeared as quickly as it came, and the Zhix took a deep breath before looking into Zac's eyes.

“The item that is being birthed has no fate with you. Only death awaits if you enter the battle for that thing, even if you are our fated fulcrum. The same goes for the Church and even the Undead Empire. That thing can only go to our Lord,” he tersely said, before entering the cosmos and disappearing.

Zac stared at the spot where Zoid’s Disciple disappeared for a few seconds before he took a deep breath to steady himself. The aura Void’s Disciple released was shocking, but Zac was ecstatic with the result of dangling that bait.

The fact that Void’s Disciple would stop at nothing to gain the treasure of the Mystic Realm, but was willing to let the Undead Empire terraform Earth, was an extremely important revelation. He wasn’t exactly sure what to do with the information just yet, but it was a great clue on how to proceed in their war against The Great Redeemer.

The Zhix’s outburst also gave Zac a decent approximation of the power of Void’s Disciple. The aura had dwarfed his own, even after he had activated his boost. That meant his attributes were clearly superior. Furthermore, his killing intent was also extremely dense which meant he was a seasoned warrior rather than someone who had gained his power by hiding in a cave and cultivating.

He needed to become stronger.

“Is everything alright, Lord Atwood?” one of the Valkyries asked when he returned.

“It was nothing after all,” Zac said as he forced out a smile, trying to hide the backlash from activating his skill.

The next day Zac kept an extremely vigilant watch of the surroundings, but neither Void’s Disciple nor any Zhix horde could be found in the vicinity. He still didn’t know what to believe about what Void said, but Zac leaned toward him telling the truth.

The fact that the array was already working was extremely troubling. Zac thought that the Terraforming would be indefinitely put on hold as long as Thea’s army kept one of the three main hordes from moving. But it turned out that their sacrifices were only delaying the inevitable.

Zac didn’t want to take any chances, so he gave himself a four-week time limit before he would have to assault the core of the Dead Zone. He desperately needed to make himself and his people stronger in that short while.

The simplest solution was for himself and Ogras evolving, but they weren’t the only ones who could change the course of the battle. Unfortunately it turned out that neither Janos or Ilvere were able to evolve at the moment, lacking the qualifications to upgrade their classes. Zac could only hope that the merits they gained through the past battles would be enough to change that.

Having to guide this the slow convoy was also starting to get on Zac’s nerves, and he even went so far as to change to his undead class to hunt any beasts within wide swathes of the army. He couldn’t waste any time and wanted to boost his second class to level 75 as well before trying out for the tower. That way he would get the most out of his only attempt, as he wouldn’t be able to go again like Ogras.

Another issue that made Zac worry was the constant anger in his chest since he arrived at the battle to see his people getting cut down. He was still able to control or push it down, but it had become a permanent presence in his mind. Now that Void’s Disciple had exposed the looming threat of the massive array it only got worse.

Being angry in of itself wasn’t the problem, the real issue was that he was being manipulated. He had been consumed by anger in the fight earlier, which was what

allowed his skill to evolve. But his rage seemed to have loosened the restrictions on the Splinter of Oblivion, and its wicked energies were constantly seeping into his mind.

However, the change didn't only come with negatives. He had already learned that the funnel that the Draugr-lady set up in his mind did not only let the energy from the splinter out, but it also refined it somehow. Until now he hadn't really understood the effect of having the mysterious energy enter his mind, but he finally understood what it did.

It was making his soul stronger.

It was hard to pinpoint exactly what that meant, but he knew that his spirit was more substantial compared to before. It felt like he would be able to endure using his Dao Seeds for longer, and even his Dao Fields had become slightly more intense.

But Zac was worried even though the boost was a welcome addition now that he was scrambling for all ways to make himself stronger. His mental resilience was quite strong, but the effect of the Splinter just kept increasing. What would happen within the next few years, how long would it be until he turned into Anzonil's disciple, slowly becoming insane?

He needed to find some solution, hopefully one that would be able to keep the benefits while dealing with the unwanted side effects. He wasn't able to cultivate, but perhaps there were ways to improve one's mind that worked similarly, something like meditation manuals.

Zac soon enough returned to the car to ponder on the Dao, but he couldn't calm his mind down enough to enter a meditative state. He kept twisting back and forth before interrupting the Ogras' meditation to discuss various strategies.

The demon had been shocked to learn about the meeting with Void's Disciple, but his analysis of the information was the same as Zac's. It would be foolish to not operate under the assumption that what the Dominator said was true. But the demon took the situation more in stride, simply saying that the situation didn't change much and that there was not much that they could do while they were stuck in the middle of nowhere.

"You might as well go ahead, you acting like this is stressing me out," the demon finally said in exasperation after being interrupted for the fifth time. "The army will take almost another week until it's back. Use that time to close the incursions in the Underworld or something. I can't help with those anyway, so I will stay behind to protect the convoy."

"They might be waiting for me to leave though," Zac hesitantly said.

"Just go undercover, use your undead form and face changing or something," Ogras said with a shrug. "We'll pretend you're still around. Besides, we haven't seen any undead activity in a week and we're far outside the area of the array they're making. It's a risk, but we need to take some risks at this point."

Zac was hesitant to leave his people at this juncture, but he did feel more confident if the demon stayed behind. Zac had seen the power he was able to unleash, especially after the inheritance. The demon was far stronger today compared to when fighting the Beast waves. Only the appearance of a general would be a match for him if he went all out.

And it was like Ogras said, they were so far away from the Undead Incursion by now. And if Void's Disciple wanted to kill the people here he could have already done so by himself. It was unlikely that Zac would be able to stop him at all as things stood.

"I'll take one last look to make sure no one is trailing us before I leave," Zac finally said. "I'm counting on you to keep our people and my sister safe."

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 363 - Stasis**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

New Month New \_drive! Read up to **36 additional chapters** of Defiance of the Fall.

Zac stepped through the Port Atwood teleporter and immediately rushed toward the government buildings. After he left under the guise of darkness he had been rushing without sleep for almost three days. Without adjusting his speed to the slow-moving army he was able to cover ground quite a bit faster, but he did take a circuitous route to keep a lookout for any threats lurking ahead of the army.

Luckily there was nothing apart from the occasional beast pack, nothing that would prove to be more than a small training excursion for the Port Atwood army by this point. His relief over the fact that his people were out of the woods was unfortunately overshadowed by the constant worry over whether he would find Alea waiting for him or if he would find a gravestone with her name on it.

“She is alive,” Adran immediately said when he saw Zac enter his office. “Calrin and the Tal-Eladar Healer has moved her to the valley with the Tree of Ascension. The energy is denser over there and the tree seems to bring her comfort.”

“Anything important that’s happened since I was gone?” Zac asked.

“Nothing major that can’t wait,” Adran said with a shake of his head, allowing Zac to head out without worries.

He immediately set out for the restricted area containing the valley hidden between the four mountain peaks. It had been a while since he last was here, and the area had largely recovered from being drained of energy then poisoned during the battle for the Fruit of Ascension. New vegetation was sprouting up everywhere, though Zac was a bit confused when he looked at them.

It almost felt as though Zac was having a hallucination as he walked among the unfamiliar flora. The plants and trees were not of species he had seen before, most of them donning various bright colors. The only answer Zac could find was that the poisoned Tree of Ascension had caused a chain of mutations in the area, making the vegetation toxic.

Soon enough he reached the core of the valley and immediately spotted the Sky Gnome fiddling with a Divine Crystal next to a glass display while Tylia stood next to him. Zac’s heart was gripped by fear when he saw the unmoving form of Alea inside the glass case, making it seem like a coffin. But he breathed out when he noticed her taking slow breaths, and immediately walked over to Calrin’s side.

“How is she?” Zac asked after greeting the two.

“She is stable for now,” Tylia said as she looked down at Alea. “I’m afraid we couldn’t find a solution to her fractured soul though.”

“This is a Stasis Array,” Calrin explained when he noticed Zac’s confusion. “It is used to keep mortally wounded people alive. But it doesn’t completely stop the wound from worsening.”

“How long does she have?” Zac asked with a sour feeling.

“Five years at the most,” Tylia said after some consideration. “But the faster you find a solution the better. If you wait too long there will be repercussions even if her soul is healed.”

“Like how?” Zac asked with a frown.

“Lost memories or crippled cultivation,” Tylia sighed.

Zac silently digested the information, trying to figure out what to do. His back-up plan was to get the soul-mending fruit from Yrial if he couldn't heal her any quicker, but it looked like that option was out. Alea would be long dead before he could access the Inheritance Trial again.

“How confident are you of getting your hands on an item that can heal her?” Zac asked Calrin who stood to the side.

“I'm sorry, but there is no chance,” Calrin said with a shake of his head. “I only have access to a few merchants, and I only have the lowest access to their wares. On top of that, there are the restrictions put in place by the System. Even if I manage to expand our business enough to have a monopoly of all commerce on this planet I won't get enough credits to get access to people who can provide those types of pills or treasures.”

“So it's impossible to find a solution on Earth?” Zac said with disappointment.

Ogras put forward the possibility of finding a cure in the Tower of Eternity, but Zac had hoped that the problem would be solved before that. It would allow him to climb the tower without worries, but it truly looked like there was no better option at this moment.

“Well... There are a few ways. You might find one in the Tower,” the Sky Gnome said, echoing Ogras' idea. “Or if you manage to travel to an established Empire. Perhaps you can find an alchemist who can concoct such a pill there. But there is also the issue of cost in the short term.”

“Cost?” Zac asked.

“It cost 25 million Nexus Coins a month to keep this array going,” the Sky Gnome explained. “It continuously uses Divine Crystals and E-Grade Nexus Crystals.”

“I'll pay for it,” Zac said without hesitation.

It was a steep price that might bankrupt most forces on Earth, but Zac didn't care. Just the Beast Crystal mine alone was worth more than keeping the array running for a decade. And he would just keep getting wealthier as time passed. Besides, now was not the time to get stuck on trifling sums of money.

“Is there anything else we can do to improve her state? What about the Tree?” Zac asked, remembering Adran's words.

“We are not sure the reason for this,” the Tal-Eladar hesitantly said. “Normally one's constitution and soul are two separate aspects. But the tree seems to be helping her somehow. I am not sure about her class, but staying close to it seems to have a positive effect on her. But it is not to the point that it actually heals her. ”

“She is working on gaining a poison constitution,” Zac said. “Can that have something to do with it?”

It was a bit of a secret, but he didn't want to hold any important information back if it might help heal her. Tylia looked a bit surprised, but not overly so.

“Gaining a constitution without having a natural aptitude is extremely hard,” she said. “She must have had a lucky encounter that allowed her to take the first step at all.”

“Would it help if I got something that might complete the process?” Zac asked.

“No idea, this is far beyond my knowledge. But you should know that treasures that would allow you to gain a special constitution or bloodline are even rarer than soul-mending treasures,” Tylia said. “My work here is done. The young human and I are no longer needed, the array is doing the same thing we did, but better. If it is alright with you I’ll return to the side of Lady Verana.”

Zac nodded with a frown hearing that it might not work, but it was still worth trying in his opinion. Those kinds of treasures might be rare, but what Tylia didn’t know was that Zac might have just the thing in his possession.

“That is okay,” Zac nodded “I am thankful for your help, I will remember it.”

“If you want to help the Tir’Emarel you just need to provide us with some of those beast crystals of yours,” Tylia smiled as she walked away toward the exit of the valley.

The Sky Gnome perked up when he heard the mention of crystals and he looked at the receding form of the healer before his eyes locked onto Zac with an enamored shimmer.

“Don’t look at me like that, it gives me the creeps,” Zac snorted and threw out a Beast Crystal. “I found a mine full of these in the Underworld. Keep it between ourselves.”

“Good quality,” Calrin whistled as he went over it. “Are you keeping or selling?”

“I am low on cash at the moment. I am thinking of selling off most of these to have enough money to buy a soul-healing treasure for Alea,” Zac said. “Would you be able to sell them within a week. Roughly 2 billion Nexus Coins’ worth.”

“No problem, Beast Crystals are always in demand. If I only have a week you’ll lose a few percents though. But all that money... I am sorry to sound callous, but is it truly worth it?” the Sky Gnome said. “You should know, cultivating as a mortal is to burn insane amounts of money. If you spend everything on your subordinates you might find yourself stuck sooner or later.”

“It’s worth it. She has saved my life on multiple occasions, how can I not spend some money to help her back? Besides, don’t I have you to recoup my losses?” Zac said with a smile. “Speaking of that, how much have you earned lately? It’s been some time since the last payout.”

The Sky Gnome looked a bit queasy when speaking about paying dividends, but he sighed after throwing the sleeping poison mistress a glance.

“Our income has been quite impressive lately,” Calrin said. “You have roughly 1.6 Billion Nexus Coins in Thayer Consortia’s books. You shouldn’t expect this kind of income for a while though. We have made extraordinary profits by unloading our mountains of gear all across the planet and looting the towns left by the Invaders.”

“That is amazing work,” Zac said, shocked by the number.

He would have thought that the sky gnome would have been able to gather a few hundred million Nexus Coins at most, but Calrin had clearly been able to accumulate massive wealth from the Incursions they closed above ground. The Sky Gnome had been in charge of gathering everything of value in those places since Zac lacked the manpower to do it himself at the moment.

“That’s not all. Your actual wealth is far higher. I took over management of the stores in the underworld, but most of the mines, towns, and hidden wealth went to you,” the Sky Gnome continued. “I believe you would be able to gain at least a billion Nexus Coins if we just sold all the stocked-up metals to the System. And finally, there are the town coffers of Port Atwood.”

“How much do I have there?” Zac asked curiously.

“No idea,” Calrin said with some annoyance. “The floating eye controls those assets, and she’s keeping me at bay.”

Zac nodded in understanding, pleasantly surprised by the situation. He had felt like a pauper after handing over most of his Nexus Coins to keep Alea Stable, but his assets were quite a bit above his expectation.

Between the Consortia, His underworld Assets, and the Beast Crystal mine he was almost at 5 billion Nexus Coin in liquid assets. It was a huge amount of wealth for someone in the F-Grade, and it should be enough to buy a high-grade Soul Mending Treasure with money to spare. Just hearing that number was like having a weight lifting from his shoulders, but the funds were only half the problem.

He actually needed to find a treasure to buy as well, and there were no guarantees he would find it when visiting the Tower of Eternity. So he needed some back-up plans as well.

“Have you heard of the [Primordial Breath Amanita]?” Zac asked.

“Huh? Amanita? A mushroom?” the Sky Gnome muttered with a slight frown before taking out a huge book from his Cosmos Sack. “Let’s see.”

It was one of the binders he had used to identify the treasures Zac brought with him from the hunt, and this one seemed to be centered on various subterranean treasures.

“Here it is, Primordial Breath Amanita. A treasure that can help evolve bloodlines and constitutions. Extremely poisonous to ingest without proper preparation, but it releases a harmless gas that gives some of its benefits. Very beneficial to plant in Cultivation Chambers,” Calrin read out loud before looking up at Zac. “You found one of these things?”

Zac simply nodded in response.

“It’s a low tiered D-Grade treasure, just like this tree and the lotus you asked about some time ago,” Calrin said. “New planets are simply a breeding-ground for miraculous treasures. These things usually take thousands of years to reach maturity.”

“Do you think we can feed that thing to Alea?” Zac asked.

“No way, we would need a skilled alchemist and the knowledge to prepare it,” the Sky Gnome unhesitantly said. “But we could plant it in the area.”

“Wouldn’t it clash with the Tree of Ascension?” Zac asked.

“We would need to plant it in the underground,” the gnome nodded. “If we go deep enough it should be okay. From there we’ll create a chimney to release the gas it emits around here, allowing the girl to benefit from it.”

Zac’s eyes lit up, and he felt it was a feasible idea. He would even be able to create a secondary outlet leading to his own cultivation cave if he planned everything correctly, making his hidden cave even more magical. He didn’t have any bloodline or constitution as far as he knew, but that might simply be due to ignorance. His mom obviously wasn’t a simple character, and having a bloodline wouldn’t be anything surprising.

“Can you handle that?” Zac asked as he took out the large box containing the mushroom. “Discreetly, of course.”

“No problem,” Calrin said. “I’ll have it ready in a few days. But if you decide to harvest it, remember to sell it at ol’ Calrin’s, ok?”

“Thank you. I’m heading to the Underworld for a week,” Zac said as he gave the sleeping Alea a final look. “It’s about time I get to work again.”

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## Chapter 364 - Crusade

### A note from TheFirstDefier

New Month New drive! Why waste your summer on traveling or dating when you can read up to **36 additional chapters** of Defiance of the Fall?

Zac was back in New London soon enough after changing back to his Mr. Black persona, and he was relieved that nothing too alarming happened while he was gone. The two incursions who previously traded with the Union had begun raiding settlements in the area, but Zac was already about to deal with them in any case.

Verana and her Beast Masters didn't need a lot of prodding as most of them were bored from staying put in New London or taking stock of the various properties that were previously owned by the Union. They got ready for war in less than an hour after hearing that they were going to battle with the Abyssal Demons. Zac knew that closing the Incursion of an elite Demonkin species would likely count as a great achievement for their people, and eagerness could be seen on their faces as they streamed toward the teleporter.

The demons who Zac initially brought to the Underworld still hadn't entered the real Underworld due to the presence of the Abyssal Demons. Some of them had stood ready in the hidden cave beneath the Underworld Nexus, whereas others had helped Mr. Trang in scouting out the massive continent above. Those who had been stuck in the darkness for weeks were all too happy when Zac instructed them to secure the Technocrat Incursion as soon as possible. He only had time for a quick sweep after the fight, and there might be more things of value in the area.

Six hours later Zac and his punitive army stood some distance from the demon Incursion. They had long been spotted by some flying bat-thing, which apparently was the demon version of a drone according to Verana, and the demons were waiting for them. There was no way that they would manage to sneak attack these guys.

The Abyssal Demons had built a decent-sized city in the open Underworld, which formed a half-circle against a mountain wall. Zac couldn't really see, but he suspected the demons had dug into the wall for resources, as large plumes of smoke rose from the back of the town, indicating there might be furnaces or some other sort of industry there.

The town itself was covered in a reddish glow from an Array, and it seemed quite sturdy. Billy was not available this time, so Zac turned to Verana for ideas on how to get int. He would no doubt be able to crack it open with **[Nature's Punishment]**, but he wanted to fight in his undead form.

"Grub can probably cause a crack in the array, which would allow you to sneak inside. But he would get killed even before he got close," Verana said with hesitation.

"I can protect him," Zac said as he looked over at the wall in the distance. "Unless they have someone over level 100 my shield will hold."

"Okay, so jump on board," Verana smiled as Grub appeared out of nowhere, and the furry beast quickly grew to its real size.

Zac had already learned that most Beast Masters could keep their pets in some sort of stasis in their bodies. However, the tamed beasts couldn't cultivate while in

stasis, so most of the time they were kept in the open. It did however allow them to conjure their pets in the middle of the fight, surprising the enemy.

Slither woke up from its nap on Verana's shoulder, and it started to rapidly grow as well. It ballooned into a terrifying beast reaching over thirty meters in length. Even Zac's hair stood on end when he saw the transformation, but he quickly jumped on top of Grub's head and took out his replacement shield. It was nowhere near as good as the large tower shield he found in the hunt, but it would allow him to activate his skills.

Zac nodded down at Verana who raised a thin sword.

When Grub saw his master's signal he opened his impossibly large maw and emitted a resounding bellow before it slammed its mouth shut, releasing a shockwave by the collision of its large slabs for teeth.

It started rushing forward with a speed that belied its short stubby legs, and the army behind started to follow as soon as there was a comfortable distance. Hundreds of purple fireballs rose from the demon town to meet the charge, and Zac quickly summoned **[Immutable Bulwark]** and expanded it to its largest possible size.

Even then it wasn't enough to properly protect the huge beast, so Zac infused the shield with the Seed of Sanctuary to make it even larger. However, Grub wasn't completely helpless himself, and he deftly dodged quite a few of the attacks to lessen Zac's burden.

The next moment Zac's vision swam, and he suddenly found himself looking around in confusion. His surroundings had changed, but he quickly realized that he was right above the expansive town. Grub had somehow teleported, just like when the two fought the first time he met Verana, and it started to descend with amazing momentum.

Zac quickly readjusted his shield as he unleashed his Dao Field rifle with Heaviness. He wasn't able to infuse the large beast directly, so he could only slightly increase their momentum with the help of his Dao.

Grub didn't need much help though as he landed like a furry meteor on the shield, and it immediately cracked to let the two through. Unfortunately, the array seemed to have impressive healing capabilities, and the damage had almost completely healed by the time they landed with a tremendous crash that toppled a dozen buildings around them.

Zac quickly activated **[Fields of Despair]** as he looked around for the control crystal that supported the Defensive Array. Destroying the control crystal wouldn't destroy the whole array, but it would no longer be supplied with energy. From there Verana and the others should be able to quickly whittle down the array to gain entry to the town. That meant that Zac and Grub were isolated inside the town for now, but he wasn't too worried about it.

He soon spotted a command platform with an enormous Abyssal Demon wielding a jagged two-hand sword on his back. To his side there were two skinny, for the massive Abyssal Demons, demons who stood in front of a large crimson crystal, continuously infusing it with power. A third demon was quickly exchanging a handful of crystals to replenish the lost energy from Grub's descent.

Zac prodded the large beast, and it immediately understood what Zac wanted to do. Unfortunately it seemed it was unable to teleport once again in such short succession. With a lack of better options it started to rush straight ahead with undeniable momentum. The beast also started slamming its teeth to cause massive shockwaves that spread like waves of destruction toward the demons who hurriedly got down from the wall to form a new defensive line.

Dozens of attacks soared toward the charging beast, but Zac immediately activated [**Immutable Bulwark**] once more to erect a shimmering wall covering the two from all directions, effectively turning Grub into a fortified bulldozer.

Screams and wails echoed across the battlefield as Grub's attacks and [**Deathwish**] started to cause mayhem, but a sudden sense of danger made Zac immediately perk up and infuse himself with the Dao of Hardness. His eyes immediately found the demon leader who had gripped his sword and swung it in a massive arc that seemed to make the air itself crackle.

Zac's eyes widened and he immediately changed his tactic to infuse his bulwark with the Dao of Hardness instead of Sanctuary. It shrunk the shield considerably, leaving Grub's flanks open, but it significantly increased the sturdiness of the shield.

A tremendous arc of pure power shot out from the demon lord's sword, and it ripped through the air with terrifying momentum. Even buildings were cut in two and crushed from the residual shockwave as it sped toward them, but Zac was ready to intercept the strike with his skill.

The whole town shuddered when the blade of energy slammed into Zac's bulwark, and he immediately lost a surprisingly large chunk of Miasma. But Zac breathed out in relief when he realized the power of the swing was well within his limits, and the bulwark wouldn't crack like when he fought the Cyborg.

However, the next second a large wound appeared across his chest, and the black ichor in his body started to freely flow down his chest. Even Grub received a nasty wound across its side, and he bellowed in pain as he glared around in all directions to find who hurt him. Zac's eyes met the Demon Lord's in the distance, and he immediately changed strategy. It wouldn't be so easy to charge the platform like this.

"Big guy, head toward the gate and blow it up, ok?" Zac said to Grub beneath him and it bellowed in understanding.

The Demon Lord kept shooting out his odd attacks, but Zac deftly controlled his defensive skill to swap between the large coverage and the smaller but sturdier one. But wounds still kept accumulating across their bodies, and Zac realized there was no way for him to completely block out the damage.

Zac wasn't exactly sure what was going on, but he had a suspicion that the Demon Lord had something akin to a Seed of Penetration that reached Peak Mastery at the least. Perhaps it was even a Fragment. Part of the attack simply side-stepped all his defenses, rendering them ineffectual.

Luckily both Zac and Grub were extremely durable, so the beast made it to the gate without any life-threatening wounds. The gate turned into scrap metal with a tremendous crash as the beast rammed straight into it. The moment Zac saw that Grub was out in one piece he jumped off the beast and stomped his foot in the ground, and the next moment he disappeared.

Zac immediately reappeared in front of the control crystal and stomped into the ground again before those around him could react, activating [**Profane Seal**]. The five towers rose out of the ground as the world turned monochromatic due to the influx of massive amounts of miasma into the area, the change was so sudden that Zac actually managed to kill one of the captains with a quick swing before the others had time to back away.

The Demon Lord was clearly the largest threat, so the five spectral chains flew directly toward him in a bid to seal his dangerous attacks. But Zac barely had time to destroy the control crystal with [**Hunger**] before one of the chains was riddled with cracks. Zac frowned when he saw it, but he kept using three of the chains to occupy

the lord while he used the other two in quickly dealing with the remaining two mages who stood next to the crystal.

A torrent of black corrosive clouds also spread out across the field as Zac took deep breaths while he fought, and the clouds intermingled with the miasmic haze from **[Fields of Despair]**. Screams of pain and rage already echoed across the cage as a large number of trapped soldiers started to get wounded by retaliatory strikes from **[Deathwish]** when trying to escape the entrapment.

The miasma inside Zac's body surged as it kept dropping only to increase again due to the continuous cycle formed between **[Deathwish]** and **[Fields of Despair]**. However, he realized that he would run out of miasma soon enough, as it was overall quite costly to keep this many warriors trapped.

But the Demon Lord didn't give Zac any time to thin the number of enemies as he suddenly roared before he literally caught fire, and the conflagration around him pushed away all of Zac's attacks. The chains were unable to pass through the purple flames without quickly melting, and even the clouds from **[Winds of Decay]** were burnt to cinders as they got close.

The demon sneered at Zac as he lifted his enormous sword toward the sky, and the next moment a hundred-meter version of that very sword appeared above the cage. The sword emitted a tremendous sharpness, and it reminded Zac of the time when he looked at the enormous axe in his Dao Vision.

The sword ruthlessly stabbed into the fractal in the sky, and a large crack immediately appeared on one of the towers. A spectral demon appeared at the same moment, stabbing at the Demon Lord. However, the stab barely harmed the demon lord, and he only laughed uproariously as he seemed to be consumed by battle lust.

Zac wasn't as happy as a new wound had appeared on his back the moment the sword in the sky stabbed down on the shield he had created. It was the same as the earlier strikes, where part of the force went right through his defenses.

But Zac wouldn't give in against something so minor. The Tal-Eladar had already broken through the town defense array since the control crystal was destroyed, and Zac spotted Verana riding her enormous snake outside, causing utter mayhem amongst the demonkin ranks.

The fight outside was clearly pitched, as two of the demons outside had actually turned into 10-meter giants to curtail the snake's wanton destruction. The demons didn't seem deterred just because their leaders were locked inside **[Profane Seal]** at all, and they unhesitantly threw themselves into the meat grinder while emitting guttural roars.

Zac didn't have time to worry about that as he rushed toward the Demon Lord as he swung his sword with tremendous force. He had already changed the size of **[Immutable Bulwark]** to that of a normal tower shield, allowing him to use the skill rather than his subpar replacement shield to block the demon's sword.

The fires burned around him, and Zac was forced to continuously release Miasma from his body to not get burnt, but he wouldn't let up as the two exchanged one brutal attack after another. Neither would back down a single step and both were more than happy to gain another wound if they could retaliate in kind.

Eventually, Zac started to get the upper hand even though the Demon possessed surprising power and the mysterious ability to always cause some damage. Zac was simply too durable. The Abyssal Demon seemed to have some innate advantages due to his race, but it couldn't match up the power of pure attributes.

Zac suddenly saw an opening as he suddenly threw away his shield when the demon swung too wide due to exhaustion. Zac quickly grabbed the arm of his opponent

and yanked it, making the demon stumble forward. The demon didn't even have time to find his balance before **[Hunger]** fell toward his neck with ruthless finality.

The large horned head of the Demon Lord thumped into the ground, and it was the sound symbolized the beginning of the end for the Abyssal Demons.

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**Chapter 365 - Lunatics**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

New Month New \_drive! Why waste your summer on going outside when you can read up to **36 chapters additional chapters** of Defiance of the Fall?

Zac looked around the rubble, slightly shocked at the ferocity of the battle. Less than 20% of the Abyssal Demons had chosen to retreat and instead opted to fight with furious intensity against the Tal-Eladar attackers, even after their leader was decapitated. They were true berserkers, roaring on top of their lungs as they tried to rip him apart. But the Abyssal Demons were not the only ones who fought with reckless abandon.

"You people are lunatics," Zac muttered with a shake of his head.

Verana, who was almost completely drenched in blood, had a satisfied look on her face as she oversaw the looting of the town. Zac could understand her happiness since the fight could be considered a resounding win for the Tal-Eladar against the Demonkin. Verana had been a goddess of war, causing bloodshed wherever she went, making the battle turn completely in their favor.

After Verana quickly killed the two generals stuck outside Zac's cage with the help of her snake and an offensive array the war was mostly turned into a slaughter. It made a huge difference to have a powerhouse presiding over the battlefield. They could put their thumb on the scale, causing a massive reduction in casualties.

Of course, none of that would have been possible without the help of Zac himself. He captured a good hundred elites along with the leader and two of his generals within **[Profane Seal]**, substantially weakening their defenses and causing chaos. While they were trying to get their leader out of the cage Verana and her beast masters could advance without any real resistance.

"Grudges built upon grudges," Verana said with a wry smile. "The Boundless Heavens thrives on conflict as war forces us to get stronger or perish. You cannot fight it, so you might as well adapt to it."

Zac sighed, feeling a bit hopeless at the prospect of living a life of constant strife. He was currently struggling because there were threats against his people in all directions, but was that all life was supposed to amount to? Putting out one fire after another while getting stronger. Was that truly the goal of cultivation?

But Zac forced himself to snap out of his brooding as he bought a teleportation array and nodded at one of the Valkyries who immediately stepped through. A few hundred warriors stepped through the teleporter twenty minutes later, and they looked wide-eyed at the utter destruction around them.

It was the soldiers that worked for the Union, which technically made them his people. They had mostly kept up their previous duties, but they came in handy now.

Zac wouldn't entrust them with any important tasks, but scouring the area for lingering threats or points of interest shouldn't be any problem for them.

Zac simply sat down on top of a boulder to overlook it all as he restored his missing miasma. He also called for Harvath, the demon captain who had kept his squad in the hidden cave system beneath the Underworld Nexus until now. The demon had been in charge of clearing out the Technocrat Incursion, but it should be dealt with by now.

The demon arrived soon enough, and he sighed deeply with conflicted emotions as he looked around at the rubble. Zac could understand his feelings, but he didn't know what to say. The two walked over to a secluded spot, and Zac activated an array disk to shroud them from prying eyes.

"Is something the matter?" the demon asked curiously when he saw Zac's actions.

"I need you to do something, but you can't let the Tal-Eladar catch on," Zac said.

The demon's eyes lit up, and he clearly had no moral compunctions about pulling a fast one on his new allies. Zac smiled when he saw Harvath's reaction and took out one of his Beast Crystals.

"This is...?" Harvath said with some hesitation as he inspected the crystal.

"It's a Beast Crystal, an item for nurturing beasts. I found a large mine of these things. I want you to send a group of experienced people to clean out that whole place for me. The mine is nowhere near as big as the Nexus Mine, so it should only take a few days for a strong crew," Zac said. "The Tal-Eladar would be frothing at the mouth for these things, so don't let them follow you."

"Absolutely," Harvath immediately nodded.

Zac wasn't sure exactly how the Tal-Eladar would react in regards to these crystals, so he chose to not take any risks with them. The crystals might be extremely valuable for the Tal-Eladar, but he knew that the invaders were extremely low on Nexus Coins since they weren't able to bring it to Earth. And Zac needed the money now rather than later.

"Extract the crystals as quickly as possible. I hope to use them to trade for a treasure to treat Alea within two weeks," Zac explained.

The demon's countenance immediately turned somber and he quickly memorized the path as Zac imparted it to him. Alea's situation had already spread among the demons, and they had almost exploded in rage. The poison mistress had proven herself for the demons, and many of them wanted to immediately rush out to fight the undead to the death when learning of the ambush that felled her.

Zac knew that Harvath would perform the task with utmost efficiency after seeing his expression, so he nodded and let him immediately head out.

"What was that about?" Verana said with a smile as she walked over.

"Just delegating a few minor tasks," Zac smiled back.

The cleanup and reorganization took half a day, which was much faster than normal thanks to the help of the vast number of people in the Union's employ. It was only now that Zac truly realized that the people under his command in the underworld was more than ten times that of his people on the surface.

But Zac wasn't satisfied with only closing one of the remaining four incursions in the underworld, and he wanted to ride the momentum. He immediately ordered an assault on the human Incursion next, since he was afraid they had spies in the cities

that would warn them what transpired here. He didn't want to give them too much time to prepare their defenses.

The strength of the Abyssal Demon Incursion was higher than Zac expected, and he would categorize it as firmly in the mid-tier. He was afraid that all the incursions in the underworld were stronger than the norm, which was why he didn't want to give them any heads-up.

The army set out almost immediately, and they were joined by a squad of elite Demons as well now that they were able to show themselves. Smaug surprisingly enough requested to join the mission as well, and Zac figured that the man and his arrays would come in handy.

With the reinforcements to his ranks the battle went just as expected. It would normally be extremely strenuous and costly to assault the incursions that were placed inside large town caves, but having Zac as the vanguard kept the whole army safe as he blocked out all the attacks from the invaders with the help of his bulwark.

Any time Zac needed to move or rest for a second Smaug was there, throwing out a handful of balls that created extremely durable shields for a couple of seconds. Zac wasn't sure how much money the man was burning during the battle, but if the man wanted to prove himself with the help of his wallet he was very welcome to do so.

It was better the guy spent some of his money than people losing their lives.

The elites of Port Atwood swept through the whole underworld, and in just five days only the final Incursion remained; the Fire Golems. Zac kept pushing himself to his limit, trapping larger and larger groups in his Miasmic Cage in the engagements.

The frantic battles were not without their gains. Each one of them had awarded Zac with a level, pushing him all the way to level 73 for his Undying Bulwark Class. It was nowhere near as good as the Technocrat Incursion, but he didn't get any quest that gave a large boost to the energy he gained. Besides, the final 5 levels were quite a bit harder to gain than the earlier ones.

After having closed the Fishman Incursion Zac finally allowed himself to take a breather, so he informed Verana and Harvath that he would enter seclusion for two days. He needed to consolidate his gains from his last fights. Besides, his people were wrung dry from fighting three incursions in short succession.

Fighting along with himself didn't help either. It had become painfully obvious that his Undying Bulwark class was just as Yrial described it; made for a leader of the undead. His [**Fields of Despair**] was essentially poisoning the people fighting alongside him, though they weren't affected by the attribute reduction like his enemies. Now that he had [**Winds of Decay**] as well he was almost as big a threat to his own people as his enemies.

Luckily the people who joined him against the underworld incursions were among the strongest people in his force, so they weren't too badly affected as long as they didn't get too close to him during battle. But since they didn't have a lot of Vitality they needed a prolonged rest before they tackled the more threatening fire golems.

Besides, Zac believed that his army would have returned by that point, providing him with more competent fighters. So Zac returned to his compound on his island, as that was where he had the easiest time to relax. The first thing he did was to go through his status screen to see how his progress was before he could comfortably evolve.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**73**

## Class

[F-Epic] Undying Bulwark

## Race

[E] Draugr

## Alignment

[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord

## Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step

## Limited Titles

Frontrunner

## Dao

Seed of Heaviness - Peak, Seed of Trees - Peak, Seed of Sharpness - High, Seed of Hardness - High, Seed of Sanctuary - High, Seed of Rot - High

## Core

[F] Duplicity

## Strength

749 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 140%]

## Dexterity

320 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

## Endurance

992 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 140%]

## Vitality

471 [Increase: 50%. Efficiency: 140%]

## Intelligence

174 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

## Wisdom

255 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

## Luck

140 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]

## Free Points

0

## Nexus Coins

[F] 184 500 077

He had already put his free points into Strength, but he sighed when he saw the disparity between his Strength and Endurance. He had hoped to decrease the gap between the two attributes, as he did not want to accidentally pigeonhole himself into tank classes when he evolved.

He would pass a thousand Endurance by the time he leveled up, while he wasn't sure he'd ever get to that point with his Strength, even after evolving his Dao seeds and getting the Title from the tower. From how things looked he wouldn't gain a lot of Strength from his final Dao Upgrades either.

**Dao**

**Stage**

**Effect**

**Heaviness**

**Peak**

**Strength +90, Endurance +25, Wisdom +5**

**Sharpness**

**High**

**Strength +5, Dexterity +40, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +5**

**Trees**

**Peak**

**Endurance +20, Vitality +90, Intelligence +5, Wisdom +5**

**Hardness**

**High**

**Endurance +50, Wisdom +10.**

**Sanctuary**

**High**

**Endurance +25, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +25.**

**Rot**

**High**

**Endurance +5, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +45.**

His Daos were coming along nicely, even though he hadn't evolved any of them from his last three fights. He had however gained a few insights that he hoped he could turn into Peak Grade Dao Seeds without the help of his last Dao Treasure. He wanted to save that thing for when they cracked open the Dao Funnel in a week or two.

Closing the three incursions, unfortunately, didn't give him any Titles either, but he had made great strides in another department; his skills. The only skill for his undead class that remained at Early mastery was **[Indomitable]**. **[Fields of Despair]**, **[Winds of Decay]** and even **[Profane Seal]** reached middle mastery from the intense battles.

His only idea to improve **[Indomitable]** was to fight enemies using mental attacks, but those didn't exist among the underworld Incursions. He kept it running constantly since his experience with the ambush that knocked him out, but it didn't seem to improve the skill.

He still hadn't had a chance to experiment with the improved skills, but he had a feeling they would allow him to push the final two levels with greater ease. However, they did not make up for another glaring problem that he found himself facing; he no longer had a shield.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 366 - Manufacturing A Fortuitous Encounter**

The Cyborg had utterly destroyed his shield with its final punch, and Zac didn't have any good replacement. He had been using much weaker spare during the battles, and he realized that using a low-quality shield weakened his class skills to a certain degree.

This hadn't proved too large a problem against the Incursions so far, but Zac was afraid that it would negatively impact him if he encountered a real threat like the Dominators or the natives in the Mystic Realm. He was already leaning toward the idea of his undead form focusing on dueling strong opponents, but that would prove difficult if he didn't have the equipment to match his power.

Zac finally closed down his screens with a shake of his head before he closed his eyes. There was no point in worrying about his gear as things stood. He could only hope to either loot it somewhere or buy a better one when he visited the Tower. For now, he would rather focus on the things he could improve; the Dao.

The demon leader's frenzied bladework felt like the final clue that Zac needed to push his Seed of Sharpness to the peak. The demon was a true warrior, and his will to cut seemed to affect reality itself as every swing of his passed through all his defenses. It was this sharp and indomitable will that Zac wanted to incorporate into his Dao Seed since it felt perfect for his fighting style. It also reminded him of the axeman, whose very being radiated an unquestionable faith in his axe, the surety that anything he wanted to cut would get cut.

The hours passed and Zac didn't move a muscle, as he was completely absorbed in searching for the truth to sharpness. Finally he reached some sort of tipping-point, and he sensed that his gains were successful. The half of the axe fractal in his chest that contained his Seed of sharpness gained a burst of intensity, and he felt that the whole fractal was finally balanced.

Both his Seeds of Heaviness and Sharpness were finally at the peak, meaning that the next step was to fuse them. Zac breathed out in relief as he opened his eyes. He was worried that the Splinter in his mind would ruin his attempt, but his mind was like a calm pond.

The past day's relentless battle seemed to have exhausted the negative emotions that accumulated from first seeing Alea get wounded and then meeting Void's Disciple. It allowed him to think clearly for a bit and meditate without lapses in focus.

It felt like he had latched onto a small clue on how to survive the continuous corruption from the splinter in his head. The Dao of Oblivion was the purest form of destruction, the end of everything. It seemed that adapting to that Dao through actions would lessen the negative effects to a certain degree.

Shutting himself off from the world to find a calm center might actually have the opposite effect of what he desired, creating a constant conflict in his mind. If he was right he realized he was already self-medicating to a certain degree, since he was constantly fighting one enemy or another.

There was also the issue of balance. Even if it was true that fighting and killing helped him to get rid of the corrosion in his mind, he couldn't just keep following his impulses to continuously slaughter. He felt there was a real risk that he would end up like a murderous lunatic if that happened.

Zac knew he would have to keep experimenting to figure out the best solution, but for now he had accomplished his goal. A lot of his plans somewhat hinged at improving this seed to peak mastery. He wanted to utilize the Dao Funnel before he headed for the Tower of Eternity, and now he had a chance to actually form a Fragment if all went well.

He had already realized that he most likely wouldn't be able to gain more than one Dao Fragment before entering the tower, and he already knew that gaining Dao Insights inside the tower itself was impossible without finding a treasure or having an epiphany.

His Fragment of Death was especially far off, with both Rot and Hardness still being at High mastery. His Fragment of life was a bit closer along, with Seed of Trees already being at peak mastery.

So Zac chose to focus on the Fragment of Axe, or whatever came before axe in that line of truths. A Fragment of Axe would hopefully increase his offensive power by a huge degree, which would allow him to climb much further in the Tower. The other two fragments might have great potential in the long run, but Zac was forced to look for quick powerups as things stood.

Even if he didn't manage to fuse his other two fragments before evolving it would still allow him to base his upgraded classes on the Fragment of Axe. From there his Hatchetman upgrade would hopefully be influenced by the life-attuned Dao seeds, and Undying Bulwark would rely on Rot and Hardness.

Zac would certainly have preferred to gain all three fragments before evolving the classes, since he believed that would ultimately lead to better choices, perhaps even two Arcane classes. It would also follow the advice he gained from Yrial. But he was simply out of time, and the path he chose would hopefully at least provide him with two good Epic-Graded classes that would allow him to fight the Dominators and the Lich King.

The old gamer inside him once again felt bad about not being able to grind for a few years extra to push all three Dao Fragments and his skills to the peak. The fact that he was forced to upgrade his class before he had exhausted his potential was truly a waste.

But such was life. There was no such thing as a perfect path in an imperfect world. Perhaps if he was the son of some great hegemon he'd be able to leisurely cultivate for a decade or two before he felt ready to Evolve. But if he did that now he'd probably condemn his whole planet since so much relied on him getting stronger quickly.

Zac sighed and got up on his feet, immediately walking out of his courtyard. The sound of laughter could be heard from the distance, and Zac immediately flashed over with relief flooding his heart. It was Ogras and Kenzie who sat by a patio table having a drink, probably having returned while Zac was meditating.

"Oh, you're out?" Ogras said as he looked up from the table, a glass of champagne in his hand.

Kenzie sat opposite of him, one of the information crystals on arrays placed on the table in front of her. Seeing his sister again was like having a weight lifted from his shoulders. He knew that the risk for something happening to the army was small, but it had been a constant worry in the back of his mind since he went ahead of the others.

"I'm glad you're okay. Did everything go as planned?" Zac asked as he sat down on one of the free chairs, grabbing one of the fruits on the table.

"We came back twelve hours ago," Ogras nodded. "There was no activity worth mentioning. We were assaulted by a pretty massive wolf pack led by a few E-Grade

Alphas, but it was dealt with easily since everyone was well rested by that point. If there's one thing our people know by now, it's how to kill wolves. More importantly, I've heard you've been busy?"

Zac's brows rose when he heard they had been back for so long. He quickly took out a watch from his cosmos sack and realized that he had been meditating for well over a day. It had only felt like an hour or two, but he would need to return back to the Underworld pretty soon.

"I took care of the underworld Incursions," Zac explained. "I still have the flame golems to deal with, but afterward I'll be able to move the Union and Council armies to the surface to help with the situation with the undead. In fact, we can probably start sending people from the Union immediately."

Ogras nodded in agreement.

"The average warriors are better used for thinning out the zombies than fighting incursions. I'll have someone gather up Union warriors with decent potential to bolster the numbers in our army," Ogras said.

"How's the study on the Dao Funnel going?" Zac asked.

"I still can't figure out how it was originally meant to be used. I think we're missing half of the item, the one that would infuse the gathered energy into someone," Kenzie said.

Zac was inclined to agree since the Great Redeemer would no doubt want to keep the collected Origin Dao for himself. It made no sense to leave the key to extract it on the planet where anyone could find it. He would rather keep it on his body.

"But I have an idea," Kenzie said as she pointed at the crystal. "I think I can set up a certain array recorded in this thing that will help."

"Oh?" Zac said as he leaned closer with interest.

Ogras didn't seem surprised as he leisurely kept drinking his liquor, so Zac guessed that his sister had already consulted the demon on this matter while they were on the road together.

"I mentioned earlier that I can crack open the funnel, but I don't know what would happen next. I still haven't made much progress in that department. But I think I have found an array that will allow us to trap the Origin Dao for a while, allowing us to cultivate inside it for a much longer duration," Kenzie said. "It's the best idea I could come up with."

"We never had any means to directly absorb the Origin Dao anyway, so I believe this is fine. It will depend on luck and fate how much we could gain from the experience," Ogras said from the side. "We're essentially manufacturing a fortuitous encounter."

"I agree," Zac nodded. "We are not in a position to research the funnel for decades. We'll have to take the gamble. The issue is how many should be present."

That was the crux of the matter. How much Origin Dao were actually collected inside the funnel? Salvation had slain hundreds of thousands of people, but they had no idea how much Origin Dao that would translate into. It would be a problem if they gathered the whole army only to realize that the energy got so diluted it had almost no effect.

The same could be said about the opposite. What if they found an ocean of Origin Dao inside when only a couple of people were present? It would be a huge waste if almost all of it dissipated and was wasted. Zac was painfully aware of the fact that they didn't have enough powerful people to take charge of important matters. The

Origin Dao might be the key to turn the Valkyries and some of the promising soldiers from elites into powerhouses.

“We actually formulated an idea about that on the way back,” Kenzie said. “We make two or three layers of arrays. If we notice the inner layer is too small, we’ll break it open to open up the Origin Dao to spread into a wider area where more people are waiting.”

Zac slowly mulled over the idea, feeling that it wasn’t too bad. It would be a shame for the people sitting in the outer layers if they never even got a whiff of the Origin Dao, but he also knew that they needed to ration the stuff if there wasn’t too much of it.

“How long would it take for you to set everything up?” Zac asked.

“We have already tasked Calrin to gather the items for the arrays. I think I will need a week or so to set everything up and make sure everything works,” Kenzie said. “He also told us about Alea’s situation.”

Zac sighed when he heard his sister mention the poison mistress, but he simply nodded.

“Don’t worry, aren’t you going to the Tower soon?” Kenzie said. “Alea might be back on her feet within a month!”

“That’s true. And even if we don’t find what we need there, we still have a couple of years. If we can get the Nexus Hub to work we might be able to head to a real metropolis and hire a healer or alchemist,” Ogras nodded.

“That’s true,” Zac smiled. “So what will you do until Kenzie has finished the array?”

“I’ll help out against the undead,” Ogras said. “I need to confirm a few things in battle before improving my Dao, and I wouldn’t be much use against the Fire Golems. I plan to lead the army back to the Dead Zone tomorrow after they’ve had a day’s worth of rest and I’ve gathered the reinforcements.”

Zac felt a bit bad for the army who already needed to go back to the front lines when they just had returned. But this was a war for Earth’s future, he couldn’t be softhearted in such a situation. They needed to do everything in their power to slow down the completion of the array as much as possible.

“Good,” Zac said as he stood up. “I’ll head down to the Underworld in an hour or two after making the rounds.”

“Be careful, those invaders seem pretty strong,” Kenzie said with some worry.

“I’ll be fine, I’ll see you in a couple of days,” Zac smiled. “Those golems don’t know what’s about to hit them.”

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**Chapter 367 - Playing the Part**

Zac was just planning to stretch his legs before sitting down to continue his meditation, but his first session lasted much longer than he expected. So he could only give up on trying to improve his other Dao Seeds for now and headed toward the town proper. As he walked through the woods of his private domain he took the opportunity to take a gander at the attribute gains from the evolved seed.

**Sharpness (Peak): Strength +15, Dexterity +90, Intelligence +10, Wisdom +5**

A smile crept across his face when he saw the stats he gained. It was just as he hoped, where he got 10 points to Strength and another 50 to Dexterity. He had counted on that Dexterity boost to keep up with his increasing Strength, and it would allow him to keep focusing all his free points into his main attribute for a while longer.

There was still some time before he had agreed to reconvene with Verana and the others in the Underworld, so he walked over to the government building to meet with Abby and Adran. He had been so focused on the Incursions lately so he wanted to get a report on Port Atwood's situation. Luckily everything was going smoothly, especially the agricultural initiative that Zac infused with extra cash. It would start to yield a harvest for F-Grade Herbs in just a few months, though the E-Grade Spirit Herbs would take a while longer.

The only issue was that the sea creatures were quickly becoming more and more ferocious, and there had been a couple of incidents lately. This wasn't anything too surprising, as attacks from sea creatures was a problem that most coastal cities in the multiverse would encounter. Little Bau, Mr. Trang's terrifying pet, was helping a lot, but it couldn't be everywhere.

Luckily there were a plethora of defensive structures in the town shop, so Zac agreed to let Abby take 200 million from the town funds to upgrade the shoreline defenses for the islands he controlled. With that in hand he visited Calrin next to get an update on the situation with the Beast Crystals.

"The extraction is finished, but there's also the need to refine the gems from their raw state. But I've made an estimate and I would say you'd get around 1.8 Billion if you sold 80% of your stock," the sky gnome said with some obvious avarice in his eyes. "You also have your 1.64 billion in dividends waiting."

"How much do you think a soul-mending treasure or pill would cost?" Zac asked.

"If it was on a proper market I would say that a pill or treasure that could mend a fractured soul would cost around 500 million to a Billion Nexus Coins depending on success rate and strength of the item," the Sky Gnome said after some hesitation. "Any natural treasure will likely be on the more expensive side of the spectrum."

"That much?" Zac groaned. "It's just to heal someone in F-Grade."

"Souls are complicated and require high-quality items to fix without leaving lasting damage," Calrin sighed. "But you should know that such a treasure might become significantly more expensive in a place like the Tower of Eternity. There is a huge demand for life-saving treasures at a place like that. The price might become double, or even higher."

"Still, that means I should be fine unless something unexpected happens?" Zac sighed in relief.

"You should still gather as much Nexus Coins as possible before going," the sky gnome said. "There are bound to be a lot of great opportunities waiting for those with money at such a place!"

"Like what?" Zac asked.

"People exiting with grave wounds, forced to sell precious items at a discount to pay for healing. People desperate to gather enough funds to buy a piece of treasure that would allow them to reach higher in the tower. There are all kinds of scenarios to exploit," Calrin said, getting more and more excited as he spoke. "A closed market like that always leads to opportunities for arbitrage."

"I'll do what I can," Zac smiled as he left.

It was a good plan, but he needed money for other things as well. Finding a proper shield, for example. He was also interested in finding pills that would allow him

to immediately break open nodes the moment he evolved. He already had the **[Four Gates Pill]**, but many other pills had similar effects. His goal was to eat all his prepared treasures the moment he evolved before bursting forth against the Undead with unparalleled power.

He soon arrived in New London in his Human form, and his arrival caused some commotion when people of the Union realized who he was. He didn't hide his movements since he wanted people to know about his contribution in the fight against the Fire Golems. People gazed at him with fear or admiration as he walked through the halls with a few Valkyries following behind.

The reason for fighting against the golems in his human form, even though he still needed two levels to reach peak F-Grade in his Draugr-form, was that he felt the risks of using his undead form were too great. Undying Bulwark relied on slowly grinding his enemies to dust, whereas Hatchetman could end the fight in seconds.

The Golems were the strongest invaders in the Underworld, and he was afraid that something unexpected would happen, allowing them to turn the situation around or cause massive casualties amongst his people. It was a bit of a shame that any Cosmic Energy he gained from the kills would be lost, but he felt it was worth it.

Verana and Harvath were already waiting in a large meeting room when he arrived, and they seemed to have recovered from their slightly haggard expressions after they close down the third Incursion together a few days ago.

"Is everything ready?" Zac asked.

"Everything is ready from this side," Verana and Havath immediately confirmed. "Will the others from Port Atwood Join us?"

"A small group of elites will join me, but most are still focusing on the undead threat," Zac said. "I don't think a large army will help against a force like the Golems. They'll just spew lava over everything and it will be hard to defend against."

"It sounds reasonable, though I believe our army should be slightly larger this time. Perhaps a hundred people, with another 50 for support," Verana said. "The golems are strong, and we will need more than one unit to create defensively layers. Oh, and it would be best if you headed to Glimthain to coordinate a joint assault."

Glimthain was the main town that the Council controlled. It was an Ishiate town and was once upon a time the capital of the technology-leaning faction among the beastmen. It was placed in the open Underworld, but it was a true stronghold even before the integration, making it a natural choice of headquarter for a faction that fought the Fire Golems.

"I was planning on heading there anyway," Zac nodded. "I have some things to discuss with the Council."

Meeting the council was another reason he wanted to come to the underworld in his human form this time. He needed to enlist the strongest warriors around in the fight against the Undead Empire. Even if he managed to get stronger he was still just one man, and there were so many zombies by now.

"We should make our sortie spectacular," Joanna suddenly spoke up from the side. "They need to know that the Super Brother-Man has arrived and that he will end the threat of the invaders."

With that she excitedly took out what initially looked like a pike, but Zac realized that it was actually a banner when she fastened a large cloth to it. Zac shot a bemused look at Joanna before he took a gander at the banner's design. It was emerald grey with black and gold details, and the motif was the four mountain peaks of his island. Beneath the summits there was a shield with an axe as a motif, looking like a

nobleman's family crest. It looked quite domineering. It almost felt like something that could have belonged to an old European family.

"What's this?" Zac asked with confusion.

"It's the banner for Port Atwood," Joanna said with glee in her eyes. "I learned from Ms. Tir'Emarel that it's a common practice in the Multiverse as well, and we needed something to display who we were."

"Please, Verana is fine," the Beast Master smiled.

"The black and green are representative of your two, ahem, identities, and the gold is there to make it look regal. The mountains are the largest landmark on your island and the axe and shield represent your authority. Do you like it?" Verana smiled.

"It's pretty cool," Zac willingly admitted. "But I'd feel a bit embarrassed if I would parade such a thing around."

"You don't carry this thing, leave that to us. You only need to walk in the front, preferably releasing some of your aura," Joanna said.

"... Fine," Zac sighed. "If this will get people to willingly follow me into the war against the undead."

"One thing?" Joanna hesitantly added. "Do you think you could put on a pair of shoes?"

Zac blankly looked at the Valkyrie for a few seconds before he looked down on his feet. He never even reflected on the fact that he never wore shoes any longer while in his human form. He had already figured out a way to passively utilize a small amount of cosmic energy to keep his feet clean and not let any grime stick. But it would perhaps look a bit odd if he walked around barefoot.

"You can ride Grub as well," Verana smiled. "He liked fighting with you, he felt very mighty ramming into the enemies' line with your shield as protection."

The two kept coaching Zac on how to make a proper impression on the underworld as the army prepared to sortie. Only a few of the warriors would stay in the underworld, whereas the rest would join the main army in the fight against the zombies. It only took less than ten minutes before everything was dealt with, and the gates of the Union headquarters opened up to let out the forces of Port Atwood.

A few people started running for their lives as the intimidating procession made its way through New London, but even more people stayed to watch in the excitement. Almost everyone in the area had already learned that people from the surface had arrived to New London and that they were led by the Super Brother-Man, but only a few had seen them since they stayed holed up inside the Union headquarters most of the time.

People had been gathering outside the gates since the news spread, either hoping to see the aliens under Zac's command or try to buy a ticket out of the Underworld. But now they didn't need to strain to see a glimpse of them as they marched through the main street full of vigor.

Zac knew of the people's desire to return to the surface, but Port Atwood hadn't let anyone leave just yet. He wanted to finish up everything before he led an exodus out of this area. And he couldn't let everyone just leave. There was a huge amount of wealth down here that needed to be extracted to strengthen Earth's forces. All these things would be needed not only in the fight against the invaders but also to turn Earth into a powerful planet before the System's protection ended.

Zac rode in the front, sitting on Grub's head as the enormous beast trudged forward, each step causing a small earthquake. The only people walking in front of him were two Valkyries, each one holding one of the newly created banners. The air around

him twisted and bent as he let his aura spread out to a certain degree. Behind him his armies walked in orderly lines, each soldier radiating a tremendous pressure that made the spectators gasp in awe.

It looked like the Demons and Tal-Eladar had gotten caught up in who could shock the spectators more, and each of the demonkin soldiers radiated a massive battle intent with most of them even having released weak Dao Fields. Zac didn't stop him since he knew that such weak Fields wouldn't be able to harm anyone in the area apart from putting people under some pressure.

But unfortunately for the demons it was hard for them to match the glory of the Tal-Eladar, who were assisted by their massive beasts. One tremendous roar after another made the whole area shake as the Tir'Emarel rode their battle beasts behind Zac. Most impressive was of course Verana, who rode on Slither's head, the snake alone taking up the whole road due to its massive size.

The whole thing felt a bit excessive and embarrassing, but Zac followed Joanna's instructions and only sat unmoving with a neutral face. Joanna, who essentially had turned into his PR Director at this point, said it was not only about prestige but also about giving the people of the Underworld hope. They had been suppressed by the Fire Golems for almost a year, and almost everyone had lost a family member or friend to their actions.

This procession would show them that Earth hadn't given up, that a resurgence was coming.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 368 - Glimthain**

Joanna initially wanted Zac to hold a rousing speech as well, but he staunchly refused. Instead, a few Valkyries walked alongside the army and told the news about how only one incursion remained, and that they were heading to war against the Fire Golems.

The procession only stopped when they reached the teleportation station, where the back-up from the surface already stood.

"You set things up at Rennbach while I visit the Council," Zac told Verana as he jumped down from Grub's head.

Glimthain was quite far from the Fire Golem Incursion, so teleporting the whole army there would be a pretty huge waste of resources. Teleportation costs were already by far the largest drain on Port Atwood's resources, so he decided to send the army directly to the frontier town to prepare. He also didn't want to cause some misunderstanding by bringing an army on his first visit to the Underworld Council.

Verana quickly agreed, and Zac indicated for the young woman that worked for the Underworld Council to open the array. Her name was Linn, and she had arrived together with the Councillors back when they visited New London after the Union takeover. Linn immediately complied and entered the array along with Zac and Joanna, while the rest waited for the array close down.

Soon enough the trio reappeared in another grand hall, but Zac's eyes widened in alarm when he saw four enormous cannons trained on the platform he stood on. They were even larger than the monstrosities the Ishiate tinkers on Port Atwood had created, with their barrels having a diameter of almost two meters.

Zac's first instinct was to take out his axe and quickly destroy them, but he realized that no one was preparing to fire them. It looked like a defensive measure in case enemies stepped through the array. Luckily they had the ambassador with them, otherwise the welcome might have been quite different.

"This way, sir," Linn said as she led them past the cannons and defensive line of soldiers who curiously looked at him.

"Can you take us to the council immediately?" Zac said. "I don't have much time to spare."

"Certainly, they await your arrival," the ambassador answered without hesitation and the group exited the fortified structure.

Zac and Joanna curiously looked around when they stepped outside of the building, and Zac whistled with surprise when he saw what Glimthain looked like. He had always considered the modern faction of the Ishiate to be somewhat steampunk, and this town truly made that impression stronger. Cramped structures fought for space within massive brass walls that were lined with all kinds of brass weaponry.

A glance at the wall told him that at least a hundred cannons were fastened to the wall walk, and even some rooftops were equipped with ranged siege weaponry. He saw multiple ballistae that appeared to be relying on steam pressure for example. The houses themselves were covered in tubes, and no matter where he looked it seemed to be one pipe or another leaking gas or water vapors.

The town was well illuminated by a mix of Day crystals and gaslights lining the streets, and it seemed to be rush-hour since the streets were filled with people. It was a truly chaotic scene as there were not only pedestrians, but a mix of modern cars and other odd machines that forced their way through the jumble. The chaos wasn't helped by the constant eruption of steam whistles and honks from the cars.

"Oh wow," Joanna said. "How do people live like this?"

"It took some getting used to," Linn said with some embarrassment. "Too many have lost their homes, and the town has become completely overcrowded by now. A new town has even started to grow outside of the walls since there simply is no room left within. Those buildings regularly get destroyed during the attacks of beasts in the area, but the inner town is one of the safest places in the Underworld due to all the weaponry."

Zac understood as well that people normally wouldn't live in such an environment, but the dangers lurking in the dark were just too abundant, and it was better to live in squalor than getting eaten by a bat or killed by the Flame Golems. The group immediately entered a jeep that waited for them, and it thankfully only needed to drive a short distance to a grand castle in the center of the town.

The castle itself reminded Zac of a larger version of the main hall of the Cogstown, the Ishiate settlement under his control. But this castle was far larger, and it was not only equipped by a huge number of weapons pointing at the sky, but there were even three zeppelins slowly floating around it.

"This way, sir," a guard said as Zac stepped out of the car.

"Zac!" a familiar shout could be heard from the distance just as Zac was about to enter the palace, and he looked over with a smile.

It was Emily who was running over, dragging along a slightly embarrassed woman in her early twenties. It was no doubt Emily's sister as she was essentially an adult version of the brat. Zac glanced at her to approximate her strength, and he was surprised to see that there was a faint aura around her.

It meant that even if she wasn't a Ranker she wouldn't be too far off, and she had likely gained a Dao seed judging by the spirituality around her. It looked like not only Emily was a talent when it came to cultivation, but her sister was as well. Then again, it shouldn't be too surprising that they had good genes since all three siblings turned out to be cultivators.

"She's pretty, right?" Emily grinned when she noticed that Zac looked at her sister curiously. "She's very single as well."

"Idiot, what do you mean by very single?" Johanna said with some embarrassment as she gently slapped the back of Emily's head. She then turned back to Zac who looked at the two with some amusement. "I am Johanna Larkin. I owe you a great debt of gratitude. If it wasn't for your intervention I would be without any family."

"It was no problem," Zac said with a sigh, giving Emily a consoling look.

It seemed like the brother had truly fallen back then after all. Emily looked downcast for a second before she looked up again with an intense stare.

"Are you here to destroy the Flame Golems?"

"Yeah," Zac said without any preamble.

"Great!" Emily said with burning eyes. "We will help you kill those guys!"

"You can come, but be careful. We don't have a lot of ways to deal with a room flooding with lava," Zac said as he handed over two large balls. "Use this in case you run out of options."

"What's this?" Emily asked with sparkling eyes as she held the two crystals that seemed to have a small snowstorm inside.

"Fire extinguisher," Zac said with a smile. "Perhaps it will slow the magma long enough for you to escape in case things go south. I need to speak with the Council now, come with me if you want."

"I can't go there, I am just a captain," Johanna said with a quick shake of her head as Zac started, but Emily only dragged her along with a giggle.

"Who cares, being with this guy is like having an all-access pass," the teenager smiled as she walked over to Joanna's side.

The four were led into a large chamber with a massive circular table made from steel and brass. There were already 13 people sitting there, with representatives from all races. Six were humans, while there were 3 Ishiate and 3 Molemen. Finally, a single Zhix sat to the side.

Zac was a bit surprised by the somewhat even distribution as there were at least five times as many humans in the underworld compared to the molemen and Ishiate combined. But perhaps it was by design so that the humans on the council wouldn't bully the others. Zac was also quite surprised by the presence of a Zhix, but perhaps it simply was a representative for its hive.

The 13 people took up half the table, giving Zac ample room as he sat down on the other side. Emily unceremoniously sat down next to him, but Joanna immediately dragged her back to stand a few steps behind with herself and Johanna. The teenager shot the Valkyrie a glare, but only received another slap in the back of her head from her sister.

"Lord Atwood, It is an honor to finally meet you," one of the molemen spoke up. "I am Romal, the current speaker for the council."

Zac had already read an information package on the Council during the days he stayed in the Union Headquarters, and he knew that the speaker was simply a rotating position amongst the council, and it changed person every month.

“It’s nice to meet you all as well,” Zac nodded. “You should know why I’m here.”

“I won’t hide anything from you, things have deteriorated quite a bit on the surface. When your Councillors met your general a few weeks ago he spoke about the Great Redeemer, who is still a looming threat to our planet. But we have a more immediate threat that will destroy Earth within two months unless we do something.

“The Undead Empire is currently singlehandedly fighting against all the combined forces of the world, and they still have the upper hand. Even the other invaders have joined in battle with us, but the zombies are pretty strong. We need assistance,” Zac said, immediately divulging his reason for visiting.

“So you’re not here about the Flame Golems?” one of the human Councilors said with disappointment.

“No, don’t get me wrong. My generals have already closed the other four Incursions of the Underworld, and I am here to immediately close the Flame Golem Incursion. The reason isn’t simply benevolence. I need your armies to come with me to the surface afterward,” Zac said. “Immediately.”

“I am not questioning your motives, but I am a bit unclear on something,” one of the human councilors said. “Your force is strong enough to close four incursions without you even lifting a finger, something that would be impossible for us. If you still can’t deal with these zombies, what use are we?”

Zac sighed and explained the situation with the array, and the dozens of massive undead hordes that were still drawing the lines for the massive array.

“So you need more armies to take down the hordes and destroy the array, while you focus on the leaders in the middle...” Romal muttered in understanding.

The meeting kept going for a few hours, where Zac essentially reiterated the situation on the surface and the various threats that Earth still faced. It was easy to see that the gravity of the situation was causing some shock to the Councillors, but he kept narrating what was going on with brutal honesty.

Of course, there were some details that he left out, such as the disappearance of Abbot Everlasting Peace, the Dao Funnel, and the situation with the Mystic Realm. Everything was to push them toward the decision to join the fight without delay.

All three of the molemen on the council were in the top 5 on their ladder, and the lowest rank amongst the others was rank 20. All apart from one were also on the Dao Ladder. These people made a stronger faction than anyone on the surface, barring Port Atwood. Neither the Marshall Clan nor the New World Government could boast of having nearly as many peak elites.

Getting these people to the surface to fight the zombies was Zac’s greatest priority. The hours passed as the two factions ironed out the details until Zac finally left with his group in tow. A small smile adorned his face when he sat down in the car, and he didn’t even mind the chaotic swirl of people crammed around the vehicle as it drove through the streets.

Zac was quite pleased with the results of the meeting as he returned to the teleportation array with his group in tow. The Council was far more utilitarian compared to the shrewd Marshall Clan, and things were sorted out quite quickly. The Underworld Council would immediately join the battle against the Undead provided that the Fire Golems were dealt with.

They even went so far as to promise to bring their whole force, leaving just enough manpower to protect their settlements from the beasts in the area. All in all, they would bring almost two hundred thousand experienced warriors, and they would cover the teleportation expenses themselves.

Of course, Zac knew their choice was not only about saving Earth. They wanted to bring enough strength to secure a corner of the surface, turning it into their own kingdom. Zac could understand their decision, as Humans and Ishiate were ultimately not built to permanently live underground, and many would no doubt want to live under the blue sky again.

The Council didn't explicitly tell Zac about their plan, but their intentions were quite clear from their line of questions. Zac himself didn't mind at all, feeling their decision made sense. If it was one thing that new earth possessed in abundance, then it was free space. The expansion in size of the planet and the monumental losses amongst the four species had resulted in massive stretches of unclaimed land.

The amount of high-quality land was far more limited though, such as lands close to Nexus Veins or other valuable resources. Those kinds of places were few and far between, though Zac had already claimed a large percentage of those places through closing the Incursions.

The armies of the council would also participate in the upcoming battle. They would assault the massive area under the control of the Flame Golems from almost a dozen tunnel systems simultaneously in a bid to spread out the golems' forces. It would hopefully allow Zac to strike at the core with less resistance.

Zac felt the idea was perfect as he stepped through the teleporter to join his forces. The fight against the Fire Golems would essentially be a practice-run for their battle against the Lich King and his forces.

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**Chapter 369 - Heat**

"Finally out of the tunnels. We'll arrive in another eight hours or so," the Council liaison said as he walked next to Zac with quick steps.

His name was Murk, and he was one of the molemen who also possessed a ranger class. He was in charge of showing Zac's army the correct path in the underworld, as the roads leading to the Flame Golems were pretty confusing. The incursion itself was in a sense placed in the open underworld, but to get to that sector you first needed to pass a bunch of confusing tunnels.

There was no way that Zac would place the fate of his people in the hands of the Council Though, and the Tal-Eladar had over a hundred beasts scouting ahead for them as well. He personally didn't think that the council had any reason to betray him, but people were unpredictable.

"Come, let's train!" another voice piped up from the side, and Zac looked over at Emily who glared at him with some grievance in her eyes.

They had been traveling for over three days, as all settlements in the near vicinity of the Flame Golems had long been destroyed. The teenager wanted to make the most of the time, so she had insisted that the two would train with their axes. Zac knew part of it was to get her mind off the fact that her brother had passed away, and he happily obliged.

She was someone he had invested heavily in, and he wanted to make sure she'd get strong enough to protect herself.

"I'll get you this time," she muttered stubbornly.

“That’s great,” Zac smiled as he hoisted her up and flashed away with [Loamwalker].

He kept running for a couple of minutes until he found a secluded spot ahead of the army.

“We have 20 minutes or so before they catch up,” Zac said as he let the teenager down.

Emily didn’t hesitate to take out her two tomahawks from her cosmos sack, and they both started to radiate with chaotic energies. It was a continuation of her elemental axeman-archetype, and a new skill she got at level 35. This one wasn’t a support skill like the earlier one, but rather a pure offensive skill.

Zac smiled as he took out his billy club and a spare shield, and waved at her to start. She immediately disappeared, leaving a scorching mark on the ground, and the next moment she appeared behind him. One of her tomahawks were already in mid-swing, and it lit up with infernal fire.

Her new skill [Elemental Fury] looked confusingly similar to her elemental axes, apart from the fact that she needed to use a physical axe for the skill. She could essentially imbue her axes with an element of her choice, and the different elements would have varying effects. The skill allowed her to have a flexible and unpredictable fighting style, and Zac felt it was a good match to her chaotic and aggressive fighting style.

The flame-infusion would imbue her strikes to erupt into large explosions, causing widespread damage in the direction of her swings. There were also earth, lightning, ice, wind, each with their own effects. The only weakness was that she couldn’t use the same attack twice in a row, at least not while the skill was in middle mastery.

Zac already knew about the effects of the strikes from their earlier sparring sessions, and he smoothly moved his shield forward to block the swing mid-way. It didn’t interrupt the skill, but it caused the gout of fire to spread in all directions, effectively blocking Emily’s sight as Zac repositioned himself as he clubbed her on the back.

The teenager stumbled forward, but she smoothly turned the stumble into a confusing set of steps as she once again tried to take him down, this time using the freezing effect of her ice axe to rob him of his mobility. Zac played along and slightly slowed his speed, but she still couldn’t manage to land a hit as his shield always got in the way.

The fighting reached a stalemate lasting a few minutes, until Zac suddenly emitted a spike of killing intent toward her the moment she launched her attack. Emily’s face turned deathly pale and she quickly jumped five meters back, and she angrily stomped her foot in the ground as she waved her tomahawks in Zac’s direction.

“That’s cheating! You said you wouldn’t bully me with your levels. How is that not using your levels?” Emily sputtered.

“I had much denser killing intent than that by the time I was your level,” Zac laughed. “I know you wanted to quickly improve, so you’ve used a couple of E-Grade crystals while down here. But doing so has left you lacking in combat experience.”

“I’ve still gone fighting against Barghest every day until recently, and I’ve even fought against the beast on Mystic Island,” Emily countered with a sullen face.

“I know, but you’ve had demon guards and Valkyries protecting you,” Zac said. “You have not yet gone through a true baptism of life and death. It makes you a bit weak against killing intent. You have honed great battle instincts from training with good teachers, but you do not trust them when faced with a great threat.”

“So I should just run straight at someone radiating enough killing intent to blot out the sky?” Emily muttered skeptically. “Sounds like a good way to get killed early.”

“It’s about instinct and decisiveness,” Zac smiled. “You can never hesitate no matter if you decide to fight or flee. The problem was that you froze when I released the murderous aura. Your movement skill is pretty good, and your attributes are very high for your level, so you should have a decent chance to escape even if you meet someone stronger. Staying alive is the most important.”

Truthfully Zac was lying to Emily in his explanation. He was emitting a lot more killing intent than what he possessed when he was around level 40. He wanted to inoculate her against dense auras and massive killing intent, which would hopefully allow her to keep her wits about her in case she found herself against a stronger foe.

The teenager slowly nodded in understanding, and she took a deep breath to steady herself. Soon enough she was back at it, and she used everything in her repertoire as she tried to break past Zac’s defenses. She flitted about with surprising speed as she launched everything from fiery blasts up-close to wind blades from surprising angles in the distance.

Zac was extremely happy with her performance, and the only thing that he might feel could use some improvement was the lack of ruthlessness. The fighting felt clean and a bit synthetic, whereas he wished for a more efficient approach like the one that the Valkyries utilized.

They did everything in their power to kill their targets as quickly and efficiently as possible, no matter what they needed to do. They would attack groins or other weak spots, utilize hidden weaponry and the environment to their advantage. Emily still lacked that bit, and that was what he was trying to instill in her.

He had already noticed that she was a bit afraid to get hit in her face, the same as Average, which made him target it even further. Last time he had accidentally knocked her out with a kick, but even before then she often left with a whole number of bruises. Zac felt a bit bad, but he knew that the others on the island, except Alyn perhaps, didn’t dare to be ruthless enough against the teenager.

The feral teenager pulled out all the stops, but the results were the same. The army caught up with the two and Verana and Joanna shot amused looks at the swollen face of Emily.

“One of these days,” she muttered under her breath. “I’ll make your head swell up to the size of a beach ball.”

“You’ll need to get a lot stronger before you’ll have a chance of that,” Zac snorted.

It was their last sparring session as they were closing in on the Fire Golems, and the invaders could crop up any time. The army entered heightened alertness, in case of an ambush. But there were no signs of them even though they could see extremely far after exiting the tunnels. The ground was completely silent as well, indicating that there likely no golems hiding beneath them.

Zac had gotten a wealth of intelligence on the Flame Golems from the Council, and the invaders were almost hilariously easy to spot. The smallest golems were over two and a half meters tall, and they all had thick builds. It was like they were made from large black boulders stacked together, and where the stones were bound together by magma.

Their natural heat was enough for gouts of flames to erupt from their bodies at regular intervals, and they were essentially portable firework shows. Stealth was truly not their strong suit, which was why they could only ambush people by silently digging new tunnels until they were right next to you. Luckily the Demons possessed a few

Geomancers who were even more skilled than the molemen at detecting changes in the ground.

But there was no surprise attack forthcoming, and they soon enough reached the area of the Flame Golems. It was very different from the general gloom of the underworld, as the moss and dark pools of water were replaced with bubbling lakes of magma.

They were still two hours from the incursion itself but it felt like they were wandering into an active volcano, and the smell of Sulphur lay heavy in the air. The weaker people were already starting to sweat from the scorching heat, and Emily was forced to take off her thick furs with some complaint.

The peak F-Grade warriors were still unaffected by the heat that would make a normal mortal keel over in seconds, but Zac knew that most would be unable to exhibit their full power in the upcoming fight. The golems had truly gotten themselves a home-field advantage. Finally they reached the true core of the incursion, and Zac was shocked at the sight.

“This isn’t what you guys described,” Zac said with a frown as he turned to Murk.

“I-I don’t understand either,” the moleman said with wide eyes. “Our latest intelligence is less than two weeks old.”

The Flame Golem Incursion was situated inside what could best be described as a gargantuan pillar in the open underworld. It was tremendously wide, and walking around it would take over a week. Due to the environment around the pillar it was posited that the core of it might actually be an active volcano, with a pillar of magma that reached all the way to the surface.

The only way to get to the actual incursions was to enter one of the many tight tunnels and cracks that existed in the pillar.

That was why the Council didn’t take the same route as themselves. They started in towns on the opposite sides of the pillar, and they would assault the incursions from multiple directions that way. But there was a problem; the tunnel they were supposed to take was gone, replaced with a huge passage full of engraved pillars.

The new passage was hundreds of meters wide, and it reached even higher into the sky. They were quite some distance from the entrance but they still didn’t have any trouble making out the details due to their size.

The pillars looked almost as large as the towering Redwood mountains over at the Cradle of God, and even from the distance they were able to make out large fractals on all of them. Zac couldn’t be sure what they were made for, but he couldn’t imagine it was anything good.

It felt like the invaders had opened the doors wide open, daring them to enter their meticulously created battlefield. Verana and the other leaders of the army wore troubled faces as well, and Zac finally felt compelled to order a halt. The group of battlefield support quickly set up cooling arrays to ward off the heat, as staying this close would no doubt continuously drain people.

“What do you think?” Zac asked the others. “I know it’s a trap, but can you make out any details?”

“It looks like array towers,” Verana said. “The Tal-Eladar does not use that sort of fortifications, but they are a popular solution.”

Zac nodded, feeling the same way. The towers were reminiscent of a set of buildings that he was able to buy for Port Atwood, though his options were still pretty limited. Each tower was likely an array of its own, and it would be able to launch attacks at anyone close according to some preset instructions.

Such buildings usually had much greater firepower compared to arrays like his own Town Protection array that could attack a far larger area, but it also had a weakness. As long as the tower was destroyed the array would break. So it essentially was extremely lethal in a small area, and somewhat fragile.

But there were over a hundred pillars crammed in that small area as far as Zac could tell, and the army would be blasted from all directions if they entered.

“What should we do?” Joanna asked. “I don’t think we’ll be able to defend against that many towers even if we activate our War Arrays.”

Zac silently stared at the towers for a few seconds before he looked back at his group.

“We’ll wait until 10 minutes until the predetermined time for our joint assault. I’ll handle the towers.”

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**Chapter 370 - Array Towers**

Most people looked relieved to hear that Zac would take care of the array towers. Charging those things was to risk one’s life without the potential for any gains in levels, so they breathed out in relief when they heard they didn’t have to do that. However, Joanna and Emily looked worried when they heard that he would charge into that deathtrap alone.

“You’ll handle them?” the Murk said with barely contained skepticism. “Do you have any of your old world weaponry, like tanks? How about I contact the other forces? They might be able to help us.”

“It’s fine,” Zac said with a shake of his head before he turned to Verana. “Where’s Smaug?”

“He’s hiding amongst the rearguard,” the beast mistress leered. “He scurried back there the moment he saw the towers.”

Zac snorted and walked back to the end of the convoy, and he soon enough found the person he was looking for.

“I have decided I will defend the rear for you, lord,” Smaug immediately said when he saw Zac approach, emitting the aura of a brave warrior. “I am afraid I will just be in the way in such cramped quarters. My arrays cannot distinguish between friend and foe. It is truly a shame, but I will pray for your success as I will defend your backs with my life.”

“Isn’t that nice,” Zac snorted. “Don’t worry, I won’t make you go to the frontlines. That’s not why I brought you here. Do you have any more of those concussive arrays?”

“I can buy five right now, at 20 million each,” Smaug said with some relief in his eyes.

Zac sighed, but he nodded in agreement as he transferred the funds.

The concussive arrays were something that Smaug had procured while they fought the Underworld incursions. They were array crystals that essentially functioned as superpowered hand grenades. They caused a tremendous explosion in a somewhat contained area, and the arrays were great at utterly destroying fixed structures.

They weren't as efficient at taking down actual cultivators though, as they had a small delay that would allow most to move out of the way or activate their defenses. But they would be perfect for taking down a couple of towers each in case things went out of control.

"So you're really doing this thing?" Smaug hesitantly said as he looked at the rows and rows of tower arrays. "These golems aren't messing around, and I don't think that the turrets they've built will be anything to laugh at."

"I have enough cards up my sleeve to feel confident I'll survive for a while at least, and if it turns out to be too dangerous I'll back off," Zac sighed. "I can't send my people into such an obvious trap. They're not strong enough."

"It's not just fun and games to be on the top is it?" Smaug snorted. "At least you're also on the top of the Power ladder as well so people don't try to rob you every two days."

Zac could only let out a deep sigh in agreement as he walked away. It had been a bit odd to reacquaint himself with Smaug during the trip, as this excursion was the first time they met while he was in his human form. He had pulled out all the stops to ingratiate himself with Zac, doing everything from providing arrays from his limited license, to updating him on rumors or valuable deposits, to even trying to set him up with a few ladies.

His over the top enthusiasm was a bit hard to swallow, but it truly is difficult to punch a smiling face.

After he got the arrays he simply sat down on his prayer mat. It actually kept him cool even in this environment, and it allowed him to smoothly wait out the three hours until the agreed-upon time. The only interruption was that Murk confirmed that the other sides of the pillar were normal, but the closest tunnels had all been closed down or filled with lave.

It had elicited a short discussion about whether they should spend two days or so to head to the closest open tunnels instead of walking into this obvious trap. Zac Eventually decided that they would stay the course. The Golems had the means to close down the tunnels, and he didn't want to waste two days only to find that their new point of ingress had been closed as well.

A few daring scouts had dared to test out the pillars on the edges, and not surprisingly the towers were fire attuned. They all shot out balls of lava that were roughly the size of a soccer ball, and they both possessed kinetic force and fiery heat. The only upside was that it almost looked like they were dropped from the top of the tower rather than being shot, so their speed wasn't troubling.

The real trouble came from the fact that one tower could shoot out quite a few fireballs in a volley every five seconds, and there were over a hundred towers. If their army entered together they would be assaulted by a thousand lava balls in no time, and such an attack would cause massive losses.

The time finally arrived, and Zac hadn't figured out any better strategy than running straight in. He would take down the towers one by one without stopping, allowing him to avoid as many of the lava balls as possible.

A rain of fire from the sky almost completely blotted out the ceiling to welcome his arrival. They looked like fiery drops of rain, slamming down all around him. Zac blanked out for a second by the majestic sight, but he shook his head to snap out of it. He immediately appeared in front of the nearest tower with the help of **[Loamwalker]** and swung a large fractal edge toward the base. The blade was already imbued with his new and improved Seed of Sharpness, and it cut through the pillar without any trouble.

Unfortunately, that was it. The pillar still stood in the same position, as Zac's swing hadn't actually managed to move it at all. He could only take a few steps back and infuse himself with the Dao of heaviness as he tried to topple the thing over with a body slam. However, the collision must have looked like an ant trying to topple a tree, and Zac only managed to make the tower shudder a bit.

He could only summon a couple of more fractal blades and launch them at the tower as he danced around like a monkey to avoid the increasing amount of lava balls landing all around him. It was not exactly how he wanted to present himself, but it was the best he could do without wasting a huge amount of Cosmic Energy. Each blade was infused with the seed of heaviness this time, and the attacks slammed into the tower with the force of a truck.

The base was already completely cut through, so the attacks were enough to topple it without any problem. Zac's eyes lit up when he saw that he was able to destroy a tower without much effort, and he hoped that taking down the first tower would have a cascading effect. The towers were clustered quite close to each other, and he pushed it over in the direction of its closest neighbor.

But a shocking change took place the moment the tower started to topple. It lost all its structural integrity in an instant, and it quickly turned into a tube of lava that spilled down straight toward a gaping Zac. Even he didn't want to take a magma bath unless necessary, even though he was pretty sure he could withstand it for a second or two without getting seriously hurt. He flashed away with **[Loamwalker]** toward the next pillar instead, leaving a large pond of lava in his wake.

After the first experiment he started to get a hang of it, and the second tower only needed three quick swings with the help of his Dao Seeds and **[Chop]**. But the intensity of the lava balls only increased as he got within range of more and more towers, and he quickly became unable to dodge them all without being forced out of the entrance.

He was forced to bear the brunt of some of the attacks if he wanted to keep going, so he activated **[Nature's Barrier]** to block the handful of the lava balls dropped in his directions. Leaves were obviously not the greatest defense against fire, but with the help of the Dao of Trees they had an unyielding vitality that allowed them to knock the balls away before burning up.

However, as more and more hits struck his defense he realized that he would waste even more Cosmic Energy this way than if he simply unleashed a greater strike. After a short deliberation the energy around him started to surge, and the enormous forester's hatchet appeared behind him. His body strained under the pressure, but a wave of destruction rippled outward causing one tower after another to fall apart into pools of magma.

What better attack to destroy what looked like a bunch of stone trees than **[Deforestation]**?

The first swing of **[Deforestation]** was all he needed, as it destroyed over half the towers. He had already taken down around ten before that, and the big gap gave him a breather from the relentless bombardment of lava projectiles. There was no need to use his second swing for the remainders as he saw it. He instead threw out a couple of boulders to avoid stepping in lava and threw out his concussive arrays at the tightest clumps of towers.

Lava kept raining down from the falling towers, but the threat was dealt with thanks to his **[Axe of Felling]**. What remained was to simply take down the final towers with his Daos, and it only took a few minutes of his time. Zac signaled the army it was

fine to move forward after the final tower collapsed, and they quickly sped toward him as they vigilantly kept watch for any remnant defenses.

But it appeared that there were no hidden arrays, among the obvious towers, and the only remnant threat was the massive amount of magma that filled the whole entrance.

The army seemed to have anticipated this though, and the stronger warriors threw out one huge block of stone after another, effectively creating a wide bridge to pass. Zac nodded in appreciation as he jumped up on the bridge from one of his boulders, and the army entered the true Incursion together.

A pillar of the purest flames entered their sight the moment they stepped inside the cave where the golems had built their base. Zac first thought it was the volcano that the Council mentioned, but he soon realized it was the Incursion pillar itself, and it showed just how closely related to flames these golems were.

The other Incursions he had encountered had generally been simply color-coded to match the force, apart from the Undead Empire who had turned the pillar into a beacon of Miasma, where specters slowly circulated the beam.

The flame golems seemed to have the ability to do the same thing, as the Incursion was a huge red flame that almost blinded Zac when he looked at it. He swiftly turned his eyes away, a bit leery about whether the sight meant the golems were powerful enough to enjoy special treatment, or that it just looked that way because all the golems were fire-attuned.

Such musings would have to wait for later though, as he knew that they needed to act quickly. They hadn't spotted a single golem so far, which made Zac believe an ambush was just around the corner. Besides, his new allies were currently fighting the Golems according to Murk's report, and the longer it took for Zac to take down the leader the greater the losses would be among the Council's armies.

The group kept rushing closer and closer toward the Incursion Pillar, but they didn't see any structures anywhere. However, the inside of the enormous stone pillar was still a marvelous sight. These golems were not only insidious combatants who had no compunctions about drowning people in magma, but they were also great artisans.

The golems had for some reason decided to spend a massive amount of effort on thousands of sculptures, each of them a lifelike masterpiece. The motifs were almost always of nature, with everything from large trees to unfamiliar creatures lovingly carved out of transported stones, or even out of the ground itself. The only exception was a huge boulder placed on a hill in the distance, the only stone that looked completely untouched.

Most people thought it was some sort of art, but Zac immediately knew something was wrong, as the boulder actually made him feel threatened.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 371 - The Floor is Lava**

Since the suspicious boulder was placed alone on a hill it immediately garnered the attention of the others as well, and many exchanged glances in confusion.

"Did they just found a rock they really liked...?" Joanna muttered, seeming a bit discombobulated from the unexpected scenery around them.

But Zac didn't agree as he trusted his instinct on this matter.

“It’s dangerous,” Zac succinctly said shot out five fractal blades in rapid succession.

His hunch proved spot on because the large boulder suddenly burst into flames as it transformed into an enormous amalgamation of fire and rock. The stone split into around twenty pieces that made up its body and limbs. The golem reached over five meters in the air, and the air for tens of meters around it shuddered from the heat and power it radiated.

Lava seeped out between the cracks in the stone, and it slowly dripped on the ground. Mysterious fractals also appeared on the stones and the inscriptions shone with a red glimmer that contained obvious power.

“This is what the golems look like?” Emily muttered in disbelief from behind. “I don’t want to fight those things. I’ll get torched before even getting close.”

“No!” Murk shouted with fear. “This one is way bigger than the ones we’ve encountered, and the normal ones aren’t covered in fractals.”

“It’s a common cultivation method for golems,” Verana said. “They inscribe their bodies with Cosmic Pathways to allow energy to flow more naturally. This one is one of the generals, or more likely the leader itself.”

“I’ll test it out,” Zac muttered as he glared at the enemy from the distance. “Give me a power boost.”

Emily nodded and she threw a burning axe into his back. Zac felt like lava coursed through his veins before the effect stabilized. He chose the axe that gave Strength and Dexterity since he wanted to finish that thing as quickly as possible. Between his own prowess and Emily’s boost he didn’t fear the golem even if it radiated a greater pressure than even the Demon Lord did.

He disappeared in an instant, and a row of cracks in the ground was the only clue of his path as he rushed forward with the help of his movement skill. He was right in front of the golem in less than a second, and he felt a scorching heat from the Golem’s Dao Field. He felt his skin smarting after just a second, but he breathed out in relief as he guessed that the golem didn’t seem to possess a fragment.

The effect of the Dao field was only slightly stronger than his own Peak fields, where the extra boost came from the golem being in E-Grade. He immediately released a Dao Field containing heaviness, which hopefully would restrain his enemy a bit.

The golem was expecting Zac’s arrival, and its huge fist looked like a small sun as it soared toward him. Zac immediately summoned a fractal edge and imbued it with Heaviness, opting to clash with the enemy head-on. The clash caused a storm of fire to explode far into the sky, but Zac imbued his body with the Seed of Trees to recover from the small burns.

Cracks appeared in the ground as the Golem stumbled a few steps backward from the initial clash, and Zac immediately knew that the golem had around 700 Strength at best. It would be an insurmountable power for most people, but Zac’s effective strength was over a thousand between his high-grade titles and Emily’s boost.

The edge from **[Chop]** detached itself from **[Verun’s Bite]** and Zac controlled his blade to harass the golem from behind, as he mounted another assault from the front. The golem lit up in a blaze of flames in response, and the fractals on its chest started to emit an even stronger red light than before.

The already huge creature suddenly grew to twice its size, and Zac sensed real danger from it. He managed to cut off a large chunk of rock from its leg with a few furious swings as it transformed, but it wasn’t enough to interrupt the transformation. The intensity of flames around it had increased by at least a tier, and Zac was forced to dismiss his independent fractal edge.

The blazing heat from the Golem King's body caused constant strain on the blade, and Zac was forced to infuse it with a huge amount of Cosmic Energy if he wanted to keep it going. It was more economical to use **[Chop]** to create disposable blades that only lasted one swing. Zac realized that the transformation had caused the golem's flames to increase in intensity, but Zac was still overpowering it in raw strength.

Chunks of rock kept falling as Zac systematically dismantled it, stoically enduring the accumulating burns on his body. The Golem King furiously tried all kinds of attacks to take Zac out, but it wasn't strong enough to crush him and the Seed of Trees kept restoring Zac's burns. It released a deep bellow and slammed both its huge fists downward. Zac didn't want to block such a swing without reason, so he quickly jumped up to avoid the strike, aiming a strike at its head.

The two fists cause a massive earthquake in the area, but Zac managed to cut off a decent chunk of one of its shoulders. But a sense of worry crept into Zac's heart as the rumblings didn't abate, but only got worse. Zac finally realized what was going on, and he turned to the people who were keeping a defensive perimeter in the distance.

"RUN!"

Pandemonium arrived a second later, as an endless amount of lava spewed up from the ground, creating a tidal wave that crashed in the direction of Port Atwood's Forces. It pushed forward with shocking speed, rapidly closing in on the fleeing warriors. Was the Golem trying to retaliate by killing his people?

Zac grit his teeth in fury as he jumped at the golem to launch another mighty swing, but the creature countered with another punch with its barn door-sized fist. Gravel rained down along the slope from a huge jagged wound that ran all the way along the Golem's arm, but Zac was in turn launched away like a rocket from the eruption of fire the fist released.

A plume of smoke made a streak through the air as Zac was thrown back almost a hundred meters, but he landed on his feet without an issue. He made no attempts to run back up the hill, and instead opted to run back toward his fleeing army. Getting thrown back was just Zac borrowing the golem's momentum, as the huge thing wouldn't be able to push him if he didn't allow it.

He used **[Loamwalker]** to the limit to get back in time, but the distance between his forces and the huge wave of lava kept shrinking. He knew that if that wave hit there would be serious casualties, as far from all of them were equipped to resist an attack of that magnitude.

But he was one with the earth as his steps took him closer and closer to the wave, and he finally caught up. The wave was simply massive by this point, and it shone with an almost blinding light. But Zac didn't hesitate as he started running on top of the malleable magma, ignoring the pain of his bare soles.

Smoke sizzled from his feet causing his eyes to tear up from the pain, but Zac only kept running. Unfortunately bad turned to worse when he realized he was starting to sink, even with his tremendous speed. In just two seconds he was already to his knees, and he started to sink faster and faster. The lava felt like quicksand, and the pain was quickly becoming unbearable.

The fractals on his robe lit up with a beautiful glimmer, but Zac had no time to admire the defensive charge his gear contained as he hurriedly pushed through the lava. Even with the protection of his top-quality gear he was still subject to tremendous heat, and he felt like a lobster getting boiled alive.

His legs strained as he waded through the viscous magma until he finally broke out on the other side, and his eyes were met with the scene of a few Valkyries

desperately erecting defensive shields with the help of their War Array. Zac shook his head as he immediately realized such a wall would not hold against what he just forced his way through, and he took out an item from his Cosmos Sack with a sigh.

A refreshing scent spread across the area as Zac spread out across the area as he had activated his Dao Field for the Dao of Trees, and the next moment a miraculous sight took place. An impossibly dense jumble of thorned brambles spread out for over two hundred meters in an instant, and they grew to twice the height of the sea of lava.

It was [**Bramble Wall**], the second ace in his repertoire that he found during the hunt. He had already used his [**Void Ball**] against the Cyborg, but he had kept this item all this time since it was an item of protection rather than destruction.

This was the choice he made. He could have likely destroyed the Golem King if he was given another minute, but that would have cost the lives of a large group of his own people. He had already cut off a third of its volume, and he couldn't imagine that didn't count as a grievous wound. But Zac had forcibly resisted the whispers of malice in his mind and literally ran through fire to protect his people.

Unfortunately it was all too obvious that a wall of brambles wasn't the optimal defense against lava, and Zac could see how the vegetation was slowly getting decimated even though the brambles rapidly regrew with shocking ferocity. Zac scrambled for ideas and quickly tried to infuse the roots with the Dao of Trees.

It gave no response, even though the two concepts should have matched. He could only try the Seed of Sanctuary as well since he was out of options. This time it actually worked, and the roots lit up with a slightly golden hue, making them slightly fire-resistant. The spread and effect of his Dao Seed were far greater than he expected, and an idea formed in his mind that he quickly confirmed.

**Sanctuary (Peak): Endurance +50, Intelligence +20, Wisdom +50.**

It was another mid-fight breakthrough. The past weeks had made him better realize the duty of a leader, and his decision to give up his own goal for the safety of his people inadvertently helped him push through the final step. He was already close to evolving the seed due to the two iterations of Dao Visions, but this fight gave him the final push.

The bramble wall was still getting scorched by the sea of lava, but the roots managed to last far longer with the help of the Dao of Sanctuary. It even slowly gained thickness due to the regrowth. Zac breathed out in relief, knowing that his army was safe for now.

"How can we help?" Joanna asked from behind.

"I think the Golem King used a skill that was massively empowered by the environment. We'll just wait it out. Have people move back just in case," Zac said before he jumped up on the wall of brambles to see what was going on.

The Golem lord still stood in the distance, and it looked like it was infusing power into the ground, making it spew out more and more magma like a real volcano. Zac frowned at the scene, knowing that their time was limited. The bramble would only keep regenerating new roots for twenty or thirty more seconds, while the Golem King seemed to just be getting started.

"Throw your [**Extinguishing Arrays**] over the wall! Buy me a couple of seconds!" Zac shouted as energy started to surge in his forearm.

The huge fractal hand emerged and shot toward the golem with blinding speed. The creature immediately noticed the new threat, and a large fractal appeared in the air behind it. Out of the fractal a white-hot flame emerged, and it actually appeared to be alive as it took a slightly humanoid shape, forming a head and two fanged arms.

“An elemental!” Verana shouted with some surprise. “Is that thing a Summoner?”

Zac frowned as he looked at the inscribed hand who was suddenly beset by a barrage of flame attacks of the elemental. His own hand started to blister and crack from the transmitted heat, but he grit his teeth as he flooded **[Nature’s Punishment]** with the Seed of Trees, allowing it to continuously regenerate its burnt parts.

It finally managed to arrive above the elemental and Golem who still kept infusing the ground with energy. The large fractal beneath the hand appeared next, just like it did during the battle against the undead. But no mountain emerged from the fractal, but something else entirely.

It was instead an endless torrent of water that spewed out of the fractal, making it look like the other end of the array was at the bottom of an ocean.

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**Chapter 372 - Deluge**

An unceasing deluge of water rushed out of the array in the sky, crashing into everything below in an instant. This was the true power of reaching peak mastery of **[Nature’s Punishment]**. Nature took many shapes and forms, and the earth was just one of them. Another type of punishment of nature was the relentless waves on the ocean, crushing anything in its path.

Just like the Golem King had his ocean of fire, so did Zac have an ocean of his own.

The elemental had summoned an enormous wall of flames to block out the water, and the clash of the two opposing forces caused thick clouds of steam to spread for kilometers in every direction. Some of the water also spilled over on the sea of lava, which helped to cool it down somewhat. Zac’s vision was completely blocked out in just a second, so he could only keep pouring energy into his skill to keep it going while maintaining vigilance for surprise attacks through the haze.

Zac was starting to worry that his bramble wall would crumble before he finished the fight, but a high-pitched shriek echoed across the cave after ten seconds or so. The wail caused Zac’s mind to blur for a second and almost made him fall off the wall of brambles. But luckily he had learned his lesson after encountering the mental bell, and he had kept **[Mental Fortress]** active and fully charged during the whole battle.

It only took an instant for him to once again stabilize his mind, and he sensed a stream of Cosmic Energy entering his body. Something had been killed by his attack, and Zac guessed it was the elemental judging from the shriek. However, the surge of energy only felt like one kill, and Zac guessed that the Golem King was still alive. Eventually he couldn’t maintain his skill any longer, and the torrential downpour ended.

The problem was that he couldn’t see anything past a few meters ahead due to the massive amount of mist in the air. He hadn’t really thought about this problem when he decided to attack with water, he simply wanted to cool down the lava and extinguish the burning Golem. But the Golem could be anywhere at this moment, as the Elemental staved off the water for almost ten seconds, giving the Golem ample time to move out of the way.

An attack could come from anywhere as things stood.

“Stay together, shout out if you sense something!” Zac shouted to the people below.

It at least became apparent that the golem no longer was infusing energy into the ground to pour out more lava, as the moving wall of molten stone had stopped, and large parts had already cooled down enough for it to become solid again. Zac briefly considered running back on top of the lava to scout out the area, but he soon enough gave up that idea.

The Golem had already shown its willingness to target his army, and he needed to be close-by in case it was preparing another assault.

“Do you have any means to sense where the golem is?” Zac asked Verana who stood next to him.

“I’m afraid not,” Verana said with a shake of her head. “I think it’s best to simply wait a few minutes for the haze to disperse before deciding what to do next.”

Zac had to reluctantly agree, even though it felt like giving the enemy time to prepare their next attack. After two minutes the bramble wall started to rapidly disintegrate, rotting with a speed visible to the naked eye. It wasn’t Zac that was doing anything, but it was likely just the natural life cycle of that odd plant. It rapidly grew for a few minutes before its life ended.

Another ten minutes passed where Zac vigilantly walked around the army as a guard, trying to find any clues in the slowly dispersing mist. Every minute that went by made his nerves even more frayed, and his mind even started to play tricks on him. Every small movement in the shadows soon enough felt like a hidden ambush by the golems, and he had to restrain himself from launching fractal edges in all directions.

But no attack appeared, and when the mist finally dispersed they only saw a desolate landscape devoid of a single Golem. Zac was a bit confused, as it felt like the golems missed the perfect opportunity to strike back. After going over his options he ordered the army to resume their approach toward the core of the Incursion.

But the group only walked for one minute when he got a prompt from the System, telling him that the Incursion was closed. That could only mean that the Golem Lord had died or that he had left through the nexus hub. The news quickly spread among the people since the Valkyries still had their quest for a few more days, and they noticed that their quest progress had advanced by one.

“The whole invasion has probably left already,” Verana guessed as they kept moving toward the Incursion with greater speed. “The moment that golem realized how strong you were it launched its ultimate attack at us, wanting to create an opportunity to escape.”

“They weren’t even willing to properly fight it out? Things might have become different if the Golem brought helpers and some arrays,” Zac said with confusion. “This approach feels a bit different from how the other invaders have reacted. They usually go a bit further.”

“Golems don’t think like us. They generally don’t have emotions, and concepts like honor or revenge are foreign to them. They likely made a calculation that the risks of staying outweighed the potential reward, and immediately left,” Verana guessed.

Zac could only shake his head in disbelief, feeling like he had been robbed of a proper conclusion. These golems really left a sour taste in one’s mouth, causing so much trouble for Earth but not having the decency to allow the natives to retaliate.

Verana’s suspicions were soon enough confirmed when they saw the harried armies of the Council arriving from the other directions as they converged around the Nexus Hub. It turned out that the golem armies had entered a heated struggle against the Council’s armies, contesting every single meter. The golems even held the advantage, but they suddenly fled with shocking speed, only leaving a token force behind to curtail the advance of the Council.

Every single golem that stayed behind fought to its death, even going so far as to detonate themselves in a final attempt to delay the army. Zac realized it was all to let as many as possible flee through the Nexus Hub, and he was speechless at learning they golems were just as ruthless against themselves as they were against others.

He had never encountered a force that would leave behind a tenth of their people like that, and that those people would fight with such rabid ferocity. Perhaps only forces who reared death sworn warriors could do something like that and trust in the results of the rearguard.

Another unfortunate result of the extreme decisiveness of the Golems was that the whole area around the Nexus Hub was completely picked clean. It was just a flat surface, and it looked like the golems had even taken their houses with them as they left through the Hub. There were no stores of resources, no gear or weaponry to loot, nothing.

Even Zac who had fought two pretty taxing battles couldn't properly rest and go over the battle, and he started to run around to look for valuables with the rest of the party. He already had a sour taste in his mouth after not being able to kill the Golem King, and that only got worse when he realized he might be losing a bunch of money on the venture.

But Joanna finally came over with some good news after a few minutes.

"They've found something," Joanna said as she walked up to Zac.

"What?" Zac said with bright eyes, hoping to make at least some money from the Incursion.

"Tunnels, lots of them," Joanna said, making Zac blankly look at her.

What was so special about a bunch of tunnels?

Murk came over as well, and when he heard their exchange and Zac's subsequent confusion he immediately explained the situation.

"The underworld is surprisingly flat, with its elevation only diverging a few hundred meters at most. The most common exception seems to be mines containing spiritual-grade resources," he excitedly explained. "And we've already found indicators what this place holds!"

"So what resources are there?" Zac asked as he got infected by the moleman's exuberance.

"It's a Nexus Crystal Mine!" the moleman said with a wide grin.

"Oh," Zac said, his excitement noticeably waning.

He already had his own Crystal Mine on the island. Port Atwood also gained another 6 mines in the Underworld, though they were far worse than his original mine since they didn't sit right on top of a Nexus Vein.

"You don't understand," Murk said with almost glowing eyes. "I've never seen a mine of this size. Our early estimates say it covers the whole area beneath the pillar, perhaps reaching even further. But that's not the most important thing!"

Zac curiously looked on as the moleman took out a raw Nexus crystals shining with scorching radiance.

"Attuned Crystal? E-Grade?" Zac whistled with surprise. "You think there are more?"

"We only found the one so far, a scout accidentally cracked a small boulder and found this one inside. But if there is one crystal like this, then there are surely more. This might be the greatest mine in the Underworld," the moleman said, almost dancing in place.

Zac nodded in agreement, feeling it made sense the golems were placed here considering their attunement. But he also remembered that the golems only kept to themselves during the start since the integration. Had they mined everything already?

“Don’t worry,” Murk said when he saw Zac’s hesitation “The Council got their hands on a measuring array that detects spiritual resources, and it’s indicating there are still vast resources remaining as long as we go a bit further into the mines. The crystals that were easiest to access might be gone already, but not even the Golems could take it all in a couple of months. Besides, the crystals will regrow.”

“I want a detailed survey as soon as possible,” Zac said, his heart finally starting to thump with excitement.

He knew he had gotten his hand on a huge treasure this time, and he wanted to get a feeling of just how huge it was. E-Grade Fire-Attuned Nexus Crystals weren’t that rare in the multiverse, and even his Top Grade Beast Crystals were worth more.

But the whole Beast Crystal mine would fit in a small side-tunnel of the massive network beneath their feet. There were only 200 top-grade Beast Crystals, but there might be tens of thousands of attuned Nexus Crystals in his newly acquired mine. And with a mine of this magnitude there might even be the possibility of D-Grade crystals appearing in the bottom, or at least in the future as Earth matured.

“We’d be happy to explore the mine together with you in the upcoming weeks,” the moleman quickly said, his whiskers shuddering with excitement. “Our people can provide both insight and efficiency to any mining operation.”

Zac only smiled in response, making no decisions on the spot. The Council had already agreed that the Incursion and it’s surrounding area would fall under his control, but the council would gain a 15% stake in any wealth from this place due to their assistance. The size of the stake had been the largest point of contention in the meeting a few days ago, but Zac ended the discussion with a simple fact. If they had the capability they would have long closed the Incursion themselves.

But the Council could still boost their income even further if they were the ones who did all the work since no one would work for free. He would have to check with one of his administrators if Port Atwood could handle such a massive venture themselves.

“Did we find any stores of already mined crystals? Like a store-room by the entrance of the mine?” Zac asked as an afterthought.

“None, and we’ve gone so far as to frisk the people who entered the mines to make sure they’re not hiding anything,” Joanna said. “I think the golems already found out about the fate of the other Incursions, and they already had one foot out the door before we even arrived. The Golem Lord simply tested your power, and when he noticed your strength he immediately gave the order to return.”

Zac sighed and nodded, feeling that what she said made sense. The golems had time for an orderly evacuation, so it was no surprise that they would also have taken their things. Still, the mine alone was a huge get, though it was unlikely he would be able to extract anything too valuable before he left for the Tower.

The Councillors were already closing in on him from the distance, no doubt hoping to renegotiate the deal after finding out about the riches below. Zac could only smile at their approach, feeling that they only had themselves to blame for the situation. The Council had so many powerhouses, yet they hadn’t closed a single Incursion. They were too tame, and consequently they were unaware that great riches could always be found close to the Incursions.

Zac was a bit wrung dry from the fight though, and he was in no mood for a haggling session. He simply threw out a couple of arrays on the ground and told Joanna

that he needed to rest after the fight. The Valkyrie nodded and moved to intercept the Councilors, immediately shutting down any attempts to discuss the mine.

The array disks isolated the small space from the hubbub outside, and Zac sat down on the ground after making sure that none of the Councilors were brazen enough to push through his arrays. It was true that he needed to recuperate after the fight, and he took out an E-Grade Nexus Crystal.

But the real reason was that he wanted to go over his other gains.

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**Chapter 373 - Desecration**

Zac had sensed a few improvements during the battle, but he didn't feel comfortable checking things out while he was still in the middle of battle, waiting for a potential ambush. But now it was about time he looked things over.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**75**

**Class**

**[F-Rare] Hatchetman**

**Race**

**[E] Human**

**Alignment**

**[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist**

**Limited Titles**

**Frontrunner**

**Dao**

**Seed of Heaviness - Peak, Seed of Trees - Peak, Seed of Sharpness - Peak, Seed of Hardness - High, Seed of Sanctuary - Peak, Seed of Rot - High**

**Core**

**[F] Duplicity**

**Strength**

**773 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 140%]**

**Dexterity**

**400 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]**

**Endurance**

**1108 [Increase: 70,5%. Efficiency: 140%]**

**Vitality**

496 [Increase: 55,5%. Efficiency: 140%]

**Intelligence**

196 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

**Wisdom**

299 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]

**Luck**

149 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]

**Free Points**

0

**Nexus Coins**

[F] 185 744 753

His attributes, mainly Endurance and Vitality, had taken a large leap forward. But he noticed that he had gained more attribute points than expected, and he looked at the usual source of unexpected boosts; his title list.

**[Promising Specialist: Reach 1000 points in a single attribute before evolving to E-Grade. Reward: All stats +5, Endurance +5%.]**

Zac had mixed feelings of seeing his new title, realizing it might cause some turbulence in his cultivation path. He had gained more Endurance and survivability, but the result of the title itself might prove problematic for his future progression. He had likely gotten the class option for Big Game Hunter due to his Apex Hunter-title, and he was worried the same thing would happen now that he was closing in on his next selection.

Would the system try to force him into another tank class now that it considered him a specialist? Yrial even mentioned that the System only allowed people to pick Classes that would suit their talents.

It might not be the first time that someone got 1000 points into the wrong attribute by accident, but Zac reckoned that it was extremely rare at best. He would much rather have gotten the title for reaching 1000 points in Strength, but beggars couldn't be choosers at a time where he desperately needed power-ups. Hopefully the title only meant that he would get an additional option for a tank class without losing his other options during his evolution.

Zac was actually a bit surprised that the title only appeared now. He had already passed 1000 Endurance in his human form even before his latest improvements, but he didn't get the title then. Perhaps the System didn't count boosts like **[Forester's Constitution]** to avoid people cheating with the help of skills like **[Hatchetman's Rage]** and Emily's boosts.

His gain in attributes wasn't actually what he wanted to look for when he sat down, even though it was a welcome bonus. It was the fact that he sensed something change in his movement skill as he ran atop the lava. He still sunk into the molten rock in the end, but he managed to move quite a bit faster than he used to, allowing him to catch up to his squad with record-speed.

As expected he saw that **[Loamwalker]** had reached Late Mastery, and even **[Nature's Barrier]** had improved a step as well. He wasn't quite sure what made the skills suddenly evolve, but he was happy to take it. Both had been subject to lava before they broke through, perhaps that was a clue to push the two skills one step further?

Zac closed the screens after seeing the changes, but he didn't exit the arrays just yet. He first summoned the emerald leaves out of curiosity, and he noticed that

the defensive skill didn't have any great changes. The leaves were larger, and they seemed to contain more energy. Zac deactivated the skill and focused on restoring his Cosmic Energy for two hours as he tried to familiarize himself with his improved Dao Seed next.

The two intense fights had not been too draining, apart from the final strike with **[Nature's Punishment]**. His energy was soon enough at an acceptable level, at which point he exited the array. Zac wryly smiled when a few councilors ran up to him. He had seen them impatiently walking back and forth in the distance while he sat in his array.

The Underworld Council had sent four of the human councilors, perhaps in hopes that Zac would be more amenable to give some concessions to his own people, but they were sorely mistaken. Their roundabout questions of reopening negotiations regarding the mine were immediately shut down. Zac made no decisions on the spot, as he had people better suited at figuring out a plan for the mine than himself. He would let them deal with it while he focused on the Incursions.

But Zac still stayed on to discuss a few other topics, and the meeting took 20 minutes before Zac excused himself. The members of the Underworld Council could only watch in disappointment as Zac bought a teleportation array and disappeared in a flash of light.

The council needed twelve hours before they got their real armies ready, and Zac left a few people to help guide them to the main continent. He wasn't too worried about them trying to doublecross him and take control of the town above, as he had made backup plans.

Mr. Trang and his squads had been busy setting up not one but three back-up towns on the unexplored continent, making sure that Zac never lost the means to get back. If the Council tried something he could descend upon them within a day. A transit station on a separate island from Port Atwood had also been set up, meaning that there was no risk of his town getting infiltrated.

The air on Port Atwood smelled extraordinarily fresh as he stepped out of the teleportation array. He headed over to the Academy when he couldn't find his sister anywhere, and he found her in the middle of setting up the arrays she mentioned the other day. A new and completely circular structure was being erected, and Zac could see that it held three very distinct layers just like they had discussed.

Ogras and the army had left a few days ago as planned, and they rejoined the extremely harried Sino-Indian Alliance to finally stop the second zombie horde in its tracks. The demon had even entered a heated battle against the Zombie General in the air above the sea of undead, though neither was able to gain an advantage according to the report.

The fight ended with both of them backing away, with Ogras sporting light wounds. Zac guessed that the demon wanted to solidify his Dao through battle, so he had sought out the strongest opponent he could find. Hopefully it would pay dividends with the funnel later. The fact that they managed to force one of the main armies to a halt was a great sign, but he wasn't sure how long they could keep it up after Ogras left the frontlines.

But it would hopefully buy them a couple of more days before the enormous array truly activated, which was great since Kenzie needed some more time to prepare.

Zac couldn't just sit around and wait until the array was finished, and he was torn between a few options. He first considered joining the battle against the Undead Horde, but eventually discarded the idea. He needed to fight in his Draugr-form since

he lacked two levels, and he didn't want to alert the Undead Empire about that persona unless necessary.

Eventually he decided to take down another surface incursion in the meantime, as many of the invaders still focused on enriching themselves rather than helping in the fight against the Undead Empire. He had no problem with using those people like a whetstone for his final levels.

Seeing the Flame Golem's actions were also a bit worrying, filling Zac with some urgency. It would become a problem if the invaders decided to follow suit and escape through the Nexus Hub before Zac could get his hands on them. It would both result in loss of experience for him, and that the massive wealth they plundered from stolen land would be permanently lost.

He wanted to take down as many as possible before they cashed out and fled to their homeworlds, and Zac guessed that many were already planning on leaving due to the Undead Empire.

So he ordered a Valkyrie who was on standby in the Academy to head over to the Fire Golem Incursion and tell his elite squad to join him. Soon enough Verana and a squad of elites met up with 'Mr. Black' outside a teleporter in a town hidden in the wilderness. Apart from Verana and Tylia there was also Harvath and his squad of demons.

Smaug had somehow joined the squad as well, and he looked about ready to cry as he looked up at the sky. He stood still like he was frozen and took one deep breath after another.

"Wait, we have two suns now?" the merchant finally exclaimed after a few seconds.

"And four moons," Joanna smiled.

"Four of them? Wonder if there are treasures up there just waiting for the first person strong enough to grab them," the demon muttered.

"Most moons are pretty desolate places," Verana said from the side. "Few of them have a planet core that generates Cosmic Energy. But those that do are often turned into private residences as the density of Cosmic Energy becomes pretty extraordinary. There would no doubt be treasures for the first explorers at such a place."

Smaug whistled with interest before he finally looked down again and joined the squad as they finished their preparations. All of them looked rested and ready for battle, which wasn't surprising since Zac had essentially carried out the whole battle against the golems himself.

The group set out without preamble, and things went as expected. After having fought against four above-average Incursions in the unfamiliar terrain of the Underworld, assaulting a much weaker Incursion on the surface provided little challenge for the group.

The moment they reached the incursion Verana silently summoned Grub, and Zac jumped on its head before they rammed the defensive array. The two had acted as a wall breaking team a few times already, and the defenses that the invaders set up proved far too weak to handle their assault. It cracked like brittle glass, and a handful of the feathered humanoids of the incursion coughed up blood from the backlash.

Zac jumped down from Grub and stomped in the ground, teleporting himself over to a section of the invader army where a group of birdmen emitting the powers of E-grade warriors stood. He directly activated [**Profane Seal**], for the first time seeing the skill after he managed to upgrade it to Middle Mastery.

The five sinister towers had gotten an addition of five gates that were placed in the gap between the towers themselves. It looked a bit funny with gates that had open space on both sides, but they emitted a terrifying enough aura for anyone to take them seriously.

Zac couldn't figure out any purpose of the gates apart from the fact that he sensed he was able to open and close them at will. It was pretty convenient as it would allow him to get reinforcements while he fought inside the cage.

On top of the gates the same types of azure fractals as the ones on top of the towers hovered, each of them summoning another spectral chain. Unfortunately, they didn't seem to be much stronger since he upgraded the skill, meaning that a strong warrior would be able to rebuff or break them.

But Zac had already found another usage of the chains as he only commanded five of them to start harassing the Incursion leader and the two guards he had by his sides. The other five started to whip around the large number of birdmen who were also caught inside the large cage as well.

Streams of energies almost immediately started to flood into his body as he started to fight the leader with the help of **[Hunger]** and **[Unholy Strike]**. It was the chains that managed to impale one of the average warriors after another, killing them before the corpses were dragged along toward the next victim.

A few of the warriors survived having their torsos penetrated by the spectral chains, and wails and screams of fear started to echo in the area as the chains ruthlessly started to drain them of their life-force. In just a minute the chains were studded by rows of desiccated husks as they whirled around in the air, creating a truly horrifying spectacle completely irreverent of the dead.

He finally understood what the profane part of the skill name was referring to.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 374 - Dao of the Axe**

Seeing the horrifying display of his skill Zac's resolve started to waver, but he soon steeled his heart. He had already confirmed with the Marshall Clan that this particular Incursion hadn't shown any mercy, and quite a large number of people had been enslaved and killed by them. Besides, getting killed by a swing of an axe was only marginally better than getting hollowed out by the spectral chains.

The birdman leader screeched in rage as he saw his underlings getting culled one by one, and he desperately tried to take Zac down. He had some sort of wind-related class, and he moved with tremendous speed to attack Zac from various angles like flashes of lightning. One wound after another started to appear on Zac's body as though they came from nowhere, but Zac didn't mind in the slightest.

Undying Bulwark was truly the nemesis of Dexterity-based warriors. He wasn't able to block out the skills, but why should he even try? In less than thirty seconds the birdman general was drenched in blood from his own attacks. The ghosts from **[Deathwish]** had dragged him into a dance of death, and there was no way that Zac wouldn't be the last one standing in such a struggle. Zac himself had quite a few flesh wounds, but it was nothing a normal healing pill wouldn't fix in a couple of hours.

Soon enough the birdman leader gave up on the assault and caused a rain of blood when he shot toward the wall of **[Profane Seal]**. But he couldn't even escape the

ghosts over on the other side of the cage, and he finally fell with an anguished wail when he unleashed a flurry of wind blades against one of the towers.

The battle was pretty much over by that point, as almost all of the trapped warriors had already fallen to the onslaught of the combination of the chains and the corrosive mists from **[Winds of Decay]**. The remaining warriors outside had long given up, and they frantically fled toward the Nexus Hub along with the non-combat invaders. They were all essentially walking Nexus Crystals, but Zac allowed the survivors to leave through the Hub even though he desperately needed to gain levels.

This was something he had already decided on earlier. He wouldn't start slaughtering people indiscriminately in pursuit of power, and he would stop the moment the fight was over. Besides, he had already killed the leader and his two generals, and those three alone were worth far more Cosmic Energy compared to the remaining army combined.

The whole town was completely desolate in less than ten minutes, and the usual process of integrating the area into a part of Port Atwood began. A group of professionals from Port Atwood immediately streamed out of the Teleportation Array less than 30 minutes after it was built. His people had become experts at quickly and efficiently integrating conquered incursions, from emancipating slaves to sniffing out all valuables in the area.

Zac sat down, as usual, to go over the battle and recuperate. He didn't have any major gains from the battle just as he expected, but it did allow him to become slightly more accustomed to his improved Dao and skills, including the Dao of Sharpness he didn't really get to showcase against the Golems.

The power of his Seed of Sharpness was amazing by this point, and his very presence was dangerous to people who had yet Evolved. Small cuts would appear on their bodies, quickly accumulating to the point that they started to get seriously hurt. Even the weaker of the evolved were slightly affected by the Dao Field, and while he wasn't able to draw blood it looked like their concentration was impacted by the constant scratching of invisible blades.

Zac himself only waited out the 8-hour time limit while resting, and pondering on the results of the battle. The most interesting thing was the upgraded version of **[Profane Seal]**. The additional structures made him look forward to how the skill would look when he reached the peak. Would it create a whole fortress with an impenetrable wall?

The only unfortunate aspect of the skill was that he wasn't able to infuse it with a Dao, which caused the chain's effect on strong opponents to be pretty limited. The Demon Lord had directly rebuffed them with a fiery aura, and the Cyborg simply disintegrated them with its aura. Perhaps the chains would have lasted longer if he could have infused them with the Dao of Hardness.

Perhaps the skill was the same as **[Deforestation]**. It was a skill given by an Epic class, and maybe those had higher requirements on the Dao to be used, and perhaps he was even expected to have formed a Fragment from Sanctuary and Hardness by this point if going by the class archetype. But he was dragged out of his musings before reaching a conclusion as Verana walked toward him.

"Your strength is getting pretty shocking," Verana said as she sat down next to him. "I am starting to wonder if our presence is even needed when you take down these Incursions. You are becoming an army unto your own."

"I still need people to stabilize the situation outside the cage," Zac said with a shake of his head. "It seems the seal is far weaker from the outside. Besides, it's good training for the future elites of Port Atwood."

“Still, it makes me expectant for the future. It is not often you get to see the ascent of a true powerhouse,” Verana sighed.

Zac’s initially smiled, but suddenly looked over at the Beast Master with suspicion.

“Okay, what do you want?” Zac asked.

“Tylia told me about the Beast Crystals after we closed the Golem Incursion,” Verana said with a roll of her eyes as she sat down in front of him.

“I’m sorry, there’s only so many in my hands,” Zac said. “And we have quite a few beasts in Port Atwood as well.”

“I am guessing you have gotten your hands on a mine though,” Verana said. “More crystals will grow.”

Zac didn’t deny that, as it was pretty obvious he wouldn’t just find one high-grade Beast Crystal randomly lying in a corner of the Underworld.

“You should know that we never planned on staying on your planet for a hundred years, but here we are. Our reserves will not last that long. We’d like to buy a share in the mine itself to secure supply,” the Tal-Eladar said, finally putting the cards on the table.

“It’s not impossible,” Zac slowly said. “But do you even have the Nexus Coins for such a transaction?”

“Not yet, but I hope you’ll remember your words in a year or two,” Verana smiled as she stood up.

Zac sighed when he realized that she wasn’t interested in paying up now, but rather only wanted to sound out the possibility. It was the better option of her, of course, since it wouldn’t do her much good to spend all her current wealth on a completely stripped mine.

He didn’t know how quickly Beast Crystals grew, but he couldn’t imagine it was too fast. It would probably take years before new low-grade crystals sprouted. But he needed the money now, so he had no choice but to be a bit shameless.

“A few years is so long, and my memory isn’t what it once was,” Zac coughed as he stood up.

Verana stopped in her tracks and looked back at him with an even stare.

“I guess you have some means to strengthen your memory, no? Perhaps if I paid a bit up-front?” she said with a flat tone, and Zac could feel his ears heating up a bit. “How much?”

“Oh, not much. One billion would do,” Zac said with a smile.

“A BILLION?!” Verana roared, making Lulu who was sleeping in her arms jump up in fright. “ARE YOU CRAZY?”

The two entered a fierce negotiation from there, but it was clear that Verana really needed the crystals. Unfortunately, she was truly unable to fork out so much money, but Zac walked away with another 500 million Nexus Coins in the end, with the additional promise that the Tal-Eladar would assist in teaching Beast Mastery at the Atwood Academy.

Those nexus coins were likely a large part of the combined wealth the Tal-Eladar had scrounged up in the Underworld, but they fell into the hands of Zac in the end. It wasn’t as much as his other sources of Nexus Coins, but it would give him a bit more breathing room when he visited the Tower of Eternity.

Zac returned to Port Atwood after having completed his mission and changed back to his human form after he arrived at his compound. He didn’t reach level 74, but

he felt he was over half-way there. He would likely just need to close two or three more Incursions to reach level 75.

Kenzie was actually in her courtyard when Zac looked for her, and her eyes were peeled at an extremely intricate blueprint.

“What are you doing?” Zac asked with interest as he walked over.

He immediately saw the blueprint was of the house she was building in the academy, but there were a ton of fractals and lines that Zac couldn’t understand at all.

“Jeeves and I are looking over the schematic, to make sure we don’t miss anything,” Kenzie said, her eyes a bit bloodshot.

“Are you ok?” Zac asked with some worry. “It’s okay to take a breather and rest. It will help you avoid mistakes as well.”

“Jeeves doesn’t make mistakes even when I’m tired,” Kenzie smiled. “Besides, everyone is pushing themselves to save our planet. I can’t laze about.”

“So how’s it going?” Zac asked, knowing he wouldn’t be able to get her to rest.

“It’s pretty much done,” Kenzie said. “I will just need a day of testing the arrays and the energy flows to make sure no one made a mistake while setting everything up.”

“One day?” Zac said, his eyes lighting up. “That’s great.”

“Have you decided on who will join us?”

“Not completely,” Zac admitted. “Only the inner layer. How many do you think would be able to sit in the outer layers?”

“I think we could fit 30 people or so? If I make the area any larger I can’t reliably contain the energies,” Kenzie said after thinking it over.

“Can you ask Alyn, Joanna, and Ilvere to nominate 9 people each? I also want to offer spots to Ryan, Lyla, and Ibtep if we can reach him.”

The insectoid had joined Nonet and was currently fighting the Undead Empire along with the Zhix hordes. The communications were sporadic, but he knew that they were still alive two weeks ago at least, and that hive Kundevi was part of a roving squad that had split off from the main Zhix army to hunt the smaller hordes.

That, unfortunately, meant that Zac currently had no means to contact him, and he also couldn’t hold up the activation of the funnel for them. It would be up to fate if they could join.

“What about Thea and the others?” Kenzie asked. “Shouldn’t we invite them too?”

“...No,” Zac finally said. “I want to use this opportunity solely for people of Port Atwood. That means that Verana and the Tal-Eladar won’t join either.”

It took a lot of deliberation, but Zac had eventually arrived at the conscious decision to not invite anyone that wasn’t part of his force. That included both Billy and Thea who he trusted, but who were ultimately allies in charge of their own forces. The same went for Verana. She was a trading partner, not an actual member of Port Atwood. The Tal-Eladar had been helpful lately, but it was essentially a business transaction since they gained something every time they joined him in battle.

Keeping it all for themselves might be selfish, but Zac and Ogras had risked their lives for the opportunity and they wanted to keep all the benefits for themselves. Truthfully, if they could keep all the Origin Dao for just the two of them, they would probably have done so since that would have the greatest impact in the fight against the invaders and the Dominators.

But since that was impossible they could only use the spillover to create more powerhouses in Port Atwood. Kenzie didn't look too pleased about his decision, but she didn't contradict him in the end.

"I will enter meditation for a day to solidify my Dao," Zac said as he stood up to leave. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Zac did just what he said he would do and entered his courtyard. His goal for tomorrow was to finally form a Dao Fragment, and he hoped to increase his chances of succeeding if he could find a direction to take the first step. He closed off all outside interference before he took out [Verun's Bite]. His eyes wandered over the axe over and over, trying to glean any type of truth or inspiration from its form or by how it felt in his hands.

Just what was the Dao of the Axe?

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 375 - Free Lunch**

It was 4 pm the next day when the crystal in Zac's lap vibrated, indicating that his sister or Ogras was trying to contact him.

"Everything is ready," Kenzie's voice emerged from the crystal after he picked it up. "We couldn't get a hold of Ibtep, but everyone else is here."

"Ask Alyn if she wants to try. I'm on my way," Zac said as he stood up. "Can you bring the prayer mat from the cave?"

"It's already here."

Zac had spent the better part of a day picturing the Dao of the Axe, or at least the part of the Dao that represented his path. He still did not know if his conclusions were correct, but he was simply out of time and would have to roll the dice.

He walked over to the Academy in quick steps and found that everyone apart from Ogras was waiting outside. There were also 50 Demon Soldiers and 30 Valkyries who stood ready to guard the structure against any interruptions. Alyn stood there as well, though he was not sure if it was because she was there to oversee the event or to join it.

Alyn was the back-up he decided to fill Ibtep's spot in case he couldn't be reached. She was not really a core part of his fighting force, but she had contributed a lot to Port Atwood in her own way. He also thought that if Alyn's accomplishments in the Dao increased, then she would also be able to teach the students more efficiently.

"Finally we're doing this," Ogras' voice drifted over, but the usually lazy tone contained an undeniable hint of excitement this time.

The demon sported a new small scar on his left cheek, but other than that he seemed fine even though he had fought an undead general the other day.

"Let's hope we got this right, otherwise this will turn into a tragedy," Zac wryly smiled as he looked across the people who would participate.

All of them belonged to the absolute peak of Port Atwood's forces. The only exception was a motley mix of youngsters who looked a bit nervous. It was the students that Alyn had recommended, seedlings with potential to become powerhouses under his banner.

If something happened to all of them, including himself, then both Port Atwood and Earth was finished.

“So maudlin,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. “It’s just a bunch of Origin Dao, what can go wrong?”

“Famous last words,” Zac snorted, though he felt the demon had a point.

“Let’s head inside and I will explain things,” Zac said as he looked over the group before entering the circular building.

Zac only took a few steps before he froze for a second, looking with some shock at what his sister had created. The walls were covered in a dense pattern of inscriptions, reaching pretty much from floor to ceiling. Even the stone floor and ceiling contained inscribed lines that went in circles around the outer layer he stood in.

Kenzie truly hadn’t been slacking off.

The group was led into the central chamber where the first group would meditate on the Dao when the Dao funnel was cracked open.

The Dao funnel was placed on an altar in the middle of the room, and the altar itself was covered in fractals as well. According to Kenzie the platform had the same effect as the spatial disturbance arrays he had used to block out the usage of teleporters. It was likely that it was these kinds of altars, albeit far more advanced versions, the Undead Empire used to block out the teleporters in the area surrounding his forces.

Whether such a thing would be needed or not wasn’t sure, but Kenzie added it as a precaution. They simply knew too little about Origin Dao, and Brazla hadn’t been helpful no matter how much Kenzie had begged or cajoled.

Their best guess was that Origin Dao was a mysterious energy that existed in the air around them, just like Cosmic Energy, but that it was impossible for people at their level to detect. It seeped into their souls from exposure, and absorbing the Origin Dao strengthened people’s connection to the Dao.

Kenzie was afraid that the energy would dissipate too quickly, perhaps through leaving into other planes of existence. So she had prepared an array to seal space itself, in addition to the arrays that would hopefully keep the Origin Dao consigned to the room they were in.

The inner chamber wasn’t actually sealed off, but it rather had an open layout with eight vaulted arches that provided vision to those who would sit outside. Even the inner chamber was separated into two rows, meaning that the group would be split into three priorities.

The innermost row was just two seats, one on each side of the altar. Just behind the seats was a line of fractals forming a circle around the seats and the altar, along with two small glass cylinders covered in fractals. Each of the glass pillars was roughly half a meter high and placed next to the two seats. Finally there were four large fractals on the floor tiles, one on each side of the innermost seats.

“Crack any of those pillars and all the restrictive arrays and the altar will be destroyed immediately, which would hopefully let the Origin Dao dissipate quickly,” Kenzie explained when she saw Zac’s gaze. “It’s like a panic button.”

“What if I only want to release the Origin Dao toward the next layer?” Zac asked.

“See the fractals that are placed next to your seats?” Kenzie asked. “They are shortcuts to the energy pathways that feed Cosmic Energy to the two sealing arrays. If you disrupt the pathway the array will lose its power in a second or two, allowing the Origin Dao to spread. It doesn’t matter what order you crush them, so just destroy one to open up the second layer, and two to open up the third.”

“So just punch the tile or something?” Zac asked, receiving a nod in confirmation.

Zac asked a few more questions about the details of the arrays before he turned toward the group still waiting behind them. Even the demons were wide-eyed as they looked around, clearly confused and slightly apprehensive about the dense inscriptions covering almost every surface around them.

“I know that most of you don’t know why you have been summoned here,” Zac said, drawing everyone’s attention. “It’s because Ogras and I are ready to present you with a unique opportunity to become stronger.”

No one would say no to a power-up, and people’s eyes lit up in anticipation. Only a few of the more experienced demons kept their cool demeanor, clearly understanding that nothing came for free or without risks. They immediately understood from the building they stood in that this wasn’t a simple bestowment of some treasures.

“You should all know about Salvation and his deeds by now,” Zac started to explain. “The Integration turned him insane, and he killed hundreds of thousands of people, turning them into puppets. Ogras and I killed him after an intense fight.”

“What you don’t know is that Salvation had a mysterious treasure on his body, something that he had stolen from the Inheritance site of the Great Redeemer,” Zac continued pointing at the golden fractal on the altar. “The purpose of this item was to steal Origin Dao.”

“I’m sorry, what’s Origin Dao?” Mr. Trang spoke up, and Zac noticed there was a noticeable hint of confusion on the faces of most people.

Only then did Zac realize that the knowledge of Origin Dao hadn’t been spread through Port Atwood. It was something that not even Ogras knew the word for before Brazla explained the concept, so it was no wonder that not even the demon soldiers had heard of it either. They only knew that people improved Dao Seeds easier on newly integrated planets for some reason.

“Before the System came there was no magic in your world,” Ogras spoke up to explain. “But now you gain levels and Dao seeds. This is partly because of Cosmic Energy. But the second half is Origin Dao. It’s a unique energy that can be found on newly integrated planets for a short time, an energy that connects your world to the great truths of the Universe.”

“Origin Dao is why people on newly integrated planets gain insights into the Dao far quicker than the rest of the universe. You should have heard of how hard it was from the Demon soldiers back on their home planet,” Zac said, drawing a few nods.

“In any case. This item contains the stolen Origin Dao of all of Salvation’s victims. And we intend to crack this thing open and release the Origin Dao into this building,” Ogras explained, unable to completely hide his impatience.

“What will happen when you do?” Mr. Trang asked hesitantly.

“No idea,” Zac frankly said, drawing confused looks. “Ideally we would have liked to study this for years before attempting this, but we are running out of time. Threats loom in all directions, and we aren’t strong enough as things stand. I will take this risk in order to become stronger, to protect our planet.”

“We hope that the massive amounts of stored Origin Dao will forcibly put us into a prolonged state of epiphany, drastically improving our insights into the Dao,” Ogras explained. “But we might be way off base. Perhaps nothing will happen. Perhaps we will be turned into idiots.”

“There is no such thing as a free lunch,” Mr. Trang muttered, drawing confused looks from the demons.

“Exactly,” Zac said. “This is an opportunity, but there are also real risks involved. I will not force anyone to undergo this experiment, everyone here is free to leave.”

Low discussions spread across the hall, as people talked about the situation with their close friends. But eventually the discussions died down, and not a single person chose to leave. Zac nodded in satisfaction, happy that the seedlings that Alyn had picked out had the guts to brave danger. It would be impossible to become a powerhouse otherwise.

“Good, prepare your mental states and ponder on the direction you want to evolve your Dao Seeds. Your results will most likely be more impressive if you have a plan in mind before we start,” Zac said.

After Zac explained the situation Kenzie took the floor, explaining the intricacies of the array and how it worked. Zac had been a bit worried that people would be offended by being placed in different tiers around the Funnel, but no one even raised a brow after learning about it. Perhaps they knew the value of the thing they were being offered, and that the leaders could make the most use of it.

Everyone quickly got into position and started to stabilize their mental state while Kenzie did a final test-run of the arrays. The building had already been sealed from the outside world with an extremely strong defensive array.

Since it only covered a small building rather than a whole town its shielding was extremely formidable, and even Zac would probably need some time to crack it open. The array also isolated any sounds, so there would be no disturbances from the outside world while the people meditated.

Zac looked around the inner chamber as he waited for everything to begin. Only thirteen people sat in the room, with the third group sitting at fixed positions outside the arches. Ogras and Zac were the two in the innermost layer, as they were the two top tier powerhouses of Port Atwood and also the ones who had secured the item.

Zac had initially wanted to put his sister there as well, but she had staunchly refused, instead opting to sit at the second layer. With her were the two demon generals, Emily, Sap Trang, and finally the three strongest demons and Valkyries respectively. Mr. Trang was obviously the weakest person in the room, and not technically one of the elites.

But the old fisherman had been with Zac almost from the start, and he had performed above all expectations in every endeavor so far. This was the chance for him to go from a normal elite to a powerhouse without having to solely rely on his scary pet.

Zac knew that Mr. Trang still hadn't been able to improve his race to E-Grade due to his age, but the old man looked at least 15 years younger compared to when he first arrived thanks to the continuous medicine baths he was taking. He would probably have no problem living for a few more decades as things stood, and Zac hoped he would find a solution for his predicament by that time.

Zac already sat on the second of the two prayer mats he owned. The other mat ultimately went to Ogras, even though Zac felt apologetic for his sister. But things were dire, and they needed to push their two strongest as much as possible for the coming fights.

It was also a distinct possibility that she would receive some assistance of her own through her AI, making the prayer mat superfluous.

“You guys ready?” Kenzie asked after having confirmed that the arrays were activated and that everything worked as it should.

“We're ready,” Zac nodded as he took a deep steadying breath. “Do your thing.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 376 - Impressions**

“As I’ve said, I have no guarantees this will work,” Kenzie muttered as she turned toward the golden funnel.

She took out a small inscription tool and started to add new lines to the funnel. Odd undulations started to appear in the room within seconds, and Zac looked around with wonder. He had never taken any hallucinogenic drugs in his life, but he believed that what he experienced right now might be a bit similar. The world felt as though it was alive, and everything pulsed with life and mystery. He quickly took out his last Dao Treasure so he would be ready to boost his experience.

“Here we go,” Kenzie said, though Zac felt he heard the voice from far away.

A small snap echoed in the room the next seconds, and Zac’s all senses were completely overloaded by impressions and scenes he couldn’t understand or decipher. If the magical sense of oneness with the universe earlier was a subdued whisper, then what he currently experienced was an unrelenting storm that threatened to rip him to shreds.

It was at that moment Zac realized that they might be in over their heads. Zac’s vision was flooded by colors and shapes that shouldn’t exist, and he heard whispers that threatened to drive him insane.

The energy they unleashed was far beyond what he had expected, and he felt like a small boat in the middle of the ocean during a terrifying storm. He was on the brink of succumbing, and he spotted his sister toppling over as she tried to get back to her spot. Ogras was already bleeding out of his nose, and he had actually cut himself on the leg with a small knife as his eyes were completely bloodshot.

“Too... Strong,” he croaked, and Zac understood.

The density was just too much, it was not something that people at their level could handle. If they didn’t dilute the Origin Dao they would die or have their minds broken. It took all of Zac’s willpower, but he managed to slam down on the restriction in a bid to release the Origin Dao to a wider area.

A second later Zac could finally take a breather, but he was still teetering on the brink of collapse as he looked around, trying to see what was really going on through the hallucinations. Just the quick look around made him forget what he wanted to do, as it felt that each hallucination contained a mystery that could elevate his understanding of the universe.

“Steady your minds and close your eyes. Focus on your own Dao,” Ogras growled, which allowed Zac to snap out of it long enough to push the Dao Treasure into his mouth and swallow it.

The surroundings kept getting more abstruse, and Zac got the notion that he would be able to grasp myriad Dao just by looking at the plaster on the wall or a spot melted wax on a candle. The fractals on the wall kept squirming, and Zac believed they tried to spell out divine secrets for him. Everything was calling out to his very soul, but he quickly closed his eyes as well to resist the temptations.

He knew it was the effect of the Origin Dao, that the enigmatic energy was exposing the truths of everything in nature. But just because there were truths to find

didn't mean he should delve into them. It would cause chaos to his cultivation system if he got a bunch of new Dao Seeds at this juncture.

He instead used his whole being to focus on the concept of the axe, basing his meditation on the fractal axe in his body. It was still split between the two Daos, and it radiated an immense pressure since Zac reached peak Dao with both his seeds. The groans and shuffling from the people around him soon drifted away as he closed in on himself and his whole being focused on the Dao of the Axe.

Unfortunately, he wasn't shielded from the chaotic energies around him just because he closed his eyes and focused his mind. The madness crept into his body through each and every one of his cells, making him feel as though he could topple any moment. Zac did everything in his power to ignore the whispers that kept trying to lead him astray, believing they were hints to various Daos in the multiverse.

Luckily a warmth spread from his stomach after a bit, and calming tendrils moved through his body and silenced the chaos to a certain extent. It was the Dao Treasure, and it allowed him to refocus on the Axe with unprecedented clarity.

Space and time no longer held no meaning as his mind was overwhelmed by the endless profundity of the axe. The fractal axe he envisioned kept growing in his mind and Zac started to sense one scene after another play the weapon itself.

He saw scenes of himself, swinging his axe in one desperate struggle after another. He kept pushing forward, and his prey kept getting more dangerous. He saw himself desperately struggling to cause a lethal wound against a barghest, where he was forced to use the environment to his advantage to survive. He could almost taste the blood as his hatchet made its way into the spine of the beast.

Beasts, cultivators, invaders, and even armies entered his vision, only to be bisected and conquered. Everything in the world was fleeting, and the only truth was the weapon he held in his hand. Whoever stood in his path would be crushed by the towering force of his swing, whatever tried to resist would be cut by the gleaming edge.

The scenes kept flashing through his mind, and something started to crystalize. It was the path of the Axe that he had arrived at yesterday. It was a path of indomitability and furious offense, one that gave up on the flexibility of the sword or the speed of the rapiers in favor of monstrous power and momentum.

Nothing could hamper the progress of his axe. All defenses would get crushed, all obstacles cut in two. The axe was the truth that would allow him to walk to the end of the path, and also the tool of slaughter that would keep those around him safe. But before his epiphany could mature into something real, the visions started to change and he felt himself getting dragged inside.

Zac was no longer looking in on his deed from outside, now it was suddenly him getting killed, and he felt himself dying one indignant death after another. He could see himself as the aggressor, and he looked up only to peer into his own wooden face and two pitch-black eyes that held no emotion or succor as the Zac in the vision swung his axe down.

He was the merchant only following orders, his heads getting cut off in one swift motion. He was the mink defending its mountain, only to get slain. He was a tiger, a cultivator, a zombie, one being after another with their own dreams and aspirations.

But those dreams turned to dust with the arrival of that sharp edge. His resistance was futile against the towering weight of the weapon soaring toward him. Zac died a thousand deaths, and he felt his soul was getting wounded each time.

Soon enough it wasn't even himself who killed, but he rather saw visions men and women getting forced to their knees, and their whole vision was filled with a finger

that moved toward their forehead. Pain that Zac never had experienced before rippled through his body as his soul was dragged out of his body in the visions.

The visions became increasingly chaotic as time passed, showing a jumbled mess of scenes that were unfamiliar to him. But as the scenes kept appearing he felt an increasing amount of anger and hatred filling his body. It was different from the Splinter, it was more open and direct. But even though Zac could see it coming he couldn't avoid his mind getting corrupted, and the destructive thoughts were eroding his soul.

But his resilience wouldn't let him falter or give up, so he forcibly lived through the discordant visions of death and destruction as he searched for that feeling that he lost just before. He needed to get back to the axe, the truth that he almost grasped before his mind was led astray.

He felt he was on the cusp of success before things turned dark, and he only needed to regain it. But the constant flurry of visions took their toll, and Zac was starting to lose track of what was going on. Everything felt muddled as the thousands of impressions threatened to destroy his sense of self.

But some hidden spark inside his mind suddenly ignited his cognizance for one final burst, and he managed to grasp hold of the feeling once more, finally putting an end to the endless visions. The visions finally stilled, and he found himself in outer space, facing the huge fractal that was formed as an axe.

In the far distance in the deepest space were two lights radiating boundless power. It was the very same stars as the one he saw during the Dao Impartment, though this time they felt far more distant. It was no surprise, as he had the help of a C-Grade powerhouse to connect to those stars last time.

But he had another type of help this time. It felt like he was full of a boundless power that allowed him to create a tendril of his own, one that reached for the distant stars just as they reached for him. It was the Origin Dao that empowered him to reach further than he would have been able to on his own, effectively creating a bridge to the Grand Dao.

The tendrils finally connected, and Zac felt a surge of endless knowledge enter his mind. His whole soul, which was already wrung dry from the onslaught of visions, shuddered from the impact, but he held on.

He first didn't know what he was waiting for, but he soon had his answer. As knowledge crammed itself into his brain the fractal started to grow in front of him. He instinctively reached toward it as he absorbed additional truths from the stars. The axe released a keening echo the moment Zac's intangible hand touched it, and the lines that made up its body started to twist and writhe with blinding speed, rearranging themselves after some unknown blueprint.

The outer shape of the enormous fractal was the same, but the lines had reformed to no longer possess two separate sides. The axe looked far more complete now, with one completely integrated pathway. The weapon radiated an immense power, and Zac sensed both his earlier Dao seeds in the mix.

Everything from the emotional heaviness to the most recent indomitable will to cut through everything was accounted for, but there were many additions that he hadn't recognized before. The snippets of truth were all meshed together into a perfect whole, and they together made up the Dao of the Axe.

He knew he had done it, he had upgraded his two Dao Seeds into a Fragment. If he was physically there he would have breathed out in relief.

The two stars in the distance receded after Zac had managed to upgrade the fractal in front of him, and the large axe started to dissipate as well. He realized that

this epiphany was over and willed himself to exit his mysterious state. The deed was done, and this step guaranteed that his classes would at least be able to upgrade his class immediately. He was pretty sure that he had passed the 'achievement' part with flying colors, anyway.

But Zac didn't even have had time to celebrate the success of his advancement before a shocking sight entered his vision when he opened his eyes. His experience hadn't been smooth, but Zac had initially chalked it up to the difficulty of forming a Dao Fragment.

The insight needed for that was on a higher level than upgrading a seed, and Zac guessed that would take a greater toll on his body. This was something he had already discussed with Ogras earlier, and the demon had agreed. But reality proved different.

He didn't know how long his meditative state had actually lasted, but the house was still under the full effect of the Origin Dao. Zac felt he had a bit greater resistance against the hallucinations now, and the brief moment of clarity allowed him to witness the state of everyone else in the building.

Something was terribly wrong with the energy they had released.

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**Chapter 377 - Risk and Reward**

It was clearly not only Zac who had struggled tremendously to withstand the onslaught of impressions unleashed by the Dao Funnel. Everyone had various degrees of struggle written on their faces, with most in the building even shaking as they had their eyes shut tight as they strained to endure.

Zac's mind churned as he resisted the constant lure of the truths of the universe, and he tried to make his sluggish mind find a way to lessen everyone's burden. He finally remembered the plan from earlier, and he slammed down at a second stone disk next to him, immediately cracking it.

But his addled mind soon realized that someone had already opened up the Origin Dao to the third layer, and when his eyes reached the people sitting outside the arches he realized they were even worse off than those sitting inside.

The Origin Dao might be like the Cosmic Water; Great in small quantities, but it could quickly become a dangerous poison if you indulged in too much of it. Perhaps someone like the Great Redeemer would be able to absorb it all, but he was at Peak D-Grade and he was perhaps planning on absorbing it over decades.

What they were doing right now might be equivalent to jumping into the Nexus Water-pond to take a bath. The only difference being that it was their souls that would take the hit rather than their bodies getting blasted to pieces from absorbing too much energy. That wasn't the only problem though, even if it might be part of the reason almost everyone seemed to have one foot in the grave.

Something was assaulting the people stuck in meditative poses. They were pitch-black specters, reminiscent of those poor souls who had been corrupted by the splinter in the Eastern Trigram sect. Perhaps they were just another set of hallucinations brought by the massive surge of Origin Dao, but Zac felt a huge amount of resentment coming from the ghosts, which was completely different from the enigmatic and almost addictive feeling that came from the other hallucinations.

The ghosts weren't attacking anyone, it rather looked like they were praying to or even begging for mercy. Others held their translucent head in their hands, radiating hopelessness. Zac's thoughts immediately went to the visions he was forced to endure while he formed his Dao Fragment. Was this the souls of those that Salvation killed?

They flocked around most people, though Zac noted with relief that his sister was completely spared. The same went for Ogras and Janos, while a few more were less crowded as well. His sister had somehow managed to make her way back to her spot in the second layer, and he realized that it was her who had cracked open the array, releasing the Origin Dao to the outer layer.

He couldn't confirm that the ghosts were actually harming anyone since they never touched anyone, but he did note that those that were more crowded seemed to be struggling more. A lot of them were bleeding out of their noses and ears, looking like they had suffered some type of hemorrhage.

But what was even worse was that he saw indistinct silver fractals appearing on the foreheads of those who struggled the most, and even in his currently muddled state he had no problem remembering where he had seen that particular design before. It was the same fractal that shone on Salvation's forehead, though his tattoo was far more intricate than the nascent inscriptions on the people around him.

Was the funnel trying to convert everyone around it, turning them into raving lunatics like Salvation himself?

Worry gripped Zac's heart he and arduously got up to his feet in his eagerness to help everyone. But what should he do? Everyone was in an extremely fragile state, likely fighting a desperate battle with their souls on the line. Dragging everyone outside might have the opposite reaction of what he hoped, as it might cause a disturbance that made them lose focus and destroy their minds.

His eyes darted to the crystal pillar next to him, but he eventually looked away from that as well. The soldiers stationed outside had standing orders to quickly evacuate everyone in case the arrays were deactivated, and that would be the same as him dragging people outside himself.

He needed to do something by himself, but he was in no condition to start swinging his axe around in the building. Not that he thought he could actually destroy any of the ghosts with **[Verun's Bite]**. But he did possess one weapon that seemed effective against the dead, so he released his Dao field for Dao of Trees, hoping it would bring some vitality to everyone while it drove the ghosts away.

His soul was already battered and bruised, feeling like when he had overtaxed his mental energy during a fight, but he persisted in using it when he saw many people regain some color on their faces. Even the silvery fractal that had appeared on a few foreheads had started to dissipate slightly.

Best yet was that the ghosts started to fall apart, releasing soundless wails as they turned into motes of dust.

The Seed of Trees worked wonders, so he kept his Dao Field going for as long as he could. But his vision started swimming after only 30 seconds, and he was forced to stop. At least everyone looked noticeably better by that point, and Zac could only pray that the extra energy would allow everyone to beat the side-effects of the Dao Funnel on their own.

He believed that as long as they managed to improve their Dao Seeds the corruption would be pushed away by the pure energies of the Daos, just like when he condensed his fragment. The moment the two Stars appeared all the discordant visions had been pushed aside, allowing him to finish his meditation in peace.

This was all he could do, as his mind was starting to tear and distort once more from the beckoning visions and intrusive whispers. He sat down at the mat again, which helped a little bit with the chaos in his mind. He closed his eyes and desperately focused on the small space that he created when he managed to form a Dao Seed from his own effort.

He needed to turn calamity into an opportunity once more since the funnel obviously wasn't out of Origin Dao just yet. It was either that or flee from this place, taking the winnings before losing everything. But Zac wouldn't stop now that he had come this far. This was a unique opportunity, and he couldn't leave his people behind in any case.

His first instinct was to go for his second fragment since both Trees and Sanctuary were at the peak by now. But he reluctantly had to give up on that idea. Forming the first Fragment had been extremely exhausting, and his condition was exacerbated by providing a respite to those around him. He wasn't confident in forming another Fragment as things stood.

Besides, there was the issue of balance. He was afraid that if he formed a Life-attuned Fragment while his Dao Seeds of Rot and Hardness were still only at High mastery, then his evolution of Undying Bulwark might become messed up. It was a safer option to work on his two final Dao Seeds instead, even if the benefits might be worse.

He desperately closed his eyes again to shut out the hallucinations, and this time he focused on the Seed of Rot, going over all aspects of rot and putrefaction he could. Rot was the seed that he felt was furthest from upgrading, whereas Hardness still had the residual boost of his Dao Vision and recent battles with extremely sturdy foes like the Battleroach King and the Cyborg. Even the imperviousness of the environment in the Underworld had given him some inspiration.

Zac quickly slipped into a deep meditate state again, his mind diving toward that empty universe where only the Dao existed. But just like last time his ascent was intercepted by an onslaught of visions.

Various scenes where he killed his foes with the help of the Seed of Rot started to flash by his eyes. This time the fights almost exclusively took place in the Underworld against the Roaches and the invaders. But just as he expected the visions turned on him soon enough, and he soon found himself the subject of an endless cycle of rotting away before everything just turned into a chaotic blur.

But the vision felt far less real now, like a weak mimicry of the terrifying experience he endured the last time. His hypothesis had been correct. Part of the trouble had come from forming a Fragment under these weird conditions. Upgrading a normal Seed might prove a deadly challenge for others, but Zac had long gotten used to this sort of struggle due to the Splinter stuck in his head.

Both his body and soul were stronger the usual as well, something that he had realized long ago. This had only been further improved by the unknown energy that continuously seeped out from the Splinter of Oblivion. Even though upgrading his Seed was easier it was still a draining task. It was like the Origin Dao from the funnel was a reservoir of tainted water, and he had to manually siphon out all the poison before he could drink it.

Time passed as Zac worked with everything he had to complete his goal. He didn't know how long it took until the funnel was completely drained of energy. After improving Rot he didn't even dare open his eyes again since his mind felt extremely fragile after enduring another round of visions. He didn't trust himself to not go astray if he looked upon the various hallucinations that the Origin Dao brought on, and could only keep focusing on his Daos.

But with risks also came rewards. Not only had he gained the Dao Fragment that he hoped for, but he even managed to push his final two Seeds to Peak mastery. In fact, after being forced into those cycles of death and despair he felt he had gained more than just the final mastery of the respective Seed, and that forming a Fragment related to death on his own wasn't impossible.

He only needed some sort of spark of inspiration to bring enough momentum. Zac was elated by the amazing results of the funnel. He had been happy if he just got the fragment and nothing else, but he got so much more than that.

Luckily the effect of the Dao Funnel seemed to have subsided by the time Zac managed to upgrade his Seed of Hardness as well, which was lucky since he wasn't sure what he would do if he had no Dao Seed to focus on. Pained groans could be heard from all directions as people arduously got to their feet.

Zac slowly opened his bleary eyes, taking in the surroundings for the first time since he unleashed his Dao Field. All the ghosts were gone, as were the tempting hallucinations in the building. However, his eyes were drawn to the dense fractals inscribed into the walls, and he even forgot to check on those around him.

"Don't look at the walls," Kenzie tiredly said, dragging Zac out of his reverie. "The Origin Dao changed the fractals somehow. They contain the Dao now."

Zac quickly looked away, since he was in no condition to keep pondering on the Dao. But horror flooded his heart when the first things he saw were the unmoving bodies on the floor.

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A prickling sensation entered Void's head, prompting him to look far into the distance. He even forgot about the half-dead anointed he held by its throat, or the hundreds of unmoving Zhix warriors strewn across the royal chamber.

"So they actually managed to open it," Void muttered, some delight filling his heart.

The change in fate made him lose interest in interrogating the miscreation in his hand, and he cracked its huge neck before throwing the oversized Zhix to the side like a piece of garbage. He had wondered if those humans would ever figure out what they held in their possession, but he had underestimated them.

Less than a month had passed since they got their hands on the Funnel, but they had already managed to release the seeds stored inside. Void had feared that it would take them years, but perhaps having enslaved a couple of alien forces worked in that man's favor. He had even considered throwing out a hint about the Funnel when he met the Super Brother-Man, but in the end he opted against it, afraid that it would increase their vigilance.

"Do you think it will work?" the curious voice of Inevitability asked from the side.

Void looked over at his child, sighing at the sight of her face full of revelry. What would their Lord think of such a bloodthirsty subordinate? Slaughter was just a means to an end, not something to base one's cultivation around. That path was a dead end, where you were no better than a beast. He knew he would have to educate her better going forward.

But such a small detail couldn't dampen the sense of victory in his heart.

"It is too early to tell," Void said with a small smile as he once again looked in the direction of Mr. Atwood's small island kingdom.

"Our lord is not so easily denied. It's always good to have a back-up plan."

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### Chapter 378 - Fallout

There were unmoving bodies in not only the outer layer, but even in the inner one where his core people were seated. Just a glance around indicated that over a third of those who entered the building were lying on the ground right now.

His sister looked tired but otherwise fine, and she was currently walking around trying to help others with the help of Janos. The illusionist seemed to be mostly fine, though it was always a bit hard to tell with that man. Perhaps he had an easier time resisting the mental corruption due to having Wisdom as his main attribute.

Zac grimaced when he saw Emily shakily helping Joanna to her feet, both of them looked ready to keel over from the simple action. Next to Joanna one of the Valkyries lay unmoving in a pool of blood, and her bloodstained eyes were blankly staring into the beyond.

“Don’t blame yourself. This is what it is to be a cultivator; braving death for a chance at greatness,” a hoarse voice echoed from behind, and Zac slowly turned over to see Ogras. “Besides, not all of them are dead. Some are just in a coma.”

The demon was pale as a sheet and his hand was visibly trembling. There was even blood running down his nose and from one of his ears.

“Are you okay?” Zac asked with a frown.

“I’ll need to rest for a day or two,” Ogras said without hesitation as he ate a healing pill. “Did you... Did you see a lot of visions as well?”

“Scenes of me killing people and dying. Even scenes of complete strangers. It was a chaotic mess that happened over and over,” Zac nodded.

“What’s going on,” Ogras muttered as his bloodshot eyes turned to the funnel. “It shouldn’t be like this... Unless?”

“Unless what?” Zac asked.

“Resentment,” the demon concluded. “The Origin Dao was dragged out of that lunatic’s victims at their time of death, and perhaps their resentment and other negative feelings came with and tainted the Origin Dao. Perhaps that was even the plan. The gathered resentment of a whole planet would contain shocking power.”

Zac nodded in agreement, though this wasn’t the time to discuss the topic. He instead started walking around the people to check on their condition. He also opened up the array to let the doctors enter, giving strict instructions for everyone to not look at the walls and avoid loud noises. A few, like Ryan, were still in a meditative pose and couldn’t be disturbed, but Zac felt that those were out of harm’s way.

“They should have passed the trial and are currently reaping the rewards,” Ogras agreed as he followed Zac’s eyes. “They should be out of it soon enough.”

Those who still were in the middle of their epiphanies woke up one after another, and after 30 minutes everyone was awake. It was at that time they finally could make a proper tally, and Zac once again felt his insides churning with regret even though he remembered Ogras’ words.

Only the lone Valkyrie had passed away in the second layer, but another one was in a coma. The same went for one of the Demons and Mr. Trang. Six people in the outer layer passed away from the experience, all dying from a brain hemorrhage. Another 8 people were in comas, caused by their minds getting overtaxed.

The doctors planned on moving the unconscious, but Zac stopped them for a second as he arduously walked around to check each one of them. There was an extremely strong correlation between the amount of ghosts people were surrounded by, and the severity of their condition.

Those who had teetered on the brink of collapse when Zac tried to intervene were those who now lay dead on the ground. Also, most of those who were now in a coma were the same people who sported the silver fractals in their foreheads. Sap Trang was the only exception, and Zac guessed that the reason of his unconsciousness was rather his advanced age.

The fractals were thankfully all gone now, but that fact didn't allow Zac to breathe easy. The Great Redeemer was an expert in Karma and seeing his people sporting his marks felt like trouble waiting to happen. He made a mental note of the appearance of everyone who had been marked before he allowed the people to be carried away.

He did also give the order to one of the Valkyries stationed outside to place a secret guard on those people, and to keep a watch out for any suspicious behavior. The woman looked confused, as a few of those who were carried away were her own fellow Valkyries, but she quickly accepted the order and brought a few people along.

Zac shook his head as he walked back into the Dao House, and only then did he start to feel some happiness about the results. The atmosphere was subdued due to those that had fallen, but many of the remaining people were discussing their enormous gains with low voices.

At least it seemed that those who made it through did reap amazing rewards, taking multiple steps forward with their Dao at once. He really wanted to check with his sister how she had done, since she seemed to have been the best at handling the side-effects of the Funnel. But he first gave Ogras a look and the demon shuffled over to talk in private.

Zac recounted what he encountered the brief instant he woke up, how the ghosts had appeared, and the silver fractals that shone on some people's foreheads.

"Did I have a fractal?" Ogras asked. "Or anyone that's still here?"

"No, you just looked to be in extreme pain," Zac said with a shake of his head. "And I don't think anyone conscious right now had any fractals, but I was only awake for less than a minute. Oh, Mr. Trang is in a coma now, but he didn't have a fractal."

"It might just be a phenomenon that indicated that they were failing against the onslaught of resentment. The puppets were created when Salvation touched their foreheads, placing a fractal there. But salvation is not here, so the fractals might just be a shadow reflecting the ghost's last moment alive," the demon mused.

"Of course, there is also the risk that those people now possess some latent problem," Ogras muttered with a ruthless gleam in his eyes. "It's lucky you managed to wake up and notice the anomaly. What if we have created ten new beacons that will lead that old bastard to Earth? Perhaps... It would be best if they never woke up from their current condition."

"Out of the question," Zac said without hesitation. "We can't just kill them. I caused this, so I will figure something out."

"Then what's your plan?" the demon asked skeptically.

"We monitor them, for now, to see if they act out of the ordinary. The Abbot once shared his Karmic vision with me, and it allowed me to see the Karmic Links of the Dominators and the beacon. Perhaps there is a treasure or pill that will allow me to do the same thing for a short while," Zac said. "That way I'd be able to tell if they have formed a connection to the Redeemer."

“Besides, even if they are beacons their link should be far weaker compared to the Dominators’, so we only need to make sure they’re not transmitting anything after dealing with Void’s Disciple and the other two,” Zac added.

“Fair enough, I guess it’s worth pursuing other venues first. So what do you think?” Ogras acceded, changing the topic. “Are you ready for the tower? If we leave now we’ll have a bit over two weeks before your deadline.”

“There is no stress,” Zac finally said after some consideration. “I want to gain the two last levels for my other class.”

“You can still gain experience inside the tower,” Ogras said. “Or you’ll probably be able to buy a pill that gives a level for an F-Grade warrior when we get there. They’re not very rare.”

“I know, but I want to gain the levels beforehand in case the skill quests can’t be completed inside the tower,” Zac explained. “I want both my classes to be at their best before entering the tower. You know I won’t get a second chance like you.”

Ogras sighed and nodded.

“How is your human class? Need help with your second quest before we go?” the demon said.

Zac froze for a second before his eyes widened. He had completely forgotten because of the hectic events just now, but he had actually completed his second class quest! Zac quickly scoured through his body and found a new fractal firmly placed on his back.

“The quest was Dao-related, I just finished it,” Zac admitted.

“Oh? What type of skill is it?” Ogras asked with curiosity.

“No idea,” Zac shrugged. “I will try it out before we leave.”

“Keep me posted, no secrets in the tower,” Ogras smiled. “It will affect our teamwork.”

Zac just threw the demon a contemptuous look. Ogras had tried to pry out all of Zac’s secrets since day one, and it was shocking how many of them he had actually figured out if you looked back on it. But Zac wouldn’t give him a complete understanding of his strengths and weaknesses.

“I think I will be good to go in an hour or two, will you join me or will you stay behind for a bit?” Zac asked as he looked over at the pale-faced demon.

“Monster siblings,” Ogras muttered. “The rest of us had our minds turned to putty but the two of you are fine.”

Zac could only wryly smile as he looked over at his sister who had been helping everyone in the building since he woke up. She was healthy enough that she was able to emit a soothing field made from her Dao, which helped people around her recuperate faster.

He initially thought that the reason he was mostly fine after that event was the fact that the splinter in his mind had made his soul sturdier, but perhaps that wasn’t the only thing he had going for him. Unless Jeeves could somehow help Kenzie block out the visions it might be due to their ancestry.

Having a big-shot mom came with all kinds of perks it seemed.

“I need to solidify my gains,” Zac said as he stood up with a grunt. “Can you look after things here?”

“It’s fine,” the demon nodded. “I’ll stick around here for a few days before heading out to play with the zombies. When do we leave?”

“In five days,” Zac eventually decided.

But there was something he needed to do before leaving the Academy. He walked over to Alyn who had bloodshot eyes as she sat on a chair with a Divine crystal in her hand.

“I’m sorry,” Zac sighed as he sat down next to her. “This thing exceeded my expectations.”

“Such is cultivation,” Alyn said, but her eyes darted over to the corpses that were lined up not far away.

The bodies that Alyn looked at were the seedlings that she had recommended. Out of the 10 youths, four were in a coma and another three were dead. Only three were still conscious, but they were barely better than the unconscious ones. Only one, a young man looking just a bit older than Emily, managed to stand on his own, whereas the other two seemed to have wounded souls.

It would be a devastating blow to the group of talents that had been slated for grooming if they were forced to take extreme measures because of the silver fractals. Would only three out of the ten youths walk away from this encounter alive in the end?

The results for the group of seedlings were the worst, whereas the demons were best off. They only lost one person, with another three in a coma. Zac could only assume that their accumulated experiences had hardened their minds, allowing them to more effectively resist the resentment.

“Do they have families? If so make sure they’re taken care of,” Zac said with a heavy heart.

“They were all orphans, which is one reason I chose them,” Alyn with a small shake of her head. “They had no attachments left to their countries or families, which would allow them to work wholeheartedly for Port Atwood.”

“Then provide them with a proper funeral at least,” Zac said as he closed his eyes, a wave of tiredness washing over him. “Do what you can for the others. I’m afraid I can’t stay here, there’s too much to do.”

“Don’t worry. Everyone understood the risk, and also the burden you carry. Just look forward and keep walking,” Alyn sighed.

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#### **Chapter 379 - Fragment of the Axe**

Zac felt bad about leaving while people were still barely able to get to their feet, but he followed Alyn’s advice. He lastly went over to check in on his sister, and he was relieved to see that she was fine as well. In fact, she might be even better off than himself as she was still able to spread her Dao in the area around the Dao House.

Only then did he return to his courtyard with brisk steps. He felt a bit muddled the whole way back, as though he was dreaming. Zac knew he had warned everyone of the dangers involved, but he truly hadn’t expected anyone to get hurt, much less get killed. He could only endeavor to etch this lesson in his heart so that something like this would not repeat itself.

The arrays around his place flitted to life as he sat down on a padded mat with a sigh. He wanted to immediately go over his gains, but a wave of exhaustion hit him the moment he sat down, and he immediately fell into a dreamless slumber.

Zac opened his eyes again, only to see that four hours had passed in the blink of an eye. The nap had made him feel noticeably better, with only a small headache remaining. He hadn't felt comfortable going over his gains while his people lay dead right in front of him, but he couldn't wait any longer and opened up his Dao Screen.

**Dao**

**Stage**

**Effect**

**Fragment of the Axe**

**Early**

**All attributes +10, Strength +110, Dexterity + 80, Endurance +15.  
Effectiveness of Strength +5%.**

**Seed of Trees**

**Peak**

**Endurance +20, Vitality +90, Intelligence +5, Wisdom +5.**

**Seed of Hardness**

**Peak**

**Endurance +100, Wisdom +20.**

**Seed of Sanctuary**

**Peak**

**Endurance +50, Intelligence +20, Wisdom +50.**

**Seed of Rot**

**Peak**

**Endurance +5, Vitality +45 Intelligence +25, Wisdom +45.**

Zac slowly read through the changes, but he was truthfully a bit disappointed with the result. Fusing two Dao seeds into a fragment had only increased the total attributes gained from 240 to 275. He knew that he had attained almost no "new" insight compared to upgrading a single Dao seed, but he had still thought that he would get more when evolving from a Seed to a Fragment.

Of course, he had to remember that if things progressed the way it did with a seed, where the number of attributes given doubled every time it progressed, it would still rack up to a lot. A Fragment would end up giving 2 200 attribute points at a peak mastery, which was a huge number even in the E-Grade.

He hadn't gained a Title by forming a Fragment either, something he had pretty much thought was a done deal. Then again, if there was a 'first in world'-title like all his other Progenitor titles, then it had likely already gone to Abbot Everlasting Peace. And the general reward for gaining a Dao Fragment might simply be the fact he now had access to Epic classes.

The good part was that he actually gained all attributes from the Fragment, which meant that his luck got boosted as well. And if the pattern kept going as it did with the seeds, then he might end up with a huge boost to Luck by the time the seeds reached Peak. However, if he was being honest with himself he hoped that he wouldn't gain any more Luck from his Dao Seeds.

One of his unique advantages was his huge pool of Luck, where he had almost ten times the amount compared to most people. It had allowed him to survive countless dangers, and often turn the tables on his enemies. That advantage would quickly get eroded if one had an easy-to-access source of the special attribute.

He also got a boost of effectiveness for his main Strength, and that in of itself might turn into a tremendous boost if the number kept increasing as the Fragment

evolved. What if he got a 25% boost or something at the peak? The value from that was far higher than static increases, especially with his already large number of High-Tiered Titles.

Then again, he knew that the true benefit of a Dao Fragment wasn't the attributes it awarded. It was just a bonus that the System tacked on. The true benefit came from the huge boost in fighting power. That was doubly true for someone like Zac who was a bit lacking in his control department and who could only use one Dao at the time.

The Seed of Hardness hadn't provided any surprises, even though he had tried to skew the results in his favor. When he pondered on the final upgrade he focused on the rebounding effect of hardness. He imagined creating a body so sturdy that people hurt themselves when they attacked him and thought that he might get some strength that way.

But it still simply doubled down on the Endurance, pushing his highest attribute to even more ridiculous heights. Luckily he had still a lot of room for improvement before he hit his limit. He had already asked Ogras about it recently, and it turned out that the next limit usually lay around 2500 attribute points for humanoids.

But it also meant that he would have to evolve his race as quickly as possible since he was already halfway there. It was only a matter of time before he reached 2500 Endurance with the increased gains in E-Grade.

The Seed of Rot had a surprising change in the attributes it provided, but not overly so. Alea had been on his mind a lot lately, and the way she fought had influenced his insights. He already knew that Alea's highest attribute was Intelligence, closely followed by Vitality, and that was reflected by the gains in his Seed of Rot.

He was especially happy with the extra 45 points in Vitality since the Tower was a 100-day climb. Having a great regenerative ability would be a huge boon. If he could cut down his rest-time to a third, then he would have a lot more time to spend on the harder floors at the top of the tower. He soon closed the Dao menu and opened his skill menu next to take a look at his new Skill.

#### **Hatchetman's Spirit - Proficiency: Early. Oneness with nature. Upgradeable.**

He wasn't sure what oneness with nature meant, but he guessed it was some sort of boosting skill. He knew that Ogras received the skill that turned him into a winged shadow demon was something he got at level 75, and he hoped he got something similar.

Even though he was a bit tempted to activate it right now he chose to wait until he visited Mystic Island. Even if he had a hint of what the skill entailed he couldn't be sure, and he didn't want to accidentally blow up his courtyard.

There was one final thing that he wanted to do before heading out, and he eagerly walked over toward the Nexus Node. He had kept himself in check all this time, but now that he possessed a Dao Fragment he couldn't stop himself from checking out his options to evolve.

He had already confirmed from multiple people that he could simply skip evolving even if he activated the Node. Zac walked over to the huge hovering crystal with eagerness in his eyes, but his face fell after touching the crystal to begin the process.

There was no response.

He kept trying to activate his the Node to display his choices, but no matter how many times he tried there was simply nothing available for him. He swapped through the other systems, such as the skill shop, to see if the crystal was on the fritz, but it

worked just fine. It was hard to believe, but it looked like Zac truly wasn't able to evolve at this point even if he wanted to.

Zac couldn't believe that there was not a single option for him to evolve even after having gained the Fragment of the Axe. Hatchetman was only Rare, and he had already gained the prerequisite Dao for an Epic class. He had a slew of titles and accomplishment under his belt as well, and it felt ludicrous that the system wouldn't deem him worthy after all he had done.

Swallowing his burgeoning anger he rapidly tried to think of any reason why he could be stuck like this, and he could only imagine there being two reasons. The first was his skills. Only two of his skills had reached the peak, while the rest were between Early and High mastery. Not even Axe Mastery was at peak proficiency, which might mean that the System didn't consider him ready to evolve.

The other possibility was that some issues had arisen due to his special situation. His duplicity Core was still F-Grade, which meant it wasn't good enough to accommodate E-Grade classes. This was something that had worried him for some time, but no matter where he looked into the matter he couldn't find any clues.

Or perhaps he needed to evolve both classes at the same time, which was impossible since his other side was only at level 73?

Zac's eyes lit up with hope at the idea as he left the building housing the Nexus Node. He couldn't do anything about the issues of his skills or his Duplicity Core in the short run, but he could easily grind levels with his Undying Bulwark class.

He quickly headed over to Tul'Sarath, the town the Tir'Emarel Clan founded before their Incursion ended. The town felt a bit desolate since a large contingent of people left along with the former slaves being freed. But by now there were quite a few humans and a couple of Ishiate who walked the streets as Zac arrived.

Some had chosen to stay behind after getting liberated, and even more had returned over the past weeks. Life outside was extremely chaotic and dangerous, and many chose to work for the aliens rather than getting eaten by some beasts. Zac shook his head at the irony as he entered Verana's mansion.

"I hear something big took place in Port Atwood," Verana said with a light voice from her seat in a garden when she saw Zac being led over by a maid.

"Nothing too major," Zac said. "I found a trinket containing stored Origin Dao, and we released it."

"It's good to see you are fine," she said with a staid demeanor. "What brings you over today?"

"I am planning to hit a couple of more Incursions over the next days, I could use your support," Zac said.

"Unfortunately we're not able to help this time around," Verana said without hesitation. "My people are exhausted, and I fear another round of battle will cause too many casualties for us to bear. If we keep fighting with this intensity there will be no Tal-Eladar left on this planet in a hundred years. We need to rest and recoup before we can discuss joint battles again."

Zac silently looked at Verana in an effort to figure out her thoughts, and she returned the stare in kind. It was pretty obvious she was angry with him and refused to help out as payback, even if that meant losing out on staking a claim on another Incursion's resources.

"Remember, you asked us to stay behind as a trading partner, not as part of your army," Verana added, ending the prolonged silence.

Zac slowly nodded in agreement.

“It’s fine. But don’t forget why you, in particular, chose to stay behind. Are you already tired of moving forward?” Zac said as he turned to leave.

Verana didn’t answer, and only silently watched him leave.

Not having the help of the Tal-Eladar was a bit of a setback, especially now that all the elites of his force were down for the count for the time being. The only reason he hadn’t needed to order his Army to completely retreat was the fact that their lines were bolstered by the huge army of the Underworld Council.

Only nine councilors were currently on the surface, with four staying behind to keep the situation in the Underworld stable. But those nine were enough to stabilize the battlefield, perhaps even more than his three demon generals.

Besides, perhaps it was a blessing in disguise that the Tal-Eladar refused to help him this time around. He had used **[Hunger]** while fighting alongside the beastmasters, as only two of them knew of the true identity of Mr. Black.

Now that they weren’t around he could freely use **[Verun’s Bite]** to fight, allowing him to take full advantage of his new Fragment. He was pretty sure that the Fragment would still work when using a sword, but the effect would be greatly diminished.

He did consider bringing a couple of the demon soldiers or Valkyries along, but he eventually decided against that as well. There would be a lot of casualties if he brought soldiers without powerful generals to hold down the fort, and all of them needed to rest for a couple of days.

Eventually, he arrived at the most logical conclusion. He would go back to his roots and close a couple of incursions on his own. He got everything ready before he headed over to Westfort as Mr. Black. He needed someone to guide him to the hidden outposts next to the incursions so he commandeered one of the Marshalls who worked for the intelligence department.

Just 30 minutes later the scenery was flashing past him as he utilized **[Loamwalker]** to run through the wilderness.

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### **Chapter 380 - Coastal Incursion**

Not being encumbered with a group of soldiers had its own advantages. Zac could move with over twice the speed he usually did when his elite squad joined him for battle, and it only took him a bit over 8 hours before he reached his destination.

It was an incursion manned with extremely ugly aliens. There was an image attached to the intelligence report, and Zac felt like they looked like humanoid toads who had injected themselves with super-charged steroids to grow oversized muscles.

Their heads were large enough for them to fit a human head in their mouths, and they sat straight at their torsos without a neck. They had two sets of large murky-green eyes, but no ears or noses. They also had four arms, with the second set being slightly smaller and extending from slightly above their thick hips.

Judging by their stocky builds Zac would have thought them leaning toward Strength-based classes like himself, but he learned that they also had quite a few water-based mages. The incursion was placed by the shore, and they had caused massive tsunamis to drown the people of the close-by settlements.

There was also an unconfirmed report that the frogmen were adept at illusionary skills since there was one thing that set this incursion apart from most others. There was no Incursion pillar to showcase their position, and the general guess was that these frogmen had hidden it somehow in a bid to stay under the radar.

These invaders were quite brutal, but Zac had held off on targeting this place until now because they had already killed everyone close-by and it didn't look like they were expanding their territory. The Marshalls were guessing that they were busy with something underwater, as their class-choices and appearance indicated an amphibian nature.

It quickly became obvious to Zac as he crept closer to the Incursion that they mainly lived on land, even if they might be comfortable in the water as well. A sprawling town right on the shoreline spread out, and Zac saw some frogmen walk back and forth along the streets.

Interestingly enough the town didn't have any physical wall, but a wide moat had been dug to encompass the town, turning it into an artificial island. There was only one bridge, and it looked like they could lift it like a drawbridge if needed.

Walls were technically not needed in a world with arrays, but a proper wall kept out weaker beasts without wasting any Nexus Crystals. Walls were so easy to construct now that people had both Cosmos Sacks to transport material and superhuman strength, so almost all settlements that Zac had visited would sport defenses that would make any medieval lord proud.

The fact that there was no wall only made Zac more confident that there was an array protecting the town, but he couldn't sense it even after spying on the town for over twenty minutes. Of course, that didn't mean it wasn't there. The invaders had killed pretty much all humans in the vicinity, so perhaps they didn't bother keeping it active to reduce their running costs. However, any force strong enough to receive a chance to helm an Incursion would at least have the smarts to protect their encampment.

His hunch that the place wasn't as unguarded as it seemed was soon confirmed as the large head of a frogman suddenly appeared in the middle of the artificial river, before it once again submerging under the depth. They actually had guards staying underwater.

Zac wasn't sure how to best attack the town. Taking out a ship and entering from the ocean would be playing straight into their strength, but just walking up to the bridge felt like walking into a trap.

Unfortunately he had no skills for infiltration in either of his classes, so he decided to get as close as possible while using the natural covers at hand. He crept along in the high grass, but soon enough he couldn't get any closer without stepping on open land. Since Zac had no way to hide any longer he immediately accelerated to a full-out sprint as he ran straight toward the closest section of the moat.

He had eventually decided to go straight in, and the ground cracked beneath him as he barreled forward like an enraged bull. It only took a second for screams and warning sounds started to blast across the town, but Zac wasn't deterred as a storm of miasma was released from him as he activated **[Fields of Despair]** before jumping across the river.

A blast of water suddenly surrounded him as the water in the moat rose with shocking speed, and Zac's brows rose when he noticed that the water had somehow stolen all his momentum mid-jump. The water surged around him as he started to feel a huge pressure bearing down on every part of his body. Luckily he didn't need to breathe in his current form, saving him from drowning due to the trap.

He had been wrong about his assumption that these people didn't have a wall. It was only that it was made out of water rather than stone or wood. The whole moat had risen over ten meters and the water stayed in the air, defying all gravity.

Sharp stabs of pain erupted across Zac's body as the nearby guards launched ranged attacks on him while he was stuck in place. Something was off with the water as well, as no matter how much he flailed his arms and legs to swim out he was still stuck in place. The liquid was somehow enchanted, and it truly was a bane for most land-based cultivators.

Of course, it was not that Zac was completely helpless inside the block of water. Since he couldn't swim out he would simply have to cut his way out. His arm swelled with power as he kept infusing it with miasma, and he noticed that he was able to cram a lot more energy into his muscles since his latest boost to his Endurance.

The water started to shudder and twist from the huge concentration of power, and Zac finally unleashed a mighty vertical swing that contained a force that shouldn't belong to someone who still hadn't even evolved to E-Grade. The wall of water in the area was completely ripped to shreds from the immense force, and Zac fell down to the exposed riverbed.

The water wall was temporarily dispersed, though another huge gout of water headed straight toward him. It was only barely that Zac managed to jump inside the town in time, avoiding getting trapped once again.

However, he made for quite the sorry figure as he crawled up on dry land. He was completely caked in mud, and there was even a crab that angrily ran along his shoulder. That was fine with Zac, as his embarrassing display had emboldened the frogmen to launch a direct assault on him.

Over a hundred warriors rushed toward him, and Zac sensed a surprising amount of power from the warrior in the lead. The frogman held a large golden trident that Zac immediately could tell was a Spirit Tool, and he also wielded two aquamarine crystals in his second set of hands. The two crystals suddenly lit up with a lustrous shine as he approached.

Zac immediately sensed danger approaching from behind, and he instinctively threw himself forward, barely avoiding a block of ice the size of a truck slamming into the ground where he just stood. The attack caused a huge shockwave, throwing Zac another few steps forward. The moment he landed his foot stomped into the ground, and Zac disappeared from sight.

It was [**Profane Seal**] that Zac activated now that he finally had his target in sight. He had held back on both unleashing his Dao Fragment and his more impressive skills since he was afraid that the incident with the Flame Golems would repeat itself. He wanted to close the incursion as quickly as possible, but he also needed to gain the last two levels.

And now that his prey was caught it was finally time to put his Dao of the Axe to the test.

The towers of [**Profane Seal**] immediately trapped the whole army, and a terrifying aura spread out as Zac unleashed his Dao Field to cover the entire cage. His attributes might not have undergone a huge change by forming a Fragment, but his Dao Field had received a shocking transformation.

The frogmen caught within his aura were no longer harassed by a constant stream of small cuts, they were now receiving huge gaping wounds from nowhere. Energy started streaming into his body almost immediately, as there were unlucky frogmen who received fatal cuts from his Dao Field, their throats getting slit open without any warning.

The number of kills quickly slowed down as shields of water quickly covered the warriors which blocked out most of the power of his Dao Fragment. Unfortunately for the frogmen the nightmare had only started, and the spectral chains started to dance through their life, punching straight through the walls of water with only minimal resistance.

The macabre scene of corpses getting strung along like Zac was making a necklace repeated itself, but Zac's attention was on the leader.

Storms of ice rampaged outside the cage as a hailstorm had formed in no time. It was no doubt the frogman leader who utilized those two crystals to attack [**Profane Seal**] from outside. The power contained in the barrage was impressive, likely because he had such a huge amount of water readily available from the ocean.

However, the Seal had already been upgraded to middle mastery, and it would take some time for the storm to break down the sturdy towers. And Zac reckoned a minute should be all he needed as he pushed toward the froglord, his right arm already swelling from [**Unholy Strike**].

The frogman seemed to sense the danger from Zac's approach, and a huge swirl of energy quickly gathered around him as he swelled up to three times his original size. Living streams of water surged around him as a liquid armor formed on his body. The transformation made him look like a god of the ocean, and it became especially poignant when the frogman's trident started to crackle with extremely potent lightning.

The invader pointed his trident straight at Zac, and one of the crystals suddenly started to spew out a rampant stream of water that possessed such speed that Zac didn't even have time to summon [**Immutable Bulwark**]. Worse yet, the froglord had crammed the stream with enough electricity to run a small town, and the barrage made Zac's whole body spasm painfully. A spectral ghost appeared to stab the frogman in his chest, but the water armor effortlessly absorbed the strike.

The ground cracked beneath his feet as Zac forcibly resisted getting washed away, but the stream of water seemed endless. He considered activating his Bulwark-skill to redirect the blast, but he instead decided to simply use his axe instead. Rampant energies made the water churn as Zac swung his axe down with all his might.

He had no skill to add range to the attack itself, so he could only use his Dao and his Strength in hopes to create an extended shockwave. The moment he imbued his axe with his newly acquired fragment it felt like he had ability to cut all creation in half, and his axe ripped down through the torrent of water with undeniable momentum.

For a moment it felt like time had stopped, but the illusion only lasted for a fraction of a second. There was an unmistakable feeling that Zac had cut something more than just the water even though his eyes couldn't make sense of the intuition. It did feel like he had unquestionably cut apart space in front of him, and that the space in front of him was actually two separate pieces even now.

But at the same time everything looked the same, making Zac wonder if his mind was just making things up in its belief that the Fragment should create a larger spectacle. Zac had learned to trust his guts by now though and he truly believed that something had changed even if he couldn't see any conclusive proof.

Thankfully there was a reaction to his swing soon enough as the torrent of water stopped slamming into him, allowing Zac to once again see his opponent. Zac's eyes turned to the hulking form pointing his trident at him, ready to meet its second attack. However, the frogman stood completely frozen, and a huge surge of energy entered his body the next moment.

Zac's eyes widened in surprise as the body of the frogman fell apart into two pieces, and the enormous cut looked so smooth that one could think that he had used a laser from the technocrat's armory. Zac still couldn't figure out exactly what happened, but one thing was abundantly clear; the froglord was as dead as dead can be.

Was that it?

Zac had expected the frog to have a water clone, or do something to avoid the fatal blow, but it simply died where it stood from a single swing empowered by his Dao Fragment. It had emitted such a mighty aura, was it all bluster? Or was the difference of power brought by the Dao Fragment simply that huge?

The fight from there on out went without suspense. The moment the leader fell the barrage of ice from outside stopped, ending any hope of escape for the remaining soldiers. The area was blanketed in dark corrosive clouds and deathly mists, and wails could constantly be heard from within. Just a minute later it the clamor gave way to a deathly silence, with only Zac walking out from one of the gates before **[Profane Seal]** dissipated.

It was at this point the remaining invaders usually fled toward the Nexus Hub in a bid to escape earth, but Zac looked on with confusion as he saw the remaining frogmen streaming into the ocean. Most had already fled, and the town was pretty much desolate by the point that he exited.

Had the invaders chosen to stay on, hiding in the oceans until they could enact revenge?

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**Chapter 381 - Options**

Zac's confusion only grew when he couldn't find the Nexus Hub even after entering the town, and he realized he needed some answers. Zac quickly ran after the fleeing frogman and jumped into the ocean himself, but even with his superior attributes he had a hard time catching up with them. They were simply better suited to move quickly underwater with the help of their four arms and huge webbed feet.

The hunt went on for almost twenty minutes, and the frogmen fled in a straight line while harassing Zac with various attacks to keep him at bay. He tried to respond in kind, but he wasn't really used to fighting underwater. It added a whole new dimension to the battle, as the targets were not only noticeably faster, but they could freely move in essentially any direction.

His undead class was also extremely bad at this type of fighting as it both lacked movement skills and ranged attacks. His acquired skill **[Winds of Decay]** could reluctantly be classified as ranged, but he was unable to use it underwater. The only thing he had going for him was that he didn't need to breathe, so he could keep paddling forward as to not let his prey out of his sight.

Zac considered swapping to his other class to start launching fractal blades at the frogmen, but he soon stopped in his tracks when he realized what was going on. Not far ahead a sprawling underwater town stretched out, and the frogmen fled toward a square in the middle. There were still some frogmen in the square, cramming toward the center to touch the enormous crystal placed there.

A cursory glance proved that the place was already mostly evacuated though, probably since the frogmen had plenty of time to leave. Zac had to admit it was a pretty ingenious way to protect their people. The town on the shore was just a decoy or an outpost, while their real base was far out to sea.

The Nexus Hub was actually underwater, which probably explained why there was no pillar to be seen at the surface. The pillar had already been deactivated by now since he had defeated the leader of the incursion, but he noticed that there was an uncharacteristic haze above the water. Perhaps the mist was created by an array in a bid by the frogmen to hide the true seat of their power.

The frogmen that he had followed were actually streaming toward the Nexus Hub rather than some hideout in the ocean, and Zac allowed them to exit now that he knew that they didn't plan on staying on earth. He was more interested in checking out the underwater town, since it was the first time seeing something like this.

Some of the structures were completely submerged in water, but other sections of the town were enveloped by enormous water bubbles, making them habitable by humans as well. Zac felt a place like this would make a decent hidden base, as long as they could figure out how to actually make sure that the pockets of water didn't disappear.

He was also extremely eager to get a hold of this kind of technology, as it might allow him to expand his kingdom to the waters as well. He was sure there were all kinds of valuables hiding in the depths around his islands, but he didn't have a way to properly extract them until now. If he could create mobile air bubbles he'd be able to send people to scout the ocean floor from everything from mines to rare Spirit Herbs.

Things progressed the usual manner from there on out as a troop of people emerged from the Teleportation Array Zac set up within one of the larger air bubbles. Exploring an underwater town would bring its own set of difficulties, but Zac would let others figure that out as he left through the teleportation array to pick up Jonas, the guide from the Marshall Clan.

The following days were just a storm of blood and steel as Zac moved through the continent of Pangea like a walking calamity. Between his unbreakable defense and the terrifying might of his Dao Fragment, nothing could hinder his path. One incursion after another was shut down as Zac wasted no time. He would have plenty of time to rest in the tower, so now was the time for action.

Jonas Marshall who was forced to guide 'Mr. Black' looked more and more horrified as the days passed, and he didn't even dare to speak up or look in Zac's direction after he had closed three Incursions in less than two days.

Zac didn't care though, as the only thing on his mind was to crush all lingering threats to Earth before he left, or at least those he could handle now. He only returned to Port Atwood after four days of relentless battle, but his hard work had paid off. He had closed every single Incursion on his list.

As far as Zac and the Marshall Clan could tell there were currently only 5 Incursions left on Earth after Zac's rampage, or 7 if you included the Demons and Tal-Eladar. One was the Church of Everlasting Dao, and another was the Undead Empire.

The final three incursions were invaders who had been unlucky enough to be placed next to the Undead Empire itself, and they were all currently embroiled in battle with the undead hordes. They probably didn't fight to help Earth, but rather to prolong their stay so that they could extract more resources from Earth.

No matter their reasons they could still be counted as reluctant allies against the Lich King, so Zac left them alone even though he had the ability to close them down as well. Shutting down all those Incursions had given him a tremendous boost to his

confidence, something that he had slightly lacked since encountering the Cyborg. A Dao Fragment provided a far larger boost to his fighting power than upgrading his skills ever could.

But most importantly he had reached his goal; he had finally reached level 75 with his Undying Bulwark Class. He had been forced to head over to Mystic Island and grind the final stretch for a few hours after closing the last Incursion on his list, but he actually made it. He sat down to catch his breath the moment he entered his courtyard, and he opened up his menu before changing back to his human form.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**75**

**Class**

**[F-Epic] Undying Bulwark**

**Race**

**[E] Draugr**

**Alignment**

**[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist**

**Limited Titles**

**Frontrunner**

**Dao**

**Fragment of the Axe - Early, Seed of Trees - Peak, Seed of Hardness - Peak , Seed of Sanctuary - Peak, Seed of Rot - Peak**

**Core**

**[F] Duplicity**

**Strength**

**798 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 147%]**

**Dexterity**

**400 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]**

**Endurance**

**1175 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]**

**Vitality**

**567 [Increase: 50%. Efficiency: 140%]**

**Intelligence**

**218 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]**

**Wisdom**

**313 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]**

**Luck**

**165 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]**

## Free Points

19

## Nexus Coins

[F] 871 111 618

He had once again been given 20 attribute points rather than 2 from reaching peak F-Grade, one of which was taken by his class. Zac only briefly hesitated before he threw everything into Strength, pushing him one step closer to his goal of getting 1 000 in that attribute before he Evolved.

He had also gained a hefty amount of Nexus Coins, even excluding the 500 million he got from Verana earlier. But that wasn't what truly interested him at this moment, and he quickly opened up his quest menu to have a look at his new quests.

**Vanguard of Undeath (Class): Obtain a defensive Dao Fragment. Reward: Vanguard of Undeath skill. (0/1)**

**Undying Legion (Class): Gather the resentment by vanquishing 500 000 foes Reward: Undying Legion skill. (500 000/500 000) COMPLETE.**

There were two new class quests as expected, but he felt a surge of elation when he saw that one of them was actually already completed. The moment he focused on the quest it immediately disappeared from the list, forming a fractal around his right wrist.

After the moment of happiness passed Zac started to frown in consternation though. The quest had been to kill 500 000 things, something he had long accomplished between the beast hordes, all the zombies, and his grinding during the Hunt. But what did 'gather the resentment' mean? Was he carrying around a bunch of resentment unknowingly?

He remembered the horrible scenes elicited by the Dao Funnel, and he started to worry that he might be setting himself up for disaster if he didn't cleanse the resentment somehow. Perhaps it was something like Karma. He was bound to kill a lot more beings than most due to not being able to cultivate, and this was potentially a hidden danger that he needed to watch out for.

Dealing with resentment was outside of his expertise, and he made a mental note of having Kenzie ask Brazla about it. The two of them had a far better relationship, and the chance of the annoying Tool Spirit divulging information was a lot higher if she was the one asking.

He held off on activating [**Undying Legion**] in Port Atwood, and instead focused on [**Vanguard of Undeath**]. The second class quest wasn't surprising at all, as it essentially mirrored the one for [**Hatchetman's Spirit**]. Luckily it didn't demand him to reach Middle mastery of a Dao Fragment due to being a quest for an Epic class, but the quest did present another problem.

He had already decided to walk his own path, forgoing fusing Sanctuary with Hardness to instead entering the path of Life and Death. Would his fragments still be considered Defensive? Yrial mentioned Fragment of the Corpse when they spoke, and that didn't sound much like a Defensive Dao. It rather seemed to be on the path of death, or perhaps puppetry or control. But his Seed of Trees was at least considered defensive for his last quest, and hopefully that trend would continue.

In either case, the skill would have to wait since he hadn't gained any inspiration that would allow him to fuse either of his two remaining fragments. He could only put his hopes on some opportunity presenting itself in the Tower or the Base Town.

Since he was done with everything he needed to do he swapped back to his human form, but he didn't immediately leave to find Ogras or his sister. He rather

headed over to the Nexus Node once more, hoping to get a better result this time. His heart was pounding in his chest as he touched the large crystal once more.

**[E-Rare] Fallen Groveskeeper (The grove fell, but you took on its torment.)**  
**// [E-Epic] Undying Warlord (Unstoppable. Undeniable. Unmatched.)**

**[E-Rare] Mountain's Ward (Defender of the mountain; stout and unyielding.)**  
**// [E-Epic] Curse of Nature (All can be corrupted, even life itself.)**

It was like a huge weight was lifted from his chest when he saw that there were actual options available for him to pick this time around. It meant that it was the level of his Undying Bulwark-class that had been holding him back, rather than the Duplicity core or something else.

Of course, he still felt he would need to put some priority in upgrading the Specialty core since having an F-grade core when he proceeded to E-Grade might result in unanticipated issues. For example, his Duplicity core was unique, giving him a full set of attributes for his second class. What if he needed to upgrade his Core for that to continue? He could stand to lose a huge amount of attribute points if it worked like that.

Zac carefully read through the classes and their descriptions, before he quickly removed his hand from the Nexus Node to avoid any mishaps or bouts of impulsivity. But he didn't walk away, but he rather stood frozen in place as he looked into the distance with some loss and confusion.

He had to admit that he was extremely disappointed with his options. He had expected there to be at least one Arcane class to pick considering his insane amount of attribute points, titles, and achievements. But he didn't even have two Epic Classes to fall back on, with his human form still being relegated to a Rare class.

Was this some sort of punishment from the System for his heritage? He had already speculated the System had it out for him before, but was it actually true? Or was he still lacking in other departments to the point that he couldn't even get two Epic classes? Only after a few minutes did he manage to steady his mind and go over the facts.

The situation was disappointing, but Zac believed he had gained a few clues as to how the System would handle his dual classes. The most obvious thing was that it didn't let him independently pick his two classes, but they rather came in pairs. It meant that his idea of only evolving one class and returning to the Tower that way was out.

The combined class evolution provided a few more clues as well. The most striking thing was the fact that his Fragment of the Axe could not be used as a prerequisite to evolve both his classes.

His struggles were clearly far from over.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 382 - Enforced Balance**

There was no doubt in Zac's mind that the System had decided that his two class upgrades could not both use the same Daos as a base for its upgrade path. This was by far the most likely reason why he was provided two different options for epic classes for his Undying Bulwark class, but none for his Hatchetman class.

He already knew that the evolution of Undying Bulwark would have to be at least Epic Rarity, which in turn required at least one Dao Fragment to upgrade. That's why the Fragment of the Axe was 'used up' to provide an option to upgrade his Draugr-Class first.

This forced his Hatchetman to rely on his remaining Dao Seeds for options in what direction to evolve in. The fact that neither Fallen Groveskeeper nor Mountain's Ward seemed to have any obvious connection to axes was another strong indicator that his theory was correct.

He could also make a decent guess about which Daos were used for which class choices.

Zac guessed that Undying Warlord used his Fragment of the Axe together with the Dao Seeds he got from Undying Bulwark. It would still likely be a class geared toward leading Undead armies, but with a more offensive component added.

That left the seeds of Rot and Trees for Hatchetman, creating the 'Fallen Groveskeeper' class. It also felt like he had the accomplishments for such a class. He had literally created a 'fallen grove' on his property, the hidden valley where corrupted Tree of Ascension stood.

The Curse of Nature seemed to have incorporated Rot and Trees with the Fragment of the Axe instead, leaving hardness to create the Mountain's Ward in conjunction with his nature-aspected skills. There were a few more possible combinations of Dao Seeds, but Zac guessed he lacked other qualifications to get other class choices.

It did leave him a bit confused about what sort of connection Curse of Nature had with the Fragment of the Axe. Would it be some sort of class that caused corruption and curses with the swing of his axe? He did have a mental component baked into his Axe Fragment come to think of it, the mental heaviness.

What Zac didn't know was if the System split up everything between his two paths, not only Daos. For example, did the System take half of his accomplishments to evolve Hatcheman, and the other half to evolve Undying Bulwark? It was much harder to figure out what the rules were on something intangible like accomplishments.

Luckily he had some extra merit in the bank from closing the Technocrat incursion, which would hopefully help him out a bit if he found himself lacking in the future. There were also more accomplishments to be had in the Tower of Eternity before he had to pick a class.

Perhaps his current situation was a way for the System to enforce some balance. Having two classes was an almost disgusting advantage, and it was fair enough that he would have to work twice as hard to Evolve both of them to high-quality classes. But it also begged the question of whether he should maintain his goal of getting as high rarities as possible.

He was so far beyond everyone else on Earth, and he had advantages that would make most people in the multiverse green with envy. Yet he hadn't even managed to get any options to upgrade his classes' rarity after all he had accomplished. That proved the difficulties surrounding the highest rarities, and he was once again reminded of Alyn's exhortations of not biting off more than one could chew.

But at the same time, he couldn't stop himself from being drawn toward the concept of an Arcane class. What was the point of cultivation if not becoming as powerful as possible in order to protect those around you? His classes and the opportunities they provided were a large reason he could defeat even those that possessed equal or even higher attributes than him.

Besides, if he got stuck when evolving to D-Grade in the future he could always head out to adventure and find new opportunities to make up for what he lacked. This time he was pretty much forced to quickly evolve to meet the threats on Earth, but Zac wouldn't be as rushed for time after dealing with the Incursions and the Dominators.

He would have 100 years to slowly and steadily progress, allowing him to push both his Skills and his Daos to the peak before attempting to form his Cultivator's Core.

His options for classes weren't exactly what he had wished for, but they gave him a good hint in what direction to work in. He felt that his optimal choice was to focus on a Fragment of Death next, or at least some subordinate Dao to the Dao of Death. That way he could use his Fragment of the Axe to upgrade Hatchetman, and the Death-attuned Dao Fragment to upgrade Undying bulwark.

Best of all would certainly be if he could get both fragments, which might at even give him the chance at one Arcane class and one Epic, but he couldn't be too greedy.

As for the specific classes he was presented, he didn't analyze them too deeply apart from figuring out why he could choose them. His options would probably change completely the moment he gained another fragment, making it premature to plan his cultivation around the classes he saw now.

He quickly left his private domain to head over to the Thayer Consortia. It was time to finish his preparations.

"The brave general returns!" the Sky Gnome said as he handed over a Cosmos Sack. "I bet your name will be used to scare unruly children after the invaders return home. I've never heard of anyone singlehandedly closing multiple incursions in one week."

The Sky Gnome had already prepared a long list of items that Zac would need, containing everything from a wide array of Attuned Crystals to provisions to last for almost a year. Ogras had said that anything could happen inside the Tower, so he had prepared for every contingency he could think of.

"Half of them fled the moment it became apparent that I would be able to singlehandedly breach their defensive arrays," Zac said with a wry smile as he accepted the sack. "The leaders usually fled first, leaving mostly the slaves and non-combat classes to cover their escape. I simply stood and watched for the most part."

"It's good to have some benevolence, but don't be complacent when you arrive at the Tower of Eternity," Calrin said with a serious face. "You will be mixing with all kinds of people, some from terrifying forces, and not everyone will share your kind-hearted mindset. Keep your head down and focus on your task."

"I will be careful," Zac smiled. "About that money?"

The sky gnome looked a bit queasy, but he transferred over almost 4 billion nexus coins without complaint. It was the combined worth of the sales of his Beast Crystals, along with his accumulated dividends from all the profits the Thayer Consortia had accumulated since the Beast Waves.

"Here, take this as well," Calrin said as he took off a ring from one of his fingers. "It's something the Thayer Progenitor found during his travels. He discovered this from an ancient gravesite, and it has extremely impressive defensive properties. It can only be used once every year though, so only activate it if you're all out of options."

Zac wasn't too surprised that the Thayer ancestor was a hobbyist grave robber in addition to a merchant after having met his descendants. He gratefully accepted the ring, since one could never have too many aces in a place like the Tower of Eternity.

"Thank you, I appreciate it," Zac said as he put the ring on his right hand.

“When are you leaving?” Calrin asked curiously.

“In a few hours. I just need to deal with a few matters first,” Zac answered after some thought. “Can you find Ogras to make sure he’s ready as well?”

“I’ll find him, he has requested some items as well,” Calrin nodded. “Good luck. And remember, a great leader always has time to earn some money on the side. Keep your eye peeled for good trades!”

There were a few more things to take care of, and the first was to head over to the battlefield. There were a couple of people he needed to speak with, and he began with the Marshall Clan rather than visiting his own army. He was leaving for a while so he felt he should touch base with Thea first.

It had been over a month since they last spoke in person, though he got regular updates on her activities and her army’s situation. He headed over to the battlefield with the help of a Marshall Liaison residing in Port Atwood and was quickly led toward the command tent of the Marshall’s allied army.

The army was far larger than Zac had thought, with tents almost reaching the horizon. There had to be at least half a million people in the camp, and Zac didn’t understand where she had gotten so many people. But it was good that she had found help against the threat, and he put aside the question as he entered the tent.

There was a middle-aged man who gave off a military vibe standing by a large map, and Thea stood next to him looking slightly troubled. Something had changed about her since he saw her last. She felt harder, and a bit colder compared to before. But Zac wasn’t surprised as war had that effect. He could imagine it was especially demoralizing to be forced to face zombies that were once your people.

The fact that she stayed in a constant cloud of miasma didn’t help either. He had seen the effect the death-attuned energy had on people personally. Zac himself was fine since he could simply cram any errant miasma into his Duplicity core, but others weren’t so lucky. They would first become broody and grim, until they were finally transformed into true zombies.

He could still remember the scene where the poor adventurer finally lost control over the accumulated miasma in his body. And the following scene where his former companions ripped him to pieces to get a hold of his Zombie Core. But Zac could tell that the people he passed in the camp was far from reaching that state, which was a small relief at least.

“Long time no see,” Zac said with a small smile as he walked up toward the table.

“Indeed. I hear your people have closed the final incursions?” Thea said as she looked up from the table. “Are you preparing to assault the Dead Zone? How can we help?”

“Not quite,” Zac sighed. “I need more preparation.”

“Every day of delay costs us ten thousand lives,” Thea said with a frown. “And there’s also the issue of the array.”

Port Atwood had immediately sent an update regarding everything they’ve learned about the array the moment Zac turned back, so the Marshall Clan and the Sino-Indian Alliance long knew about it.

“We still have a few weeks before the array can activate, especially now that we’ve gotten reinforcements from the Underworld,” Zac said, feeling a bit startled about Thea’s strong reaction.

He knew he had gotten a bit side-tracked with the Underworld and rescuing his army, but the fact remained that he was pretty much on schedule. They had discussed

a timeline of up to two months to close all the incursions on the surface, and Zac had completed the task well within those parameters.

At the same time he could understand her sentiment. It was her people, many even from her own family, that kept dying in their continuous effort to keep the zombie horde at bay. He had heard that Thea almost lived out on the battlefield, taking on as much as she could so that as few of her people as possible would die.

It might have felt extremely frustrating to suddenly see Zac's progress stop after only closing a handful of the incursions on the surface. It was only last week he resumed his work, closing the remaining ones in quick succession. That made the three weeks in-between look particularly suspicious.

But even then things couldn't be rushed.

"We have to be careful about the Undead Empire. They are far beyond any other incursion in power. We need to do everything in our power to improve our odds while we still can, only attacking when we have confidence in success," Zac said, trying to underscore the importance of taking their time to power up.

"I understand," Thea sighed.

The two kept discussing the war for twenty minutes or so until Zac needed to leave.

"Ten days to two weeks. I will launch an all-out assault within that time. I hope I can count on your assistance," Zac said as he left, leaving the two Marshall Clan members silently looking at his back.

"What do you think?" Thea asked as she watched Zac disappear out of sight.

"I think he speaks the truth, he doesn't feel like the scheming type. He needs to do something before evolving," Mark said after some thought. "All our research does point that evolving to E-Grade is a quick process though, even if you have a high-rarity class. I would guess he has been holding off in order to get a better class. Our liaison mentioned some large event took place at their Academy the other day. "

"A better class..." Thea mumbled, some light dimming in her eyes. "But he's been level 75 for over a month by now while Earth is dying. So it's for himself in the end... Was I wrong about him?"

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**Chapter 383 - Final Hours**

The meeting with Thea was surprisingly tense, but Zac guessed it wasn't anything too surprising considering how her last month had been. It was obvious that she was both physically and spiritually exhausted after fighting the zombies for so long. He could only shrug off the uncomfortable feelings as he proceeded with the things on his list.

He visited his settlements one after another to see whether there was anything that required his attention. Luckily things were running quite smooth so far. The former Incursions had vast swathes of unclaimed land around them, and there hadn't been a single dispute over territory so far. Not that anyone would dare encroach on his domain.

Next he headed over to the Atwood Army, which once again was embroiled in a protracted war against the second undead horde. The soldiers looked at him with awe as he stepped toward the frontline, and he saw Ilvere hurry over from the distance.

“Is there something wrong?” the demon asked with confusion since he hadn’t been forewarned about Zac’s arrival.

“I’m leaving in a bit,” Zac said after making sure no one else was within earshot. “I thought I could thin the herd a bit for you guys before that. Do you know a good sector to strike?”

The general’s eyes lit up and he immediately started to think of a plan.

“I’d stay away from the innermost core, even if I were you. The young master mentioned that there is an extremely strong array in there, he barely got out before it closed in around him. There are a few places we call command clumps in the inner area though. They’re far into the horde, but not so far as you enter the array of Unholy Beacons,” the demon eventually said.

Zac nodded as he had heard Ogras mention it earlier as well. It was the same reason that Thea hadn’t dared another assassination attempt. It was pretty much impossible to head into the core unless you were ready to risk it all in taking the General down, and Zac wasn’t ready to reveal all his cards before fighting the Lich King.

“Command clumps?” Zac asked curiously, focusing on what he could help with at the moment.

“Clumps with highly intelligent zombies that commands the rest of them. They’re what stopping the stupid ones from simply walking off into the woods. We generally try to find and kill solitary leaders like that to fracture the horde one piece at a time,” the demon said.

“Won’t I cause a stampede if I kill a command clump then?” Zac asked skeptically.

“The clump is surrounded by the strongest zombies. If you kill them as well only the rabble will remain,” Ilvere said. “We will be able to handle the weaker ones now that we have the underworld army to help.”

“How have things been working out with the Council so far?” Zac asked.

The Underworld Council was the last thing he needed to check in on before returning to Port Atwood. The Atwood Army relied on the strength of the Councilors to keep the Undead General in check. Now that Alea was out of commission only Janos and Ilvere remained. Both had gotten a decent power-up from the Dao Funnel, but they also had a much lower starting point compared to the Undead Empire.

They alone weren’t a strong enough deterrent, but with ten councilors to help out, even the undead General would have to think twice before moving out.

“They are competent fighters,” Ilvere said with approval. “Much better than the rabble of the Sino-Indian Alliance. But they are also holding back, and they appear to have sent out quite a few scouting parties toward the wilderness.”

“They’re no doubt looking for places to set up proper towns,” Zac said, before changing topic. “By the way, how’s your progress on **[Cyclic Strike]** coming along?”

“I’ve mastered it, thanks to the opportunity you and the young master presented,” Ilvere said with some pride. “I managed to push both my Daos to Peak mastery. Everything went extremely smoothly after that. As soon as my soul healed I tried it out, and it almost came naturally, as though the two Daos wanted to form a cycle on their own accord.”

The mouth of Zac started to twitch with some annoyance since he couldn’t say that he had enjoyed the same success the past days. He had renewed his efforts of mastering **[Cyclic Strike]** now that both his Seed of Trees and Rot were at peak mastery. But his control hadn’t really improved at all, and he wasn’t even halfway to being able to activate the skill properly, let alone using it in a fight.

Was this the result of having 0 affinity with the Daos? Was he forced to stay a dumb brute who had to smash his head against every trial that came his way? Was the path of the refined cultivator forever out of his grasp?

He had the demon display the strike a few times, and Zac had to admit that its might was a bit shocking. It almost felt like the large metal ball was infused with a Dao Fragment rather than two Dao Seeds as it shot out in the direction that Ilvere targeted, and the power was enormous for someone at Ilvere's level.

Yrial had said that the attack was nothing much, but was he simply saying that from the perspective of a C-Grade hegemon? **[Cyclic Strike]** was not too important for Zac who already possessed a real Dao Fragment by now, but what if he managed to form the Life/Death Fragments? How powerful would the skill be if it was powered by Fragments rather than Seeds?

Zac kept having Ilvere repeat the strike over and over, and he asked all kinds of questions to make sense of why the demon mastered the skill so effortlessly. He asked about everything from how he controlled his Mental Energy to even minor details like how he breathed during the infusion.

Zac was determined to learn the skill during his stay in the Tower. If he couldn't manage that much in 100 days he might as well jump into a well and stay there out of shame.

He didn't immediately find out any solution to his inability to combine his two Daos, but he did get a few clues on how to act going forward. It was all he could do for now, and he returned to the subject of thinning out the zombie horde.

It quickly became apparent that they would need the assistance of the Underworld Council if Zac started rampaging inside the horde, so Zac set off to the nearby, and much larger, camp belonging to the Council. He was immediately showed inside a command tent with great courtesy, and he spotted a few familiar faces there.

"I barely see any of the molemen around?" Zac asked with confusion after going through the customary greetings. "I thought they'd jump at the opportunity to see the sky again after all this time."

"Old habits die hard," Lararia, one of the molemen councilors, said. "We have lived beneath the surface for thousands of years. The darkness and stone have become part of us. Not all are ready to leave their sanctuary just yet, or perhaps ever."

"I see," Zac slowly nodded, understanding their feeling.

The concept of 'home' was something built into one's wiring, and Zac had felt slightly oppressed the whole time he spent down in the tunnels. Coming back to the surface was like he could suddenly breathe again, so he could understand how the opposite held true for the molemen. Perhaps his dreams of creating large underwater towns would end up as a pipe dream unless he could find some amphibious races to join his force.

"So what brings you here today?" another councilor asked.

"I will be busy taking care of a few unavoidable matters for a bit over a week," Zac explained. "So was planning on thinning the horde a bit before I leave. I was hoping I could count on your cooperation."

"No problem. These undead have proven a great whetstone for our armies," Lararia said without hesitation. "We don't mind getting our blades wet some more."

Zac nodded in thanks and immediately set out after ironing out the details of his assault. Ilvere had already prepared his people, so Zac didn't go back to the Atwood camp. He put on the amulet he got from Ogras back then and flashed straight into the huge sea of zombies, and he found himself mostly unencumbered.

The both good and somewhat frustrating thing about the zombie horde was that it wasn't tightly clumped. It allowed Zac to simply walk between the millions of undead who were just milling around, but it drastically decreased the lethality of any area attacks aimed to take out a lot of them in one go. It was nothing like the tightly cramped zombie hordes you could see in the movies where they were crammed together like sardines.

He couldn't be sure whether it was the efficacy of the amulet, or if the general had already decided to not meet Zac's head-on, but Zac managed to find the clump without much hassle and unleashed the first two stages of **[Deforestation]**, causing a huge swathe of scorched corpses.

Just as Ilvere warned chaos immediately ensued, but Zac stayed on for another hour to rip apart the larger clumps of Zombies with his fractal blades. However, even if he wanted to take this opportunity to get more accustomed to his Fragment of the Axe he chose to not display it here, and he also refrained from using **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** and his Undying Bulwark class.

He wanted to keep his aces hidden for the final clash in the Dead Zone in a few weeks.

Between the coordinated efforts of Zac, his army, and the Underworld Council a week's worth of zombies were felled in the span of a few hours. Zac wanted to do more, but he needed to get going. He could only pray that his small help on the frontline would give his people a breather and delay the terraforming a day or two.

He returned to Port Atwood and gave some instructions to Adran and Abby, and he also took the opportunity to plunder the town coffers of another 800 million nexus coins. The money came from a mix of taxes and sales of Nexus Crystals, along with some plundered wealth from the underworld.

His final destination was the secluded valley between the mountain, and Zac was happy to see that Calrin already had accomplished his task. Alea's crystal coffin was shrouded in a green mist that seeped out from a grate next to her, and even the poisoned Tree of Ascension seemed to benefit from the Amanita's mist.

Zac didn't say anything as he looked down at Alea who seemed to simply sleep in her crystal encasing. She neither looked better or worse compared to when he saw her last, which Zac guessed was the best he could hope for. A tired sigh escaped from his lips as he lightly touched the coffin before he left.

He had finally crossed off everything on his list, allowing him to head to the Tower of Eternity with a clear mind. For the people of Port Atwood he would only be gone for 10 days at the most, but for him it would be over a hundred days. He didn't want to carry a nagging feeling that he had missed something for such a long time.

He finally returned to his compound and found both Emily and Kenzie in his sister's courtyard. The three had a dinner where the two seemed to compete in bragging of who had the greatest gains from the Dao House. Zac was relieved to hear that both of them were doing good, and it seemed that everyone had already woken up from their comas by now.

There was still the issue of latent dangers, but at least it seemed like a possibility that people's souls had simply been overtaxed after being forced to ponder on the Dao too intensely. Luckily even those who had fallen unconscious had made great gains, and there were now over 15 people from Port Atwood on the Dao Ladder.

His sister had even managed to crash into the 6<sup>th</sup> position, while Joanna just missed the top ten at 11<sup>th</sup>. Emily, who had chosen to use her real name for the ladder, was currently in the 87<sup>th</sup> position. She would likely have been a lot further ahead if it wasn't for her late start.

It felt good to have a relaxed meal, but Zac knew he couldn't put things off any longer. He finally headed toward his courtyard to meet up with Ogras, with the two girls following behind.

The demon already stood ready, but no one else was there to see them off. Only a very select number of people knew that Zac was about to leave Earth for a bit as Zac was afraid someone would use his absence to cause damage to Port Atwood or his people. He wanted to use his identity as a deterrent even when he wasn't around.

He took one last look in his Cosmos Sacks to make sure that he hadn't missed anything, before nodding at the demon.

"Stay safe, both of you," Kenzie said. "And you know... See if you can find any news of her?"

"I will," Zac said with a smile as he crushed the token while placing his hand on Ogras' shoulder. "Take care of things while I am gone, ok?"

He looked at his sister for ten seconds as the space around them started to shudder and twist until the System swallowed the two to send them on their way.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 384 - Apparitions**

Zac had expected to be stuck in darkness for a prolonged duration, but the two appeared almost immediately some distance away from the base of an enormous set of stairs. Transportation that the System provided itself sure was different Zac reckoned as he looked around to get his bearings.

People kept appearing around him as well, most of them looking quite young. Some looked around in confusion and wonder just like himself, while others immediately started to ascend the steps after orienting themselves. Zac's eyes followed the stairs until his eyes finally reached the crest.

"Holy crap," Zac muttered as his eyes tried to compute was in front of him.

"Pretty impressive, yeah?" Ogras echoed as he looked up at the Tower of Eternity in wonder.

They were currently standing at what seemed to be an endless square, as there was nothing in all directions apart from the people who kept appearing out of thin air. This whole space seemed to be made solely for one thing; the Tower of Eternity. Its name was truly apt as it really towered into space itself, breaking all logic and convention.

The tower itself was a pristine white and completely without adornments as far as Zac could tell from this distance. There were no windows and no decor, and it didn't get any thinner at the top. It essentially looked like a massive tube made from marble, but Zac had trouble getting any sense of its actual size. He could only confirm that it spanned at least a couple of kilometers in width.

As for its height, it was impossible to tell.

The tower itself didn't look very impressive apart from its mindboggling size, but that wasn't the only magical thing about it. Mysterious lights trailed along its massive surface, causing a beautiful spectacle that stirred something in Zac's soul. It was like a subdued but never-ending firework show that brightened up the sky.

It reminded Zac a bit of the gaudy display of his own Towers of Myriad Dao, but there was a vast difference in their essence. The lights that Brazla conjured around the Dao Repository felt empty and pretentious, but it was completely different with the radiance around the Tower of Eternity.

It was as though the lights were communicating the Grand Dao itself, and Zac's mind shuddered slightly when he watched them. Zac finally understood that the original Brazla had tried to imitate the Tower of Eternity when he created his Dao Repository, but only managed to project a cheap copy.

Zac had a feeling that if he observed the lights for a few months it wouldn't be impossible to gain a completely new Dao Seed. The sight made Zac better understand why almost everyone stayed for the full year inside the Base Town if they could. Just living next to the tower itself was a precious opportunity.

But the divine lights suddenly disappeared and were instead replaced by an impossibly large snake that coiled around the tower. It was majestic beyond comprehension, and Zac couldn't stop gaping like a fool as he watched it stretch its scaled head toward the sky.

The snake actually had a horn on its head, and Zac could barely distinguish some sort of fractals covering it but it was too far to discern any details. It was a shame, as he felt that the inscriptions on the horn contained shocking insights into the Dao.

Everyone around them had stopped what they were doing as well and looked at the snake with rapt attention. A few people even seemed to have been struck by an epiphany as they quickly closed their eyes, delight clear on their faces. The mythological beast only appeared for a minute or so before it dissipated, and was once again replaced by the mysterious light.

"A flood dragon," Ogras muttered. "I think that is the 38<sup>th</sup> level? Pretty auspicious to see a sign the moment we arrive."

"What do you mean?" Zac asked curiously, finally taking his eyes off the tower in the distance. "I thought there were only 9 floors?"

"Well, each floor has nine subfloors, each a world in of itself, so most people simply count it as there being 81 levels," Ogras explained. "The 38<sup>th</sup> level means that someone has completed the first four floors and another two levels before exiting."

"Apparitions appear when people pass specific floors, and there are a few rules to it," the demon added. "It essentially showcases that a powerhouse just completed his climb in the tower."

"Aren't there always powerhouses undertaking the trial?" Zac asked with confusion. "Wouldn't people get blinded by constant apparitions, especially if the time inside the tower is accelerated?"

Zac heard a few snorts from around him and noticed that a few cultivators looked at him like he had a hole in his head. He even heard someone mutter 'country bumpkin' under his breath, no doubt talking about him. Even Ogras looked over at Zac with exasperation.

"Don't underestimate the difficulty of the Tower of Eternity, especially the 36<sup>th</sup> floor and beyond. I only barely made it past the 27<sup>th</sup> because my grandpa spent a good chunk of his life savings on me gaining a good score," Ogras whispered.

"But still," Zac said.

"If you stay here for a year you might see one of the apparitions between the 36<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> levels a few times a week, so it's nothing too exciting," a voice drifted over and Zac looked over to see a young man with a bow strapped to his back smiling in their direction. "But the others are pretty rare."

“Oh?” Zac said with interest.

“This is my second time here. Last time I saw the apparitions for the 45<sup>th</sup> level ten times during the year I stayed here, which meant someone passed the 5<sup>th</sup> floor. The last level of each floor represents a huge spike in difficulty, so it’s a tremendous achievement,” the man explained.

Zac looked at the man with some confusion before he understood what he meant. The tower of eternity possessed 9 true floors, each of which had 9 subfloors. That meant that the 45<sup>th</sup> level was the final subfloor of the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, and the next true floor ended at the 54<sup>th</sup> level.

“I also was lucky enough to see an apparition for the 52<sup>nd</sup> floor,” the man said, seemingly enjoying Zac’s attention.

“And for higher floors like 54<sup>th</sup> and beyond?” Zac asked with interest.

“No, that’s something that you might only see by chance. It doesn’t even happen once every ten years,” the bowman said with a shake of his head. “But you never know. One of my family’s ancestors had the fortune of witnessing the apparition for the 63<sup>rd</sup> floor, that’s a grand occasion taking place only once every few millennia.”

Zac’s brows rose in surprise when he learned of the details. Apparitions above the 54<sup>th</sup> level happened every decade or so, but the 63<sup>rd</sup> was once every couple of thousands of years? That was over a hundred times more difficult from the time it took. Then what about the 72<sup>nd</sup> level? The young ranger seemed to understand Zac’s thoughts, and he was obviously happy to showcase his expertise.

“You’re wondering about the higher tiers, right? The last time an apparition for the 63<sup>rd</sup> level appeared was around 4600 years ago now. It was actually a loose cultivator called Parvan Beradan, though most know him as Lord Beradan now that he’s become a C-Grade Lord. As for the 72<sup>nd</sup> level?” the young man said, pausing for dramatic effect.

“That was the Eveningtide Asura.”

Both Zac and Ogras blankly looked at the young man after his grand proclamation, neither of them ever having heard that name before. The ranger seemed a bit embarrassed about the lack of reaction, and he coughed while scratching his chin. But just as he was about to explain the origin of the so-called Asura, an attendant stepped up to his side.

“Young Master, your reception is waiting,” the young girl next to him discreetly said.

The man gave a start before he sighed with annoyance.

“Anyway!” he said as he started to move away from Zac and Ogras. “Witnessing those top apparitions is an opportunity that one can hope for, but never control. If you need to stock up on goods or intelligence before you try your luck in the tower, remember to visit the Trentach Society!”

After that the ranger started ascending the stairs with rapid steps, and a retinue of ten people quickly followed behind. Only then did Zac realize that the people around him were all elites that completed a quest for the tokens. But even elites who qualified to get a token were only assistants to that guy, so they might just have met a bigshot.

Zac’s eyes followed their figures as they pushed forward, and he realized that the endless stairs simply led up to a vast plateau that the tower itself stood on. The plateau itself was crafted from some black stone, and Zac guessed it was a few kilometers in height. The only reason it didn’t feel so massive was since its size was dwarfed by the tower itself.

“Well, let’s go,” Ogras said with a shrug. “And remember to keep a low profile. There’s no law and no restrictions here, and anyone can be a true monster.”

“That guy told us to visit his store. Do people live here permanently?” Zac asked as the two started to walk up the stairs.

The steps were hundreds of meters wide, so it wasn’t cramped in the slightest even though quite a few people were appearing on the platform.

“Rydel and I were the only ones who had gone to the Tower in my family among those who entered the Incursion, and no one had gone for well over a decade before us,” Ogras said. “But some forces are so big that they always have some people here. Maintaining a compound or a business here is a show of strength since it proves that the force is flourishing with young talents.”

“So any place up there is controlled by some real powerful families?” Zac asked with a whistle.

“Not all,” Ogras corrected him. “The top forces control the structures closest to the entrance of the towers. But most buildings don’t have a permanent owner, especially at the outer parts of the town. Anyone could live or set up a temporary business there if they want, and close it down when they leave this place.”

The two kept walking and soon enough they reached the summit of the plateau. A sprawling town full of palaces and luxuriant compounds entered his eyes, and it felt extremely bustling. The architecture was extremely varied as well, making Zac believe that the System had simply stolen a bunch of large mansions from different parts of the multiverse.

There was no way that there was a single society that had created all these buildings. But even though the mansions and storefronts varied in both style and size it all seemed to blend perfectly into some sort of cultural melting-pot. It also wasn’t cramped at all, with the streets being over a hundred meters wide.

Even though there were dozens of people ascending the stairs at any moment, the enormous town didn’t seem to have any trouble swallowing them all. Some walked in certain directions with purpose, while others simply chose to meander around. The new arrivals were walking along both in groups or alone, and Zac was shocked to see some of the creatures.

The cultivators they passed came in all shapes and forms, including quite a few Humans. Zac already knew that humans were one of the most populous races in the multiverse, but yet it was a bit mindblowing to see all these humans who were probably from all corners of the universe.

It was a far cry from how many believed that Earth might be the only planet housing life back in the day.

Still, humans were only a somewhat large minority in the mix of people around. Zac couldn’t help look over at a dour contingent of undead warriors silently walking toward the center of the town, all of them releasing dense clouds of miasma to avoid the Cosmic Energy in the environment.

Most cultivators took a wide berth around them, some out of fear and others not wanting to get sullied by the death-attuned energy. There were also enormous golems, flying pixies only as large as a hand, and all kinds of other odd beings.

There was one thing that essentially looked like a flying disco ball, and it slowly flew forward with a low hum. There were also a couple of Stargazers as well, and when Zac accidentally looked into their cosmic eye he couldn’t help but twitch a bit as his mind got a small shock.

He remembered that these guys almost always used mental classes, and just looking into one's eye was to ask for trouble even if they weren't hostile. Abby was different since she was an administrator without any combat capabilities.

Zac also noted with some interest that the groups of cultivators were more diverse than he had expected. He had thought he might stick out by traveling together with a demon, but he realized that was an unnecessary worry. At least a third of all groups were comprised of a mix of races, so they weren't exactly unique.

But even though all these diverse groups of people were put on the same street it was all surprisingly harmonious. There should be quite a few grudges between races, especially with the System's instigation, but people seemed to get along just fine.

Of course, Zac believed that this serenity was only the surface of the Base Town.

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**Chapter 385 - Protect Your Wallet**

"It's pretty quiet, I thought things would get rowdier if there were no laws," Zac said with a low volume to Ogras as they walked down the seemingly endless road leading toward the tower.

"Everyone here is an elite of their force, bringing hidden aces to climb as far as possible in the tower. Only a real mouthbreather would risk their lives against enemies of unknown power for no reason. This might be the only chance they have to come here, most people are only concerned to gain strength before evolving," the demon responded. "Of course, there are always some who were just born without a brain."

Zac followed Ogras' gaze and saw a scene where three burly beastkin cultivators seemingly had bumped into a group of hooded beings that were shorter than a meter in height. Even Calrin was slightly taller than the diminutive cultivators who covered their appearance. The beastmen towered above them like giants and they seemed to be rearing for a fight.

"Look where you walk you little shits," one of the beastmen growled as it threw a forceful kick. "You puny things should scurry in the sewers like the other rats."

Zac could sense that the power of the beastman wasn't too bad, and his kick was even imbued with some Dao seed that was at least middle stage. But the kick was forcibly stopped by the small hand of the leading hooded cultivator.

A shockwave erupted from the clash, but Zac noted with interest that its power was quickly swallowed by the atmosphere, and not even those standing within 5 meters were affected apart from a small flutter of their clothes. If such a collision took place on Earth it would have been able to topple trees over twenty meters away.

The beastman seemed shocked how effortlessly the little cultivator stopped his kick, and he hurriedly took out a large axe with some fear in his eyes. However, before he even had time to swing the group of hooded cultivators disappeared, only to reappear again at the same spot a second later. As for the three beastmen; they stood frozen for a second before their bodies started to fall apart into neatly separated chunks.

Zac looked at the beastmen, knowing they were deader than dead. He had barely been able to see what the hooded creatures did, but he realized they were actually some sort of small beastkin that all focused on Dexterity. They hadn't used weapon

when dissecting their bulkier brethren, but rather a set of sharp claws on their furry hands.

The people in the surroundings didn't care in the slightest that a murder had taken place just in front of them. Not even the other beastman in the area lifted a brow when seeing their kin get slain. They rather looked down at the killed beastmen like they were idiots, and Zac had to agree. You would have to be extremely powerful or extremely stupid to harass people in a place like this.

Interestingly enough the blood and the bodies of the killed cultivators turned into motes of light that soon enough dissipated, and only the cosmos sacks were left behind. One of the hooded cultivators snatched them up before the group walked away without a care, walking toward the inner parts of the city.

"Some people come here without a real understanding of the world, thinking they're unbeatable," Ogras snorted with a shake of his head. "Let's go."

"Weren't those small guys supposed to be suppressed or something?" Zac asked curiously as he took a last look at the beastmen.

"The larger ones attacked first, so whatever happened next was counted as Self Defense by the Ruthless Heavens," Ogras smiled. "So remember, if you want to kill someone try to make them hit you first, even if it's just a shove. Then you can kill them without any repercussions. This is another reason why there's so little fighting."

"Even if you win, as long as you hit first you will still get hunted down, right?" Zac confirmed.

"Right," Ogras nodded as he kept walking. "There is an exception though, but it doesn't relate to us. You can simply follow the rule to not hit first and we'll be fine."

"Where are we heading?" Zac asked as he walked along.

"You said we only have ten days here at most, so we better make the most of it," Ogras said. "First off, let's get something to eat. I haven't had a decent meal since I arrived at your godforsaken planet."

Zac stopped in his tracks and gave the demon an even stare, making Ogras roll his eyes in exasperation.

"We need to get a feel of the current situation here. Listening in on the discussion at a tavern is a good way to get some of the latest gossip of the area," the demon snorted. "It might allow us to save a lot of money to learn what we need to know. Information brokers are pretty damn expensive."

Zac reluctantly agreed with Ogras even if he felt the urge to start running back and forth to complete all his various goals of coming here. There was so much to do, with helping Alea and learning more about his Specialty Core being the top priorities before entering the Tower itself. So it was with some reluctance he let the demon drag him to a decently sized open-air restaurant roughly halfway between the stairs and the tower.

"This is roughly the halfway point," Ogras said as they walked inside the huge courtyard of the restaurant. "The buildings from here on out generally have permanent owners. Of course, if you feel the need you can always take a building by force. But there is no point in us doing that even if we have the strength to do so."

It was completely packed, but the two luckily managed to get a table in the back. Almost the moment the two sat down a golem arrived and gave them each a crystal containing the menu. Zac curiously looked at the waiter, but it stood unmoving until the demon placed a round of orders for the two. Only then did it slightly bow before wordlessly walking away.

“...It’s a puppet?” Zac finally asked as he looked at the dozens of golems walking around between the tables.

“Yes. Only elites can come here, so most businesses use puppets or arrays rather than living personnel. I hear that the elite stores right by the tower entrance have living waiters, but that’s not the kind of place we can freely enter,” Ogras muttered.

“Why not?” Zac asked, not understanding why they couldn’t shop where they wanted.

“This version of the tower is low-tiered, but the strongest forces here are still Peak C-Grade. Getting involved with those kinds of people before we have some sort of backing won’t end well,” Ogras explained. “Besides, most of the top tier establishments require referrals or things like that.”

“Isn’t the point of coming here making a connection with those kinds of forces?” Zac asked skeptically.

“No,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “It’s better to look for a weaker force in my opinion. A strong Early C-Grade or weak Middle C-Grade force might be best. They will be strong enough to rebuff that old goat, but not so strong that we’ll be forced into a situation we can’t dig ourselves out of.”

Zac slowly nodded, feeling it made sense. Yrial had full confidence in killing a Peak D-Grade powerhouse even if he was just a soul fragment. It went to show what a huge difference it was between D-Grade and C-Grade. A live C-Grade Hegemon would probably have no problem dealing with The Great Redeemer even if he was stuck in the early stages.

“Besides, those peak forces are millions of years old. What elites haven’t they seen before? There’s no guarantee they’d bother recruiting you even if you passed the 6th floor,” Ogras added after a thought. “Even if you’re a monster in human skin you’re still a mortal.”

Zac ignored the demon’s insult as he suddenly realized something odd about what the demon said earlier.

“This version?” Zac asked with confusion.

“The tower services the whole multiverse, how could all the young elites fit in this small town?” Ogras snorted. “There are innumerable Base Towns where elites of the same sector gather.”

“Sort of like the incursion forces?” Zac mumbled, remembering that only forces in the same star sector got the opportunity to invade earth.

“Yes, though the area for who gets teleported here is a lot larger,” Ogras shrugged. “At least I saw more forces I didn’t recognize than ones I knew last time. Its scope is quite large.”

“So, the forces we’re looking to ally with are locals?” Zac asked. “Are they staying here or further inside the town?”

“Yes they are, but we’ll deal with all that after you’ve proven your worth by summoning a top tier apparition in the sky,” Ogras shrugged. “For now we’ll be treated like garbage if we go there, and might even get ourselves killed. Remember, those places likely have a bunch of treasures that aren’t suppressed like in the tower.”

Zac nodded in agreement. He also felt it was no point to sound out strong backers before he had proven himself in the tower. That way he wouldn’t need to divulge any of his titles or attributes. He could simply point to the apparition he created with his tower run, and it would vouch for his power.

There were a lot more things Zac wanted to ask about now that he had a better understanding of what sort of place they had arrived at, but just as he was about to ask

another question he noticed a squirrely human look in their direction. He was a pure human just like Zac and looked to be somewhere in his thirties.

It wasn't anything too surprising, but most people looked quite young. Looking a bit older could be a sign that they weren't very powerful and had been stuck at F-Grade for a few decades. But it could also mean that he was someone like Zac himself, someone who only evolved his race a bit later than normal.

Some might spend a decade or two perfecting their Daos or gathering achievements, as not all could have direct access to Origin Dao like Zac and Ogras did. So looking even older than Zac was a bit out of the norm, but not unseen. There were even a few people looking middle-aged in the area, though those were likely people who had been stuck on a bottleneck for most of their lives.

When the man noticed Zac's stare he immediately started to walk over to their table. Zac frowned slightly, afraid that trouble had already found them for some reason. Was that man someone from one of the incursions that he had closed? But Zac didn't sense any danger from the man, and he gave a weak smile when he arrived.

"I am sorry. It seems quite crowded here today. Would you mind if I imposed on the two young masters? I am Galau of Clan Beroria by the way, from the Allbright Empire," he said.

Zac's brows rose when he heard of the all too familiar empire, and he immediately indicated for the man to sit down. What were the chances of meeting a countryman of Average and Greatest? He had been thinking of the Allbright Empire often since meeting those two, mainly because he had a standing invitation of Greatest.

It might just have been an offering made out of politeness, but if Zac actually showed up at their doorstep Greatest would hopefully at least be able to arrange something that would help him in his cultivation. Such a powerhouse no doubt had a large network of connections, and he might even be able to introduce Zac to a force that could keep The Great Redeemer at bay.

Greatest was also someone who already knew of his Specialty core but hadn't made any attempts to snatch it, which was Zac's biggest fear in dealing with the powerhouses of the multiverse. He even went so far as to give him his bracer, which was something that he still wore every day to maintain his secrecy.

"I'm Zac," Zac simply said, not explaining his origins any further. "This is Ogras."

"Nice to meet you, I'll order a round as thanks for your hospitality. Have you been here long?" Galau asked.

"We haven't entered the Tower yet, if that's what you're asking," Ogras snorted.

"No, no, I am just making conversation," Galau said with some embarrassment. "I have been frequenting this restaurant for a few months, but it is the first time I see the two young sirs. But I can already tell you're two people destined for greatness."

Zac and Ogras gave each other a weird look before the demon leaned over.

"Protect your wallet and your butt," the demon muttered with a guarded expression.

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**Chapter 386 - Galau**

“I am sorry, I am flattered but I am interested in the fairer sex,” Ogras said without waiting for Galau to speak up again. “As for this guy, I’m not sure? I think he’s converted to ascetic cultivation for some reason.”

Galau blankly looked at Ogras for a few seconds, obviously unable to compute what the demon was talking about.

“What? No! I like.. I like the ladies as well,” Galau stammered. “I was just making conversation. I have been here for so long and it simply gets a bit tedious after a while, so I like making new friends.”

“Oh, how long have you been here?” Zac asked with interest.

He knew that Ogras hinted at the fact that Galau might be a scammer, but Zac didn’t care. He was interested in learning more about the Allbright Empire, and they were in need of information. If this guy had been here for a while he surely had a general sense of the situation.

“I only have a month before I need to leave this place,” the man sighed. “It’s a shame. There are not many places where so many forces can gather and display their wares. Interesting treasures and techniques keep appearing in the auction houses.”

Zac could only shake his head with a wry smile. There was nothing to gain by comparing oneself to others. This man seemed to have taken his visit to the Tower as an opportunity to relax and do some shopping, while Zac was here to fight for the future of his planet. But someone like this could be quite useful as well.

“So you’re knowledgeable about the shops in the Base Town?” Zac asked curiously.

“I have gained some understanding of what’s available, except what’s in stock in the top tier firms,” Galau nodded.

“How are the auction schedules? Are there any interesting ones coming up?” Ogras immediately asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Interesting Auctions?” Galau thoughtfully repeated. “I hear that a main branch member of the Talovor Trappings arrived a week ago, they are holding an auction of their wares in three days.”

“What kind of wares?” Ogras asked.

“Mainly wearable treasures. Rings, Amulets, bracelets. That family consists of both craftsmen and traders, and they almost only sell their own wares. Their specialty is defensive treasures, so I expect the auction will turn quite heated,” Galau dutifully explained.

Zac nodded in understanding. Ogras had already explained that defensive treasures and arrays were suppressed in the Tower, but not completely. Having a great defensive treasure could still save your life or allow you to reach a higher floor. It was no wonder that such things would be in high demand at a place like this.

Normally Zac wouldn’t mind spending some of his money on defensive treasures to supplement those he had, but he was hesitant to spend too much money until he managed to get his hands on his top priority items; medicine for Alea and a shield.

“Do these Talovor sell shields as well?” he probed.

“Like physical ones?” Galau asked with surprise. “No. They focus on consumable and rechargeable defensive treasures. For a shield you would either have to find a blacksmith outside of this place or hope that one appears at the general auctions. The System gives them out sometimes as quest rewards to people who don’t want them, and they sell them here to make some money.”

Zac only sighed in understanding, not too surprised about what Galau said. It was essentially the same as what Calrin had mentioned before. Most good shields were custom-made since they were so expensive.

“Anything else?” Ogras probed.

“Let’s see...” Galau muttered as his brows furrowed. “The Naspheyi clan holds a weekly auction, the next one is tomorrow evening. The quality of the auction can vary a lot, but it’s never too bad. Sometimes amazing items appear as well. Visiting cultivators usually go to them to sell off items they don’t need in order to gather money for other treasures before attempting the climb. There are a few more places like this, but Naspheyi is generally the most reputable among those open to the public.”

Zac shot a look at Ogras, only to see the demon’s eyes glazing over. Zac finally remembered that attending auctions was one of Ogras’ favorite pastimes back in the day, and he sighed with exasperation. The demon was supposed to be helping with information gathering, but he was daydreaming about going on a shopping spree.

“Have you heard of Trentach Society?” Zac asked, remembering the man they met by the stairs.

“Trentach? It’s a high-grade general store,” the youth said. “They carry almost everything, but they do not really stand out in any department. Trentach is actually a cooperative venture between eight allied clans who run the store together. None of the clans can be considered a supreme force, but their combined might is nothing to scoff at.”

“How do you define the grade of the stores?” Zac asked curiously.

“By how close you are to the tower. It’s graded the same as most things, from low to peak. Of course, the grade of a business doesn’t necessarily reflect the quality of the wares. But it is usually indicative of quality,” Galau explained. “This restaurant could barely be considered medium grade, for example, but their food is above average.”

“I am looking for top tier healing treasures, do you know where I could find that?” Zac asked as he kicked the demon under the table to wake him up from his dreams of auctions.

“Healing treasures?” Galau repeated with some confusion. “You can get them at any pill shop, they are everywhere. Or do you mean something specific?”

“I am looking for something that can heal a fractured soul,” Zac explained, not opting to lie.

There were likely various pills with soul-mending capabilities in the pill shops, but an extraordinary treasure was needed to heal a fractured soul. It wasn’t as simple as a soul wound.

“I’m sorry, such treasures are not readily available in even the higher-tiered Pill stores. But I’ve seen things that might work crop up every now and then in the auctions,” Galau said before hesitating. “Of course, there’s always the Zethaya Pill House by the tower entrance, but...”

“But what?” Zac asked with a frown.

“They are an alchemist family and likely one of the three wealthiest clans among those who control shops by the entrance. They are extremely powerful, but more importantly, they have a vast network of connections,” Ogras spoke up for the first time in a while.

“So they have pills for healing souls?” Zac asked. “Then what’s the problem?”

“If any shop has it, then it’s that place. But their shop is invitation-only, just like all peak grade stores,” Galau explained. “You can’t just enter at will. There are always people desperate for their pills, but the Zethaya turn them all away. ”

Zac frowned, but Ogras nudged him to not keep pressing the issue. He knew he shouldn’t make too big a row at a place like this. Besides, these Zethaya people might invite him if he performs impressively enough in the tower. It should be in their interest to form some ties with promising cultivators while they’re still young and weak.

“We might as well head to the auction tomorrow,” Ogras shrugged. “Even if they don’t have what we need, we might still be able to find some clues.”

Zac nodded in agreement.

“Let’s look around today, and we’ll head to the auction tomorrow,” Zac agreed.

“Oh, if the two gentlemen are amenable, let me host you tomorrow! I have been awarded a bronze membership due to my regular visits, so you can join me at my table rather than sitting crammed in the back,” Galau enthusiastically said.

Zac looked over with some hesitation at Ogras, who seemed to be a bit confused as well. Why was this guy so helpful to two complete strangers? The universe was seldom so benign. Galau seemed to understand their skepticism, and hurriedly spoke up again.

“I promise, I just wish to be a good host. How about this, I will simply meet you outside the venue before it starts tomorrow. There’s no way that I could do anything suspicious right in front of the Nespheyi Clan’s doors, no?” he hurriedly said. “Besides, going to the auction as a bronze member has various perks, such as additional information on the items for sale, and complimentary liquor.”

“Deal,” Ogras said without hesitation.

“Excellent!” Galau exclaimed as he raised a glass of some unknown alcohol. “For new friendships.”

The dinner lasted for another hour where Ogras and Zac interrogated Galau for as much information as they could before they split up for the day. Galau initially wanted to accompany them as they walked around Base Town, but the two excused themselves, citing that they needed to get their bearings.

“What do you think?” Zac asked as his eyes followed Galau who scurried away after paying the tab in full.

“A bored young master who wants to pretend to be a commoner for a day?” Ogras ventured. “In either case, we’ll figure it out sooner or later. Between my looks, smarts, charms, and your sturdy body I’m sure we can handle any scheme that guy has planned. So let’s just let him pay for our food and drinks.”

Zac snorted in response, but he didn’t contradict the demon. He didn’t sense any malice from the guy, so he would let things play themselves out. The two spent the next couple of hours looking around in the shops, gathering snippets of intelligence everywhere. It quickly became apparent that Galau had been pretty much accurate in all the information he shared during the dinner.

They found nothing that would help Alea’s condition in the normal stores, even when they went to the upscale establishments in the inner city. Those places had pills that would help with a wounded soul, but not a fractured one, and the two quickly confirmed that their best bet was hoping that someone would put up an item for auction at one of the major houses.

Only when it started to get dark did they decide to find some place to stay. Zac wanted to simply find some empty building in the outer rim, but the demon staunchly refused, citing hours lost every day just walking back and forth to the slums. He wanted to rent a place as far inside as possible, preferably in the inner sector.

Eventually, the two settled on a hotel that covered a huge area at the edge between the middle and the inner zones. It was essentially a gated community where every guest rented their own smaller mansion with its own gardens and arrays. It was extremely tranquil and a perfect spot to meditate during the nights.

What impressed Zac the most was that it actually had a spatial array covering the whole compound, just like the Ayr Hive. The size of the place was at least three times larger when they entered, and the two rented a small mansion for the price of 250 000 Nexus Coins a Day.

It was a steep price, but it was nothing uncommon in this place. Luckily they only planned to stay for ten days. Otherwise just the lodging would have turned into a real sunk cost. According to Galau the buildings starting in the middle of the Base Town came with those arrays from the beginning. They were not something that the owners controlled. That was one of the reasons the inner buildings were so contested.

They contained the best spatial arrays, providing extremely luxurious accommodations to whoever controlled the place. But that wasn't the most important reason that forces wanted to claim structures as close to the tower as possible. The Cosmic Energy was denser closer to the tower, and Galau said there was even some Origin Dao in the core sector.

Origin Dao was nothing special for Zac or even Ogras by this point, as they came from a newly integrated planet. But for people coming from an established force it might be what would allow them to push their Dao Seeds or Dao Fragments to the next step before entering the Tower.

Some buildings even possessed temporal arrays, though those were only used for business purposes as it was impossible to cultivate inside those structures. The auction houses were a prime example of that. There were a lot of treasures to auction off, but people did not want to spend half a day of their limited time in the Base Town to visit it.

With the help of the arrays they would spend less than an hour in real-time, while still not missing out on the action. Zac couldn't understand why the System would bother to set things up like this, but he soon understood the motivation. It wanted to create conflict.

As long as there were good lodgings and bad lodgings there would always be covert and overt competition for the best spots.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 387 - The Naspheyi Clan**

It wasn't without reason that Zac believed that the difference in the quality of the lodgings would cause friction. He had already witnessed an attempted take-over of a shop with a decent location at a crossroads with a lot of foot traffic. It was a group of Purple humanoids that tried to snatch it from a group of Golems that reminded Zac of the proprietor of the Merit Exchange.

An intense battle ensued, but the humanoids were eventually forced to give up on their takeover after the shop owner took out an amazing offensive artifact. However, that wasn't the end of it. Multiple forces assaulted the humanoids the moment that they started to flee. Apparently they would have been safe if their attempt succeeded, but now that they gave up they became fair game.

It was a world where the powerful lived and ate well, while the weak could just look on from the distance. There was no such thing as equality.

The two mainly meditated during the night as they knew that they had almost no chance to evolve their Daos within the Tower itself. The atmosphere in their borrowed garden was quite nice though, and it allowed Zac to freely gaze upon the ever-changing lights surrounding the tower. Unfortunately he didn't gain anything that would allow him to form his second Fragment, but he still had a few days to go.

Zac and Ogras had already decided to enter the tower toward the end of their visit. They could accomplish most of their goals anonymously right now as they didn't know what would happen after climbing the tower. Ogras wasn't completely sure, but he guessed that the current Zac should be able to reach at least the 5th floor, something that was pretty rare all things considered.

It might not sound like much climbing only five out of 9 floors, but that was something that only happened a few times a year among the elites of thousands of planets, and everyone succeeding would cause a certain amount of spectacle. That would ideally result in making connections with stronger forces, but it might also put a target on his back.

So they would only allocate one day after the Tower itself to find a backer, and endeavor to finish most of their purchases before.

The auction they were going to attend didn't take place until the evening, so Zac and Ogras took the time to continue their exploration. Ogras wanted to spend another day 'gathering information' at restaurants, but they instead headed to a reputable information broker in the Inner Zone on Zac's insistence.

There were a lot of things that he needed to know, such as the requirements for Specialty Cores and Arcane classes. Zac had already asked the demon next to him, but he had no idea. Ogras had only gotten annoyed by the questions since they were simply a form of humblebragging in his opinion.

The information merchant was run by a sect rather than a Clan, and they were called Seed of Jnana. Zac was pretty surprised to hear that the sect was actually populated by monks, and it made him think of Abbot Everlasting Peace. Was Lord 84<sup>th</sup> perhaps someone from this sect? It was a strong C-Grade force according to rumors, and splitting off into a 100 000 incarnations might be the Clan Ancestor's bid at breaking through to B-Rank.

None of the monks were present in the store though, so Zac couldn't make any comparisons to the chubby powerhouse's appearance. They were instead met by a puppet who led them to a private room, and Zac was happy to hear that they did indeed carry the information he was looking for.

A short introduction of Arcane Classes only cost 10 million, probably since it was general knowledge among the more powerful factions. Zac immediately paid for it, and the puppet engraved the knowledge onto a blank Crystal. The puppet didn't immediately give a quote for information about specialty cores though.

"Specific or general knowledge?" The puppet asked with a lifeless voice.

"General," Zac answered after some hesitation.

He was currently needed general information about Specialty Cores, as his information was a few snippets of rumors from various sources. Besides, even if this place had information on Duplicity Cores there was no guarantee that it would be relevant for his mutated version.

"245 Million Nexus Coins," the puppet said.

"What's included in the report?" Zac said, whinging a bit at the price.

The puppet opened a screen, and a short presentation was included. A decent list of common cores was included, as was a general guide in matching various types of classes with cores. It mentioned there was a long list of successful combinations to prove the theories. But most importantly there were a general guide in nurturing and evolving cores.

Zac could only bite the bullet and cough up the money since he didn't even know what to look for in his goal of upgrading his core as things stood right now. There was quite a lot of information in the second crystal he bought, but he breathed out in relief when he skimmed to the part about evolving.

He breathed out in relief when he read that Specialty Cores could only be upgraded to a higher rank after one had upgraded one's Class. But at the same time it said that the strength of cores was limited, so they would quickly become too weak to provide any assistance unless you kept them at the same rank as your class.

Zac also had the puppet list all the specific cores it had intelligence on, and he was both relieved and disappointed that there was nothing on the Duplicity core. He wasn't sure if he could handle the cost of a specific knowledge packet if a general one cost that much.

Hopefully, that would mean that the core would still be usable at the start of E-Grade, allowing him to put the matter aside until he dealt with the Undead Empire.

The Naspheyi Auction House was a grand structure three quarters in from the edge of the plateau, placing itself somewhere between the middle and the inner cone. It reminded Zac a bit of the Hagia Sophia, with four grand ornamental towers in the corners and an enormous dome atop the main structure.

When the two approached they saw people streaming toward the Auction House even though it didn't start until an hour later. Some were perhaps there to enter an item into the auction last minute, but most likely just wanted good seats.

Zac and Ogras weren't really interested in entering this early, especially since time moved quicker inside. If they entered now they'd be forced to wait half a day before the auction started. So they instead planned to walk around the area to see if they could find anything interesting.

A lot of people were taking advantage of the large draw of the auction house and held impromptu auctions of their own treasures, shouting on top of their lungs to advertise their wares. Some did it because the Auction house didn't find the treasures precious enough, others were probably unwilling to pay the 10% commission.

Of course, there were a lot of scammers as well, wanting to take advantage of inexperienced people.

Zac and Ogras barely had time to make the rounds before they saw a familiar figure wave at them from the distance, some excitement apparent on his face. Unsurprisingly it was Galau, and it even looked like he had been on the lookout for their arrival.

"Just what is this guy's deal?" Zac mumbled with some bemusement. "Is he lonely?"

"I think he is looking for an expert, but he's running out of time," Ogras said with a half-smile.

"An expert for what?"

"Someone to help him reach a higher floor than what he would be able to reach himself," Ogras said. "Strong people often do that for payment."

"So like what you're expecting me to do for you, but without pay?" Zac snorted.

“Our situation is different. What’re a few floors between friends?” Ogras said as he shot Zac a toothy grin.

“If it’s something common there should be a market for it, no? Most people wouldn’t turn down free money if they were strong enough,” Zac said, even thinking if it was possible for himself to make some money on the side.

“My guess? He seems to enjoy the auctions, and he has already spent the money that was meant for a carry,” Ogras shrugged. “So now he’s looking for some strong-looking hillbilly’s to do it on the cheap.”

“It’s also possible that he’s offended someone, and no one wants to stick their neck out just for some extra income. So he’s forced to skulk around new arrivals in a circumspect manner, looking for someone who could take him up. We are probably not the first people he has approached if that’s the case.”

“So we should distance ourselves from him?” Zac asked. “We already have enough on our plates as it is, no need to take on additional problems.”

“No need, if my guess is true he’s desperate, and he’ll be far more helpful than even an information merchant. If we get confronted later we can simply proclaim ignorance and simply point to the fact that we just arrived,” Ogras smiled. “For now let’s enjoy his Bronze Ticket and free liquor.”

Zac sighed, but he eventually complied with Ogras’ idea. It was not even certain what the demon speculated was correct, and if he started to act on every little suspicion it would become impossible to get anything done. It was just as possible that the guy was simply lonely after staying here for months and wanted to make new friends.

“Wait,” Zac suddenly said. “You said that your Grandpa spent a huge amount of money for you to climb to the third floor? Did you simply pay someone to carry you?”

“Of course,” Ogras snorted. “I was only level 54 at the time. What do you think, that I would rush inside there on my own? I had only just formed my first Dao Seed at that point.”

“So it wasn’t actually with your own power you got to the third floor,” Zac snorted. “That wasn’t how you made it sound before.”

“I would be able to conquer the third floor with my own prowess by now, so what does it matter,” Ogras muttered, looking a bit glum. Clearly this was a bit of a sore topic for the proud demon.

*After I’ve provided you with all kinds of opportunities,* Zac lampooned in his mind, but he didn’t bring it up. No one had worked harder for Port Atwood than Ogras, after all.

In the end the two decided to head over to Galau, who excitedly led them around the area full of hawkers displaying their wares. The two didn’t really find any great deals, but Zac bought a decent number of Divine Crystals from a Golem who sold them for 10% cheaper than what Calrin charged.

Ogras also bought a slab of metal, which was apparently complementary to what his black spear was made from. Perhaps he wanted to have some of the material on hand in case he found someone that could upgrade it or even turn it into a proper Spirit Tool.

But neither was ready to buy any valuable treasures outside since they didn’t possess as discerning an eye as Calrin. Galau seemed somewhat proficient at inspecting treasures, but the two wouldn’t put their trust and wallets in the hands of someone they just met.

Soon enough the trio entered the massive Auction Center, and Galau kept trying to make a good impression as he immediately forked out the 200 000 Nexus Coin entrance fee for both of them. Zac was surprised when he heard the price, and he couldn't help but look around at the sea of people entering the building.

The Naspheyi Clan held an auction like this every week, and according to Galau they also held a few major auctions a year that were even grander. On top of that they took a 10% commission on every sale that took place, though that fee could probably be negotiated down. He couldn't imagine just how rich these guys were.

Of course, most of the entrance fee probably went into keeping the Temporal array active during the auction. The System set them up, but they still required crystals to run. But he wouldn't be surprised if the Clan still made billions of Nexus Coins every week.

"The Naspheyi is an ancient martial clan whose ancestor is reported to be Mid or High C-Grade. Their family members generally use spears," Galau explained when Zac probed about their heritage.

"It's not a mercantile clan?" Zac asked with interest.

"Most huge clans would have some businesses to provide the resources for cultivation. To be a cultivator is to be forced into poverty, always scrambling for resources," Galau said. "But they are mainly a martial clan. This auction house is one of their main sources of income, and they are pretty ruthless with anyone trying to take it away from them. "

Zac nodded and looked around the venue. It was simply enormous inside, and he realized this place was just more than an Auction venue. There were multiple restaurants and bars, and Zac's eyes widened when he saw that there was even a brothel.

And just as Zac feared the shadows around the demon started to twist as the demon unhesitatingly teleported away a second later.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 388 - Toxicity**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac desperately tried to grab onto the demon before it was too late, but Ogras had clearly learnt from his failure during the auction held by the New World Government. Zac didn't exactly know what happened, but he somehow missed the demon, instead grabbing right behind where he stood. He couldn't be sure, but it felt like Ogras had somehow influenced him to slightly misjudge his position.

Was it the Dao Seed that the demon had gained recently?

Ogras had let it slip in conversation a few times, where he mentioned Dao Seeds as plurals rather than singular. Zac learned of it after they did their respective

Inheritances. Perhaps The Umbra provided Ogras with a similar Dao Impartment that Zac himself enjoyed.

Galau looked a bit confused at the exchange, but he didn't comment on it. He instead continued to explain how the auction was handled.

"The Naspheyi will only divulge what items will be put to auction within the current segment for bronze members," Galau explained. "If you don't see anything that tempts you, you can visit one of the other establishments inside to relax until the next segment starts. But the items in the final segment will not be divulged at all, as they want to maintain maximum participation for the top treasures."

Zac nodded in understanding, feeling that these guys really knew how to do business. Such a setup would stop people from leaving early, and most people would still spend money even if they didn't find anything to buy. And people would perhaps become more willing to fork out some real money if they had been plied with alcohol for a few hours before the final section.

The two walked around the enormous lobby for a while as there still was some time. Suddenly the shadows shuddered and Ogras reappeared, looking like he had just experienced a crushing defeat.

"Bunch of Puppets, don't know what I expected," Ogras muttered with a constipated look.

Zac snorted in derision as the three entered the auction hall, loath to make a comment. A quick glance indicated that there were actually fewer seats than he had expected. He guessed that there were roughly 3-4000 seats in total, with roughly two-thirds being cramped cinema seats in the back.

The group didn't have to use those though thanks to Galau and were instead shown to a table some distance from the scene. The table was luckily equipped with a decent-sized screen that would show the items, allowing them to take a good look at all everything.

Zac immediately started to go through the catalog of items that would appear to see if there was anything of use to them. He was surprised to note that quite a few items were listed as unknown items, only describing what they looked like. It seemed quite possible to make a few good deals if your eyes were discerning enough.

Ogras wasn't nearly as curious, and he only took a quick glance at the catalogue.

"It's just the opening segment," Ogras said with disinterest as he indicated a puppet to bring a bottle of liquor. "Those weapons in the start are pretty good. They are there to create some excitement, but the rest is just slightly better than things you can buy in the shops."

"Don't get too drunk," Zac warned. "We're not here to mess around."

"Not much else to do here when the brothel is full of automatons," Ogras scoffed as he started to look around.

"Well, not many who have the ability to get their hands on a Tower token would be willing to work as a... courtesan. Likewise, those types of classes are generally considered non-combat, which precludes entry to the Tower of Eternity," Galau coughed with some embarrassment. "But I am sure that a handsome man like you would be able to find a paramour in one of the bars."

Ogras only snorted in response as he kept observing the other guests. Zac himself only shook his head with a smile, already having heard the demon complain about the lack of brothels in Port Atwood on multiple occasions.

When it was around ten minutes before the auction started the area above their heads was starting to fill up with floating platforms of varying size. On top of them sat groups of people who mostly looked quite impressive, or at least wealthy.

“That’s the VIP platforms, the higher it floats generally mean the higher status of its occupant,” Galau said with a hushed tone, probably afraid to draw the attention of the bigshots upstairs.

Zac shot a glance above, not really caring about the special treatment. It was not like it mattered where he sat as long as he could buy the items he needed.

The auction started soon enough, and Zac was impressed with the quality of the items presented. All kinds of items were sold off in rapid succession, ranging from pills to arrays to weapons. There were some raw materials as well, but Zac noticed that most items were ready to use, and things that might help when climbing the tower.

However, there was nothing that Zac couldn’t do without, so he never placed a single bid. Most items went for between 5 and 15 million Nexus coins, which meant they were decent items, but nothing rare. It was a bit disappointing, but Zac knew the items would get increasingly impressive as the auction went on.

“How are the prices?” Zac asked to the more experienced Ogras.

“The starting bids are slightly below what you would usually pay for the items outside this dimension, but they usually end up a tad more expensive,” the demon said after some consideration. “It looks like items that will prove helpful in the tower has a slightly higher premium at around 50% to 80%.”

Zac nodded, realizing that Calrin had been spot on with his estimation. This place truly was a money-making machine for the established forces, where they allowed to earn far more money on their products compared to the outside.

Ogras placed a few bids for fun, but he got quickly bored when he realized that the process was completely anonymous where you placed your bid through an array on the table.

“What’s with the secrecy?” Ogras muttered with annoyance. “Takes the fun out of the bidding process.”

“Open bidding caused a bit too much chaos in the end,” Galau said with a wry smile. “A few strong people suppressed the prices of any items they wanted. So the Naspheyi clan finally installed arrays in the table to allow anonymous bidding for everyone’s safety. Of course, anyone is still able to bid openly if they so wish.”

Zac nodded in agreement, feeling it was for the best. It would help normal people from becoming targets of the powerful factions, and lessen the risk of getting robbed afterward since the items would be exchanged anonymously after each section.

It did make his own back-up idea of robbing the treasures he needed almost impossible though, so he could only hope the items he was looking for wouldn’t end up too expensive.

Hours passed as the event proceeded, and Zac started to become a bit bored. He hadn’t placed a single bet so far, not daring to waste his limited money before he found what he needed. He did learn quite a bit by the Auctioneer’s explanations about the various treasures, and the day gave him a lot better understanding of what drove the value of treasures.

When it came to Spirit Tools there were generally two factors that decided its value. The first factor was the material the item was created from. Different materials and combinations had different potential it seemed. Some weapons couldn’t be upgraded very far due to poor quality of the core material, whereas others had greater potential.

It was the same as with most people. Very few had the capability to reach the peak of cultivation. Their constitution simply wouldn't allow it unless they managed to remold their bodies through some extreme fortuitous encounter.

Zac had already somewhat instinctively picked up on this difference when he gathered a couple of Spirit Tools earlier, but he couldn't explain it better than the fact that a few of them were better than others.

There were a lot of Spirit Tools for sale on the auction, and it was standard for the auctioneer to explain what the item's core materials were, and its guaranteed evolution. The weapons who could evolve further were tens of times more expensive than those with a limited progression path.

The other thing that could have a large impact on an item was whether it was attuned. It seemed to work just like with crystals, where there were normal Nexus Crystals, but also items like Flame Crystals and Divine Crystals. A weapon with a popular attunement was usually many times more expensive than one without.

After figuring these things out he had a bit disheartening realization about his own weapon, **[Verun's Bite]**. It was a weapon that he got from the Merit shop during his beast wave quest, and he knew by now that it wasn't some top tier item. The weapon had no attunement, and Zac realized its materials were nothing too special either after seeing all the Spirit Tools on display.

However, it was a weapon he had grown extremely accustomed to, and he was loath to give it up for something else unless absolutely necessary. He also had a feeling that Verun had its own points of uniqueness due to the fact that the Tool Spirit could actually appear and fight. The auctioneer had never mentioned such a thing when presenting all these weapons, and she was clearly working hard on the up-sell.

It made Zac believe that the mysterious stone he fed to Verun all back when it was still F-Grade was an extremely precious item. It was his luck that no one on Earth could figure out what it was, which allowed Zac to get it for a fraction of its true value. That thing alone might be what would allow him to evolve Verun to even greater heights in the future.

Besides, it was not like the more common weapons couldn't be upgraded. They just needed their own fortuitous encounters, just like cultivators did. So even if Verun was common, so what? It just put his axe on the same level as himself, a mortal.

It was only at the second to last section of the auction that Zac started to see things he was interested in on the list. The final 5 items were still obscured, but the 7<sup>th</sup> weapon was actually listed as a "One-of-a-kind" Shield. There were also multiple pills that would give large boosts to both improving race and opening Nodes.

Zac eagerly waited as the auctioneer sold off one item after another, until she finally arrived at one item that Zac was interested in.

"Next item might not be helpful during your stay inside the Tower of Eternity, but it is a must-have for when you return home triumphantly. It is the **[Treasure Blood Pill]** that will complete up to 15% of the Race upgrade for a general humanoid cultivator. It will even purify your blood, reducing the pill toxicity in your veins by a noticeable degree," the young Auctioneer said with a smile as she presented a crystalline vial.

"Pill Toxicity? What is that?" Zac asked with a frown.

Galau gave Zac a befuddled look, as though Zac asked what air was, but he still quickly answered.

"Most pills contain small amounts of impurities that the body is unable to break down. The more pills you eat the more it accumulates. The problem is that it is very hard to notice that there is a problem before it's too late. You won't lose any attribute

points, but it might cause your Cosmic Energy to become a bit sluggish. But most importantly; it might affect your attempts at forming a Cultivation Core negatively,” the man said with a hushed voice.

“Eating too many pills will essentially end your path of cultivation unless you deal with the crap,” Ogras added.

“Are all pills like this?” Zac asked with a frown. “Even healing pills?”

“No, its just pills that improve your Dao, Race, or Levels that has this effect as far as I know,” Galau said with a shake of his head.

“What about natural treasures?” Zac asked.

“They’re borne by nature, so there’s no residual toxicity,” Galau said. “Instead they are often poisonous, and still require getting turned into pill before they can be used.”

“So this pill is pretty good, even reducing the toxicity rather than increasing it?” Zac asked.

Galau looked back and forth before he leaned over and whispered.

“It’s a sales trick,” he said as quietly as possible. “Remember what she said? It removes toxicity from your blood, but she never said anything about removing it from the body.”

Zac’s eyes widened in understanding, feeling it was a bit lucky to have the experienced youngster to explain the pitfalls. If it wasn’t for his warning he would have unhesitantly bought this thing after learning about pill toxicity, perhaps ready to buy it at a huge premium.

Just from hearing Galau’s explanation he realized that Pill Toxicity would become another barrier for his future cultivation. He would be far more reliant on pills compared to normal cultivators, since the only other way for him to crack open nodes was to risk his body by forcing them open.

But now he learned that even the safer path was fraught with hidden danger. What if he managed to get all the way to peak E-Grade only to discover that his body had accumulated too much toxicity?

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 389 - Dreams**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Summer flings are temporary, but the Dao is eternal.**

“Is there any way to cleanse the toxicity for real?” Zac asked.

“There are various means, like certain Natural Treasures. There are even arrays that will slowly purify the body. Most alchemy clans are researching ways to reduce pill toxicity in their bodies almost as ardently as they are researching new recipes,” Galau said.

The biography of Galvarion that Zac read in the Marshall Library immediately popped into his mind after hearing Galau’s explanation. That mortal had stayed at the

peak of E-Grade for over a century before finally forming his core. Was this related to pill toxicity perhaps?

Zac eventually spent 130 million Nexus Coins on a pill that would push forward his Race by a decent amount, pill toxicity or not. Most of the herbs gathered in Port Atwood was geared toward gaining E-Grade Race, and wouldn't really assist him in reaching D-Grade. And that was something that he had to get done sooner or later, as he would quickly approach the Attribute limit otherwise.

He also spent 100 million on a pill that was guaranteed to break open a node beneath level 80, and another 120 million for a pill with a similar effect. Hearing about the Pill Toxicity made him a bit worried, but he would simply have to find a way to deal with this later. Surviving the Undead Incursion and the Dominators was simply more important in the short run.

Ogras finally bought an item as well, which apparently was a treasure that was known to strengthen the psychic bond between a cultivator and his contracted spirit. It was no doubt bought with the purpose of getting a better handle of the mysterious creature that lived in his shadows, and Zac could glean that the situation was less than ideal since the demon spent over 300 million on it.

Zac was happy that the demon found an opportunity to get a handle on his parasite, but his mind couldn't help returning to the advertised shield that was listed. For some reason there was no detailed description like those Zac read for the Spirit Tools, and he didn't know if that was a good or a bad thing.

Luckily the wait wasn't long, as two assistants produced a massive shield that thumped down on the ground with enough force to cause the whole scene to shake slightly. The shield itself was more of a large heater shield compared to the huge spiked scutum he used until it broke.

It was made from some material that Zac couldn't recognize, but it obviously was extremely heavy. It looked like a bit like carbon fiber ingrained with streaks of copper. Only the core was a bit different as it was covered in dense white fractals that formed a circle. It didn't have the same ferocity as his old shield but Zac could tell it was of much higher quality.

"Next up is this spectacular item wrought from almost pure Neprosium that has been treated with expert care to provide the highest standards in durability and regeneration," the auctioneer said with a smile as she held her hand on the anthracite and copper shield.

"What do you think this item would go for?" Zac asked with a low voice.

"It doesn't have an attunement and it's not a Spirit Tool, but the material it's made of is extraordinary. A piece of raw Neprosium that large would alone cost hundreds of millions of Nexus Coins. I don't understand why someone would use such a large piece to create a normal shield. The creator will risk making a loss," Galau said bafflement. "Neprosium is rare, and it's a popular material in defensive treasures."

"Perhaps the craftsman had a quest or an inspiration," Ogras shrugged. "They made it for the experience rather than money. I would say you will have to fork out at least 700 million if you want this. People would be willing to pay over 5-600 million just to melt it down for the materials."

"The creator named this shield **[Everlasting]**, and I can inform you that it is the only shield appearing in today's auction. I am sure many of you are a bit confused as to why a blacksmith chose to make this item," the auctioneer said with a smile, playing on the suspense in the room.

The name made Zac strongly resonate with it. It not only reminded him of the ancient protector in his Dao Vision, but it also indicated that it would be able to take blow after blow. Wasn't that just what he needed?

"Truthfully it is a failed item. The creator wished to create a mighty Spirit Tool but it wasn't to be, and it ended up a normal shield without a soul. However, the creator felt it was still an item of beauty, and chose to sell it rather than reforging it," the auctioneer continued.

"So that's why the materials used are so damn expensive," Ogras muttered. "But that blacksmith seems a bit loony to not repurpose the materials."

"The extravagant choice of material puts it at the very peak of E-Grade items, something that you will not encounter more than once. This, combined with Neprosium's inherent ability to take in and even strengthen almost any attunement, makes the shield the ultimate companion for any warrior used to the vanguard," the auctioneer finished her introduction. "Perhaps you can even upgrade it to a true Spirit Tool in the future!"

"Turning a mundane tool into a Spirit Tool is extremely difficult," Galau whispered when he saw Zac's interested expression. "But what she said about Neprosium is true. It is a really high-quality material. But you should know that Neprosium doesn't mix well with a lot of materials, which might make it a picky eater when you try to upgrade it even if you manage to bring it to life."

Zac slowly digested the information as he took a look at his savings before making a decision. As long as the shield didn't become too expensive he would buy it. The inherent quality of the material might come in handy in the future, as he walked the path of both life and death. This shield might be usable in both his forms, something that was hard to find.

"The starting bid is 400 million Nexus Coins," the Auctioneer said. "Minimum increase is 25 million."

That price was already well over what many of the earlier Spirit Tools sold for, but the bidding immediately pushed the price to 500 million. Zac guessed that those bids were mainly from people who wanted the shield for the material, as the bidding drastically slowed down after having passed the value of the Neprosium itself.

However, it did steadily keep climbing in price, something that seemed to surprise the demon.

"I was wrong," Ogras whistled. "It might even pass a billion."

"Shields are rare," Galau explained. "Not many use them, and they are hard to make. So few are produced, creating a bidding war when a good one finally appears. Besides, Tool Spirits aren't as important for shields as for weapons. The weapon's Tool Spirit can increase your lethality to a large degree, but a Spirit Tool shield is mostly better at regenerating itself after taking damage. That's something Neprosium is already extremely good at by itself."

Zac waited for a bit longer, but when the price rose to 800 million he immediately increased the bid with 100 million nexus coin hoping to dissuade the competition. But only a few seconds passed until another person raised it with 25 million, at which point Zac raised it to a billion. This repeated twice until he finally bid 1.2 billion while his stomach was churning due to the price they had reached.

It was a huge sum for Zac who had felt the pinch when spending a few million on the creator vessels just a few months back. A billion nexus coins would be able to pay for all the expenses of his Academy for years, perhaps decades, but it wasn't even enough for a single item here. It was truly a rich man's game.

“1.2 Billion? Anyone?” the auctioneer smiled as he looked around. “Remember, the shield might not have an attunement right now, but who knows what will happen when you manage to upgrade it.”

It was the most expensive treasures sold so far by over 600 million nexus coins, but it still wasn't any record-breaking amount. She was obviously trying to push the price a bit further with all kinds of exclamations.

“Gaining an attunement during evolution?” Ogras snorted in derision. “How often are people that lucky? And you need to make it a Spirit Tool First.”

Galau didn't say anything, but he nodded in agreement, proving that it was truly just a sales trick. Zac felt pretty annoyed as he inwardly cursed the woman to close the auction. Luckily no one else fell for the auctioneer's exhortations, and Zac successfully won the bid.

Time passed and the item got more and more impressive, but neither Zac nor Ogras bid anymore. The last section only had ten items, each one of them going for well over 1 billion nexus coins. The final treasure was actually an urn from the Limitless Empire, an item predating even the System itself.

It did emit a trace of spirituality, but Zac couldn't tell if there was anything special about it. It had just been excavated from an unknown Mystic Realm according to the Auctioneer, and the method to unseal it was unknown. Perhaps a great treasure waited inside, or perhaps it was just wine that went bad billions of years ago.

The urn eventually went to a lady sitting on one of the top platforms for the staggering price of 47 Billion Nexus coins. The only reason Zac even knew that was because she had entered an open bidding war against a young man sitting on another of the platform.

“That's some gamble,” Ogras muttered. “Or perhaps she just collects those things.”

Zac could only shake his head in bemusement. Life truly wasn't fair.

Unfortunately there were no soul-mending pills or treasures on today's auction unless one of the unknown treasures had such capabilities, but the haul wasn't bad overall. Zac had already received his items in the intermissions so the group didn't need to stay behind to complete any transactions.

“I'm sorry that you didn't find the thing you were looking for. But don't worry, it's only been a day. There will be many more opportunities,” Galau said after they had exited the venue. “How about I treat you two to dinner to cheer everyone up?”

Zac wasn't really in the mood, but Ogras preceded him to graciously accept, loosely mentioning a certain restaurant that he had heard quite a few good things about. Judging from Galau's face that place was obviously expensive, but he quickly recovered and led the two there. He even went so far as to book a private booth for the three of them and ordered a large set of dishes and drinks for the three.

“So, I guess it's about time you explain why you've been following us,” Ogras said after they sat down by their table. “If you plan to rob us you should understand by now we aren't that wealthy.”

“I don't harbor any malicious thoughts!” Galau said hurriedly, his eyes darting back and forth between the two. “But truthfully there is a matter where I require your help. I need assistance in climbing the tower.”

“It's a carry after all? But why us though? We are completely unknown, and you don't know our strength,” Ogras asked skeptically.

“That's part of the point,” Galau sighed. “I need to reach at least the thirtieth level without it being obvious I was carried. Preferably even higher.”

“Thirtieth level?” Ogras muttered. “It’s a pretty hard carry, but nothing impossible for the stronger people who offer services like that. Why not just go to them? Are you trying to get a cheaper deal?”

“I am afraid my family will find out from one of my cousins who is also here,” Galau sighed. “The point of me climbing is to gain more freedom, but it will become invalid if this gets found out. But if I simply enter with a few unknown friends I made while dining out it will be harder to prove that I was carried through.”

“I have a decent chance of taking on the 3rd-floor challenge with the help of my saved-up treasures, but I doubt I would be able to climb any further after that,” Galau admitted. “But I need to reach at least the 30<sup>th</sup> level to achieve my dream.”

“What? Why?” Zac asked with confusion. “It’s just a title, and isn’t it based on the floor rather than level? As long as you pass the third floor aren’t you fine?”

“Because I wish to become an appraiser and run a store,” Galau said, an unfamiliar sense of determination appearing on his usually timid face.

Zac was completely stumped, and he looked over at Ogras to see he could follow what was going on. But the demon looked just as confused as himself, and he had even frozen mid-bite.

What the hell had reaching the 30<sup>th</sup> level to do with opening up a store?

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**Chapter 390 - Balance**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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It turned out that Galau’s family was a stuffy old martial clan that almost exclusively raised warriors for the Allbright Armies or adventurers who explored wild Mystical Realms on behalf of their owners. Galau’s ancestor was one of the 7 grand elders in the family, and the pressure was on him to carry on the legacy.

However, Galau had become enamored with buying and selling artifacts after having handled the inventory that his clansmen had gathered while traveling or fighting wars. He had asked for permission to set up a store, but the elders had denied his request.

“Why say no?” Zac asked with confusion. “Sounds like opening up a side-business would only be good for the family. Cutting out the middle-man.”

“For one it’s about legacy, but it’s also an undeniable fact that families with a stricter focus are more likely to progress, no matter if it’s on the martial path of business ventures,” Galau sighed. “The ancestors are all dreaming of rearing a C-Grade Powerhouse that can elevate the clan, so they do everything in their power to raise promising warriors. Especially us in the main branch.”

“What does this have to do with reaching the 30th level?” Ogras asked.

“I wanted to change profession, giving up the martial path. That would generally see as a sign of weakness, or that I was giving up. It might affect my whole branch negatively. But my Ancestor eventually gave me an ultimatum after I kept pestering my

elders. He told me to reach the 30th level in my upcoming visit to this place, to prove that I did have the power to proceed on the martial path if I wanted to.”

“But you don’t,” Ogras laughed.

“So you want to trick your grandpa and your clan to let you do whatever you want?” Zac added with a raised brow.

“Well... Essentially, yes,” Galau coughed. “And that’s why I need to use this circuitous method to not get caught.”

Zac looked over at Ogras to get his opinion. The demon only shrugged in response, meaning he didn’t see any issues with the proposal, and Zac felt the same way. It was a bit shady, but that wasn’t really their problem. Carrying one person to the 30th level shouldn’t be too difficult, especially since it was just the early stage of the 4th floor.

“But why us?” Ogras repeated. “You haven’t explained that part.”

“Because there is no fear in your eyes,” Galau finally said after a short pause. “The biggest asset to becoming a successful business owner is to have an understanding of people, and I believe this is an area where I shine. It’s something that has allowed me to triple the wealth I brought with me, as I was able to sniff out those who lied about their products or were desperate to gain a quick buck.”

“I have observed the warriors who have come and gone the past months, and most carry a well-hidden fear in their hearts as they carry themselves here. It’s natural, this town is full of hidden dragons and people don’t have their elders to protect them. Even the Tower itself brings a real risk of death even with its protective measures.”

“But you two are completely unafraid, and I know it’s not due to stupidity as with some,” Galau continued, his speech increasing in fervor as he turned to Ogras. “The two of you seem to take this as a stroll in the park, not even flinching when you saw those scary people sitting on the floating platforms. This makes me sure you are dark horses, the people I’ve been waiting for over the past months. You surely have the capabilities to reach the fourth floor.”

Neither denied the claims since what he said was essentially accurate. Zac didn’t worry about some people causing problems, as he felt confident in rebuffing most people when he had the System on his side. There was the risk of running into someone with top tier E-Grade arrays, but it was doubtful that anyone would throw those items around on some random person who kept to himself.

And even if they did he still had [**Loamwalker**] to get away in an instant in case someone took out an unknown crystal. He felt confident in surviving at the edge of even a top tier array thanks to his defensive skill and a massive pool of Endurance.

When neither Ogras nor Zac spoke up Galau’s eyes lit up in delight, but Zac felt a bit sorry for the guy. He had a feeling that Galau’s plan was bound to go awry. Who would believe that Galau’s accomplishment was his own after Zac elicited a projection from something above the fifth floor?

But Zac needed the money, so he could only hope the effect of making the acquaintance of someone like himself would make up for Galau’s plans. Besides, he never mentioned any stipulations about him or Ogras not being allowed to ascend too far.

“So what are you ready to pay for bringing you to the 30th level?” Ogras asked, making Zac lock onto Galau with interest as well.

“How about 3 billion Nexus Coins to take me to the 30th level? Each, of course,” Galau said. “And we can negotiate an additional price for taking me even further when we get there.”

Ogras' eyes glistened with greed, and Zac saw that he was about to agree without hesitation. But there was something else that Zac needed even more than money at the moment, and an aspiring merchant like Galau might be just the right person to ask for it.

"Throw in a Dao Treasure for each of us as well, and you have a deal," Zac said, receiving an enthusiastic nod from the demon.

"Two Dao Treasures," Galau muttered, looking a bit pained. "Fine, but you'll need to take me to the 32nd floor then."

The two mulled it over for the fraction of a second before they immediately stretched out their hands to seal the deal.

Agreeing to carry Galau to the 30th floor would essentially double Zac's and Ogras' wealth, and the two ate until they barely could move in order to celebrate. The restaurant that Ogras recommended had a non-combat class Chef that brought out amazing dishes that all contained a high amount of Cosmic Energy.

These dishes didn't give any temporary boosts to increase their attributes or anything like that, but they were far tastier than anything Zac had ever eaten before. Zac finally understood why Ogras kept calling Earthlings country bumpkins, and he wasn't sure how he would go back to eating some crude meals he had thrown together himself.

Nurturing a proper Chef became one of his side-missions after that evening.

Zac spent the next few days walking around the Base town to search for items that could help his force. With the extra cash infusion from the surprisingly wealthy Galau he had some wiggle room to buy more than the bare essentials.

He first purchased a large number of low-grade talismans from a reputable store. Each one cost less than 100 000 Nexus Coins, but they would perhaps be able to save the lives of his elites in case of a crisis back on Earth. He also cleaned up a sizeable number of herbs on Calrin's List of things they needed to create medicinal baths on a large scale.

He even found a small stack of **[Sky Reed]** that were almost as aged as the other three herbs he gathered during the hunt, which meant that he now had all the needed ingredients to concoct more **[Four Gates Pills]**. Unfortunately still couldn't find any medicine that could help with Alea's situation. Many of the better stores had items that could mend a wounded soul, but a fractured one was something else entirely.

There also weren't any Dao Treasures available, which wasn't too surprising. If anyone had one they would eat it themselves to improve their strength before the Tower. Some did appear during auctions according to Galau, but they were amongst the most fiercely contested items, turning insanely overpriced.

Everyone wanted to have a couple of Dao Treasures on hand in case someone elicited a grand projection. A single projection alone usually wasn't enough to form or upgrade a seed, but there was a decent chance if you also had a treasure to help out.

So Zac could understand the scarcity, but it did put a damper on his goal of forming another Fragment before leaving the Tower of Eternity. He could only put his hopes on Galau's ability to sniff two of them out.

Ogras bought a few items as well, including things that would help out with his progress after evolving. But Zac guessed that the demon already had quite a few such resources in his possession, given by his grandfather. He should have planned on evolving soon after arriving at Earth, but was delayed by various reasons.

Galau was actually the one who bought most of them all, but what he bought during their visits to stores and the open bazaars were completely random. He

explained that the items weren't for himself, but things he felt he could make money on either here or when he returned to the Allbright Empire.

Zac spent the nights sitting on his prayer mat, working his hardest to meditate on the Dao. The atmosphere wasn't quite as good as Earth, but it was far better than the Eastern Trigram Sect. That place was completely devoid of spirituality, but he felt he still could progress his Dao here. He also had the tower to help, and he had already seen three projections, though they were of the lowest kind that didn't provide too much.

On the sixth night he took a break as Ogras had brought over some expensive Spiritual Wine. The two sat and enjoyed the evening breeze in the courtyard, gazing up at the sky. The stars were unfamiliar and massive nebulas painted the sky into a mesmerizing haze. It was a poignant reminder of how far away from Earth and its struggles he was at the moment.

"This is the life," Ogras sighed in contentment, the tranquility of the night affecting him.

"Is this what life is like for those who stand at the top? Those who are part of established forces?" Zac asked, somewhat rhetorically.

"Not in clan Azh'Rezak at least," Ogras sighed as he took a sip, some wistfulness apparent in his eyes. "There was always struggle, though a different kind compared to the one we face now. But the moment that we as a family relaxed we would be eaten by one of many forces in the surroundings who lusted for our land or our inheritance. I think it's like that everywhere."

"Struggle?" Zac asked with some despondency creeping into his heart.

"Balance," Ogras answered. "The universe is a lawless place, where might makes right. Our kingdoms, empires, galaxies are in a state of a delicate balance that keeps a semblance of peace. But a small ripple will topple that balance, and bloodshed will invariably follow."

Zac understood what he meant. The moment a clan or sect declined, like through the passing of an ancestor, it would be under constant threat of annihilation. This worked the other way as well. If a true powerhouse emerged in a family it would likely set out on a path of conquest to sustain that person's continued cultivation and to raise the standard of their progeny.

Any change would result in lines being redrawn and blood spilled until a balance was restored.

"Balance..." Zac echoed, as his eyes slightly glazed over.

The solemn atmosphere was suddenly ruined by the frazzled entrance of Galau as he almost fell through the door to the courtyard.

"He's about to emerge!" Galau panted.

"What? Who?" Zac asked with some annoyance.

"Reoluv Er Suriav Prehavandar Dravorak," Galau said in one breath.

"Did you just cast a curse on us?" Ogras muttered with a raised brow.

"No that's his name," Galau said, almost jumping back and forth in impatience. "The Dravorak Dynasty is over 100 million years old, and it is the Imperial family of an Empire that is at least as strong as my Allbright Empire. I just found out that he entered the tower yesterday."

"And this Reoluv is part of this family?" Zac asked, still not understanding what the big deal was.

The Dravorak seemed like a huge force, but there were a few of them around, especially around the core of the town.

“Reoluv is the 15th and youngest son of the current reigning Emperor, born from the Emperor’s favorite wife. He is someone who has received an entire Empire’s blessings and resources. More importantly, he’s supposed to be extremely talented, and he is a strong contender for the throne even though one of his brothers already has broken through to C-Grade,” the young man continued. “Rumors are that the previous Emperor has taken him on as a direct disciple.”

“This all sounds very impressive, but what does that have to do with us?” Zac asked, still confused.

But Ogras’ eyes suddenly widened, and he looked up toward the sky surrounding the tower.

“A Dao Mirage,” Ogras muttered before turning back toward Galau. “Which level?”

“There is no doubt that he will pass the 6th floor, with some even saying that he has the power to reach the later levels of the 7th floor. But most are hesitant whether he would actually be able to pass the 7th floor’s final challenge on the 63rd level since that hasn’t happened for thousands of years,” Galau said.

“Dao Mirage, haven’t we already seen a few?” Zac asked. “What’s the big deal?”

“Yeah, but that was one of the worst ones. If this Reoluv crashes through to the end of the 7th floor you have a chance of actually breaking through your Dao Seeds. Meditating under the vision from the 7th floor is almost the equivalent of an epiphany,” Galau excitedly said as he took out two boxes.

“These are two Dao Treasures I promised. I was planning on presenting these after the climb, but this opportunity is too rare to miss,” Galau said.

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**Chapter 391 - The Eight Calamities**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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“You’re not worried we will take the Dao Treasures and run?” Zac couldn’t help but ask. “Don’t you need them for yourself?”

Dao Treasures were obviously hard currency here, especially now that some bigshot was about to emerge from the tower. Giving them out like this was to give up on either an opportunity for himself, or the chance to sell the treasures outside for a huge mark-up.

“I am sure I can trust in your character. Besides, I have managed to get my hands on a few more,” Galau said, but he quickly followed up with another sentence when he saw Zac and Ogras’ eyes light up with avarice. “I can’t part with those though. They’re for my family members and myself after I’ve broken through.”

“Do you even need Dao seeds if you want to become a merchant?” Ogras smiled. “Why not part with a few more of them?”

“The Dao is important for non-combat classes as well!” Galau said as he took a step back. “It can help us in all kinds of ways just like with a warrior. Besides, I plan on becoming a hybrid class at least for E-Grade.”

“Thank you, we’ll remember this favor,” Zac nodded as he took out his prayer mat.

Time was of the essence so he immediately rotated his Cosmic Energy through his pathways a few rounds to clear out the lingering effects of the alcohol. The sky was still the same beautiful spectacle of shimmering stars, and the three silently looked up at the scenery in silence as the minutes passed.

The ethereal mindset as when he gazed upon the skies earlier soon returned, and he felt like he was on the verge of something. He didn’t try to force it though, and rather let the feeling naturally stir and grow in his mind.

The tranquility of the night was suddenly broken as a massive titan appeared in the space behind the tower. It stood thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, meters tall, and seemed to be completely wrought out of metal. However, it was clearly not a golem or puppet, but rather a projection of a being made from flesh and blood. It just had a bluish tint like zinc or osmium.

Its head and torso were mostly obscured by the tower itself as it actually stood behind the structure and didn’t move, and Zac could only see the sides of the behemoth. That was just fine for Zac as his eyes were glued to the things that it carried in its hands that each was as large as an island. The Titan actually possessed eight arms, each one bare and bulging with muscles, and each hand held a mysterious object.

Most of the treasures did not seem to match the gruff and bulky figure of the Titan, but Zac looked at each and every one of them seriously. One hand held a flute made from a golden metal, and Zac felt like he saw a meteor shower when his eyes locked onto it. Another hand gripped a fan as large as a mountain, seemingly capable of causing a hurricane with a wave.

There was also a burning sword, a castanet crackling with terrifying bolts of lightning, a calabash releasing the sounds of a raging ocean. One hand even held a drum shaped like a volcano, emitting a fiery glow that reminded him of his visit to the magma world and the Fire Golems.

But his eyes only briefly swept over these items before they stopped at the two hands that each held a flower. One was a large Basket Flower, and it swayed as the Titan held onto its long stalk. The air around it seemed to be vibrating to the point space itself cracked.

Zac’s eyes finally landed on the last item, a single lotus flower. His thoughts initially went to the massive lotus that was in the Abbot’s possession, but he immediately realized the thing in front of him was in a completely different league. This was a grand treasure of the universe, containing endless power.

Its attunement seemed to be completely different from the Abbot’s lotus as well, and its purple leaves emitted a chilling sense of death and putrefaction. It didn’t feel like it released toxic plumes, but that it was pestilence itself.

There was something mesmerizing about the lotus, making Zac unable to move his eyes away. He barely had enough presence of mind to quickly cram his Dao Treasure into his mouth. His consciousness started to wander, and his vision was closing in on him. Just as he was about to drift away he heard the seemingly distant voice of Galau speak up in a daze.

“It’s The Eight Calamities!”

Zac had no time to react before his whole being was consumed by the Lotus flower. His vision suddenly changed to show a battlefield where two endless armies fought. One army looked a bit like the lizardmen of the church, but they were more akin humanoid dragons. The other force were actual cyclops, each reaching over a hundred meters in height.

At first glance it might have been a foregone conclusion that the lizardmen who only seemed to reach two to three meters in height would be hopelessly outmatched, but reality proved different. The warriors somehow summoned, or more likely used massive war arrays to conjure, fiery dragons to battle their enormous foes.

The battlefield stretched into the horizon, and it felt like thousands of warriors died every minute, and the corpses created mountains of the unwilling dead. The resentment in the air was palpable, and it only grew worse as the war raged on for years and years. The losses were uncountable, and the boundless world itself was teetering on collapse from the accumulated resentment.

Terrible maladies sprouted due to the sea of corpses, and but the armies seemed to be possessed, ignoring their increasingly horrific bodies as they transformed and mutated from the corruption in the air.

A small purple flower quietly floated in a turbid pool of blood, hidden in one of the largest corpse mounds on the planet. It consumed the energies of everything around it and steadily gained power as the war raged on. The massacre only got worse, but the diseases and resentment oddly enough disappeared over time, and suddenly it was as though a spell had been broken.

The war stopped, all thanks to a blood-drenched lotus having eaten its fill.

The grand generals, each one a Peak C-Grade warrior at the least, called for a ceasefire. Everyone seemed to be horrified by their actions and looked as though they were walking in a living nightmare. Their eyes turned toward the thousands of corpse-mountains as immense regret gripped their hearts. It looked like they wanted nothing more than get away from this cursed world that had whipped them into a murderous frenzy, yet they stayed on.

They eventually found the reason for their salvation, a large purple lotus that rested in the middle of an ocean of blood. It had taken on their sins, their resentment, and their ailments, giving the two races a chance at survival. The generals bowed toward the grand treasure in reverence, no one having any ideas of taking it for themselves.

However, things suddenly took a disturbing turn as large welts started to appear on the people around the flower. Just a second later flesh was dripping off everyone's bodies like melted wax. Not even the immensely powerful generals were spared, and they crumbled before they managed to reach any of the teleportation arrays near-by.

The unstoppable putrefaction spread like an invisible wave, reaping the little life that still remained on the once glorious planet that stood at the core of a star sector. The mountains of corpses were slowly absorbed as the lotus kept growing, and every millennia or two another petal emerged on the flower.

Within that petal was the lament of a million powerful warriors sealed, forever unable to leave. The lotus kept slowly growing in its domain as the sole emperor of the planet.

But one day a hand as large as a continent appeared above the desolate planet, and it reached down to grasp the cursed lotus. A torrent of pestilence and rose up to meet the hand, but the Lotus' attack was immediately defeated as a black coffin appeared out of nowhere, sealing the flower within.

The stone sarcophagus shuddered a few times, likely from the lotus releasing immense attacks to escape, but it quieted down again soon enough. But the terrifying power the coffin now radiated was a clear signal that the lotus might be sealed away from the world, but still very much alive. The moment the coffin opened again all life would end.

The scene ended with the enormous hand rising through the atmosphere, leaving the cursed planet behind, and Zac's eyes opened just in time to see a screen appear in front of him.

**[Fragment of the Coffin - Early - All Attributes +10, Endurance +80, Vitality +50, Intelligence +15, Wisdom +60, Effectiveness of Endurance +5%]**

Zac looked at the line with incomprehension, not understanding how he had gotten there. He had imagined something along the lines of Petrification or Decay when considering the combination of Rot and Hardness, but the vision had rather created an odd Fragment. Was there such a thing as the Dao of the Coffin?

Was it because his thoughts had been on Alea lying in her crystal coffin for the past week? Zac felt that the vision of Alea lying beneath the Tree of Ascension somewhat mirrored what he had just witnessed during his epiphany. Alea was poisonous just like the lotus, and both were preserved within a coffin.

It made him confused whether what he witnessed was something that actually had happened, or whether it was just something his mind conjured to make sense of the insight that he gained from looking at the lotus in the Titan's hand.

Of course, the real issue was what the hell the Dao of the Coffin entailed. He could understand the concept, as a coffin was both hard and the corpses inside would rot away, but he didn't understand how the Dao of the Coffin would be utilized in battle. Was it defensive? Offensive? He simply couldn't tell.

Unfortunately there was no way for him to try it out before he entered the tower either. His only clue was that he had actually lost a little bit of Endurance in favor of more Vitality and Wisdom when he fused Rot and Hardness. Endurance was obviously the main stat, but its somewhat balanced spread might indicate a Dao less focused on simply defense.

The projection had already disappeared by the time Zac opened his eyes, so he decided to close his eyes again to ponder on his newest Fragment. But his eyes were drawn to a gaping Galau who sat a few meters away, looking at him with what looked to be a mix of elation and jealousy.

"Did you actually gain something?" Galau said with some shock in his eyes. "The fluctuations around you were quite massive."

"Yeah, didn't you?" Zac asked with confusion. "I was dragged into a vision the moment I looked upon that Titan."

Galau opened and closed his mouth a few times, but no words came out.

"You'll get used to it after traveling with that guy for a while," Ogras sighed. "At least we'll hopefully get some soup while the general eats his meat."

"What's going on?" Zac asked.

"That was the 'Eight Calamities Titan', one of the rarest projections representing the 62<sup>nd</sup> level," Galau explained. "Only those with a connection to one of the calamities will gain something from the items in the Titan's hands. Rumors say that special bloodlines might gain something directly from the Titan itself, but I haven't heard of anything like that actually happening so it might be false."

"Eight calamities," Zac muttered. "So those lucky enough to have a Dao that resonated with one of the treasures would get a guaranteed epiphany?"

"Perhaps not an epiphany, but they would make improvements," Galau nodded.

"Then it's perhaps thanks to you and your Dao Treasure I managed to take a step forward. I'll remember the favor," Zac said seriously.

It was true. The Dao of Death, or rather the Dao of the Coffin was the remaining fragment he felt most leery about completing before evolving, but he suddenly gained it when he was actually targeting his Life Fragment.

Even just before Galau came barging into their courtyard he had felt he was on the verge on something, making him somewhat confident he had taken the first step toward a suitable concept for his final Fragment.

Of course, three low-grade Fragments was unfortunately still not enough for him to get his hands on an Arcane class according to the report he bought the other day.

But gaining the Fragment of the Coffin was definitely a step in the right direction, making Zac more hopeful for the future. It truly felt like his high Luck had helped him out again, presenting him with just the vision he needed.

“How does luck work?” Zac suddenly the demon asked after Galau left their courtyard. “Could my Luck have caused that Reoluv to fail the final challenge in order for me to gain this opportunity?”

“Luck is an obscure subject, and I don’t know any specifics,” Ogras said hesitantly. “But I don’t think its effect would be that exaggerated? That guy reaching the 62<sup>nd</sup> level is exactly what was expected of him.”

“Yeah, but wouldn’t a guy like that have a few hidden means to reach even higher?” Zac ventured.

Ogras didn’t answer and rather opted to glance in the direction of the Tower with a pensive expression.

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**Chapter 392 - Emerald Skies**

Reoluv was inwardly fuming, but he still had to retain a dignified expression as he received the many congratulations from the various young masters and ladies from distinguished forces as he exited the tower.

Passing the 62<sup>nd</sup> level was respectable, but not what he had aimed for. His goal had always been to completely conquer the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, just like his master did once upon a time. But a small mistake had abruptly caused the end of his trial, even before he had used up his final hidden cards. It was just the difference of one level from completing the whole 7th floor, but that 1 level was like an endless abyss.

It was the divide between a talented cultivator and a genius of an era.

The conquering the seventh floor have given him a shot at making contact with the hidden peak forces presiding over the sector, or perhaps provided him with the same sort of opportunity that presented itself for Lord Beradan a few decades after he managed to conquer the 7th floor.

Winning the favor of an undying existence passing by their remote sector would elevate his fate to a level that not even becoming an Emperor could match.

But it was all for naught.

It felt like a cosmic joke, a brief lapse in concentration made his token crack, which forcibly teleported him outside even though he still was able to keep fighting. He didn’t even know that was possible, since the tokens were essentially impervious to outside forces. Or did that change at the high-tier floors?

Reoluv grit his teeth at the memory and quickly excused himself from the square full of people, citing the need to go home and ponder on a few insights he gained from conjuring the Eight Calamities Titan.

The truth was that the mental shock of falling short for such a stupid reason had even made him unable to completely immerse himself in the effect of the Apparition, but perhaps the situation was still salvageable if he hurried home to his master's Dao Chamber. As long as he managed to push one of his fragments to Medium Mastery the tower wouldn't be a complete wash.

Many impressed sighs and comments echoed across the square, praising such a genius that never let himself relax. But he didn't care as he crushed the token even though he could stay here for another month if he wanted to.

At least there was one small comfort in this disappointing climb. There was at least no one in the area who would be able to beat his score in the short run, and he would have another chance in a few years.

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"My Lord, it is done," Triv said as his miasmic body shuddered with excitement.

"Oh?" Adriel said with some surprise. "I thought it would take a few more days."

"We managed to sneak a handful of spectral squads behind their lines to place the final flags. They will start to corrode the environment though, so it will be found out within a week that something is wrong," the ghost attendant confirmed.

"You don't need to explain to me," Adriel snorted. "I was the one who modified them."

"My apologies!" Tviv hurriedly said.

Adriel waved his hand that it didn't matter as he thoughtfully stared at his crystal for a few seconds.

"Have we found out the source of undeath yet?" Adriel asked. "Those closed incursions teemed with miasma, but I couldn't recognize its signature. I first thought it was Mhal who had somehow resurrected, but he was much too stupid to orchestrate something like that."

"No, we sent a group to greet and possibly integrate the person who closed those incursions, but we were always too late," Triv said. "We also tried to compare the residual energies to everyone here, but we couldn't match it either."

It shouldn't be possible that it was one of his children. Adriel had never heard of a newly turned citizen ignoring the commands of its leader. Even those ignorant things scuttling around his domain would respond to the calling, shuffling toward him without hesitation. Had the undead warrior mutated to allow him to somehow resist it?

"There is something else," the attendant added. "He can use the natives' teleportation arrays. The scouts believe that the warrior is an unaffiliated wanderer since he didn't respond to the call in the slightest."

"So he's not a designated invader at least," Adriel muttered as he started to pace back and forth. "Unaffiliated wanderer at F or early E-Grade? A twist of fate? Or is a scion of the ancient clans bored enough to visit a baby planet?"

"If it's one of those young masters who have gained an interest in this world... Should we back off?" Triv Nervously asked.

"No need. If such a personage wanted this planet they would simply visit me and claim it. That would be a pretty good outcome as well. A family that can see through the obscurity of the heavens wouldn't be stingy with their compensation for claiming a world," Adriel smiled.

However, Adriel's instincts told him that the mysterious warrior was not some scion of an ancient clan. He was just a Lich rather than one of the five blessed races, but he was representing the Empire in this invasion. Even one of the purebloods would have had to respond to the call since it contained the authority of the Primo.

"Of course, there's another possibility," the Lich pondered.

"What?" Triv asked with confusion. "If not a turned citizen, and not an unaffiliated wanderer, then what?"

"It might be related to the Mystic Realm," Adriel muttered with a thoughtful smile. "We know it's an abandoned research facility of the heretics of the Boundless Path. Did the Technocrats perhaps create a synthetic bloodline disconnected from the Call of the Empire? But why would they do that? Immortality?"

"What do you wish us to do, my Lord?" Triv asked hesitantly, knowing the far more knowledgeable lich was simply asking rhetorically.

"Leave it be," Adriel finally said. "We'll ignore that man for now since he hasn't shown any hostility against us. Perhaps activating the array might prompt him to visit me for a talk."

"So we're finally liberating this world?" Triv said with excitement. "We'll finally be able to breathe again!"

"We have played passively long enough," Adriel agreed as two green sinister lights lit up in his eyes. "Those humans and ants think our citizens are just targets to farm levels? It's time for them to join my kingdom."

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"Miss Marshall, it's bad!" Trevor screamed as he almost fell on the ground in his frantic entrance of the command tent.

"What's going on?" Thea said with a bad premonition as she immediately ran out of the tent, and one glance was all that she needed to know what scared Trevor so badly.

The sky was green.

Enormous azure lines crisscrossed a murky-green sky and the air was rife with miasma. Worse yet, she saw almost a dozen azure pillars reaching toward the sky in various directions. They looked a lot like incursion pillars, though death-attuned rather than the blue one she had encountered during the battle with the Incursion neighboring Westfort.

But a second look helped Thea understand that the pillars weren't Incursions, but rather a part of the massive array that the undead had worked on for the past months. They connected with some sort of unseen ceiling a thousand meters in the air, infusing the azure lines with a continuous stream with energy.

Had they failed? But they had held all up until now, sacrificing tens of thousands of lives!

"Shit, I thought we had more time?" Mark said with a grunt as he walked out of the tent as well. "This is beyond what I can deal with, miss. What do you want to do?"

Thea's mind was blank as she looked at the pillar closest to them. What did she want to do? How should she know? A year ago she was simply running a small non-profit that rescued stray animals, mostly with the help of her family's vast wealth. She knew nothing about warfare and leadership.

"I..." Thea stammered, her mind trying to grasp for a solution.

It was one thing talking about an array powerful enough to turn Earth into a world of death, but it was a whole other thing seeing it in person. How could they stop

it? Or at least delay it? This was not something a swift stab with [Petalstorm] could solve.

“Take a breath,” Mark said as he saw her face. “You are not alone in this. You have both the family and the whole planet with you.”

Thea took a steadying breath to calm herself, and she started to go over the situation they found themselves in.

“According to Zac it would still take a week or so for the array to truly activate even after it was completed. It seems that those pillars are dragging energy out of the ground, converts it to dense miasma, and finally funnels it to the inscription lines in the sky,” she analyzed. “Perhaps we can slow down the charge-up by stopping the flow of energy?”

It wasn't a solution, but it was the first step, helping the following steps to come easier. Just a minute later a group of scouts set out from their camp, guarded by elites decked in a terrifying number of weapons. They would spare no expense to reach the closest pillar to study it and relay images back to the command center.

Meanwhile, their army would launch a massive assault at the undead horde to make sure they didn't veer off toward the pillars to defend it.

But things quickly deteriorated as the scouts got close to the pillar, as all of them zombifying with a speed visible to the naked eye. Thea and the other commanders could only helplessly look at the monitors as their party ripped each other to shreds. The scouting party didn't even manage to get closer than a few hundred meters before they were turned.

What was even scarier was that there was no sign of miasma entering their bodies or any complaints of discomfort from the poor men. The change came abruptly and without any warning.

“We can try launching rockets at the pillars, but our munitions aren't enough to target all of these things. Besides, I fear that this issue cannot be solved with our mundane weaponry. If that was the case the undead wouldn't have left most of the pillars unguarded,” Mark said with a sigh.

“Do it, we must try everything,” Thea said with a bleak expression. “I'll head to Port Atwood to see if anything can be done on that end.”

“We can only pray that man will choose to put his private plans on hold to help deal with this mess.”

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“Do you have any ideas?” MacKenzie asked, desperately trying to mask the fear taking hold of her heart as she looked up at the pillar in the distance.

This wasn't in line with what they had learned so far. They should have had up to a month at the most, but at least a week before this happened. But it was hard to refute the pillar reaching into the sky.

Their appearance had caused everything to go awry, and with both Zac and Ogras gone people didn't know who to turn to for answers. People keep looking at her, and she understood the fear and question in their eyes. They were wondering where her brother was. Zac and Ogras weren't slated to return for a few days though, and there was no way for her to contact them.

“We can't even get close,” Ilvere sighed with a shake of his head. “Anything that gets within a few hundred meters of that thing will be turned into a zombie in a heartbeat, and its domain seems to be spreading. We even tried taping a bunch of divine crystals on a Barghest, but the crystals simply cracked and the barghest was turned as well.”

“I know,” Kenzie sighed. “Thea Marshall visited me a half an hour ago looking for Zac. She looked like she would explode when I explained that Zac was off-world. My hopes of getting a sister-in-law keep getting dimmer. Anyway, it looks like we will need to take down those pillars from a distance.”

“That lassie will wake up from her sleep sooner or later,” Ilvere smiled before returning to business. “Destroying the array flags will be quite difficult. They are dug far into the ground, making a direct assault from distance extremely troublesome. You would have to destroy the whole area to get to the array, but we don’t possess such force.”

“Not necessarily,” Kenzie said as she took out her brother’s flying treasure.

“Wait, what are you planning?” the demon general asked with worry. “If Lord Atwood returns to find you turned into a zombie he will skin us alive.”

“I’ll be fine,” Kenzie said as she stepped onto the flying disk.

Ilvere groaned when he saw that she wouldn’t change her mind, and jumped onto the disk with some resignation. Soon enough the two were soaring through the skies toward a pillar at the outer edge of the green canopy. It only took them half an hour to reach it, and the demon sighed in relief when he saw that it was completely unguarded. At least they wouldn’t have to deal with the undead elites.

Then again, the pillar itself was scary enough to keep everyone at bay.

“So what are you thinking, young miss?” Ilvere said as he hesitantly looked at the pillar a kilometer away.

“I have been working on something my brother left me the past week,” Kenzie said. “I think it will be helpful against the pillars.”

“Powerful offensive arrays?” Ilvere said as his eyes lit up. “That might work, but it needs to be a really powerful one. The pillars are also protected by a shield. Your old world weaponry didn’t work on them according to the report we just got from the human armies.”

“Perhaps not, but what about new-world weaponry?” Kenzie smiled as she released a swarm of newly manufactured drones from her Cosmos Sack.

She knew that her brother would freak out when he learned that she set up the whole production line just hours after he left, rather than slowly study them for any latent risks. But she was tired of just sitting by on the side while people were getting killed, and Jeeves had no problems hacking the things.

An army of weaponized drones was a perfect counter against the sea of undead as Kenzie saw it. They were mostly immune to the corrosive effects of miasma, and even if they fell they wouldn’t convert into new zombies.

The drones flew out with shocking speed and in just a minute they had formed a circle around the pillar. Each of them was only a meter in height, and they didn’t emit even a speck of Cosmic Energy. But Kenzie had great confidence in her children, and she made some final adjustments to their position with the help of her AI.

“Wha-“ Ilvere said with wide eyes as he gazed at the unfamiliar machines with confusion.

But his questions got stuck in his throat as the flying machines no larger than a child each released a beam of terrifying energy straight at the foot of the pillar. When the two managed to open their eyes again only a smoldering crater remained.

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### Chapter 393 - Last Day

Zac woke up early the next day and got ready to head out after training a bit more with [**Cyclic Strike**]. Unfortunately it seemed that the small progress he had attained in the skill over the past weeks had been completely erased after gaining the Fragment of the Coffin. The Fragment completely overpowered the Seed of Trees, making it impossible to maintain a balance.

He could only pause his practice until he gained his final Fragment as well.

At least he could confirm that the odd Dao Fragment worked with his new shield, perhaps even better than the Dao of Hardness did. Hopefully that meant that his Undying Bulwark class would still work as intended.

It was also a decent indicator that Fragment of the Coffin was a Defensive Dao as well, meaning his final skill quest was also most likely completed. He didn't dare change into his Draugr-form to make sure though as he was still in the Base town. He would be stuck in his undead form for roughly an hour after shifting which might cause unintended problems. But he was heading for the Tower soon enough, and there would be ample time to go over things in there.

Today was the last day before entering the tower, so getting the additional fragment ahead of time was a huge boon. Zac and Ogras had already decided upon what to do. They would visit the weekly auction once more in hopes of finding anything of value. It was their last shot before returning to Earth where they were limited to Calrin's selection once again.

No matter the results of the auction they would immediately enter the Tower afterward. They would spend one day inside, leaving one day afterward for networking. Provided that Zac managed to reach a floor high enough to warrant the attention of the larger forces, that is. In either case, they would have to return to Earth since their ten days were up.

The auction was pretty similar to the first one, though on the second-to-last segment an item that piqued Zac's interest appeared. It was simply called a [**Heaven's Secrets Array**] and was said to upgrade Nexus Nodes.

"What is this?" Zac asked Ogras, but the demon shrugged with confusion as well.

"It's normally called an [**Information array**], but perhaps this is a special variant," Galau said, not showing too much interest. "It acts as a substitute if you're unable to upgrade your Nexus Node for your town."

"Upgrade the Node?" Zac asked with interest. "What does it do?"

"At the lowest level a Nexus Node doesn't provide almost any information about the skills it sells or details about Class Choices. But if you manage to upgrade the status of your force then all its nodes will be more helpful. This Array gives that kind of effect as well, but only to one Node," Galau explained.

"Buy it," Ogras said without hesitation.

"What kind of information?" Zac asked with interest, also pretty interested in purchasing it. "Does it provide better Classes?"

"No, it can't help there. But it gives information about the type of classes, their main attributes and things like that. It's doesn't display everything, but enough to get a better idea of what the classes represent. It is a bit hard sometimes to understand the description after all," Galau shrugged.

"Is it rare?" Zac asked, completely agreeing with Galau's assessment of the cryptic descriptions of the Class choices.

“I guess these things are slightly rare, but it’s still not too valuable,” Galau said. “Most people that visit this place are from forces that have upgraded their crystals the normal way and have no need for it. It’s meant for weaker and newly established forces as a stopgap until they get the real thing.”

Zac was immediately interested, and he would make sure to buy that thing unless its price got out of hand. It would help him to choose a class better in line with his goals.

“Next up is the **[Heaven’s Secrets Array]**. I know what many of you are thinking; ‘Isn’t this just an Information Array?’ Truth be told, the array itself is just that, but this specific array is still a bit special. It was crafted by a cultivator adept on the path of Karma, which has given the array a slightly mysterious effect.”

The auctioneer saw that he had managed to catch the attention of quite a few people, and he continued with a bombastic voice.

“It not only provides the benefits of an Information array, but it even gives small Karmic hints of which choices might be best for you. It would be a marvelous opportunity for the youths of your factions who are unsure what path to pick for themselves,” the man said.

Zac was a bit disappointed in the extra function, as that wasn’t something he needed for himself. He only had two options at the moment, and he wasn’t so sure it would expand all that much even with his new seeds. Besides, he had already had a high enough Luck stat that his gut feeling was at least as effective as some small Karmic infusion into the array.

He had rather hoped that it would contain some hacking function that would give access to better structures in the Town Shop or better Classes, but he wasn’t that lucky. Still, it would be an item that would prove greatly beneficial for Port Atwood, especially since the system was so new for everyone. Most established forces followed heritages to choose their classes, but this was a great option for his people.

The price on the screen immediately jumped up to 200 million nexus coins, but the bidding already slowed down after 300. It clearly wasn’t a too valued, and Zac finally snatched it for the price of 380 Million Nexus coins. This was one of the types of items that might be very valuable on the outside, but here it went for a discount since people were more interested in items that could help them climb further.

Soon enough they reached the final segment, but Zac didn’t find anything else he wanted. The treasures were extremely good, but they were either too expensive or not things that weren’t suited for himself. A set of six small Spirit Tool axes appeared that Zac felt would be perfect for Emily, but they ended up with a price-tag of 3 billion, quickly forcing Zac out of the bidding.

Soon enough they reached the final item, and it wasn’t something that Zac could recognize either.

“Our final item in today’s Auction is something that might only enter our halls once every few years. It is the crystallized eye of a Pathfinder Oracle,” the Auctioneer said before he paused for dramatic effect.

Zac, along with a lot of other people looked extremely confused, but a low susurrus could be heard from the platforms up in the air.

“This mythical creature has long been hunted to extinction due to its marvelous nature, but now and then a lucky hunter can find its crystalized remains in various Mystic Realms. Legend states that the Pathfinder Oracles could see the truths of the universe, which turned their whole bodies into a treasure for almost any field,” the auctioneer kept going.

“The eye of an oracle is the second most valuable part, with only its core superseding it. It can be used for a wide array of purposes. Almost any Spirit Tool would gain a great boost to spirituality from consuming it, and it can be used to upgrade most basic Specialty Cores. You can even plant it in your cultivation cave, and it will start attracting Origin Dao. It is truly one of the few treasures that almost any genius could make use of.”

Zac had only halfheartedly listened to the Auctioneer’s efforts to upsell his final item, but he soon showed full attention to the proceedings. Being able to upgrade the spirituality of a Spirit Tool was pretty amazing, but his axe had already awoken due to that mysterious rock. He was far more interested in the second effect. That large eye could upgrade almost any Specialty core?

Wasn’t this exactly what he needed for his Duplicity core?

“Is this thing real?” Zac asked with a hushed tone to Galau who looked at the scene with wide eyes.

“I can’t believe such a good thing was put up for auction,” the squirrely man said with shock. “The seller must be desperate for cash.”

That was all the confirmation Zac needed. It truly possessed the capabilities that were advertised, and Zac immediately got ready for a heated Auction. This was already the last item, so it looked like he would need to find a solution for Alea somewhere else than here. But if he bought this thing he would at least be able to accomplish one of his goals for coming here.

But the auctioneer’s next words were like a cold shower, quickly waking him up to reality.

“Opening bid is 5 000 E-Grade Nexus coins. The seller is also willing to accept payment in Attuned Nexus Crystals at market rate.”

Five thousand E-Grade Nexus Coins was equivalent to 5 billion Nexus Coins, which was almost all the money that Zac had brought to the Tower. Worse yet, he had already spent a decent chunk on his shield and various other items. Even if he included the 3 billion from Galau he was just above 6 billion at the moment, and it felt very uncertain that would be enough.

His thoughts of borrowing money from Ogras and Galau were soon moot as the price rose with shocking speed. This time there was no one placing open bids, but the number on the screen rose as the auctioneer kept screaming out the current price.

“12 000!” the Auctioneer exclaimed with glee, “An- Wait! 14 000! 22 000!”

Zac’s eyes widened in shock at seeing the price, and he couldn’t help but inwardly mock himself for thinking he had a chance at that item. The price landed at almost 80 billion nexus coins, which elicited a small round of applause. Yet no one openly admitted to buying it, perhaps to avoid getting robbed. The eye was truly an item that someone might risk everything to snatch.

Even Ogras looked a bit shocked at the price. That was a huge amount of money even for a small D-Grade force. They might certainly have it, but using it on a consumable item that could only benefit one junior was likely way out of their budget. Such expenditures could only be used on safer investments, such as allowing one of their ancestors to progress a step forward.

This only became more apparent when the System apparently didn’t spoonfeed powerhouses Nexus Coins from kills at higher levels. Zac had been shocked when learned of it, but Ogras explained it with the fact that anything E-Grade warriors and higher killed were worth a lot of money by itself. The System didn’t feel it necessary to reach into its own pockets to supplement the income.

It was a small relief to Zac since he had initially been afraid that the stronger forces could earn hundreds of billions of nexus coins in a day by going out into the woods and killing a few beasts. But reality showed that it didn't rise that dramatically. Stronger forces could still earn shocking wealth in short times by going out hunting, but not to the degree that Zac feared.

None of this helped Zac though, and he could only wistfully sigh as the Eye went to the unnamed moneybags. The auction had concluded, and Zac was in no mood to stay on for the following festivities.

Their second visit to the Naspheyi Auction was the final thing on their agenda, and Zac couldn't help but despair a bit when he realized they hadn't accomplished a single one of their goals. He was still without any cure for Alea, and his chance at evolving his Duplicity core had slipped through his fingers due to his apparent abject poverty.

An ember of anger ignited in his mind, no doubt fanned on by the splinter. It had already gotten restless after days of Zac's inactivity and tried to instigate something. So Zac was a bit muddled as they walked toward the Tower as he needed to spend some of his energy to suppress his violent tendencies.

It was getting late but there was no point in returning to their courtyard. They had ample time to rest inside the Tower. They had bought everything they needed, and Zac was unwilling to waste his accrued wealth on anything else at the moment. He felt tired of the whole Base Town and wanted to get on with the challenge already.

The buildings got increasingly grander as they walked down one of the main roads leading toward the immense tower that blotted out half the sky. Soon enough the massive surface of the Tower of Eternity filled up half his vision, a massive block of white that pushed the blue sky to the sides. Even the grand towers and mansions they passed felt like small doll-houses compared to the impossibly large structure.

But even though the structures got larger and more refined, the number of people on the streets were generally decreasing.

Most people stayed at the middle and outer edges of the town since the risk of running into someone dangerous increased the closer you got to the tower itself. There always some who went to the central square to look for carries or just to take in the sights, but people rarely lingered in the area unless they had the power to back it up.

After an hourlong walk they finally reached the Core Area, the solitary row of extraordinary structures placed in a semi-circle around the entrance to the Tower itself. Each structure was as large as a town by itself, and inside the most powerful forces in their star sector resided.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 394 - Last Opportunity**

"Is that the Zethaya Pill House you mentioned?" Zac asked as he looked over at the grand pagoda that emanated a palpable medicinal scent that could be sensed from where they stood.

Behind the pagoda was a garden that looked large enough to be considered a proper park, but a high wall obscured what went on there. Only treetops and the occasional roofs could be discerned.

“Yes, that is them. The number one alchemy clan in the system,” Galau nodded with avarice flashing in his eyes. “Imagine being able to buy a few pills from them. I’d be able to double my investment simply by targeting collectors.”

“The door is open, why don’t people just go in? I don’t see any guards keeping people away,” Zac muttered, unable to tear his eyes away since that might be the final opportunity to accomplish at least one of his tasks.

“There’s an extremely powerful restrictive array blocking the entrance. Most people would be turned to paste just by trying to enter the gates. You need the invitation of the Zethaya to avoid the array,” Galau explained.

“What happens if you simply endure the array and push your way through? Will you be able to buy things?” Ogras asked. “Or will you be attacked as an intruder?”

Zac’s eyes lit up as he heard Ogras’ question. Having an array to keep out the average people, but allowing the elites of the sector to enter would make sense. It would prevent a bunch of tourists entering their shop while also allowing the family to make friends with unknown powerhouses.

“Well... I’ve heard of people pushing their way through and completing purchases, but I’ve also heard of people getting thrown out. I am not sure about the details,” Galau hesitantly said.

“So this place has been accessible from the start?” Zac said with a scowl at Galau. “Why have we wasted so much time at that auction house if we could simply have gone here on day one?”

“That array is crazy strong, you can only dream of entering if you can’t easily conquer the fourth floor. Entering it might cause wounds that will take weeks to heal,” Galau entreated as he looked at Zac with worry. “Furthermore, there is a high risk of injury even if you give up early. It might ruin our climb.”

Zac realized that he might have been a bit too restrained. If he had showcased some more strength then Galau might have told him about this opportunity long ago, but even now the aspiring merchant believed Zac to be too weak to even think about barging in.

“Don’t worry, isn’t it just an array to keep out the rabble?” Ogras smiled before turning to Zac, clearly understanding what was on his mind. “See if you find something useful for me as well. It’s not every day you get access to a stockpile like theirs.”

Zac took a deep breath and walked over toward the house. A group of people nearby first looked at him speculatively, as though they were trying to figure out which force he belonged to. Only the top tier factions could get into a place like Zethaya, yet Zac was completely unfamiliar.

But those faces quickly turned into sneers when they noticed him stopping outside the array, clearly trying to figure it out. Zac didn’t mind the looks at all as his eyes were trained on the space in front of him. He tried to glean what sort of array it was so that he could best prepare himself.

He had encountered all kinds of barriers during the hunt, and he felt confident in defeating most of them. But he wasn’t without his weaknesses. His mental defense was good but not great, and he wasn’t confident against any poisons that Zethaya’s alchemists would concoct.

But his guts told him that the array wouldn’t deal with poison or things like fire. It was a gatekeeper and a test, and it was unlikely that even an arrogant place like Zethaya would try to poison their presumptive customers. He felt it more likely to be some sort of restrictive array that required a certain amount of strength to push through

Zac looked over at the group of humanoids who stood some distance away, looking at him like he was some sort of clown.

“Do you guys know what kind of array this is?” Zac probed.

Two of the people only ignored him, but the third spoke up after seemingly thinking it over.

“It’s a general suppression array from what I’ve heard, it restrains both your mind and your body. It gets lighter if you block it with the Dao or strong skills. It’s a test of power,” the youth said. “But I haven’t seen it personally.”

“Thank you,” Zac nodded and immediately stepped in.

He didn’t put all his faith in that man’s words, but he thought his words rang true. Some excelled in Dao while having a low Endurance, and others had amazing skills. It made sense that Zethaya would want to test for any sort of unique trait that would qualify aspiring guests as potential powerhouses.

Zac only managed to take two steps before he was stopped in his tracks. It felt like he was carrying a huge boulder on his shoulders, and the air itself had congealed into an impossibly thick sludge that required his body to strain to push forward.

But the strain was only slightly worse than the power required to unleash the second axe of [Deforestation], and he didn’t even feel the need to imbue himself with one of his Fragments to proceed. After the brief stop, he started to move forward one step after another, walking through a beautifully decorated tunnel.

The tunnel was only 50 meters in length, but it took him over a minute to traverse toward the end, and sweat was starting to drip down his forehead from the exertion. What was a bit more embarrassing was that the tunnel turned transparent half-way through, and he noticed there were a decent number of people observing his entrance. He considered activating one of his Dao Fragments, but he felt it might be more impressive to push through without any assistance.

He kept thinking of ways to make sure the deal went through with the discerning clan, but his musings were rudely interrupted. A foot suddenly came out of nowhere, landing straight on his chest with a resounding thud. The attack itself wasn’t anything special, but Zac was still within the array which caused a tremendous strain. Zac felt some blood in his mouth, and he had no option but to act.

The Fragment of the Coffin spread through his body, turning it impervious. Not only that, it felt as though his rage imbued him with power, and a monstrous strength surged throughout his body to the point that it felt like he was bursting at the seams.

The unprovoked kick had well and truly pissed him off, and his instincts kicked in. His hand shot forward like a snake and he grasped the ankle with enough force to cause some cracking sounds to echo through the tunnel.

“Wai-“ a voice screamed, but Zac ignored it as he slammed the attacker into the ground with shocking force before he threw him out from the Pill House like a piece of trash. Only a few cracked stones smeared with blood was the evidence that a struggle had taken place.

Zac didn’t know if the man was alive or dead after that response, but he didn’t care as he took the last steps into the Pill House, his Fragment making the final stretch effortless. A glance showed that the man was lying motionless outside, allowing Zac to focus on the matter at hand without worrying about him throwing out an attack from behind.

The whole shop looked like a luxurious lounge rather than a store, with groups of sofas and beautiful fountains creating a harmonious atmosphere. There were no pills

or other wares on display anywhere, but there was a rich medicinal aroma in the store that made all of Zac's cells feel full of life and power.

The whole area was lit up by a glass dome in the ceiling tens of meters in the air, and he saw there were multiple stories that all had open balconies toward the central lounge. There weren't a lot of people inside, but he could spot a couple of groups scattered about, most of them looking over at Zac with curiosity.

But a small sense of danger suddenly pricked his mind, and his eyes turned to see a young human standing on the second floor looking down at him with cold eyes. Zac frowned when he sensed the animosity since he had never seen that guy before. Was it him that sent out an underling to sound him out? And if so, why?

Was it someone from a force that ran one of the Incursions he had closed, like the Ez'Mahal Empire? There were no obvious signs on him or his clothes that could give Zac a hint, and he didn't dare to use **[Inquisitive Eye]**. He was pretty sure that anyone that could enter a place like this possessed an item similar to his own bracer anyway.

The young man looked away soon enough and walked away from the balcony, disappearing out of sight. Zac could only drop the matter as he refocused on a clerk who walked toward him.

"We do apologize for the disturbance, that guest breached our rules and will no longer be allowed back inside," he said, though Zac could tell that he wasn't all that contrite. "I am Orbat, a clerk working for the Zethaya Clan."

"No matter. I passed through that array, does that mean I can shop here?" Zac asked, not wanting to press the issue.

Their reception was an indicator that they did not put all too much value on him, only sending a clerk rather than whoever was running the shop at this moment. A large clan like the Zethaya would no doubt have a couple of people at the Tower at any point in time, meaning they definitely could have sent someone with higher status.

That was the problem with a lack of renown. He was a nobody in the end, someone without strong backing. Even if he was powerful enough to break through the array he was only someone with potential, whereas the usual guests at this place no doubt had living ancestors at C-Grade.

"Certainly," Orbat said as he smilingly led Zac to a sectional not far away.

"What's on the other floors?" Zac asked offhandedly as he sat down.

"The Zethaya Pill House is both a store and a residential district. The Zethaya maintains friendly relations with many forces, and some choose to stay here during their climb, while others simply visit," the clerk smoothly explained with his ever-present smile.

*'So only for big-shots, huh?'* Zac thought with a wry smile as he shot a look toward the balustrade where he saw the man who emitted some hostility.

He was no longer anywhere to be seen, and Zac threw it into the back of his mind as he refocused on the task at hand.

"I am looking for two items. I am first in need of a pill or a treasure that can heal a fractured soul. Secondly, I am looking for things that can help evolve a specialty core," Zac explained.

"We do not carry anything that can generally evolve Specialty Cores. I am afraid only extremely rare items like the Pathfinder Eye that appeared earlier has such a magical effect," the clerk said as he took out a crystal, causing a screen to emerge. "However, we do have the capability to produce the following pills."

Zac seriously read through the list, and he saw that there were six different pills that were geared toward evolving specific Specialty Cores. Unfortunately, none of them

was the Duplicity Core, and he could only sigh internally in disappointment. However, this was a rare opportunity to get some clues at least.

“Does taking one of these pills guarantee an evolution?” Zac asked, not divulging that he wouldn’t buy any of them.

“Unfortunately no, there is a chance of between 40 and 60% of a full evolution with the pills that are brought here. But even if the evolution is not successful a strong foundation will be created, allowing for easier evolution down the line,” the clerk smoothly explained.

Zac slowly nodded and moved on to the second item he looked for, the soul-mending treasure for Alea.

“May I ask if it’s a preparation for the tower, or whether it’s meant for a patient?” the clerk asked.

“Why does that matter?” Zac frowned.

“The Zethaya carries the **[Serene Soul Pill]** that can perform emergency repair on a fractured soul. It will not heal you completely, but it will stop the fracturing and allow you to slowly recuperate with the help of regular soul-nurturing pills afterward,” the clerk said. “However...”

Zac’s eyes lit up when he heard the explanation, but the ‘however’ sounded extremely ominous.

“The **[Serene Soul Pill]** needs to be imbibed within 5 minutes of being wounded,” Orbat concluded.

Zac closed his eyes to restrain a surge of fury that lambasted his mind for a second and took a deep breath to curtail the Splinter locked in its Miasmatic cage. He needed to enter the tower soon.

“It’s for a patient, the wound is a month old,” Zac conceded.

The clerk nodded, some sympathy showing in his face. Zac frowned when he saw the clerk’s reaction, fearing that he was simply out of luck.

“Well... There is something,” the clerk said after some hesitation. “There is an item in our treasury, but I do not have the authority to make any decisions regarding treasures of that grade. A proper Zethaya Clan member needs to give the go-ahead.”

“What Item?” Zac asked with eagerness.

“I cannot divulge,” the clerk said. “Please wait a moment, I will consult the manager.”

Zac nodded in agreement, and he impatiently waited for the clerk to come back. His mind spun as he tried to come up with arguments for the Zethaya to sell him the item. It seemed like the item was something they kept for themselves in case of emergency or something, which probably meant its effect was pretty amazing.

Paying above market price probably wouldn’t work in such a case, since the Zethaya didn’t lack for money. Should he promise a favor if he could buy it? Would they care? Did he have anything else to trade with apart from money that would interest an ancient clan?

Soon enough the clerk returned, but he was a bit pale and didn’t dare to look up. Next to him was a young man wearing a luxurious blue robe. He radiated an impressive pressure, but it was more like a gently flowing river compared to Zac’s usual aura of brutality. It was no doubt the Zethaya Clan member who could decide on the matter.

But Zac frowned when he noticed that a third person was approaching him, walking shoulder to shoulder with the Zethaya Alchemist. It was the young man with the cold eyes that had stood on the second floor earlier.

Zac sighed as he realized that trouble had finally come for him.

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### **Chapter 395 - Prajñā Cherry**

Zac looked at the approaching trio with some apprehension, afraid that the chance of a smooth transaction taking place might be ruined. He once more tried to connect the man in the red robes or the crest embroidered on his chest with anyone he had offended, but he came up with nothing.

He still wasn't sure exactly what kind of information had been released about him to the multiverse from the 20-odd incursions he had closed, but he felt it was pretty unlikely that the matters were connected.

He had only really started closing incursions for real around two months ago. Chances were that the youth in front of him was already here when it happened, so he probably shouldn't have heard anything. Or did someone specifically send an information packet to the Tower because they knew that Zac would sooner or later arrive here?

It was a scenario that Zac felt was distinctly possible, but at the same time unlikely. The Zethaya was a real big-shot family, a peak C-Grade force. According to what Ogras estimated the most invaders were from between middle D-Grade to early C-Grade forces, with a few 'lucky additions' like clan Azh'Rezak.

Perhaps stronger forces would get access to Incursions as well, but they would probably be sent to planets that already had cosmic Energy and already powerful natives. Both Earth and the Ishiate Planets were almost completely lacking Cosmic Energy before, and the Zhix planet was only slightly better off. Worst off was the moleman planet, since it was essentially half-dead.

There were three anomalies on their planet though, the Technocrats, the Church of Everlasting Dao, and the Undead Empire. The Empire could be explained by the fact that it was only some weak rural area of the Empire that came. The Church and the Technocrats likely snatched their spots by eradicating the forces that originally owned them though.

Ogras' family had kept their qualifications hidden until their spot was secured specifically to avoid such a fate. The youth accompanying the Zethaya Clan member seemed to be of equal standing, indicating he was probably from a peak faction as well. So it was unlikely he came from one of the remaining Incursions.

But what other enmities could there be? Did he recognize the origin of Zac's bracer? Greatest certainly seemed like a man that seemed to be good at creating grudges with his straightforward manners. Or did the youth sense the splinter in his mind and want it for himself? But he couldn't arrive at any conclusions, and the trio sat down opposite of him.

"I apologize for the wait. I am Boje Zethaya. My attendant told me about your interest in a treasure that can mend a fractured soul?" the man in the blue robe spoke up with a smile.

"That's alright. I'm Zac," Zac nodded, trying to maintain a balance of deference and poise. "That right. I need something that can mend a soul that's been fractured for a while. She- The patient is currently enclosed in a stasis array to not get any worse."

The man in the red robe didn't say anything as he sat down. He only looked Zac up and down with a mix of overt hostility and disdain. Zac didn't want to give the guy an excuse to ruin his business, so he ignored the rude behavior even if it was a bit irking. Perhaps the guy was simply some sort of elitist that didn't like 'commoners' entering his surroundings.

At least the Zethaya representative didn't carry the same sort of hostility.

The blue-robed man nodded and took out a small but intricate chest, and opened it for a short duration. Inside was a branch with a stone fruit attached to a thin stalk. Zac immediately knew it was a great treasure as his cells screamed at him to consume the fruit, and the calling was even greater than when he first encountered the Fruit of Ascension.

"We do possess this [**Prajñā Cherry**]. It actually comes from an ordinary F-Grade cherry tree, but a great Sage pondered on the Dao of the Mind beneath the tree for a thousand years, giving the tree and a few of its fruits spirituality. This cherry has been infused by the powerhouse and has miraculous effects on the soul, no matter if it is to heal or strengthen it," the alchemist explained. "It is a High E-Grade Soul Treasure."

"What price do you have in mind?" Zac asked, trying his best to hide how much he wanted it.

"This thing does not have any set price," Boje said. "The Zethaya clan normally hires promising warriors for various tasks, and we would be ready to offer this item as a recruitment bonus. Of course, you would have to prove a strength worthy of this unique treasure first."

"What sort of tasks? And how long would I be working for you?" Zac asked.

"Overestimating yourself," the red-robed man snorted, but Zac ignored him.

Boje awkwardly smiled as he spoke up.

"We hire warriors for all sorts of purposes. Most choose to become guardians of our clan, signing life-long contracts. Others join us for short durations like a decade or two. The requirements for the latter are a lot harsher though. Someone wanting such a position would have to pass the 6<sup>th</sup> floor of the Tower to warrant such a large payment like this cherry."

Zac nodded in understanding. It wasn't too bad to pay a high price for someone to sign a life-long contract. Those treasures would strengthen the cultivator which would benefit the Zethaya as well.

"What would a short-term warrior do?"

"Usually explore Mystic Realms with restrictions. There are some that have limits on attributes or levels, and we need strong warriors to explore for us as we can't send in our elders. The clan would claim a majority of all spoils you get inside, but you would still walk away with any titles and a part of the treasures. It's usually a great opportunity for any promising warrior," Boje explained.

Zac felt that it sounded like a pretty good deal, but he also understood there was another side to the 'opportunity'. If it was such a good thing the clan would rather send their own people rather than spend a lot of money to send in outsiders. The risk of getting killed or crippled was no doubt high in the places the Zethaya Alchemist talked about.

"I'm unfortunately unable to sign any such contract in the short term. Is there any way for you to directly sell the cherry instead?" Zac asked.

"This item is quite unique and something formed by chance. It is not something we can simply grow as we wish, so we are unwilling to part with to for Nexus Crystals

or Nexus Coins. But our pill house is always interested in trades of items or intelligence of similar value,” Boje explained.

Zac slowly nodded in understanding. It might be the young man causing trouble for him, but his instincts told him that wasn't the case. A clan like Zethaya was already obscenely wealthy, and it made sense that they were more interested in unique treasures that could help them in ways that money could not.

The problem was that he wasn't walking around with any impressive treasures that he could trade for the cherry. The Amanita or the budding lotus were both probably worth as much as the cherry, but they were back on his island. Not that he would be able to bring it to this place anyway. The lotus was probably categorized as a D-Grade healing treasure which made it impossible to bring, while the Amanita was helping keep Alea alive.

“Are you looking for natural treasures or items that might be of interest to study?” Zac asked.

He actually had two things in mind. The first was the cyborg body he still kept in his Cosmos Sack. That thing was beyond durable, and perhaps the Zethaya could study it to create pills with similar effects. Any death squad or fanatic would want a pill that could help them drag down their enemies to hell along with them when they were facing death.

There was no doubt in Zac's mind whether the cyborg corpse was something valuable. It was a creation of a top tier Technocrat faction, people who didn't even fear the Undead Empire if the little alien could be trusted.

Besides, getting rid of that thing might be for the best, in case Firmament's Edge possessed some means to track the corpse. Luckily the body was still only counted as E-Grade since he found no trouble in bringing it here, but it should at least be a Peak E-Grade treasure as he saw it.

The second item of note was the notebook regarding the Draugr corpse. It came uncomfortably close to his secrets, but no one here would be able to discern his specialty core thanks to his bracer. Perhaps the Zethaya would find the report interesting, or at least have the connections to sell the report to the Undead Empire for profit.

He could even sign an agreement that he would look for the samples when he came back and send them to the Zethaya. Then again, they could probably snatch the true Draugr body from Mhal's Clan since it seemed like a small upstart force.

If neither was of interest he would have to try something else. Perhaps this alchemist needed a carry in the tower as well? He had already decided to display his Apex Hunter-title if it came to that since that title was a clear indicator of extreme fighting prowess without divulging any specifics.

“Both are fine, we're particularly interested in items that can either help in our research to create new pills or in methods of combating pill toxicity,” Boje said, looking at Zac with some interest.

Zac's eyes lit up and he reached toward his Cosmos Sack to present the Cyborg Corpse.

“I have something that migh-“ Zac started, but he was suddenly interrupted by a discordant voice.

“Oh? Isn't this that treasure I was asking about the other day?” the red-robed youth said, finally speaking up. “Hadn't we already reached an agreement for a trade?”

“Huh? Rasuliel?” Boje Zethaya said with confusion, until his eyes widened slightly in realization. “Uh, of course. It must have slipped my mind due to the excitement with Prince Reoluv’s ascension.”

A surge of anger ignited in Zac’s chest when he realized that the youth had come to create trouble after all. It obviously wasn’t enough for the guy to stare at him with his shitty attitude. Zac immediately discarded the idea to take out the cyborg, but he wouldn’t completely give up at this point. Hopefully Boje Zethaya would choose profits over keeping this Rasuliel character happy.

“I have a corpse of a cultivator who was modified by a peak force to have a forced evolution when approaching death. He rose from a weak early E-Grade warrior to touching upon the D-Grade barrier in the span of one minute, releasing a shocking might that killed all of his enemies before he died of exhaustion,” Zac said, modifying the facts slightly.

“If you can figure out the process of this change you might be able to create a pill that could mimic the effect. I’m sure that kind of pill would be desired by all kinds of forces,” Zac added.

Boje’s eyes lit up in interest when he heard the explanation, and it seemed that he was about to ask a few more questions about it. But he soon restrained himself and sighed with disappointment.

“I am sorry. The item does indeed sound interesting, but our Pill House is known to keep our word. This treasure has already been claimed, and I can only apologize for my forgetfulness,” Boje said as he handed over a small vial. “Please take these healing pills as a token of my apology. They were concocted by my uncle, and are some of the most effective healing pills in Base Town. I wish you luck in your endeavors.”

Zac almost crushed the vial or threw it in the face of the alchemist, but he restrained himself as he put it away. Not that he would dare eat them after seeing how they acted, but he might be able to sell them for a premium later.

“My family will send over the payment within a month. Its value will no doubt satisfy you,” Rasuliel smiled as he claimed the small box and put it away before he turned to Zac. “I am so sorry about that, little guy.”

The world started to turn jagged and Zac’s vision became tinted with red and black and as fury took hold of his mind. The innocuous taunt had turned his smoldering anger into a blazing fire, and he was fast losing control. His body shook from restrained anger, and it was all he could do from not jumping the two and ripping them to pieces.

He needed to quickly find some secluded place to wrestle back control of his mind before he did something stupid. Zac arduously got to his feet and nodded at Boje with grit teeth before he turned toward the exit. The Rasuliel seemed to notice Zac’s weird state, and a taunting voice echoed across the lounge as Zac walked away.

“You said it was meant for a girl? Your Dao Partner perhaps?” Rasuliel laughed. “I am so sorry about that. Let’s hope she meets a more dependable man her next life. Someone who isn’t foolish enough to meddle in the Tsarun Clan’s business.”

Zac froze as the words echoed across the room. His thoughts became a jumble and soon enough he didn’t even know where he was. His vision closed in on him and his consciousness slipped away despite his best efforts to remain lucid.

The last thing he heard before darkness consumed him was a bestial roar that was both familiar and foreign.

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### Chapter 396 - Aftermath

A dense killing intent suffused the whole hall, causing the numerous guests of the Pill House to look over with consternation after hearing the roar. The source was obviously the interloper, who looked angry enough to spontaneously combust. His eyes had turned completely bloodshot, and he was already reaching for his Cosmos Sack.

Rasuliel was inwardly delighted the way things turned out. Sometimes Luck was as important as skill, and he had no doubt been helped by his massive pool of 52 Luck today. Who would have thought that the scoundrel who somehow snatched the Thayer Consortia from underneath his uncle's hands would present himself here?

Furthermore, he was only some no-name cultivator who lacked any proper connections to enter this place the right way. And better yet, he was a hothead who only needed a little bit of goading to lose control.

He couldn't believe a person dumb enough to emit killing intent inside the Zethaya Pill House would be able to get inside, let alone snatch a Mercantile License that their family had targeted for decades.

The arrays in here would block any attempts at retaliation, allowing him to freely kill the interloper without repercussions. The biggest risk to his plans was if this Zac character crushed his token and fled, but as he looked at the man who seemed to have lost all rationality he knew his gambit had proven successful.

As soon as the fool got himself killed he would hopefully be able to glean the whereabouts of those damn Sky Gnomes from his belongings. This level of contribution to the clan was almost at an elder-level, and he couldn't imagine the bump in resources he would enjoy when presenting the signet and this man's body to his uncle.

The aura of the man in front of him kept rising, and even Rasuliel started to feel some pressure. But even then he wasn't overly worried. Someone who could both get through the entrance array and even block Rudrik's strike was strong, but the Zethaya had spent hundreds of thousands of years to strengthen this place to the limits of what the System allowed.

"I apologize for the harsh words from my friend here," Boje said with a frown. "But I urge you to remember where you are. Violence will not be tolerated within these walls."

But the warning fell on deaf ears as Zac's aura kept increasing, and Rasuliel started to frown when he sensed an extremely sinister energy within it. It was unlike anything he had encountered before, and it elicited an intense sense of danger.

*'This guy mentioned some modifications that pushed one's power beyond the natural limits. Has this lunatic actually done the same to himself?'* Rasuliel thought, some worry finally creeping into his heart.

The worry quickly turned into a primal fear in Rasuliel's heart as the aura of the man suddenly skyrocketed as a black rune appeared on his forehead. Lines started to cover his whole body as well, creating a pathway reeking of destruction.

Rasuliel suddenly found himself falling backward as he coughed up a mouthful of blood. Just looking at the fractal caused his Soul to get cut, and a glance indicated that Boje had suffered the same fate.

"Stop!" Boje roared as the whole Pill House hummed with power like a beast waking up from its slumber.

One restriction after another appeared in the air, and defensive treasures of inestimable value created an inescapable net around the man who still stood rooted to

his spot. But a wave of unadulterated destruction rippled out from his body, and the massive arrays cracked like they were some cheap talismans bought from a flea market.

Thoughts of escape filled Rasuliel's mind, but streams of terrifying power ensconced the whole lobby, cutting off any path of retreat. Rasuil el could only reluctantly turn back toward the human-shaped monster, and he took out a small tube from his Spatial Ring. There was no way he would be able to crush his token and escape from this evil star in time.

He could only bet it all on the cursed object in his hand.

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Pain with enough urgency to jolt him awake plagued Zac's body. He found himself bruised and battered in the middle of a huge pile of rubble, every part of his body hurting beyond imagination.

His vision was a bit blurry, but he still saw the towering trees from **[Hatcheman's Spirit]** dissipating around him. When had he activated that skill? And why did it look so different from when he tried it out back on earth? The leaves and trunks shouldn't be black.

And where the hell was he? He had been inside the luxurious lounge of the Zethaya Pill House just a second ago.

A broken-off head of a statue depicting some unknown mythological creature jogged Zac's memory awake. It had been the centerpiece of one of the fountains inside, but now the fountain was gone, replaced with broken pieces of stones and the crushed remnants of the furniture who sat around it.

Zac's mind still had some problems connecting two and two, and his head slowly swiveled around to take in the surroundings. A couple of familiar faces, many with minor wounds and looking haggard, stared back at him from a respectable distance, undisguised horror evident on their faces. It was the other customers and residents of the Zethaya that had spectated his entrance to the Pill House.

Even further back a small crowd had gathered, likely people who were visiting Tower Square. No one dared to take a step forward, and some were even running away after Zac trained his eyes in their direction.

Zac couldn't bother with the onlookers as his muddled mind tried to compute what the hell was going on. He knew he had been bested by the Splinter once more, and it had caused him to completely lose control when he heard the taunts from that Rasuliel guy.

Normally he might have been annoyed, but he still had years to find a cure for Alea. He wouldn't risk everything at this juncture just to forcibly steal a treasure. Doing so would cause unneeded enmities and more trouble than it was worth. But the accumulated anger from the Splinter of Oblivion had pushed his rage to unprecedented heights, ruining his plans completely.

Just thirty meters away a young man in a blue robe lay huddled in a fetal position with multiple layers of arrays shimmering around him. Zac realized it was Boje who was still fine albeit somewhat worse for wear. And just in front of him he could see the outline of another body.

He arduously looked down, but he almost immediately regretted it due to two reasons. The first reason was the huge wound that had mangled a large section of his torso, which put both his bones and innards on open display.

The second was the bloody head he held in his right hand, where his fingers were completely entrenched. His index and ring-fingers were pushed all the way through his eyes, and the sockets were still leaking some mix of blood and brain matter. His thumb

meanwhile was inserted in the victim's mouth, making it look like he was holding a bowling ball.

The head wasn't connected to a body, but a grisly and broken spine dangled from beneath. However, a matching headless corpse lay at Zac's feet, clearly indicating who it was.

Rasuliel Tsarun.

Zac groaned as he knew that he had really caused a shitstorm this time around, but he didn't feel too broken up about it. He obviously regretted causing this trouble, but Rasuliel was targeting him for some reason. This random guy had caused him so much trouble for no reason at all, and he didn't feel too broken up about killing him. People died for far less every day.

He irreverently threw away the head before quickly popping one of his best healing pills while he activated his Dao of Trees. His wounds were nothing to scoff at even with his terrifying constitution, and he needed to quickly restore his condition.

The trouble wasn't over just because he had killed his enemy. There was no doubt in Zac's mind that he had been the one to make the first move, meaning that retribution would come soon enough. Ogras appeared the next second as if reading his thoughts.

"We need to flee. *Now*," the demon said with grit teeth.

His usual lackadaisical expression was nowhere to be seen, replaced by a mask of horror.

"The tokens?" Zac asked with a hoarse voice.

"The two of us were judged complicit of your madness, we're stuck here," Ogras said, waving the limp body of Galau in his arms. "This useless guy got so scared that he fainted when you tore down the whole netherblasted building. Throwing out that guy in the beginning wasn't enough?"

"Let's enter the Tower then," Zac said, opting to save the explanations for later. "People seem shocked enough to stay away."

"It just takes one, then all hell breaks loose. The bounty on your head is crazy," Ogras lamented.

Zac nodded and the two unhesitantly sped toward the large platform in front of the Tower after Ogras gripped the body of Rasuliel with a shadow tentacle. There wasn't any actual door to enter, but rather a teleportation array that took you inside.

He figured that they would be fine as long as they managed to get on the platform in one piece. What happened when they exited tomorrow was Future-Zac's problem. He would have 100 days to figure out that mess.

The demon's words, unfortunately, proved prophetic. One impulsive cultivator started rushing after them, and with that the floodgates were opened. Many chose to stand back, but more than half the remaining warriors on the square started rushing toward Zac, and a few cultivators emerged from the nearby buildings as well.

The fact that he looked half-dead with mortal wounds likely emboldened quite a few of the people who had an eye on whatever the System offered for his death. But they had drastically underestimated his constitution, and he still had some fuel left in his tank.

Better yet, he realized he had activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**] during his rampage, and he still benefitted for its effects. He also still had his most powerful skill. He had apparently torn down the building without using either [**Deforestation**] or [**Nature's Punishment**] somehow. Perhaps it was the other guys who did the heavy lifting in the destruction they caused.

He clearly had activated **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** since he saw the trees just as they dissipated, but the effects of that skill weren't really offensive. He had a hard time seeing himself managing to destroy the Pill House just by activating that skill unless he had misunderstood its uses when he tested it. Had he used it by instinct to avoid certain death?

There was the issue of the appearance of the trees though. They looked corrupted for some reason, but he didn't have time to analyze it before they were gone. He had only tried out the skill once on Mystic Island, and he wasn't sure of all its uses just yet. Perhaps it changed appearance due to circumstances just like **[Nature's Punishment]**.

He would have to experiment some more inside the tower. Now was not the time. There were more pressing issues to deal with, such as the swarming bounty hunters right on their heels. His body was full of complaints, but Cosmic Energy started to churn through his body.

The huge axe of **[Deforestation]** appeared in the sky above, but its powerful aura only managed to intimidate a scant few. The rest looked like they had eaten stimulants as they kept running toward him, and the whole square shuddered with power from their skills.

Zac had no compunctions about finishing what he started since these people wanted to kill him out of greed. His body screamed in protest from the exertion, but he felt that **[Hatchetman's Rage]** still had over ten seconds on the clock. It would be enough to do what needed to be done.

This time he wouldn't hold back as he did against the undead horde, and the Fragment of the Axe Effortlessly slipped into the huge hatchet in the air, causing a terrifying increase in its aura. A few with discerning eyes immediately turned to flee for their lives, but many still kept going.

A small shudder swept out across the square as the hatchet finished its trajectory, and the clamor died down in a second. Most of the attacks aimed at Zac were completely obliterated, with the few remaining losing most of their power. Ogras managed to clear those out with a few shadow-blasts.

However, the results were not quite as impressive as Zac had imagined in his rage-addled brain. Only a dozen died from his attack, while an equal number sported pretty grievous wounds. A small part in the back of his mind reminded him that these were the elites that stood at the peak of the whole sector. Just pushing them back with your own power was a huge accomplishment, let alone killing a bunch of them.

Zac coughed a mouthful of blood as activating the skill in his current condition had put an even worse strain on his body. The gristly wound in his side painted the ground he stepped on red, and he started to feel woozy.

Unfortunately he didn't manage to deter everyone on the square just with that single swing. In fact, a few people with extremely dense auras had appeared as though out of nowhere, each of them looking like a god of war as they closed in on the three. Going by Zac's pathetic appearance they no doubt believed he was an arrow at the end of its flight.

His time was running out on his buff, so Zac could ignore his pain and unleash the second swing as well. The shocking **[Infernal Axe]** appeared in the sky above, and a coruscating wave of flames ripped out across the square, slamming straight into the attacks that came their way.

A chaotic mess of fire and dozens of other elements fought for supremacy in the square, causing a shockwave that launched Zac off his feet. It was at this time the timer

for [Hatcheman's Rage] dissipated, causing a wave of exhaustion and pain to wash over him.

A sneaky cultivator seemed to have been waiting for this opportunity, and he appeared out of nowhere from the shadows with a sinister dagger poised to strike. But those very shadows immediately turned on the assassin and ripped him to pieces.

Zac's sight was starting to blur, but a storm of fractal blades blasted through the wall of flames from [Deforestation] and flew their way. Zac could immediately sense they contained the energy from a Dao Fragment, and some despair crept into his heart. He was completely spent, and he knew that defense wasn't Ogras' strong suit.

Swapping class was out of the question as well, the blades moved far too quickly. But the square was luckily only so big, and they had already reached their destination. With the help of Ogras moving them through the shadows they found themselves atop the platform, and the fragment-imbued blades hit an invisible wall.

The hunters stopped in their tracks as they looked at Zac with greed in their eyes. But they were unwilling to enter the platform since that would only send them into a separate version of the trial. They were no doubt more interested in staying until he reemerged. Zac looked down at the people with his bloodshot eyes, some residual anger reigniting when he saw their greedy expressions.

"I will for-," Zac said with a hoarse voice that echoed across the square, but his grand proclamation was cut off as they were teleported away.

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**Chapter 397 - Elites**

"Pretty, why didn't you join in on the hunt?" Leyara asked with interest as she looked over at her friend with a spurious smile. "Did you know that guy would be so strong? But I still think you would have a chance to trap him."

"I've told you a thousand times, call me Daoist Summit Reacher," the beautiful woman said with an annoyed look as she glanced at Leyara.

*This family and their naming sense, Leyara lamented as she shook her head. And wasn't it Swordmistress Grace last time?*

The two sat at a friends' viewing terrace that overlooked the Tower Square and the entrance to the Tower of Eternity. They had all gotten the quest, but only Ulmar and Presseus had made a move. They now sat to the side with their frizzy hair, looking a bit embarrassed. They probably hadn't expected to get drowned in a sea of high-grade flames infused with a Dao Fragment the moment they set out.

"So?" Leyara probed.

Pretty was the strongest person here, which meant she was one of the strongest people in Base Town, especially now that Reoluv had left. Furthermore, as the granddaughter of that war maniac she was probably loaded with nasty treasures perfect to create havoc. It was a bit surprising she didn't make a move considering the quest reward. It was something that only those with the stoutest Dao Hearts would be able to resist.

"That guy was always so annoying, stupid upstart family. It's not my problem he got himself killed. The latest Zethaya generation must have let their excessive wealth turn their brains into excrement for things get out of hand like that. Why should I exert myself to clean up their mess?" Pretty shrugged with disinterest.

“But that guy who was with him came from your Allbright Empire though?” Leyara said with an impish smile. “I remember him hiding in the corner looking scared at the party you held a month ago.”

Leyara was so bored after all these gatherings and auctions. There was finally something interesting happening, and she couldn't help but try to stir the pot a bit to make things even more exciting. She knew things would get chaotic if Pretty made a move.

She didn't just have one or two suitors who had timed their climb to be here at the same time as her. Intergalactic dating was pretty hard after all, especially opportunities to meet outside the gaze of the elders. No matter if she decided to help or hunt the results no doubt be spectacular to witness.

“I'm not from the Imperial family, why should I care about what some guy from our Empire does or what company he keeps? I don't even think he's from the Emyrean sector,” Pretty said with disinterest.

“Yeah... But your grandfather...” Leyara said.

“What does grandpa have to do with some small squabbles between the younger generation?” Pretty snorted.

Leyara only rolled her eyes and gave up. It looked like she wouldn't be able to drag her old friend into the mess.

“Besides, the fun has only started,” Pretty suddenly said with a smile.

“Oh?” Leyara asked, hope reigniting.

“Haven't you noticed? We all still have the quest even though a few minutes have passed. I think the Ruthless Heavens doesn't feel this play has acted itself out yet. Won't he be kicked out of the tower in a day at most?”

Leyara's eyes lit up in excitement as she looked down at the large crowd who stayed by the entrance. Only a few were leaving, but most seemed content to simply wait, intently waiting for that lunatic to return.

“What do you think, Pretty?” Leyara said. “Will he survive? Do you think I should join in on the fun?”

“I know you don't care about which floor you end up on, why should you join this fight? As for whether he will survive...?” Pretty said with a mysterious smile. “I think he will surprise us all.”

“And don't call me Pretty.”

-----

Catheya looked down at the square from the window far up in the tower belonging to the Undead Empire, her pitch-black eyes absorbing the candlelight like two black holes. Calmness had already returned to the core area after the destruction of the Zethaya Pill house, but a storm was still raging inside her heart.

“Did you find out the identity of the man?” Catheya asked into the shadows, eliciting a dour zombie to emerge.

“I am afraid not, mistress,” the zombie said with a bow. “The warrior entered the Pill House by challenging their array, and he only identified himself as Zac before things deteriorated. However, I did manage to find out a few facts from one of the assistants.”

“Oh?” Catheya looked over at Varo, the leader of her deathsworn and her personal steward.

“He was able to forcibly pass through the array by virtue of his attributes alone. His constitution should be quite impressive. Also, his main goal of visiting the Zethaya

was to find a cure for a fractured soul. It seemed quite urgent for him,” the zombie finished.

“A fractured soul?” Catheya mumbled, her pale lips curving slightly upward. “The Zethaya better pray that man never grows too powerful. Such a response when he came looking for medicine will no doubt plant a seed of intense grudge. Was that what he wanted to say before he got whisked away?”

“Do you wish us to prepare an ambush of him for when he exits?” the Zombie probed. “A free level would guarantee smoothly passing the 7<sup>th</sup> floor.”

“No, it would be shameful to use such a crutch in this place. Besides, I have some confidence in passing the 7<sup>th</sup> floor without any outside assistance. By the way, who was the man he killed?” Catheya asked as she looked over at her assistant.

“Rasuliel Tsarun. A main branch descendant of the Tsarun clan, but only of middling import. He was a talent to be nurtured, but not in line for succession,” Varo said.

“Tsarun? Never heard of them,” Catheya muttered.

“They are a somewhat young force local to this remote sector. They have some connections to the local kingdoms of our Empire, mainly providing high-quality corpses,” Varo dutifully reported.

“How many of that clan are here right now?” Catheya asked.

“One more main branch member, 8 from side branches, and 17 employees,” Varo said without missing a beat.

“Are you confident in killing them all?” Catheya asked.

“We might have to sacrifice one or two of our deathsworn, but our situation is generally favorable,” the zombie thoughtfully answered, not caring why her mistress wanted to kick the Tsarun Clan out of the Base Town. “Rasuliel was the strongest member of their force. He likely carried most of their treasures as well, leaving the rest somewhat exposed.”

“Good, do it,” Catheya nodded.

“If I may, mistress. This might cause friction between the local kingdoms and the Tsarun clan, negatively impacting their access to new bodies,” the steward added. “These kingdoms are newly formed and have few avenues for such resources.”

“What do I care about that? We’re only here because Master had an epiphany and needed to enter secluded cultivation for a few years,” Catheya shrugged. “If it truly turns into a problem I’ll ask master compensate the local kings after he exits.”

“By your will,” Varo bowed and melded back into the shadows.

Catheya’s abyssal eyes once again turned toward the tower, her thoughts a confused jumble. There was no way that she was wrong in her conclusion. That crazy warrior carried a hint of aura from her clan’s progenitor. But that should be completely impossible.

Her family didn’t have any connection to this sector, and she and her master only passed by here during their travels by chance. More importantly, their progenitor left their clan well over a million years ago as she found herself facing the inevitable madness of advanced age.

She created two grand treasures to defend their clan against annihilation, and these treasures were still consecrated by the whole family once a year to maintain the aura of the progenitor. But they had never heard from the ancestor after she left, and every one long believed that she found her end during her search for a way to break through.

Was the grand ancestor still alive? That would mean that she either had managed to break through or found a way to stave off the madness. She couldn't wait for that axe-wielding warrior to emerge. Killing a couple of local noblemen would be a small price to pay for such a valuable piece of information.

But if the progenitor was truly alive, why hadn't she come back during all this time? Was she trapped somewhere and needed assistance? And why had she left her mark on a human? Was he her disciple? It sounded preposterous, but she had her reasons for believing it to be true.

There was an undeniable sense of death surrounding him. It might be impossible to sense for the humans around him, but how could a pure-bred Draugr of an ancient heritage not feel the aura of undeath?

That warrior might hold the clues to the questions that ailed her, and she couldn't wait for him to emerge once again.

Just who was that man?

--

A rancid odor rose from the cauldron, telling Boje that he had actually failed in concocting a basic [**Golden Constitution Pill**]. It was one of the first recipes he learned while still a teenager, and something he would be able to concoct in his sleep. Yet it had failed today.

The knock on the door made Boje flinch in fear, a sheen of perspiration covering on his forehead. He tightly gripped his fists in an effort to stop their trembling as he tried to get his fraying emotions under check.

"Enter," he said, trying to sound as unruffled and confident as possible.

He couldn't let the world know that the past encounter had scared him shitless. Others were discussing how to capture the man when he emerged in a day, but Boje only contemplated means of surviving. They hadn't seen those eyes filled with unending madness or felt the aura sharp enough to wound souls.

The reward was certainly alluring, but he wouldn't challenge that god of death. He'd rather take his chances with the floor guardian at the 6<sup>th</sup> floor than standing in front of that Asura again.

The door opened and his manservant entered holding a clipboard.

"The regeneration of the main hall is essentially finished, apart from some furnishings that are still being made. We paid 2.7 billion to have the Bruckner expedite the process. But we expect it will take at least a month before The Boundless Heavens restores the array functionality," Ulred said.

"That's to be expected," Boje nodded. "Take out our 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> sealed treasures to solidify the main hall."

"The fourth treasure costs almost 20 billion Nexus Coins a day to keep active," the Steward reminded.

"I'll take responsibility for the cost," Boje said. "We have many guests staying with us, and we need to show some sincerity. At least until the issue with that man has been dealt with."

"Regarding that... What are your instructions?" the manservant hesitantly asked.

Boje knew there was some confusion amongst their ranks. He had immediately entered seclusion, citing a need to ponder on new insights gained from witnessing the battle. But truthfully he had just been scared and wanted to hide away in his sanctum.

It was a shame that Rasuliel had gotten himself killed, robbing Boje the chance of killing that idiot himself. The amount of trouble that guy had created for the Zethaya was inestimable. That guy was completely unknown but insanely strong. Who knew if

he'd pop out of nowhere in a few thousand years as a C-Grade hegemon, destroying their strongholds one by one?

Such things happening was all too common.

Of course, he knew that he was the one to blame in the end. Rasuliel had stuffed his pockets full of rare herbs to help progress his crafts, and Boje had felt that it wouldn't be such a big deal even if he bent the Family Rules a bit to reciprocate. His mind had been muddled from the opportunity of concocting a pill with such a rare item as a base.

It would probably have been enough to progress his craft to the next level. But now it was all for naught.

But the steward asked a valid question. How should the Zethaya respond?

"Send someone with an invoice for the furnishings and the [Prajñā Cherry] to the Tsarun Clan. Also indicate we're expecting an explanation as to why Rasuliel initiated a fight within our compound, even going so far as to take out a peak offensive treasure while I stood right next to him," Boje finally said.

"Certainly," Ulred nodded. "And the man who entered the tower? There have also been quite a few forces who have approached us for information regarding that man."

"There's no need to hide anything," Boje eventually said. "Tell them what we know. It's not much anyway. But keep the seal on his transformation or the battle itself."

"Certainly," Ulred agreed as he scribbled down a few notes. "All the guests and personnel have already signed contracts of secrecy. It will not leak."

"Good," Boje said. "We'll wait and see how things turn out tomorrow. Perhaps there is some way for us to turn this calamity into an opportunity."

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**Chapter 398 - Piker**

Darkness quickly gave way to light, and Zac in his muddled state was a bit confused when he was met with a prompt that covered his whole vision.

**[Tower of Eternity entered. Use pseudonym or real name?]**

It was just like when the ladder system was initiated back in the day, and Zac looked at the prompt blankly for a few seconds. The events that just had transpired made him unwilling to use his real name, but he also didn't want to be known as the Super Brother-Man again. He had already introduced himself as Zac at the Zethaya, and Boje was still alive, so he was a bit unsure what to do.

But suddenly he had a spark of inspiration.

"Zac Piker," Zac said with a raspy voice.

Piker was his mother's maiden name, at least according to his dad. Zac had been one year when they married, and Leandra took on Robert's last name. By now Zac realized it was probably a fake name she used when she arrived on Earth, which made it a solid option to choose.

Picking this pseudonym was a way for him to signal his mother that they were alive. She would perhaps hear of the name somehow, especially if he climbed far enough, and come help them out with their situation back on Earth.

The scene quickly changed and Zac found himself sitting on by a camp-fire, joined by his two travel companions and a headless corpse. The moment the prompt disappeared Zac felt a pang of worry, and he couldn't help but wonder if he had just made a monumental mistake choosing that name. But done was done, and Zac rather focused on the others.

Galau had woken up at some time during their frantic escape, and he currently sat on the ground looking as though his soul had left him. His eyes were glazed as they stared into the distance, void of thought and hope. Ogras was instead staring evenly at Zac, his eyes rife with unspoken words.

"I'm sorry, I didn't expect that to happen," Zac coughed as he scratched his chin. "But I did get a treasure for Alea I think."

Of course, his true feelings weren't quite as calm as he wanted to let on. The Splinter had thoroughly screwed him over this time, to the point of no return. Zac groaned as reached for his Cosmos Sack and took out a Nexus Crystal to start restoring his energy.

The combination of his terrible wounds, using [**Hatchetman's Rage**], and activating the first two swings of [**Deforestation**] had really done a number on his body, and he felt so weak that a level 20 would be able to wring his neck if they wanted to.

Luckily he hadn't suffered any wounds to his soul, so he had no problem activating his Dao of Trees to help recuperating. The Dao soothed his harried body, and he finally had a chance to look around.

If it wasn't for him remembering entering the Tower he would have thought they had left the special dimension and were teleported somewhere on Earth. He knew that the place was magical, but he had underestimated the Tower of Eternity.

Zac had somewhat expected to find himself inside some sort of maze, where he had to beat the floor boss to proceed to the next floor, like some old school dungeon crawler. But he was currently sitting in front of a fire in a small glade. Around him was a tranquil leafy forest, and there was even a normal sky when he looked up through the canopy.

Nothing about this place felt like either a tower or some sort of Trial, but rather a simple camping trip that brought back his memories to the day that the Integration took place. They were only missing the trusty camper and a cooler full of beer to complete the experience. But everyone present obviously didn't share Zac's nostalgia.

"I'm finished," Galau said with hollow eyes from across the fire. "My cousins will tell the elders what transpired. I will be sacrificed to the Zethaya Clan in an effort to curry favor and distance themselves from you two lunatics."

"Well, this is our bad," Zac said, but corrected himself after seeing the face Ogras was making. "Fine, my bad. I got a bit heated and things got out of hand. We will do our best to make things right for you."

"You can always say that we kidnapped you," Ogras finally said after releasing a heavy sigh. "We did carry you into the tower after all."

Galau didn't answer, as he kept looking into the distance with a face full of regrets. Zac and Ogras could hear him mumbling under his breath, but Zac could only make out '*Why did I sit down at that table?*'. Ogras only rolled his eyes before he turned to Zac.

"Are you okay?"

"Can you give me a few hours?" Zac sighed.

"It's fine, we're not short on time any longer," Ogras shrugged. "We'll wait."

Zac nodded in thanks and arduously got up from his sitting position, but he suddenly turned back toward the fire as he took out the small vial he got from Boje.

“Can you tell me what this is?” Zac asked as he waved it at Galau.

The youth initially wanted to ignore him, but he soon enough reluctantly got up to his feet to look at the bottle.

“It’s actually a bottle of High-Grade **[Serene Flesh Pill]**. It’s part of the Zethaya Pill House Serene Path-series of healing and nurturing pills. These three pills are worth almost 200 Million Nexus coins!” Galau blurted out. “The Zethaya truly have the best stuff.”

“Can you be sure that it’s not poisoned or something?” Zac asked.

He initially hadn’t planned on eating these things, but if he only relied on his own pills and constitution he would be in a bad shape for weeks, which was too much time to waste even within the Tower. He literally had pieces of guts dangling down from the side, and he was hesitant to move around as it was.

Galau looked a bit confused, but his eyes started shimmering with a slight glow, indicating he was using some sort of ocular skill.

“It looks fine to me?” Galau said. “Besides, I think the Zethaya wouldn’t do something to create poison pills disguised as their healing pills. Such a thing would cause massive harm to their reputation. They would rather offer an extreme bounty for your capture if they wanted to deal with you.”

Zac felt it made sense, and he took out one of the pills that looked like a pristine pearl. It was a lot better than any pill he had found during the hunt or bought from Calrin. His gut feeling didn’t warn him either, so he quickly popped the pill into his mouth as he went over to the body of Rasuliel. He searched through his clothes, but a frown started to emerge when he couldn’t find what he was looking for.

“Where is the Cosmos Sack?” Zac muttered, worried that he had lost it during the battle. “I clearly saw him putting away a treasure.”

“It’s probably the ring on his finger,” Ogras muttered. “Rich bastard.”

Zac suddenly remembered Calrin mentioning that the high-class Cosmos Sacks were jewelry rather than literal sacks. They were a lot more valuable as they required a craftsman proficient in the Dao of Space to create.

He twisted the ring off from Rasuliel’s finger and limped over to a tree some distance from the campsite. Zac needed to rest a bit and let the pill do its magic. His head was also a complete mess for some reason, and he needed to restore his mental state as well.

Sitting alone in the forest full of wounds made his thoughts go back to his first months on the island, where his body was always in various state of disrepair. He usually felt like a completely different person compared to the guy who kept getting himself in trouble while fighting the dumb demonic beasts, but sometimes it seemed like he hadn’t actually improved all that much.

Zac restarted his recuperation with practiced ease as he went over what had just happened. The whole fight was just a jumbled mess in his mind, and he couldn’t remember the details. Had he forgotten due to his anger, or had the splinter actually controlled him? The distinction was extremely important, and he quickly looked inward to check up on the splinter.

The **[Splinter of Oblivion]** was extremely docile at the moment, and it had retracted all its tentacles that usually tried to finagle their way out of the miasmatic prison in his head. It didn’t release any of that odd energy into his mind either, making

the funnel completely empty. But that alone didn't bring any comfort to Zac at all, and the reason was simple.

One of the Miasmatic Runes were missing.

He had looked at the runes that encircled the **[Splinter of Oblivion]** many times in an attempt to understand them, and he was certain that there were one fewer of them now. Initially there had been nine of them, but now only eight remained, making the gap between them slightly larger.

Worry filled Zac's heart, and he started to wonder if the protection of the mysterious Draugr lady was failing. If the runes disappeared with this speed then he would lose all protection in just a few years. He might be able to reach peak E-Grade in ten years if he pushed himself, but he knew that wasn't enough to control the effects of the splinter.

Or perhaps it happened because he lost control due to his anger. It had empowered the Splinter enough to break one of the runes, resulting in the destruction that followed. If that was the case he would have to focus on ways to fortify his mind to avoid such a scene repeating itself.

Unfortunately there wasn't much he could do about the issue as things currently stood, and he retracted his mind from the splinter.

He instead looked down on his finger to see that the ring Calrin lent him had lost all its luster, and the large inlaid crystal looked like a murky piece of glass. Zac couldn't help but groan when he saw the sight. This had been his strongest defensive ace, but he only had one use of it and it had been expended before he even entered the tower.

It was a poignant reminder that he wasn't invulnerable even with his massive pool of attributes. Everyone had their own advantages and hidden aces. That Rasuliel hadn't seemed like a peak genius, yet he had almost killed Zac even if he activated the ring. There was also the attack fueled by a Dao Fragment that almost hit him as they fled, indicating his level of insight wasn't anything unique in the Tower.

At least his battle came with a few upsides Zac reckoned as he turned his attention to Rasuliel's Spatial Ring. It had turned into an ownerless item since the guy died, allowing Zac to immediately bind it. But he was surprised when he saw the somewhat limited space when he inspected the insides.

The space was only a bit larger compared to the ordinary Cosmos Sacks that cost just a few million Nexus Coins. Zac had expected a spatial tool belonging to a rich guy like that to be able to store mountain ranges if needed, but he guessed he had severely underestimated the difficulty of making Spatial Rings. The space in his own cosmos sack was a lot larger than this.

However, it was a lot more convenient compared to the Cosmos Sack. He needed to physically touch a sack to take out an item, but he could simply will the ring to spit out its contents since it was already on his hand. That would allow him to take out his axe or a defensive treasure a lot quicker, which might be the difference between life and death. He also knew that the space inside a Spatial Ring was a lot more stable, whereas Cosmos Sacks needed to be replaced at regular intervals as to not lose the contents.

Just the ring itself was an amazing treasure worth well over a Billion Nexus Coins, yet he knew that was only the tip of the iceberg after a cursory glance at the contents. He immediately found the box that Rasuliel put away just before the battle started, and just that box alone almost made Zac feel the danger he found himself in worth it.

He still couldn't be certain that the **[Prajñā Cherry]** would be enough to heal Alea, but it would no doubt make her situation better than it currently was. If he could

prolong the time she could stay inside the coffin to a few decades he felt confident he would be able to find a few more treasures to feed her.

Perhaps the Tree of Ascension would be able to produce another fruit as well, and with its odd mutation it might be able to help the Poison Mistress.

Of course, the cherry was just one of a large number of treasures, making Zac feel that expending the charge on his ring to not be the end of the world. There were no doubt more defensive treasures in the Spatial Tool that Rasuliel didn't have a chance to use during their hectic battle.

Zac took out one box or vial after another, glancing at their contents. All of them were clearly good items judging by their spiritual emanations, but he had no idea what they did. He could have Galau go through the things to find anything that would be useful during the climb. But he suddenly froze after opening a particular box.

Wasn't that the Eye of the Pathfinder Oracle?

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 399 - The Peaks**

Who would have thought that it was actually Rasuliel Tsarun who coughed up a shocking 78 billion Nexus Coins to buy this thing? Zac had already learned that while the Eye was a precious item, it wasn't worth nowhere such an obscene amount. Galau had explained that it would go for at most 20 billion Nexus Coins in the outside world.

There were many ways to upgrade one's specialty core, such as the pills Zethaya Pill House provided. Those pills cost less than a billion Nexus Coins, a far cry from the shocking amount the Eye ended up at. Most proper heritages with instructions on forming Specialty Cores also came with methods to evolving them, making Zac suspect that Rasuliel wanted the Eye for some other purpose than himself.

Did Rasuliel perhaps have some urgent need for the Eye, prompting him to pay through his nose? That might have been why he visited the Zethaya Clan as well. He might have been looking for help in turning the Eye into some specific pill with the help of Boja or some of his elders back home.

Of course, Rasuliel's reasons for overpaying for the item no longer mattered.

Getting his hands on the Eye meant that he had essentially acquired everything on his list before arriving at the Tower of Eternity. Now he only needed to get out in one piece, and he would have all the tools he needed to burst out with a huge amount of power after returning to Earth.

He finally retracted his mind from the Spatial Ring and refocused on recuperating. The **[Serene Flesh Pill]** did wonders to his body, but then it still took a few hours before he felt well enough to even walk any distance. His wound was still an open mess though, and one could see his body slowly growing new cells to restore the hole in his side.

Zac guessed that it would take a few days for his wounds to close completely, and a few days more for him to regain his full strength. It was an extremely long convalescence for someone like Zac with a huge pool of Endurance and Vitality, but it would have been even longer if it wasn't for the pill.

There was an unmistakable aura of a strong Dao in his wound that slowed down his efforts to heal up, but he wasn't as helpless as when Mhal infected him with the

Draugr samples. He was slowly grinding down the foreign Dao with his fragments, and it wouldn't be long before all of it was expended.

His Spirit Tool Robes also had mended themselves by this point, which at least blocked the grisly sight of his wound. He got up to his feet with a grunt and returned to the campsite, only to find Ogras leisurely sipping wine from one of the dozens of vats he had bought during the past week. Galau still sat and stared despondently into the great beyond, and didn't even give Zac a glance when he returned.

"He's still out of it?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Sheltered brat, all despondent after a little bit of mayhem," Ogras snorted with some derision before he turned to Zac. "Now, can you explain what the hell happened? The plan was for you to buy some healing pills. How did that turn into you tearing down the Pill House of an ancient clan and ripping the head off this poor bastard?"

Even if the demon appeared unbothered on the surface it was obvious he was a bit frazzled by the events as well. He looked back and forth between the headless body of Rasuliel and Zac, clearly trying to get a grip on the situation.

Zac sighed as he recounted the whole encounter from the moment he entered, adding on his own speculation about Rasuliel being from one of the ousted families of Earth. He didn't hide the fact that they came from a newly integrated planet since he felt Galau deserved to understand the situation after having been dragged into this level of trouble.

"What' you're progenitors? But what about.... Wait, he's from the Tsarun Clan?" Galau cried when he heard about the identity of the corpse. "Oh, Mommy."

"You know about them?" Zac asked curiously and a bit accusatory. "I still don't know why he targeted me, do you have some sort of feud with them?"

"Ahem..." Ogras coughed. "It's the Tsarun, remember? Calrin's old friends?"

Only then did Zac remember why the name was so familiar. It was the old Clan that had worked on stealing Calrin's Mercantile License for centuries. If that man knew who Zac was, then it would explain his hostility. Who knew how much time and effort clan had spent only for Zac to foil their plans inadvertently.

"I wonder how that Tsarun guy could know that I was the one who helped Calrin though," Zac muttered. "It looked like he knew right away."

"Who's Calrin?" Galau finally asked.

"A merchant targeted by the Tsarun clan fled to my planet, I gave them a place to stay in exchange for a part of his business," Zac shrugged.

"So you had already made that clan your enemy even before you came here?" Galau blankly asked, looking ready to barf. "Those guys are extremely overbearing. Their patriarch is dead-set on elevating their clan to a peak force, and they don't shy away from any means. They're almost bordering on turning into an unorthodox force, but they stay just within the limits to not get targeted."

"Yes, I didn't expect them to be here, or that they'd find out about me," Zac shrugged. "Do you know how that's possible?"

Galau's distraught eyes focused for a second, but a frown slowly crept onto his face.

"I don't know either. The world is full of mysterious skills and arrays though. Do you wear anything bought through that store they were targeting?" he asked.

Zac considered for a few seconds before his eyes turned to the defensive ring given to him by Calrin. Ogras' eyes lit up as well as he looked down at his hand.

"I'll punt that little blue bastard over to the next island next time I see him. Did he do it on purpose to make us complicit?" the demon muttered with annoyance before

he wryly smiled at Zac. "I think our plan of feigning ignorance and handing over Calrin in case we meet the Tsarun elders is ruined now."

Zac could only snort in response. Ruined felt like an understatement after killing one of the young masters of the clan.

"The real issue is how you'll deal with this. Remember, we'll only be inside here for a day. By that point those guys might have amassed a small army outside to welcome our return," the demon added.

"Well, can't we just zap out the moment we leave the tower?" Zac asked. "It's a shame to leave so early, but there's no option. The 60-second limiter should have passed by now, right? Or maybe we can even leave right here?"

"We can't leave the Tower straight to our homeworld," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "You can only use the token to leave the Tower, then you can use it again to leave this dimension. And I don't know how it works for us. This situation is outside my general knowledge."

"Maybe if we climb high enough they'll back off?" Zac ventured. "Or at least hesitate long enough for us to teleport out?"

"Wait!" Galau suddenly exclaimed as he turned to Zac looking like a drowning man finding a glimmer of hope. "Pretty Peak is in the Base town! Can you ask her for help?"

"Pretty Peak? Who the hell is that?" Ogras said.

"The Peak family of the Allbright Empire!" Galau explained as he pointed at Zac. "He clearly has a connection to them, and they are both strong and overbearing enough to make the Tsarun Clan back down. Even the Zethaya might give them face if they know you are related."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Zac said, and he wasn't lying. "Who are the Peak family?"

"Your bracer," Galau said. "It is no doubt made by someone from the Peak family. They utilize a unique crafting method that's easily distinguishable if you know what to look for."

"So that spiel about the fear in our eyes the other day was all dogshit? You simply recognized the bracer this guy wore and figured we were strong?" Ogras snorted.

"Well... I did not really lie. I simply didn't explain all my reasons for employing you," Galau coughed before his face once again was marred by despair. "But what good did my planning do? No one will believe the authenticity of my climb after having seen your rampage. You will no doubt reach the sixth floor, perhaps even conquering it."

"Tell me what you know about the Peak family," Zac said with interest, ignoring the complaints of Galau.

He had held back on mentioning Greatest and Average since he didn't want to expose his connection to them, but it looked like it was for naught. Galau had known about it since the start, and had even used the connection as a measure of his strength.

"It's a unique family in the Allbright Empire. It can't really be called a clan since there are only a hundred members or so in the family. But all of them are crazy strong. The patriarch of the family is Ultimate, one of the four Marshalls of the Allbright Empire. He is a friend of the emperor himself," Galau said.

"What about Pretty? Is she Ultimate's daughter?" Zac asked.

"No, grand-daughter. Her father is Strongest, the eldest of the three sons of Ultimate. The other two are Greatest and Fiercest," Galau said.

"What's with these names?" Ogras snorted.

Zac kept asking a bit about the family without making it obvious who in the family he had a connection with. It turned out that the Peak family actually lived in the capital of the Allbright Empire, but most members were out battling. Greatest had headed to the Red Sector in order to find dangerous criminals to fight.

The Red Sector was apparently one of the more remote zones of the Allbright Empire, and bordering it was a large unclaimed sector with a huge number of spatial anomalies. It made both teleportation arrays impossible to construct while also making it extremely dangerous to travel with Cosmic Ships.

This had turned the sector to a mostly lawless no man's land where unorthodox forces, pirates, and other dangerous people hid. The Allbright Empire often launched assaults on the area, but it was an absolute rat's nest that was almost impossible to completely cleanse.

Apart from the Allbright armies, the Red Zone was also rife with bounty hunters and mercenary squads hoping to make a killing inside the unclaimed territory. The numerous anomalies created a unique atmosphere that regularly gave birth to valuable treasures. Sometimes extremely valuable items were even spat out through a spatial tear, coming from god knows where.

It was in that chaotic space that Greatest sought to hone himself through bloodshed.

Zac suddenly remembered the conversation between Greatest and Average. He had mentioned asking the Red Emperor to allow Average to enter some Eternal Legion. Was the Eternal Legion one of the punitive armies that regularly tried to clean out the pirates and other scum in the lawless zone?

Zac's mouth turned upward slightly when he imagined that gaudy teenager being forced to fight ruthless pirates or crazy cultists while still at F or Early E-Grade. Even strong E-Grade warriors should be at risk there, as people who had the ability to traverse between planets should be very powerful.

He wasn't all too worried about his safety though. Greatest's family was a lot more impressive than he had imagined, and there was no doubt someone hiding in the shadows making sure that Average didn't actually kick the bucket.

But Zac knew that just because he had met those two during his Hegemony trial, there was no way that he could completely rely on them to clean up his mess.

"I truthfully have no connection with that family. I only got this bracer through a chance encounter," Zac said. "I had never heard of Pretty Peak before today, so I doubt that she would extend a hand to help with our situation."

Galau looked completely crestfallen, but Zac was internally delighted. Greatest was from a force far stronger than he had expected, with multiple C-Grade powerhouses in its ranks. Perhaps he could ask this Pretty for a way to save Earth from the Great Redeemer.

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**Chapter 400 - The Law of the Land**

The problem was that Zac's connection to the Peak Family wasn't all that deep. It was simply a chance encounter between himself and Greatest. Perhaps they would have lent a helping hand if it was before, but now he had a bulls-eye on his back due to the quest.

It was one thing for them to stand up against a solitary D-Grade warrior, but another thing entirely to create enmity with all the forces in the Base Town in order to protect him.

“We’ll just have to play it by the ear. In case we get split up later, remember to stay until the time runs out, so that we all exit this place at the same time,” Ogras said as he walked over to Galau. “Get up, there’s no time to waste.”

“You are from a recently integrated planet so you don’t understand just how troublesome people you’ve offended. We need to figure out a way to make amends!” Galau said as he finally dragged himself back to his feet.

“We won’t apologize to those assholes. Why was it so hard for them to sell one puny healing treasure?” Ogras snorted. “I say good riddance. Seeing how they acted they would just have caused problems for us even if we cowered in their presence. Might as well be proactive and kill them first.”

Zac nodded in agreement. He wouldn’t have acted the way he did if it wasn’t for the Splinter in his mind, but he was pretty annoyed even without it. That guy wanted Alea to die out of pure spite, even though they had never met before. All because some unverified clue that he had some connections to the Thayer Consortia.

“Anyway, let’s get going,” Zac said after throwing the demon a nod in thanks for the support. “How do we get to the next floor?”

Galau looked at Zac incredulously, obviously shocked at how uninformed he was. Ogras wasn’t as surprised of course, as he was the source of everything Zac knew about the tower.

“The Tower contains various challenges, and which challenge you will encounter at a specific floor varies. The only way to completely prepare for a climb is to be good at everything, which is of course impossible,” the demon said.

“Challenges? Like what?” Zac asked with interest.

Zac hadn’t actually bothered to learn too much about the tower itself until now. He had been so consumed with finding all the things he needed for himself, Earth, and Alea in the Base Town. Ogras had already mentioned that you could brute-force your way through the tower, but he needed to know how things worked now.

Besides, it wasn’t like Ogras was a wellspring of information. Getting anything out of the demon when it didn’t benefit him was like squeezing water out of a rock.

“It can be anything. It can be passing an array, like you did at the Pill House, finding a treasure, identifying the source of a curse, saving someone,” Ogras explained and listed a handful of other challenges the demon himself encountered.

Zac frowned since his skillset was quite limited. He had a basic understanding of arrays, but that was about it. How the hell would he dispel a curse or complete a summoning ritual for a departed ancestor? He knew nothing about pill concoction, tracking, or any other of the myriad side occupations in existence.

“Don’t worry, The Ruthless Heaven’s always leaves a path of survival,” Ogras smiled. “There is a second option, one that suits you better.”

“Oh?” Zac perked up.

“Just blast through everything. Might over technique,” the demon grinned. “There is always the option to just kill something instead of completing the quest. It might sometimes be a bit unclear just what needs to be killed though, so make sure you think it through before you start swinging. Killing the wrong person might have odd consequences.”

Zac sighed in relief. It was just like the System to provide a back-up solution like that, it truly preferred violence over shrewdness.

The three finally got ready to leave the glade they wound up in, and Zac put the headless corpse of Rasuliel into his Cosmos Sack after some deliberation. Perhaps it would come in handy for some reason when they emerged from the tower.

“By the way, what was the reward?” Zac suddenly asked with some morbid curiosity as they walked. “What was my life worth?”

“One free level.”

“One free level? That’s it?” Zac asked incredulously, and he even started to feel a bit insulted by the System.

“That’s a huge reward!” Galau said. “I’ve never heard of such a big reward before at Base Town. It’s usually things like clue crystals that provide hints on how to complete a single quest, but yours is simply one free level.”

“Oh, so a level for the tower? Still, what’s the big deal if you get to one level higher?” Zac asked.

“Because it might allow you to completely skip the final challenge of a floor. Over 90% of all trail takers get stuck at the final challenge of a floor since the difficulty is way higher there than the earlier levels. Blasting past that trial will get you fame, rewards, and a better title,” Ogras explained. “Just look at Reoluv. If he managed to kill you first he would reach the fabled 8th floor rather than being stuck on 7th. It’s the difference between once a decade genius and once a millennia genius. I’d be tempted to take you on right now myself if you weren’t such a monster.”

Zac only rolled his eyes in response, but he suddenly realized that Ogras wasn’t just messing around. The demon was subtly telling him that the quest was still active. And while Galau felt like a slightly hapless youngster he wouldn’t be here unless he was an elite.

It wasn’t unthinkable that Galau would try to kill him sooner or later, as that would not only let him pass another level, but it might also allow him to survive the storm that was no doubt brewing outside the tower. If Galau presented his head to the Zethaya or Tsarun Clans he might even get a huge reward.

“Well, thank you for your restraint,” Zac quickly answered, adding half-jokingly. “I guess I will have to sleep with one eye open.”

The three walked through the tranquil forest for the better part of an hour, and interestingly there wasn’t a single predator in sight. He did spot a level 20 bird, but it was pretty small and kept a wide berth from the three.

This was of course fine with Zac who was in no fighting condition at the moment, but it was a bit confusing for someone who had been primed to fight some peak F-Grade boss to complete a trial. Zac was just about to ask what was going on when the scenery changed.

The forest gave way to cultivated farmland that stretched out across the horizon, and a small farming village could be seen in the distance. The whole scene felt extremely calm and idyllic, but Zac was dragged out of his reverie by a prompt from the System.

**[The Village of Whittlecreek of the Bravorian Kingdom has lately been subject to an increasing number of raids from Fallen Goblins. Find out the source of the new threat.]**

“Did you get the prompt about Whittlecreek as well?” Zac asked curiously.

“Yes, this is our first trial,” Ogras said as he pointed at the pastoral village in the distance. “I guess it can be categorized under information gathering. Let’s head over to the town first.”

“Is there anything else I should know?” Zac said. “The people in the town, for example. Are they real?”

“That’s a subject of some debate,” Galau said, finally getting into the spirit of adventure. “Some believe these people are real, but others say there are simply illusions or lifelike puppets created by the System. They do all give Cosmic Energy when killed though, which give more credence to the first theory.”

“The Ruthless Heavens can simply provide energy itself though,” Ogras interjected.

Zac nodded in agreement, remembering how the System had provided Cosmic Energy for destroying robots back at the Technocrat Incursion.

“That’s true,” Galau nodded, before turning back to Zac. “The reason that a large group believes these are just puppets is that they simply ignore all comments about the Tower or the world outside. It doesn’t matter what you do or say, these villagers will truly believe they are from Whittlecreek in the Bravorian Kingdom.”

“The people are also never surprised to see or hostile against other races, like they don’t even know that a huge golem or a humanoid fish is standing in front of them. The villagers would still welcome Mr. Azh’Rodum even if the quest was to rebuff enemy demons,” Galau added.

Ogras had introduced himself using the name of the demon town on his island rather than his true last name even before they entered the tower, and Zac guessed he had done the same when prompted by the system. The demon still didn’t want any clues about his situation leaking back to the demon hordes in case it would bring trouble to either his grandfather or Earth.

There was also the issue of Karmic threads and other troublesome skills. Not using your true name wasn’t a foolproof plan, but it did make various types of information gathering slightly harder. That’s was another reason Zac chose to use his alias as well, apart from sending out a hidden signal to his mother in case she was listening.

“So how would we normally complete a trial like this?” Zac asked.

“This is the very first level, so it should be possible to complete quickly,” Ogras said. “I would guess that there is a clue in the town itself that would allow us to complete the trial, or at least give us a clear hint of where to go.”

“But that’s the hard way, what about defeating the guardian or whatever?” Zac asked.

“The guardian would probably be the boss of the Fallen Goblins, and we would no doubt find out where he is soon after entering the town,” Ogras said. “Completing the normal way would be to find out why the Goblin tribe moved here. My guess is that a rival Country is trying to weaken them by tricking these vermin to raid the farmlands.”

Zac looked over at the talkative demon with surprise. It sounded like he had thought everything through, and already formulated a plan. He even seemed to have an in-depth understanding of the mechanics of the tower itself, which allowed him to infer hidden clues.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. “Remember, I was a lot weaker last time I was here. I wasn’t even level 60, so I focused on gathering intelligence rather than fighting. The guy I hired was a bit of a meathead, so I had to help out where I could.”

“What?” Galau blurted out. “Why would you head here so early?”

“I was bored,” Ogras shrugged, clearly not interested in divulging his precarious situation back in his old clan.

Zac kept asking questions as they walked over toward the town, and Ogras simply told him to play the part. It made things easier if you inserted you into the setting in a believable way. In this case they would say they were warriors who had come to look into the newly emerging threat. That way the villagers might be more inclined to share information with them.

He also underlined that they shouldn't attack random people. It could quickly make things get out of hand. For example, it might garner the ire of some nearby nobleman of the Bravorian Kingdom who would rush to the village for revenge, and such an individual wasn't necessarily within the expected strength of the floor they were on. Many climbs had ended early due to cultivators taking too large liberties while inside, where they took the opportunity to act despicable while out of prying eyes.

After all, no one would ever know what happened during a climb unless they retold the story themselves.

"But why would the System design such an elaborate place like this?" Zac asked. "Why not just present a series of increasingly strong opponents for us to fight? This place must cost an insane amount of energy to keep running."

"Have you heard about the origins of the System?" Galau asked.

"Of course, the Limitless Empire created it to nurture warriors for their war," Zac said.

"Exactly. The System has changed a lot since that ancient era, but its main prerogative remains. It needs to create powerful warriors. You shouldn't see this place simply as a trial to get a good title, but as a training ground to hone your skills," Galau explained. "Everyone who comes to the Tower is an elite the System has deemed worth nurturing, and this whole place is a massive incubator."

"And I am not talking about your Skills or your Dao. This place teaches you to think," the youth added. "That's what I believe, anyway."

"What do you mean?" Zac asked with confusion.

"You can look at it this way. Most people who come here are from established factions. They might have good insights and high attributes, but they have lived generally sheltered lives under the protection of their elders. I have no doubt that you as a progenitor have seen far more battle than almost any warrior you encountered in the Base Town," Galau said.

Zac nodded, feeling it made sense. There was no reason for a clan to throw their youths to the wolves to grow like he did. It might create one or two powerhouses, but most would end up dead. Almost no one was willing to rear their young generations like that.

But that also meant that they turned out like Average, people having the technique but not the grit to make it through a harsh battle.

"It seems you understand. The Tower throws you into a large number of unfamiliar situations, allowing you to gain not just experience in fighting, but also how to solve various types of situations you might encounter in the future. The things you learn today might save your life in a Mystic Realm in the future," Galau finished.

Some excitement started to well up in Zac's heart as he listened to Galau's explanations, and he couldn't help but look forward to the trials now.

Until now there had only been a fight for survival, where he was thrown into one perilous situation after another. Now he could relax and enjoy some exploration and adventure, all while honing his skills.

It was nice to finally get a breather.

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### **Chapter 401 - Taboo Origins**

Kenzie exhaled with a tired sigh as she waited for the drones to return to her side. Jeeves was doing all of the calculations when she commanded the flying machines to strike her targets, but the AI ran on her spirit energy to function. Destroying one infusion pillar felt even more draining than using all her Daos to battle for half an hour, even though she didn't even leave the flying treasure.

Ilvere silently gazed upon the destruction, not even bothering to comment as he directed the treasure toward their next target. He had assisted her for her campaign the past two days, taking care of all minor details so that she would only have to worry about the pillars themselves. No one else had accompanied the two out of security concerns.

Kenzie had felt a bit stupid after realizing that bringing the demon general might have opened a can of worms, but the general solved the issue by immediately creating a contract of silence after she destroyed the first pillar. It stipulated that he would keep silent on all matters regarding MacKenzie Atwood, and there was no time limitation. As for remuneration, it was only 1 Nexus Crystal a year.

Ilvere was a trusted general under her brother and Ogras, and she had initially felt it was unnecessary to go to such lengths regarding such a small issue. But the demon had said it was as much for himself as for her as he didn't want his head to leave his shoulders when Lord Atwood returned in two days.

She initially wanted to refute him, but she honestly wasn't sure what the truth was any longer. Her brother had changed during the past months, and she wasn't just talking about the transformation that everyone was forced to undergo to survive in this new environment. He had become harsher, more paranoid. It honestly wasn't impossible that he'd kill Ilvere just to make sure nothing would leak out about their heritage.

Of course, the demon general only knew a part of the truth. She had explained the drones by saying that Zac had found the Technocrat Incursion while in the Underworld, and he had decided to take their technology for himself to protect Earth. It was taboo technology, but things were getting desperate and her brother had made the decision to bear any repercussions by the System for using them.

Luckily for her Earth was somewhat technologically advanced before the integration, and it was impossible for a demon like Ilvere to properly understand the vast gap between the tablets and cars of old Earth and the futuristic drones crammed full of shocking technology. He thought that Zac had put some of their engineers on analyzing the drones before they quickly were deployed into battle, which was of course ludicrous. It would probably take years to reverse-engineer this type of technology, if they ever managed to do it.

As for repercussions, Jeeves assured her there would be none. It was something that her AI was still vague about, but it had on multiple occasions assured her that he would not draw any ire from the System for its existence or actions. She wasn't sure what to believe about that claim though. Her AI was a great teacher, but how could it control what the System would do?

Since Ilvere was in charge of driving the flying treasure toward the next pillar she closed her eyes and focused on one of her training regimens. She formed four thin

strands of Dao Energy in her mind and started to arduously weave them together into an ugly braid. It required extreme control of her Dao Energy and it didn't have a lot of applications, but it did help her in various ways.

Braiding her Daos allowed her to take the first step toward fusing them in the future while also helping her to more naturally use multiple Daos while battling. She could only infuse two of her elements into an attack at the moment, but Jeeves assured her a full infusion of all four was possible.

*'Can't you help Zac a bit and create a training program for him as well?'* Kenzie entreated for the umpteenth time. *'You know he's struggling with this type of stuff.'*

**[No. I cannot get involved with him.]** the synthetic voice answered as usual. **[I cannot.]**

*'But why?'* Kenzie lambasted in her mind, her usual caution thrown to the wind due to stress and exhaustion. *'You know he is the best shot for us all surviving. If he fails against the undead we'll all die. Unless you tell me I won't feed you any longer!'*

**[...]**

**[Pain. Fear. Loss]**

Kenzie's vision suddenly changed to an enormous chamber. Her eyes were instinctively drawn to a large insignia depicting nine horizontal lines of increasingly short length forming a downward-pointing triangle. One vertical line cut straight through the nine lines, splitting the triangle in two, and the ends of the line were sticking out a bit on each side.

There was not much else to see in the chamber. The walls and floor were a pristine white, and the lack of details made it impossible to guess whether they were ten meters or hundreds of meters away.

The only other exception to the endless white was the machine.

The machine was beyond anything she had seen before, no matter if she talked size or complexity. It was built in concentric circles where it formed an upside-down pyramid with its tip pointing toward her vantage point.

Even the small tip that stopped fifty meters or so above her head was over a hundred meters wide, which made it almost incomprehensible just how large the machine was at the far thicker base at the top. The chamber itself must be tens, perhaps hundreds of kilometers in diameter judging by the machine. The construction dwarfed anything she had ever encountered.

Even the Mystic Realm she had spent a lot of time inside recently shouldn't be as big as this single room judging by the size of the apparatus.

The tip of the machine was neither flat nor sharp. It rather ended in thousands of spikes aligned toward her. Each one thrummed with enough power to tear a hole in the fabric of space, and her vision swam from focusing on any single one of them.

Each of the spikes felt like a doomsday device, each one of them containing their own unique way to destroy the world. Four of them actually resonated with Kenzie's soul, making her realize the spikes contained the Daos of Tinder, Loam, Waves, and Gust. But if her Dao Seeds were snippets of a fragment of a grand truth, then these spikes contained the real deal.

Was Jeeves trying to appease her by giving her a hint into her Daos?

A flashing light interrupted Kenzie's inspection and the scene changed to one of utter destruction. The machine was mostly gone, and fragments from the construction scorched almost beyond recognition floated in an empty space illuminated in blue.

Two massive vaulted domes with enormous cracks floated in the distance, each surrounded by a nebula of technological debris. She tried to look closer, but she soon

lost sight of the domes as her vision slowly turned away. She realized she was in space as well, slowly rotating from her own momentum.

But the odd sights didn't end, and something even more shocking waited for her as she spun 180 degrees. Endless oceans of lightning covered the darkness of space, creating a spectacle of an impossible scale.

The lightning was too scary and Kenzie felt it contained the power to destroy everything in the world. And its scope was *massive*. She spotted a whole planet being swallowed inside the lightning like a small pebble in a pond, which meant the lightning at least covered an area as large as a whole solar system.

Kenzie couldn't make sense of what happened, and then the scene was over.

'*What was that?!*' Kenzie asked with shock, barely coherent enough to not speak out aloud.

The magnitude of what she had witnessed was far beyond anything she had encountered so far. It made her remember the Dao Visions that her brother had recounted for her. Such a thing like the machine or the sea of lightning wasn't something someone from their little planet should come into contact with.

The power in that lightning was terrifying. She had no doubt that if just one wisp of lightning from that ocean grazed Earth only a scorched husk would remain. There was something primordial about it, like it contained the wrath of the universe itself.

*Your origin?* Kenzie ventured when Jeeves didn't directly answer.

**[Probably.]**

*But what does that have to do with my brother or why you won't help him?*

**[I don't know.]**

After that exchange the AI turned taciturn and refused to answer any further questions. But Kenzie was still happy about the result. She had glimpsed what was probably the origin of Jeeves, which was also a clue to finding mom.

That large insignia was the first clue, and she made sure to memorize it properly. The second clue was that terrifying lake of lightning. Was that the System itself descending on the Technocrats? She knew the two forces were at odds, but she hadn't heard of the System actively going against them. It seemed to usually work circuitously by giving quests or restricting the Technocrats in various ways.

Kenzie opened her eyes and resumed looking at the passing landscape since Jeeves wasn't in the mood to talk any longer. These past two days they had been in constant motion, closing one pillar after another with the help of the drone swarms.

However, the next target was likely their last one. The drones were all spent, and they would require at least a week to convert Cosmic Energy to whatever energy they used to fly about. It was an extremely convenient technology to never require any upkeep, but she wished they just had some batteries they could swap out at this juncture.

It took them two more hours before they reached the pillar by flying at maximum speed. The pillar was the same as all others, an azure beacon of energy left alone in a desolate area. No zombies or other guards were stationed around it, giving them free rein to do what they wanted. It was a bit odd, but it felt like the undead truly didn't care if some pillars were destroyed.

It was due to the redundancies according to Jeeves. Since the undead managed to activate the array a pathway had formed in the sky. That pathway was self-sustaining and slowly filled with miasma by the beacons, and destroying a pillar would only hamper the rate the pathway was filled. It wouldn't stop the array itself. You'd need to destroy the Array Core to do that, and that thing was no doubt in the heart of the Dead Zone.

How such a thing was made was beyond Kenzie even after her intense study of arrays. It was likely a higher-tiered Array compared to the basic ones she had learned thus far. An array surviving even after its flags getting destroyed was no doubt the result of some high-grade technique that might have been unknown to the small Sect where Zac got the information crystals.

Kenzie ordered the swarm of drones to emerge once more and form a circle around the beacon. A high-intensity blast followed, and the next moment the pillar was exchanged with a smoldering crater. Kenzie nodded in satisfaction and recalled her spent drones, but a dozen of them were suddenly destroyed as a female voice drifted across the area.

“So your ilk is still skulking around on this planet after all. Makes sense you wouldn’t want to give up that base. But you made a mistake when deciding to meddle with the Empire’s affairs. You should know that the conquest won’t be stopped for any reason.”

The next moment terrifying energies were released from the ground as another miasmic beacon shot into the sky. In the middle of it a blurry figure floated in the air, teeming with power.

“She’s too strong,” Ilvere said with a frown as he infused the flying disk with a lot of Cosmic Energy. “I’ll try to block her attacks as we flee. Let the young master and Lord Atwood deal with her when they return.”

“Left!” Kenzie suddenly screamed, prompted by Jeeves who had awoken again. But it was too late.

Ilvere unhesitatingly followed her advice, but his reaction wasn’t quick enough. A lance formed of what looked like crude oil slammed straight into the disk from below, cracking the whole flying treasure in two. Horror filled Kenzie’s heart as they were over a hundred meters into the air.

“Down you go,” the undead woman’s laugh echoed across the area.

‘Help’ Kenzie shrieked in her mind, knowing that she was out of her league.

**[Initiating Battle Protocol, full utilization. Time remaining: 1 minute 36 seconds.]**

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**Chapter 402 - Whittlecreek**

The trio soon enough reached the main gate of the ramshackle wall surrounding the village. It looked like the fortifications were erected hundreds of years ago, but the townspeople had let it deteriorate. The only sign of recent maintenance was a hole in the wall that had been filled with rocks and logs in a clumsy effort to close the gap.

The gate was open, but an old guard gave them a glare as he blocked the path into the town. Zac didn’t sense any threat from him, and he could tell that the guard was around level 40 at best. There was also no aura or pressure emanating from him, telling Zac that the old man was wholly unimpressive and likely without even a Dao seed. He was most probably a mortal who had gotten to this point by fighting the local animals and splurging on the occasional Nexus Crystal, and the chances of reaching E-Grade was next to zero.

“Who are you lot?” he gruffly asked as he looked back and forth at the trio with a clear hint of suspicion. “What do you want with Whittlecreek?”

“We’re adventurers who heard of the plight of your fair town,” Ogras said as he righteously slapped his chest. “We have come to investigate the appearance of those dastardly Goblins.”

“Oh, did the guild send you?” the guard said, his eyes immediately brightening in anticipation.

“The Guild? Ah, yes the Guild did send us,” Ogras nodded after a brief lapse. “I am sure you’ve been instructed to co-operate properly?”

“Great! I will inform the Mayor! My name is Keldor, just find me if you need help with anything! I wish you the best of luck,” he said as he hurried away toward a large manor at the other side of the town.

Zac gave Ogras an amused glance, not used to his heroic demeanor from before.

“What? Might as well have some fun with it,” Ogras shrugged as they passed through the gate. “Once again, remember the rule. Do not kill innocents inside the Tower. There have been many reports of extremely powerful old cultivators jumping out of nowhere when the normal citizens get killed rather than the targets of the trial.”

“I heard you the first time. Besides, do I strike you like a person that would run around killing people willy-nilly?” Zac snorted.

“Well, not really,” Ogras conceded before he threw Zac a scathing glance. “But you also didn’t strike me as the type of person who would obliterate the shop of one of the most influential forces in the star sector, so what do I know?”

Zac was about to refute the demon but he realizes he didn’t have a lot of leg to stand on. Ogras still wasn’t aware of the whole story regarding the Splinter, so even he must have felt that the whole thing looked like the actions of a madman.

“Well, I am all better now. I won’t do something like that again,” Zac sighed.

“I’m sure,” the demon snorted before he got serious again. “So what do you want to do? Find the Goblins or investigate the source?”

Zac was stumped for a second before he looked around the picturesque town for a bit. It was easy to forget that he was actually undergoing a trial, and that he was inside a mysterious tower in some hidden pocket dimension of outer space.

He hadn’t really considered his tactic before coming. He had just planned on smashing through everything as quickly as possible before going back to Earth. But after having walked past the beautiful fields and having arrived at this place he felt the same sense of calm as when he sat in the courtyard gazing up at the stars the other day.

Those moments of tranquility were hard to come by in his current reality. The moment he stepped out of the Tower he would have to enter a series of life-and-death battles to take out the last enemies on Earth. But he was now given a hundred days to slow down and adjust his state of mind for a bit.

He knew he couldn’t treat the Tower as a vacation, as the higher floors took time to complete, but he also didn’t need to rush to the peak. He would be weakened for a while longer due to his wound, so he was in no hurry to rush to the harsher floors.

Besides, he felt that what Galau said about learning to think made a lot of sense. He had been fighting tooth and nail for a year since the integration, but there were still huge holes in his knowledge. He knew a bit about arrays and how to swing his axe, but nothing else. Completing the trials the intended way was a chance for him to actually widen his skillset.

“Are there any benefits to completing levels quickly?” Zac asked.

“Not really, except that it gives more time for the difficult trials further up,” Galau said with a shake of his head.

“I thought so,” Zac nodded. “Let’s try to complete the quests the normal way for now. We can start pushing harder if we notice we’re running out of time.”

Galau didn’t have any objections, not that he had much of a choice. He could go ahead and kill the Goblin Leader if he wanted to, but if he exited the first level without Zac and Ogras, then they would be separated for the rest of the climb. They would have to physically touch every time they stepped into a portal or otherwise their cooperation would end.

“Let’s split up,” Ogras said as he started to saunter toward what was obviously a tavern. “Just ask around for any clues you can find.”

“I will assist... in the tavern,” Galau said with a cough.

Zac wryly shook his head in response before he started walking in the other direction. He didn’t mind that the two didn’t care about the mission as he wanted to get a feel for how the trials worked for himself anyway. He tried to put himself in the shoes of an actual adventurer who truly had arrived due to the Goblin threat.

Provided that they weren’t able to eradicate the whole Goblin tribe with a swing or two with their axe, how would an adventurer go about solving this matter? Zac started to walk up to one townspeople after another, trying to find clues to the situation.

The whole town was full of farmers, and Zac was a bit confused as to why they all stayed in the town rather than tending their fields. But he soon understood that it was due to the goblins who would stream out of the forest and kill solitary farmers when the opportunity presented itself.

They only went out in large groups now to tend the fields once every week, and they had to let the crops fend for themselves most of the time now. A lot of people worriedly talked about weeds and parasites ruining their crop, or that they wouldn’t be able to pay this year’s tax to the local lord.

Zac was shocked by the reality of it all, and he could understand that there was no consensus on whether these people were real or not. He even tested mentioning the Tower of Eternity and the System, but they truly simply ignored those things like he said nothing at all.

Ogras was proven right as it was no secret where the Goblin Tribe stayed. They had taken up in an abandoned mine some ways’ into the forest. The villagers had tried to root them out with the help of their strongest warrior, the Mayor. The campaign ended in an embarrassing defeat, resulting in the mayor still being on bed rest to recuperate.

But no matter who he asked he couldn’t find a hint of why the goblins suddenly had arrived. The villagers all assumed that it was simply bad luck, or that the goblins perhaps had been pushed out of their old domain by a rival tribe. They didn’t look too deeply into the matter, and most of them seemed to take it as a general inconvenience that would soon enough be sorted by the Lord and the Guild.

Zac sighed in exasperation after having walked around or thirty minutes questioning the townspeople. The base of the Fallen Goblins was easy enough to find, but he was not one step closer to completing the actual mission. Was he unsuited for this type of work, or was he simply asking the wrong questions?

A sudden movement in the periphery of his vision suddenly caught his attention though, and he flashed over to see what was going on. He had noticed this type of movement multiple times already, but he had ignored it since his danger sense didn’t warn him at all.

Sharp pain in his side immediately made him regret using [Loamwalker] to move around, and he grimaced as it felt like getting stabbed. His scrunched-up face also had the additional effect of scaring the daylights out of two small children who had been spying on him from behind a large bale of hay.

The young boy who looked no older than five immediately jumped into the bale in an effort to escape, while the even younger girl stood rooted in place like a deer in headlights.

“I’m not someone dangerous, I am from the guild,” Zac said as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. “I’m here to help your parents.”

He felt a bit weird lying to children about who he was, but at least it seemed to have the desired effect as the girl visibly calmed down.

“Mister, are you here to beat up the goblins?” the girl curiously said as she looked up at Zac with big eyes.

“I am,” Zac smiled as he tried to remember how to talk to children. “But I am also trying to figure out why they came here in the first place. I don’t want any more of them coming here after I’ve left.”

“It’s the ghosts!” the girl said with certainty in her eyes. “The grownups don’t believe me, but I saw it!”

“Jinny, shh!” the subdued voice of a young boy emerged from within the hay. “We’ll get in trouble again.”

“What ghosts?” Zac asked with piqued interest.

He didn’t know what connection some ghosts had with goblins, but this was the first hint of something out of the ordinary since he arrived here.

“Me and Bulb were visiting the tower, and we saw a ghost! Then the goblins came not long after,” the girl exclaimed.

“Jinny…” an entreating voice emerged again as a snot-nosed face popped out of the haystack.

“We are not allowed to go into the forest, but we snuck out when the grown-ups were busy,” Jinny said with a low voice. “We saw the old man ghost in the tower! He looked like a bad man.”

Zac started to understand what was going on after a round of questioning. These two kids had gone exploring the forest while their parents were out tending the fields roughly two weeks before the goblins first appeared. They had happened upon a large tower, and they saw what they believed was a ghost walking around its base.

The sight had scared the wits out of the children, and they had immediately run back to town to inform the villagers. Eventually the mayor and few of the townspeople went over to scour the area, but they came up with nothing. The parents thought they were lying, and simply punished the two for going into the dangerous forest alone.

“Thank you for the information,” Zac smiled. “I will make sure the ghost doesn’t cause any trouble.”

The kids enthusiastically nodded before they skittered away, and Zac walked over to one of the villagers to ask about the tower.

It turned out that the tower was once a part of the defensive line of the Bravorian Kingdom, but the country had expanded its borders 300 years ago. The war transformed Whittlecreek from a border town to a safe village in the heartlands. The guard tower was abandoned soon enough, and it had stood in the mountains untouched for centuries without causing any trouble.

Zac couldn’t be sure, but it certainly sounded like the clue for a simple mystery fitting to the first level of the Tower of Eternity. Armed with this knowledge he turned

to the saloon, where he found Ogras chatting up a cute farmer's daughter working double as a waitress. Galau wasn't as talkative, and he rather seemed determined to drink himself into oblivion.

A full barrel of some locally brewed liquor was placed next to him, and Zac saw that it was half-emptied already.

"How does buying things work here?" Zac asked curiously as he sat down opposite them with a groan.

"Nexus Coins," Ogras said with a grin. "But you will usually not be able to bring anything outside."

"Usually?" Zac asked with piqued interest, almost forgetting why he came here.

"It's a gamble," Galau said with slurred speech. "It's a small chance anything you find is real."

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**Chapter 403 - Questing**

Zac slowly nodded. It was messing with his head a bit not knowing whether everything around him was real or not. From what he had heard so far it was both and neither. He also briefly wondered if his high Luck stat would skew the ratio of real to fake items in his favor. Perhaps he would walk out of here an extremely rich man.

Or perhaps the System would decide Zac hadn't suffered enough turned all his items illusory.

"Things here also have their own pricing. Sometimes a precious item might only cost a tenth of what it cost outside. You can take a gamble and buy it, and you might make a fortune when you exit," Ogras added.

"Is there any way to discern what's real and what's fake?" Zac asked with interest.

"Nope, not that I know of at least," Ogras said with a shrug. "Perhaps some factions know of a method, but why would they share such a thing with the masses? Oh, the rewards from completing a floor are always real as well."

"Eat it," Galau burped from the side, drawing a confused look from Zac.

"If you find something useful it's best to use it immediately if you can. Everything is real while you're still inside the Tower. The Ruthless Heavens will not reach into your belly to pull the item out," the demon said.

Zac nodded in understanding as he ordered a huge dinner. He wasn't in a rush to head to the tower since Ogras was happy idling about Galau seemed intent on finding the bottom of the barrel. There was still some time remaining on his weakened state brought on by **[Hatchetman's Rage]** anyhow, and the nasty wound in his side still pained him.

"I think I found the clue, by the way," Zac said as he gorged himself on a huge flank steak.

"Oh?" Ogras said, clearly disinterested.

Zac sighed at the lackluster response, but he still carried on and explained the situation with the tower.

"Sounds like that's it," Ogras nodded after hearing the description. "We can head there after finishing things on this end."

That was fine with Zac as having walked around the town had caused his wounds to flare up again. Taking it easy while he recuperated was just what he needed. The three only set out two hours later, at which point Ogras was forced to carry Galau who had drank himself into oblivion.

As expected of the first level they didn't encounter any trouble finding their target. It was the only building on the desolate mountain, and it rose almost a hundred meters into the air. Along with the guidance of Zac's Automatic Map they found the place in no time.

The demon threw the still-sleeping Galau on the ground and showered him with water from one of his canteens, making him wake up with a sputter. The scene made the demon snicker before he started to scout the area.

"There's no one here," Ogras said as he looked around. "That wizard guy you mentioned is probably long gone."

Zac nodded and the three walked inside the dilapidated tower. Nothing seemed to be out of place. In fact, the place was pretty much picked clean, and the only residents seemed to have been a bear and a bunch of birds judging by the droppings everywhere.

The base floor contained a couple of side-rooms holding nothing, and the only path led upward. Zac immediately headed for the stairs, but he only got a few meters before he was stopped.

"Wait," Galau spoke up and pointed at a dark corner. "There's an array hiding a set of stairs leading downward."

"How do you know?" Zac asked curiously.

He liked to believe that he had some attainments in spotting arrays after his time trapped during the hunt, but he hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary at all. That a depressed and still half-drunk merchant managed to find something he missed was a bit humbling.

"I have a pretty decent inspection skill," Galau conceded. "I mainly got it to help me discern whether items I wanted to buy were fake, but it sometimes comes handy in other situations."

Zac nodded in understanding and the three walked down, their descent spearheaded by Ogras. The demon would have to do most of the heavy lifting while Zac was on the mend, but it shouldn't matter on the beginner floors.

The area at the foot of the stairs was in a lot better state than the levels upstairs that were pretty much reclaimed by nature at this point. The dust was swept away, and it looked like someone had lived here recently. There were both bedding and a table with some scribbled notes, but Zac couldn't read it.

No one was there though, meaning the wizard or whoever the children had seen had likely left some time ago. The three only needed to look around for a minute before Ogras found a hidden passage, and they proceeded even further down to find a hidden chamber that was directly cut into the mountain foundation.

There was only one item in the room, a golden crown lying on a pedestal. The crown seemed to be a bit small for a human's head, but what was most concerning about it was that a black mist that formed hazy fractals slowly swiveled around it. It might be a spirit tool, or the fractals might be a defensive array inscribed into the pedestal.

"It seems to be a cursed object," Galau said with a frown as he looked at the crown. "We might be abl-."

However, he didn't get any further as a cannonball slammed into the crown with enough force to almost tear a crack in space. It was Zac who scouted out the thing in his customary manner. A loud snap could be heard before a distant wail entered their ears.

A sinister aura spread across the room, but it was quickly crushed when Zac unleashed his Dao Field from his Seed of Trees. The sinister atmosphere only lasted for a second before the basement returned to its original state.

The metal ball had completely crushed the treasure and the pedestal it lay on. The fractals were forcibly broken as well. Galau looked at the scene of destruction mutely, before he slowly turned to Zac with an incredulous expression. The demon sighed from the side, but he didn't comment.

"I... I was about to say that we might be able to cleanse the item, allowing us to take it with us. If it turns out it's a real treasure we might have been able to make some money..." Galau said with a wry smile.

Zac coughed with some embarrassment, feeling he had committed a rookie mistake. He even opened up his wounds in his eagerness to help out, which made him feel doubly stupid.

"Well, it's just some random trinket at the first level," Ogras shrugged. "Even if it turned out to be real it would be worth a pittance at best."

Zac nodded in agreement, before looking around in curiosity.

"What now? Do we need to kill the Goblins as well?" Zac asked.

Ogras was about to speak when a hidden door suddenly slid open in the wall opposite them, showcasing a lit hall inside. The three immediately walked inside and found a platform that looked just like the entrance to the tower itself.

"Is that it?" Zac asked, and he couldn't help but feel some disappointment at the lack of excitement.

"The first floor is essentially a tutorial floor," Ogras smiled. "Anyone who has gained the requirements to receive a token should have no trouble completing it. Almost half of all climbers finish the second floor as well."

"Then why the carries if it is so easy?" Zac asked.

"The problem comes from the third floor," Galau explained. "The final level is especially tough for the average elite. Many are willing to buy the carry just for that trial alone. A few might have been able to complete it themselves if they went all-out, but they would rather pay a few billion to guarantee a reward and the better title."

Zac nodded in understanding and the three stepped up on the platform, and it immediately started to hum into life. He looked back toward the stairs they came from, and it was a bit unsettling knowing that the whole world he had just visited might just cease to exist since it had fulfilled its purpose.

The next moment he found himself sitting by a table in a rowdy tavern, with Ogras and Galau joining him. The other customers were almost all some sort of beastkin, resembling panthers a bit with their golden eyes and black fur. The occasional humans and elf-like humanoids could be seen as well though, meaning the place they found themselves in wasn't completely homogenous.

Most of the beastkin seemed like warriors rather than the farmers in the last floor, and pretty much everyone was decked in armors and some manner of weaponry. A few of them almost looked like a walking arsenal as they were covered in daggers, swords, and anything sharp they could carry.

Even though they looked pretty ferocious Zac still sensed they weren't too strong, perhaps around level 50 or so at best. He would personally place them at the

same strength as the Valkyries. Zac guessed they actually wouldn't meet any peak F-Grade warriors until they reached the final level of the first floor after having seen the average strength of the first two levels.

**[The Kingdom of Eyrvar has launched a quest to clear out the Fungal Depths of Lake Varia. Claim the riches in the depths before the mercenaries or the Royal Army.]**

"Lucky," Ogras said with a whistle. "A treasure quest."

"How's that lucky?" Zac asked with confusion. "Aren't most of the treasures fake anyway?"

"Well, yes. But if you snatch a whole hoard of items, then chances are that at least one or two of them is real," the demon explained.

"It seems we're not the only ones after the treasures though," Galau whispered as he listened in on the conversations on the neighboring tables.

"Excuse me," Ogras said as he walked over to the table next over with a large cask of the local liquor he bought from a waiter. "We just arrived to the area and heard about the quest. Mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"Sit down, lad," the mercenary said, his eyes peeled on the jug of liquor.

"Why did the kingdom give suddenly give such an order?" Ogras said, feigning interest.

"The depths are crawling with those goddamn monstrous crustaceans. They would rather waste our lives than their own in clearing it out," one of the men said with a snort. "Rumors are there is an evolved alpha leading the swarm."

"Crustaceans? Like big lobsters?" Ogras asked with confusion.

"More like crabs," the mercenary explained. "Nasty pincers and sharp legs. Pretty smart too."

"So why are there so many taking up the quest if it's so dangerous?" the demon probed.

"The pearls," another man said after taking a huge swig. "It's no secret in this area so I might as well tell you. Some clams produce magical pearls in the lakes at the bottom of the caverns. Those pearls can be used to prolong your lifespan. Each pearl is worth a pretty penny, and you can keep what you find according to the kingdom."

"I see, thank you. We will have to think about if we're ready for something like before heading down," Ogras nodded 'thoughtfully' as he turned towards Zac's table. "Oh, by the way, when will people start the mission?"

"Tomorrow," a beastman burped. "That's why we're getting drunk today."

"Let's go," Ogras said with a loud voice to Zac and Galau. "We are behind these people. We need to gather provisions and weaponry if we want to join tomorrow."

His words elicited a couple of guffaws from the beastkin who kept drinking contentedly. Zac and Ogras followed the demon out of the tavern, and they found themselves in the docks of an alien port city. A few enormous ships were anchored a few hundred meters out to sea, and dozens of smaller vessels could be seen sailing back and forth.

A constant bustle was taking place with people coming ashore or embarking, even though it was the dead of night. Zac whistled with appreciation as he looked around. Was this what Port Atwood would look like when it advanced? He had been afraid that the use of naval ships would decrease as people became stronger, but perhaps that wasn't necessarily the case.

"What gear would we need for something like this?" Zac asked with some confusion as he turned to Ogras. "Doesn't sound too complicated."

“Of course we don’t need to gather gear from some shabby store here,” Ogras snorted. “I just wanted to head out immediately without arousing suspicion. Do you want to let those animals get their paws on our pearls?”

“It could be some basic specimens of [Longevity Clams] they were talking about,” Galau added thoughtfully. “Their pearls can be used in concocting pills that improve longevity just like he said. Each pearl is worth millions on the outside. Tens of millions if their quality is good enough. We’ll make a great profit if even a handful of the pearls are real. We’re pretty lucky to get a scenario like this.”

“Lucky, yeah...” Ogras said as he shot Zac a pointed look.

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### **Chapter 404 - Remuneration**

Zac understood what the demon was inferring. Was his uncommonly high Luck Attribute finally starting to bring him some fortuitous encounters? So far his Luck had mainly been helping him stay alive from ambushes, but he had long known that the attribute could also increase the chance of lucky encounters.

His Luck had increased from 149 to 182 after gaining his two Fragments, which wasn’t a small boost. It meant that he also had passed the old attribute limit of the F-Grade, 175 points. Perhaps that came with some new boosts as well? Zac couldn’t tell, and there seemed to be no one that knew how it worked in his surroundings either. Even Alyn only had a hazy knowledge of the subject, and his attempts at getting information packets on the subject had failed. So Zac could only speculate, apart from the fundamental knowledge that higher numbers were better.

It didn’t take a lot of effort for the trio to learn of the location of the so-called Fungal Hollow. It was a region a few hours north of the town where a river caused a large section of brackish water. A mid-sized mountain rose out of the ocean in the middle of the delta, and that mountain contained the Fungal Hollow.

The group wasted no time as they pushed north, using the moonlight for sight as they ran along the coast. They passed a few fisherman’s villages immediately after exiting the town, but soon enough the coastal line turned completely desolate. It was probably due to people not daring to live neighbors with aggressive crab beasts who could emerge from the depths at moment’s notice.

The moon and its luster reflecting on the ocean waves were the only sources of light until they finally saw a few large braziers burning in the distance. The flames came from the fortress that the kingdom had built to keep a watch on the river inlet and to both counter the crustaceans and to stop any enterprising pirates from sailing inland.

The moment they saw the flames Zac knew they were close, but they didn’t continue to the settlement ahead. Zac instead took out one of his Creator Vessels from his Cosmos Sack, and they immediately set sail. Galau seemed to be a bit confused by ship, as the Creators had actually put the insignias of the Allbright Empire on them to mask their true origin. But he didn’t bring it up, and Zac didn’t bother to come up with some excuse.

Zac hadn’t expected to use the boat for its intended purpose, but he had rather been inspired by Alea’s tactics. The Creator ships had blown up half a town with the help of their offensive arrays in the battle with the undead, making them a great

offensive tool. Their hulls were also extremely sturdy to survive the beasts of the sea, making them good shelter in a bind.

But now it came in handy as it allowed them to reach the mountain reaching up through the muddy water without giving away their actions to the royal army. Infiltrating the mountain didn't prove much trouble either, and they smoothly proceeded further and further down into the depths of the mountain hidden by Ogras' shadows.

The interiors of the mountain reminded Zac a bit of a miniature version of the Underworld, as there was a mix of tunnels and caves large enough to house small villages. But instead of molemen the caves were half-submerged in water and crawling with crabs that were up to three meters tall. But Zac could see that the beasts were even weaker compared to the mercenaries, though there were far more crabs than beastmen. Only a couple of swings of [Verun's Bite] would be needed to decimate a whole cave.

But they didn't want to start a battle because that might alert scouts hiding on the mountain, so Ogras led them through a confusing maze of tunnels in their descent. Now and then they were unable to proceed without walking perilously close to the crabs, but with the help of Ogras and their array disks they could slip past without raising any alarms.

It only took them half an hour to reach the bottom, which was an enormous cave that seemed to lead out to the ocean. There was a shallow and crystal-clear lake covering most of the area, and the three immediately spotted their target. Quite a few crabs were walking about, and they noticed that the largest crabs were actually eating the clams, shell and all.

Perhaps the clams and their precious pearls could help the crabs to evolve, or at least level up?

But the so-called crab king was nowhere to be seen, and Ogras soundlessly killed the few dozen crabs in the cave before they sealed the exits with sound-proofing arrays. After that they had free rein to loot pearls to their heart's content.

Even Galau seemed to finally get over his despondency due to his life plan going awry as he cracked open one clam after another to look for a pearl. There was an almost manic gleam in his eyes as he arduously forced open the shells and it made Zac think of Calrin. He had to admit the squirrely young man had the right temperament for a merchant.

Unfortunately for Galau, he traveled with two people far stronger than him. He had the will but not the power to loot the treasures in front of him. It took him almost twenty seconds to force open one of the sturdy clams, but Zac simply crushed them with a twist to extract the pearl within.

Ogras wasn't as strong, but he managed to poke holes in the shells with pinpoint accuracy, allowing him to take out the pearls without even forcing open the shells. In the end, it was Zac who came out a winner, claiming almost half of the pearls, with Galau barely getting a fifth of them.

The moment the last pearl was extracted a prompt sounded out and a teleportation array appeared by a bank of the subterranean lake. Seeing how easily they completed the floor Zac better understood that things weren't quite equal for everyone who entered. Getting a suitable floor quest could both make and break someone's climb. If it was Zac climbing alone the second level would have played out pretty differently.

He would have no doubt been spotted soon after entering the mountain, and then he would have been forced to fight his way down to the treasures in the depths.

Perhaps even the kingdom on the other shore would be alerted, turning the situation extremely chaotic.

Considering they were still only on the first floor Zac would no doubt have been able to blast through all resistance without breaking a sweat, but it might play out differently on the later floors. He could only pray that his high Luck would overpower the animosity the System seemed to have toward him, giving them suitable challenges at the end of their climb.

The following levels went quite smoothly where they completed one quest after another without encountering any real trouble. They didn't rush at all, but it still only took them 3 days to reach the 9<sup>th</sup> level. Galau's mood had gotten noticeably better as time went, and by this time he had mostly recovered from the shock.

He even seemed to be a bit excited about the prospect of having befriended a future powerhouse, often reminding Zac to come to him in case he wanted to sell loot from mystic realms or the like in the future.

The ninth level placed them at the foot of a mountain, and the quest was to defeat the Bandit Lord who had made the peak his home. It was the first time the quest directly told them to do battle. The other 8 quests had been possible to complete with only minimal battle, with the option of finding the floor guardian to kill instead.

In fact, they had barely fought at all during the first eight levels. Only a few unlucky sentries had been taken out so that they could complete the quest the intended way.

Climbing the first floor had given Zac a good grasp of how things worked, and he realized that it was always better to complete the quest than killing the floor guardian. Following the quest almost always taught a valuable lesson or led to some sort of treasure, whereas killing the guardian would make you miss that opportunity.

The treasures might turn out to be fake in the end, but the gained knowledge was real, and Zac vowed to only kill his way out of a level if he really couldn't figure out the quest.

"I can take charge of this one," Galau suddenly said as they ascended the mountain, showing unusual proactivity.

"What's going on? Have you accidentally eaten some stimulants?" Ogras said as he shot the merchant a suspicious stare. "What if you faint again and get yourself killed?"

Galau deflated a bit, but he mustered his courage as he stuck out his chest.

"You have done most of the work, so I should contribute a bit as well," Galau said.

Zac smiled a bit, somewhat understanding Galau's thoughts. He was no doubt a bit cowardly, but he did have a good heart. He wanted to help out and prove his worth during the climb, but he knew that they soon enough would encounter challenges that might prove too dangerous. So he wanted to knock out a few floor guardians early to shore up his contribution.

"That's nice of you, but that's okay," Zac smiled. "Days have passed without me fighting, and I could use the exercise. I get a bit antsy if I don't fight for too long."

"Unless you want to see him rampage again due to lack of bloodshed? You missed most of it last time," Ogras snorted. "It's quite spectacular."

Galau paled as he looked at Zac like he was a dangerous animal before he restrained himself.

"Well, I will simply stay back and support then. It is good to exercise a bit as you're recuperating. But remember, moderation is important," Galau coughed.

Ogras only rolled his eyes as they continued up the mountain.

“But that brings us to another topic,” Galau said, looking a bit uncomfortable.

“What’s that?” Zac asked as he looked around for hidden traps.

“Our original agreement was for you to help me reach the thirtieth floor so that I could convince my elders to let me start a business. But now that your extraordinary might have been put on open display, that has ruined any chance of that happening. In other words, shouldn’t we revisit the issue of... remuneration,” Galau said, his voice getting lower and lower as he saw Zac and Ogras stop and direct emotionless stares at him.

“I agree,” Ogras eventually said, getting a surprised glance from Zac. “The price you quoted was for a carry by two unknown cultivators. But now you are hiring one of the most famous youths in the sector. How can 3 billion be enough?”

“Wh-“ Galau stammered. “I- I just realized it would be bad form to change the terms mid-climb. I apologize for bringing the matter up.”

“If you say so,” Ogras snorted.

The three reached the peak soon enough and found a weathered fort take up a large part of it. There was only one way to enter unless you climbed up the sheer wall, but that would no doubt leave you exposed to bandits staying in the base.

“You guys stay here,” Zac said as he openly walked toward the closed gate.

What he said earlier was partly true, there were a few things he needed to confirm. First of all, he was simply curious about the power of a floor guardian. He wanted to personally fight all of them so that he would be able to give helpful pointers to the people of Port Atwood. As far as he knew he was the only one who had a token so far, but as people started to reach level 50 more would no doubt get the chance to come here.

And even if no one from Port Atwood got a token there were still Thea and Billy, both of whom should qualify for this place as far as Zac was concerned.

But the part about needing to fight to avoid losing control was a lie. The splinter in his mind had been completely silent since his outburst in the Pill House, and it didn’t even release a smidgeon of the odd energy that usually seeped into his mind.

He was rather worried about something having happened to his skill after having seen the black trees surrounding him as he woke up from his stupor in the rubble of the Pill House. Zac had his guesses what was going on, but he needed to confirm them.

Energy surged around him as he walked forward, and a red array sprung up around the fortress, signaling that he had been spotted. That was just fine for Zac, as he released [**Hatchetman’s Spirit**]. The scenery of the mountain top started to drastically change as one tree after another started to grow.

The trees quickly rose to over fifty meters in height, and some even started to grow from the wall of the fortress, making it seem that the place had been deserted for hundreds of years. The trees themselves were of a traditional leafy variant with green leaves and brown trunks with bark.

There was one exception though, a singular stout tree that appeared just behind Zac. Its trunk was still light brown, but its leaves shone with a golden luster. Around the tree four white ropes were tied, each of them full of intricate knots. Hanging from the ropes were some unknown talismans, but Zac couldn’t recognize the script on them.

It looked like something that fit in an old temple, and it did emit a dense aura of life. Zac’s cells swelled to life as he felt one with Nature. It was like he was strolling through his own garden rather than toward some Bandit’s lair. Zac looked around and sighed in relief.

It looked like the Splinter hadn't corrupted his skill fractals after all.

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### **Chapter 405 - Floor Guardian**

The bandits quickly understood that the trees sprouting up everywhere were bad news, and various attacks soared out to destroy them. But the projectiles harmlessly shot straight through, hitting the mountain or sailing far out into the air.

It had taken Zac a while to understand the skill as well, but he eventually figured it out. The trees were mostly projections, a way for his spirit to change the surroundings to suit him better. It created an effect similar to a Dao Field, where he was at his optimal state while his interlopers were somewhat weakened.

The only 'real' tree was the tree behind him that provided a direct buff to his Strength and Vitality, providing 10% each without any downsides like **[Hatchetman's Rage]**. Zac also guessed that the skill counted as being inside a forest, which renewed the boost he got from **[Forester's Constitution]**.

Attacking that tree would work, and cutting it down would cancel the skill. But the tree wasn't just helpless. Each rope on the tree represented one defensive charge that could be used to protect itself or Zac, allowing it to stand long enough for Zac to come and protect it if needed.

The skill even worked as a detection skill as the trees essentially were his eyes and ears. Anything within his forest was within his purview, and it would take a pretty good stealth skill to move about unnoticed.

All in all, it provided a little bit of everything, helping Zac round out his Hatchetman Class. It wasn't as flashy as Ogras' equivalent where he turned into a shadowy angel with his 5-meter wings, but it was a skill that he could always use to gain an edge during battle. Zac also guessed it would be useful in the battle against the undead, as the golden tree emitted an intense amount of life which might counteract the miasma.

Its functions did overlap a bit with the general skills **[Mental Fortress]** and **[Nature's Barrier]** he had bought for himself, but no one would say no to having multiple layers of defense.

When the bandits noticed that their attacks didn't have any effect they instead focused their attacks on Zac, but it was extremely hard for them to hit him. He was in his own forest now and being one with the surroundings pushed the efficiency of **[Loamwalker]** to new heights, making him seem like a forest spirit that flitted back and forth amongst the illusory trees.

He reached the gate without getting hit once and one swing of his axe cracked the shield and gained him entry.

"Another bounty hunter?" a gruff voice sounded the moment he entered the fortress. "But my head is not so easily claimed."

Zac immediately sensed some danger and jumped forward, but he was still caught inside a massive explosion. The bandit had used an offensive array like a mine. A snap could be heard from behind as one of the ropes fell from the tree, and a green wind rose simultaneously to protect Zac from the flames.

Zac was a bit surprised a floor guardian would fight dirty like that, but he soon found his bearings as he spotted his target. It was a humanoid who stood almost three

meters tall, and the humanoid most closely resembled an ogre, though his skin was dark grey.

There was no hair on his head, and there were four large tusks in his mouth that created a bestial image for the bandit. He was a mix of fat and muscular, with a big belly but arms thick enough to look like trees.

Zac actually felt that **[Verun's Bite]** might be more suited for a being like this, or better yet Billy's massive club. But the guardian was unarmed, perhaps only relying on his massive and meaty fists. He wore thick bracers to protect his forearms though, and a couple of knives almost as large as swords could be seen dangling from his belt.

He was also accompanied by a dozen or so bandits who all were of the same race, though they were almost a meter shorter than their boss. The bandit lord tried to slap one of the trees with his massive palm in annoyance and growled when it passed straight through.

"I don't know why you play with these dumb illusions. It won't save you," he said before he stomped the ground, seemingly in frustration.

The area rumbled for a second before a dozen spikes shot up at Zac. Each of the spikes was imbued with some sort of Dao, though only an early seed and Zac was taken a bit by surprise once again. He had thought that the ogre would be a similar class as himself going by his attire, but it looked that he was rather some sort of geomancer.

A large fractal blade grew out in front of the edge of **[Verun's Bite]**, and it soon enough detached as Zac instructed it to hunt down the bandits while he focused on the big boss. The illusory trees even moved about, forming what looked like an arena that enclosed the two of them.

It was nothing like the cage of his other class, and the bandits could simply walk straight through the enclosure if they wanted to. But it still had its uses. Zac had noted that a higher concentration of trees around him increased his control over the area, making him sense the tiniest fluctuations of Daos or Cosmic Energy. Perhaps getting boxed in like that also negatively impacted the mental states of his enemies, making them feel trapped.

But the bandit didn't seem bothered by getting "trapped" inside the ring of trees at all, and his beady eyes glared straight at Zac as he summoned a large boulder to chuck at him. It contained the same Dao energy as before, but Zac simply turned the boulder to gravel with a punch.

The floor guardian of the first floor might be the first peak F-Grade warrior he had encountered since entering the tower, but the ogre was far from being a match to someone like himself. Zac only decided to battle because he wanted to take a look at his skill once more, and now that he could confirm **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** worked as usual again he saw no need to prolong the fight.

One step brought him in front of the Ogre, but the huge bandit was prepared. A chain of explosions erupted, swallowing the two in an inferno. Zac had multiple ways to defend against such a surprise attack, but since he had his new skill up and running he might as well use it.

Another snap from behind allowed him to be enclosed in nature's embrace once more, and after a brief hesitation he also imbued his body with the Fragment of the Coffin to make sure he avoided his wound opening up again. The flames raged all around him for over ten seconds, making Zac look around in confusion.

Had the bandit lord decided to blow himself up?

But the flames eventually abated, and Zac could once again see the ogre in front of him. He was covered in a layer of rock, and Zac had seen the earth-mages among the demons perform the same trick. The Ogre had found an interesting fighting method

that took advantage of the high durability of a geomancer, but how could his Endurance match up to a monster like Zac? He would need a far larger bomb to break through his defenses.

“How are you ali-?” the bandit roared, but he didn’t get any further as space split from a swing of Zac’s axe.

The body of the bandit lord fell apart into two neatly separated pieces, and a small surge of cosmic energy entered his body before it dissipated once more. The underlings had already been decimated by his Fractal Blade, and it returned to hover around him once more.

Zac released [**Hatchetman’s Spirit**], and his two companions joined in short order. Neither of them looked too surprised that the battle took less than a minute, and they stepped into the teleportation array that had appeared in the courtyard of the fortress.

But this time Zac wasn’t transported to a new world to explore, but he rather found himself in the black space that might as well be the System’s waiting room. As expected a prompt appeared soon after.

**[First Floor Complete. Rewarding Title.]**

**[Choose Reward: Weapon, Skill Crystal, Nexus Coins]**

Zac looked over the three options and chose Skill Crystal after just a second of deliberation. It was just the first floor, so none of the options were likely to be anything amazing. A Skill Crystal might benefit someone back home though, or it could at least be put in the Merit Exchange.

The darkness disappeared and Zac found himself on the deck of a boat sailing on a turquoise ocean. Apelike humanoids scurried around all over the ship, and all of them wore the same type of livery indicating they came from the same force.

A crystal had appeared in his hand and he infused some of his energy into it to see if it was something he could use immediately.

**[Frozen Enclosure - Create a sphere of ice that surrounds you. The strength of the shield increases with Intelligence.]**

Zac sighed and put the crystal away. He had no affinity with Ice, like all other elements, and it was obviously a mage’s skill. It would probably have a terrible efficiency if he learned it, so he didn’t bother. His sister might find it useful though as she was an Elementalist. There were only so many skills a Class gave, and this might be a nice addition.

Galau appeared a second later, and Ogras came last after half a minute. Neither of them had very excited expressions, meaning they hadn’t made any huge hauls either.

“Didn’t think that you would immediately get the title,” Zac commented as he opened his Title screen.

The New title had appeared, and just as expected it was a Permanent Title, rather than a Limited one.

**[Tower of Eternity - 1<sup>st</sup> Floor. Strength +5, Endurance +5, Vitality +5]**

“I think it’s to lessen the need for a second run,” Galau said. “It’s still worth it to come back here if you make large gains, or if you were unlucky during the first climb. But the things you gain inside the Tower generally won’t warrant another tower run.”

“I got five points in three attributes, is it the same three attributes for everyone?” Zac asked.

“No,” Galau said with a shake of his head. “It boosts the three attributes you focus the most on.”

It made sense. Zac would have preferred some Dexterity or wisdom to shore up his weaknesses, but he knew that the third floor at least provided all attributes. And the fact he got the title immediately worked in his favor. There was no way he would be able to return to this place, and getting the titles directly meant that he would have an even better chance of reaching a higher floor.

“What did you think about the boss?” Ogras smiled.

“The weakest a peak F-Grade warrior could possibly be,” Zac said. “I can’t believe anyone who arrives here wouldn’t be able to defeat him.”

“Failing is exceedingly rare, but now and then someone messes up horribly or underestimates the challenge,” Galau said. “But failing on the first floor is generally pretty shameful. Not something you’d share with others.”

“Things will quickly get harder though,” Ogras warned. “Of course, it won’t be too bad while we’re still on the second floor. But don’t get lax.”

Zac nodded as he closed his eyes to rest. Even if a couple of days had passed he still felt some lingering pangs from the wound in his side, though he could use most of his strength if the situation called for it. If it wasn’t for the pill he got from the Zethaya he would no doubt still be bedridden, and that fact alone made Zac mostly forgive Boje’s actions.

The ship soon anchored outside a solitary island, and the tree found out the quest was to look for clues to a hidden inheritance of an ‘Ascendant’, which was what these apemen called a D-Grade powerhouse after some probing.

“Can we take the inheritance for ourselves?” Zac asked, feeling they had hit the jackpot.

“Quit dreaming,” Ogras snorted.

“Some quests task you with finding clues to extremely valuable items, such as divine treasures or long-lost inheritances like this one. But those are almost always fake. It is a huge gamble to try to snatch such a thing,” Galau started to explain.

“First of all, the inheritance is likely not on this island. We would have to set sail with these apemen for weeks rather than continuing on to the next floors,” Ogras continued. “And when we finally arrive we’ll most likely just find another teleporter to the next level.”

“But it is possible for it to be real?” Zac asked.

“There have been some reports of such things turning out to be true, but the odds are extremely low, even worse than with treasures. It’s only really worth trying for such a thing if you find yourself stuck, unable to climb any further,” Galau answered.

“That’s one of the reasons why people keep pushing themselves to climb even if they know they won’t beat the floor guardian they’re at. Their title won’t improve from climbing another few levels, but they might find an opportunity like this,” the demon added.

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**Chapter 406 - Penalties**

The trio soon joined the monkeys in scouring the island, and with the help of Galau’s superior investigative skill they found an odd fluctuation beneath a lake. They

could have explored it themselves and risked falling out with the simian sailors, but they instead called for the captain who awarded them each with a small sack of E-Grade Nexus Crystals as thanks.

Most of the crystals would most likely turn to dust the moment they exited the Tower, but they would work just fine while they were still inside. So all of happily took the reward as it meant they would save on their own stock.

The following floors went quite smoothly as well, as the difficulty could be easily managed by anyone of them. Zac did however note that the setting of the quests started to subtly change. The quests first floor had all taken place in civilized areas such as towns or established countries, with the exception of the floor guardian hiding on a mountain top.

But that changed with the second floor. The surroundings they found themselves in were more wild and untamed. The first level of the second floor took place on the tropical island, and the seventh was on an island as well. The third level took place in a fallen kingdom where order was rapidly crumbling.

They were tasked with escorting one of the surviving children of a once-great noble house to an ally waiting outside the town, and were ambushed by both rebels and random bandits who saw how richly decked the lordling was. But a blast of Zac's massive and blood-drenched aura was all it took to force them all to run for the hills, allowing them to complete the quest without lifting a finger.

Zac felt he learned a lot from their quests, and he more and more understood the crazy gambit of the Lotus Emperor. He had split himself into 10 000 incarnations to live a multitude of lives. If this method ever came to fruition and he could fuse his incarnations back into one being, just how deep would his knowledge of the universe become?

The final level of the second floor was a simple quest to save a faltering town bordering a massive forest from a dangerous beast in the area. After asking around they learned it was some sort of recently evolved reptile and that it possessed shocking speed.

"It's usually like this," Ogras explained. "The final level of a floor almost always requires a proof of strength to conquer. You can't just luck into a quest that suits your skillset. Strength is ultimately the true language of the multiverse."

"The 9<sup>th</sup> level of a floor requires you to defeat a floor guardian 95% of the time, with the final 5% requiring proof of Strength in other ways," Galau nodded in agreement. "And be careful, the strength will sharply rise compared to the things you've fought so far."

"It's only the second floor though," Zac said, but he still took out his axe just in case.

"That's true, but the attributes of the beasts are around 40% higher because there's three of us," Galau said.

"That much?" Zac said with surprise. "What would happen if I brought 10 people to carry?"

"Nine is the limit, and the floors would be almost three times as hard," Galau said. "Most carries only bring one or two people. Taking too many might negatively impact your own climb."

"Wait, will we still be penalized after leaving you on the 32<sup>nd</sup> level?" Zac asked with a frown.

A 40% boost in attributes wasn't a problem now, but what if it stayed when he assaulted the 5th and 6th-floor guardians? That would be a pretty huge handicap, and he wasn't so sure that 3 billion Nexus Coins were worth it.

"Any floor one enters together with others will be adjusted accordingly, even if some people drop out early," Galau answered before a hesitant expression entered his face. "I didn't mention it because I was sure you knew."

"So we'll be only be penalized on the fourth floor?" Zac mused. "That's not too bad."

He had high confidence in defeating a floor guardian of the fourth floor even if it had a 40% attribute boost, and afterward the penalty would decrease, making it not too difficult bringing Ogras compared to going at it alone.

The benefit Ogras would bring would no doubt supersede a 20% bump in the enemies' strength.

"Any idea of how to find the beast?" Zac asked after they had walked in the forest for two hours.

"I thought it would show itself since we've restrained our auras," Ogras muttered before he turned to Galau. "You should have something to solve the situation."

"Ahem... The person providing the Tower Carry generally includes all the materials for the climb itself in the price," the merchant said. "But I do have some items for sale that might help. Best prices in the forest, heh."

Both Ogras and Zac stopped when they heard the mention of money, and another standoff commenced.

"But then again it's just a small trinket," Galau stammered, clearly feeling the pressure. "Here. Simply place this in an open space. If the beast is near-by it will no doubt come."

Galau handed Zac a small ball with a stench that made his nose-hair curl up. It smelled like thing contained a mix of old diapers and rancid meat, all pressed together into a ball of unholy horrors. The stench was so unbearable it made him question life, and the only reason he didn't throw it away was that he was afraid it would break into pieces making the smell even more unbearable.

"What the—" Ogras groaned, looking about ready to hurl. "I'll keep watch from the trees."

The next moment he disappeared, no doubt to escape the smell. Galau was already running as well, leaving Zac with the hot potato still in his hand. He didn't want to spend one more second than necessary with that cursed object in his hand, so he simply left it on a stone and jumped into some bushes that were just outside of the smell.

At least the ball turned out to be pretty effective, and their target arrived just 30 minutes later.

The beast was actually a large snake rather than a reptile, and his hair stood on its end when he looked at it. He still was a bit emotionally scarred after his desperate battle with a mutated snake during the first week of the integration. He had been way too close to death at that time, and there was still some lingering fear deep in his heart.

The snake was at least not as big as Slither, Verana's pet, as it only reached a bit over ten meters in length. It was a deep brown with green spots on its back, and for such a large snake it was pretty slim. It slithered between the trees with surprising agility, and it reached the puke-ball in the blink of an eye.

An enraged hiss emerged from the snake's maw when it realized that it was just bait rather than whatever the ball pretended to be, but at that point Zac was already running toward it with his axe at the ready. However, the snake turned its head with shocking speed and spat out a green mist that immediately covered a hundred meters in front of it.

Zac's brows rose in shock and he hastily infused his body with the Dao of the Coffin as he held his breath. The mist was clearly poisonous, and Zac frowned in consternation when he realized the mist burrowed itself into his pores even after having activated his defensive Dao.

He was just about to switch to the Seed of Trees to start purifying the invading poison, but he noticed a startling change that made him stop. The Dao of the Coffin might have failed in keeping the poison out of his body, but that apparently didn't mean it was helpless against it. It was actually refining it instead.

The mental energy that was spread throughout Zac's body was attacking the poison like white blood cells, and turning it into normal Cosmic Energy that seeped into his body. In other words, the Snake's attack was restoring Zac's energy rather than harming him.

Was this the effect brought on from the Dao of Rot? He had already discovered the properties that were akin to those of Hardness, but now he also witnessed the Rot. His thoughts briefly went to the lotus locked inside the coffin in his vision, the basis of his Dao Fragment. Corruption locked in a hard exterior.

So what if the hard shell let poison seep through? The interior was meant as a prison for such things anyway.

The Snake hadn't realized that its wide-scale attack was ineffective though, and it immediately went in for the kill when it noticed that Zac had stopped moving. But a flash of light was all it saw before its massive head was removed from its body. The beast was still too weak to prove a worthwhile opponent for him to hone his skills, so he didn't want to waste any time on it. He was more interested in observing the changes inside his body.

Zac sat down in the middle of the poison haze, and he slowly tried to understand what the Dao Fragment did, and if there were some other benefits it could bring. Unfortunately, he didn't find out anything else, but it was an interesting topic to keep looking into. Galau and Ogras arrived soon after the poisonous clouds dissipated, and the demon immediately headed for the carcass.

"Do you need an antidote pill?" Galau asked as he reached for his cosmos sack.

"No need," Zac said with a shake of his head. "A poison of this level won't affect me."

Galau nodded in understanding, not seeming too surprised by the fact that Zac was fine. Having some means to handle poison was a basic precaution for any wandering warrior, so Galau probably thought he had some skill or treasure that protected him. But there still was some hesitation as he looked at Zac.

"What?" Zac asked.

"Why aren't you using your shield? You paid so much for it but I've only seen you take it out to play with a few times," the merchant asked. "Are you thinking of repurposing the material after all? I could buy it off your hands, but you would make a small loss."

Zac blankly looked back at Galau for a second, realizing what he meant. It must truly look a bit odd for him to pay through the nose for the shield only to not use it at all.

“Why bother defending against weaklings like this? Might as well directly kill them to get things over with. Would almost be a dishonor to such a nice shield to waste it on some large worm,” the demon said from the side as he extracted a large sack from the head of the snake.

“The gall bladder?” Zac asked curiously. “Do you know how to make antidotes?”

“What antidotes?” the demon snorted. “I want it for my liquor.”

“You can do that as well?” Zac asked with interest. “Does it have any benefits?”

“It might have some benefits if the wine is good enough,” the demon said after some deliberation. “But I mostly want it for the taste. Haven’t been able to drink any good snake wine for a while. Besides, it better than just stowing it away and hoping the gallbladder is real.”

Zac nodded, understanding that this might go under the ‘eat anything you can while still inside the tower’-umbrella, and left the demon to his devices.

Galau helped Zac extract the fangs and poison sack. The poison wasn’t very strong, but who knew if it would come useful in the future. An array had already appeared in the clearing not far away, and Zac started to walk toward it.

“Wait,” Galau suddenly said, and Zac noted that the demon hadn’t moved either.

“What?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Take a look at this,” Galau said as he took out a small array disk.

He placed a Nexus Crystal inside the disk, and it lit up and fired a projectile straight into the air a second later like a firework. It looked a lot like one of those flare guns that you kept on a boat in case you got stuck at sea, and it illuminated the whole area in a blue luster for almost a minute before it dimmed.

“What’s that for?” Zac asked.

“For us to find him,” Ogras explained.

“The change of the third floor is that we will no longer emerge at the same position,” Galau explained. “We will be placed in the same area, but there will usually be some sort of barriers between us. Beasts or cultivators, for example. But it can also be arrays or other things.”

“So you’ll shoot off one of these when we arrive at a new level, and we’ll come to pick you up?” Zac asked.

“Exactly. Blue means no danger, red means I’m in danger. So, uh, if you see a red light please hurry,” Galau said.

“Was this how you did it as well?” Zac asked.

“Pretty much. The guy who helped me had a mother-daughter array that allowed him to find me, and I simply hid in the shadows until he showed up,” the demon nodded.

“Fine, let’s go,” Zac said with some anticipation as he walked toward the array. “Perhaps we can finally find some decent sparring partners on the next floor.”

Galau didn’t say anything, but rather just looked at Zac like he was a lunatic.

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**Chapter 407 - Mastery**

Sweat ran down Zac's back as he weaved back and forth among the pack of plagued Apes. Their quest was to cleanse the area of corruption, but Zac had found the insane beasts living in the area excellent sparring partners.

The progression through the third floor had gone quite smoothly, but the quests started to become harder. Twice they decided to just find and kill the guardian rather than completing the quest as it was simply more convenient that waste multiple days on a single level of the third floor.

One of the times they had been tasked to lead the defense of a town beset by a beast horde for three days until reinforcements could arrive. Zac had hoped to use those beasts to work on his skills, but they proved too weak to make any real progress. After a few hours all of them were tired of killing an endless deluge of critters who were only around level 50 to 60, and Ogras flashed over to kill the alpha to end the level early.

The other time some knowledge of arrays was needed, and neither of them would be able to solve the problem without spending a couple of days in research. They once more decided to not waste time on such a low level and destroyed the body of the deceased ancestor that the array was supposed to restrain. It made the descendants quite pissed off, but it didn't matter to them as they moved on to the next world through the array.

They had also gotten a chance at seeing Galau's skills in battle, and Zac had to admit that he was much stronger than expected. Due to his timid character and somewhat cowardly nature Zac had always thought that he wanted to switch occupation mainly due to lack of talent in combat. But that probably wasn't the case.

A red flare had illuminated the sky when they arrived at the sixth level, making Zac hurry over with the help of **[Loamwalker]**. He had found Galau desperately fighting off a huge pack of mangy wolves with a large two-handed sword. Both the choice of weapon and the aggressive battle-style created an odd disconnect with the usually timid youth, and Zac could only attribute it to his Clan.

They seemed to be solely focused in one direction in hopes of one day creating a real powerhouse, and all their youth were probably required to follow the same heritage. The heritage itself was one that felt pretty similar to his own battle-style, one of full-frontal assaults and massive swings causing widespread destruction.

The sword even contained a familiar feeling as it crushed rather than cut the beasts, and Zac realized it was a high-tier Dao Seed of Heaviness. Galau had chosen a different path than himself though, so the feeling the swings emitted were slightly foreign to Zac. They seemed to go more in the direction of Ilvere, focusing on momentum and impact.

The scene had made Zac question how someone with such a class would swap into a mercantile class, and the answer was simple. Galau's hope was to gain the option of choosing a traveling merchant class with the help of his year of trading in the Base Town, and the impressive profits he had accrued.

Such a class would be a hybrid class, focusing both on battle and business. After all, one would need the prerequisite power to defend oneself while traveling the endless worlds of the multiverse. A merchant couldn't simply put his life and his goods in the hands of hired guards, he needed some capabilities of his own in case the guards proved insufficient or if they even turned on him.

Otherwise, the third floor was not much different compared to the second. The settings of the quest were quite similar to the second floor, with the differences being the enemies being stronger, and that they started in different locations.

Most average warriors they encountered were between level 60 and 75, and the level guardians were all recently evolved just like the snake of the second floor. The three had continued to push through the levels at a rapid pace, and only stopped their progress at the 8th level at Zac's insistence.

His body was finally as good as new, perhaps even better than usual as the Splinter was still completely silent in his mind. That together with the setting made Zac confident that he could finally make some progress with his skills. He had essentially spent the first two floors as a vacation to decompress from the constant running back and forth on Earth.

It was only after he had slowed down in the Base Town that he realized he was tired to the bone. Stress and trauma had accumulated on top of each other, but he had simply pushed it deep down as there were too many things that only he could handle. And if he didn't, then people would die.

Besides, the enemies were too weak for him to be able to push himself at all, which made it pretty much impossible to improve his skills. Simply activating a skill over and over wasn't enough to improve the proficiency of the skills. It was as a lot more efficient to find insight in the midst of battle.

And the monkeys were simply perfect sparring partners.

The corruption they were supposed to root out had turned them extremely aggressive and almost as tireless as zombies, and their bodies were sturdy enough to take a beating without dropping. Best of all, there was a huge number of them occupation the valley, so the risk of him running out of targets in the short run was quite slim unless he unleashed [**Deforestation**].

A punch imbued with murky energy ripped toward him, but he effortlessly redirected the force downward with his palm, giving him a huge opening to cut the beast's head clean off. The edge of [**Verun's Bite**] was already by the throat of the monkey, but it only left a shallow cut before Zac backed off again.

The monkey became doubly enraged after having been toyed like that, and a burst of black energy rose from its sturdy frame.

Zac felt he had thought about the Dao in a too shallow a manner until now. He had considered them almost the same as a skill, a boost that would make his active skills more powerful. But the Dao was so much more than that. The Dao was the deeper truths of the universe, what everything was based on.

This was something he had realized after talking with Galau over the past days. The youth wasn't some great warrior, and neither was he from some peak force in the sector. But his family could be considered a strong Peak D-Grade force with hundreds of D-Grade warriors, and they had a rich warrior culture.

The way the youth spoke about the Dao was a lot deeper and more reverent compared to Zac, like it was the basis of everything. Even worse, Galau hadn't strictly said it, but he had indicated that if Zac didn't get a deeper grasp of the Dao, then he risked getting stuck in a bottleneck. Or even worse, create a shaky foundation for future cultivation.

This was something that Zac absolutely wanted to avoid, but he somewhat knew the reason for his current predicament. For one he came from a world recently integrated, and the Dao wasn't an ingrained part of his life yet. But more importantly, he had advanced too fast.

Not only that, but he had also done it mostly through artificial means. Some of his insights came from battle, but it was mostly his skill visions and treasures that had propped up his Dao through unnatural means.

His situation with his Dao insights was akin to Pill Toxicity as he saw it. He had eaten too many 'pills' related to the Dao, and while he had gained a tremendous burst in power in just one short year, it had damaged his foundations. He felt he needed to get a better command of his Daos if he wanted to keep smoothly progressing in the future.

Having a lacking understanding of his own Daos would not only negatively impact his fighting prowess, but it might hamper him in all kinds of ways.

Alyn often talked about the importance of a foundation. The most important part of becoming a successful cultivator was taking things one step at a time, and not hurrying for quick gains. Moving too quickly might inadvertently cut your path of cultivation short, as you find yourself having created a cracked foundation that couldn't support your continued progress.

Luckily there wasn't any actual toxicity in his body, he was only suffering from progressing too quickly. The problem was easier to solve than such a troublesome matter like actual pill toxicity. He would simply have to slow down his cultivation as soon as he had dealt with all the threats to Earth.

He would take a couple of years to digest everything he had learned since the start of the integration and stabilize his foundations while shoring up his weaknesses. It would slow down his progress, but it would probably also quicken it in the long run. Besides, wasn't there some time to do it now?

He kept the Fragment of the Axe active in his axe as he tried to pry out all the secrets it contained. The words written at the beginning of his guide to formations felt all the more poignant as he marveled in the feeling of man and axe becoming one.

*It is folly to believe the study of formations to be differentiated from other pursuits such as Alchemy or even fighting. All are children to the same parent, the boundless Dao.*

It was not that his skills became stronger by infusing them with the Dao of the Axe. The skills themselves were part of the Dao, and imbuing them with the truth of their origin allowed them to exhibit their real power.

Or something like that, Zac couldn't be too sure.

But he felt he was on the correct path, and he kept at it for hours, a lone human fighting a sea of enraged beasts. The church that had 'hired' them for this mission stayed outside the valley, as the corruption could affect people as well.

However, Zac had found that his Dao of the Coffin had no trouble refining the energy just like with the poison, grinding it down to unattuned Energy that was expelled from his body. Zac suspected that if he wasn't stuck in a bottleneck he'd even be able to use the cleansed corruption to open up nodes, though he would have to sit in this valley for years to absorb enough energy for a single node.

But Zac felt it was an important distinction. He might not be able to absorb Cosmic Energy like a Cultivator, but he could perhaps build his own system. He could get himself poisoned on purpose, and then slowly convert the poison into energy.

He wasn't sure if it was efficient enough for it to actually be worth the time and suffering, but it was worth keeping in mind. For now, he let his Dao Fragment passively course through his body as he focused on the axe.

There would be time to work on the Dao of the coffin after they had left Galau on the 30th level.

He had considered swapping over to his Draugr form in this secluded valley, but he had eventually decided against it. He really wanted to try his two new skills, but he still didn't have a too great a grasp on Galau's capabilities. The Allbright nobleman

might be spying on him at this very moment, it wasn't like he had the ability to know if that was the case.

He had already drawn a large enough target on his back from his actions, and he didn't want to tack on the fact that he ran around with two classes. Who knew how the reaction would be if that got out to the forces waiting in the Base Town.

It didn't mean he had nothing to do just because he couldn't work on his Undying Bulwark class. His primal axe kept sweeping along the aggressive monkeys following a set pattern, switching between sweeping arcs meant for widespread destruction, and quick jabs meant to maim or grapple enemies.

It was the method provided by [**Axe Mastery**], and he had been working on pushing that skill toward the peak the past day. He was swapping between using the training fractals to guide him for an hour and then trying to apply those tactics in battle against his extremely willing sparring partners.

The monkeys were luckily extremely fearful of his Dao Field for the Dao of the Coffin, likely because it could destroy the corruption in their bodies. The moment he unleashed his Dao Field, which now had a diameter of over a hundred meters if he pushed it, the monkeys would run for the hills.

Pushing Axe Mastery to the peak was probably not something that would help him in the tower, but it was still something that needed to be done. It was proof of a basic grasp of his weapon, and something that would positively impact his class choices. How would he get a good axe class if he couldn't even be bothered to max out his most basic axe skill first?

His efforts paid off soon enough, and a prompt told him that he had finally reached the peak of the skill. A familiar sense of pressure in his mind made Zac's eyes lit up, and he quickly flashed away from the valley while he blasted his Dao Field at full force to deter the monkeys from following him.

He found a secluded spot and put multiple layers of arrays down before he sat down and closed his eyes. The skill had actually provided him with another vision, and Zac's heart beat with excitement as he let the vision take him away.

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**Chapter 408 - Creation**

A warrior drenched in blood swung his intimidating two-handed axe, causing a wave of destruction to ripple outward. The attack created cascading explosions that cleared out a large swathe of rabid rats that tried to drown a town. There were millions and millions of them, but the axe warrior stoically took down one swarm after another.

The vision changed to a wiry warrior with two jagged hatchets who created blur with his frenzied swings in the arena. The swordsman desperately blocked one strike after another, but he was soon drowned in the avalanche of attacks. One of the hatchets snuck behind the guard and cut off the swordsman's arm, and from there the result was a foregone conclusion. The arena erupted in cheers as the Hatchetman held a decapitated head in the air triumphantly.

A man donning a gentle expression sat beneath a tree in a glade, carving an intricate figurine with the sharp tip at the edge of a grisly war axe. One could have thought he used a small engraving knife judging by the intricate details of the wood carving. But a snap of the twig brought the man out from his reverie, and he looked up

to see a group of beasts encroaching on his domain. The congenial face was instantly swapped with one of fury, and the axe started to drip with blood as he lifted it toward its targets.

The warlord laughed maniacally as she decapitated one warrior after another with a swing of her axe. She had some time ago forgotten how to use a shield as she was consumed by her bloodlust, and she instead used it to cave in skulls or break bones. Her axe keened with its master's glee, and the two created a song of madness and fury as they roved the battlefield together.

One scene after another flashed past Zac's eyes, showing all kinds of axe-wielding warriors in the midst of battle. Some relied on raw strength while others on speed as they launched furious swings at their enemies.

Some had fused their axework with various elements, often ones rife with destruction. Flames and blood were common traits, as were wind. But one of the more powerful warriors shown actually seemed to use insight into the Dao of Space as his swings could pass right through a mountain to hit the target hiding on the other side.

There were also some unexpected usages of the axe. One vision showed a man wielding what looked like a halberd like it was a massive paintbrush, and he drew large fractals in the air with the weave of his weapon that unleashed massive attacks. Another one used hundreds of small flying axes that rapidly spun around him like a swarm of angry wasps.

There was a clear inclination toward certain types of elements and styles of battle though, which Zac felt made sense as not all Daos fit equally well with the characteristics of an axe. Some had created successful systems that stood out from the norm, but most followed the pattern of a blood-soaked warrior, just like himself.

However, Zac started to frown when he didn't sense any insights coming from the barrage of visions. He was starting to wake up and it was usually at this point that he would incorporate the visions into his Dao, pushing it one step further. There was no resonance and no Dao Stars descending on him to push his fragment to middle grade. It was almost like he had just watched an action movie.

It was cool, but it didn't connect to him on a deeper level. Zac kept trying to grasp onto something to spark an epiphany, but he reluctantly had to give up after an hour after the vision ended. He looked up with a frown, unsure what had gone wrong.

Was it because of the Tower?

He had already known since the start that improving one's Dao within the tower was pretty much impossible. Time dilation cut one's connection to the 'heavens' as Ogras explained it, and Zac immediately understood what he meant after his first real battle.

There was usually a resonance to his actions when he fought, like his moves and attacks contained a deeper truth. But that was completely missing inside the tower. The Daos still worked just fine, but everything felt hollow for lack of a better word. This didn't affect the strength of the Daos or his skills, but it was simply impossible to move his Dao Fragments forward this way.

It was so bad that he was even pretty sure that he wouldn't be able to gain anything after exiting the Tower. He had initially thought he could fight a couple of harsh battles inside the Tower, and then ponder on the fights outside. But he had already realized that this was likely a fool's dream.

There were no sparks of insight born through battle in the tower, and the Dao was clouded for him. And perhaps this was what had ruined his vision bestowed from his class. Had he missed the opportunity to push one his Dao Fragments to middle grade because he had pushed one of his Skills to the Peak while inside the tower?

It would be extremely frustrating if that was the case, but Zac had some reason to believe that there was something else in play. Ogras had already said that you could benefit from things such as Dao Treasures while inside the tower, even though the effect was worse than outside. The Treasure itself contained Origin Dao, which allowed him to move his Dao Seeds forward even inside the time chamber provided he had the necessary insights to match.

It should have worked the same way with the Vision, as it was an epiphany brought by his class. But there was not even a hint of pushing his Dao forward, which made Zac a bit suspicious there was another possibility. What if it wasn't a Dao vision?

The skill [**Axe Mastery**] was essentially a basic training skill that would allow him to gain a fundamental understanding of his weapon, and reaching the peak meant that he had completed the basic training course. But that didn't mean he had mastered the art of the axe.

He was still just a beginner, a brute who fought more with his attributes than any sort of mastery of his weapon. What if the vision was a way for him to gain inspiration as to how to move forward from his basic mastery. It showed him various masters who had forged their respective paths with the axe, opening a world of possibilities for him.

That might have been the first step in attaining the Fragment of the Axe if one followed the normal proceedings. He would first master [**Axe Mastery**], and from the vision gain inspiration on how to improve his combat further. That would eventually lead to an insight that could form a Dao Fragment. But he had skipped this normal path due to his access to all the Origin Dao on Earth and the Dao Funnel.

Or perhaps he was simply deluding himself to make himself feel better, Zac thought with a sigh. But he felt he wasn't all that far off from the mark with his guess. He would have heard about a second vision by now if there was such a thing as the Mastery-skills were extremely common.

He wasn't in any mood to ponder on his Daos or the Vision any longer in either case, and he instead took out one of his information packets instead. He perused them a little whenever he was free or when he needed to clear his head. This time he once again looked at the package that broached the subject of Arcane Classes.

The restrictions for attaining an Arcane class still felt distant even after gaining his Second Dao Fragment due to the lucky encounter with the calamitous Lotus. The most basic requirement was a Medium Mastery Dao Fragment, but that was just the start.

Zac had until recently felt that achievements wouldn't be a bottleneck for someone like him. He had achieved almost the impossible by rising up as a terrifying Progenitor who had snatched up most of the titles on Earth. Not only that, he somehow had gained dual races and classes, pushing his power and attributes to shocking levels.

Those advantages had snowballed into a list of achievements that would probably even shock the scions of the powerful clans in the Base Town. How many would be able to close multiple incursions in a week, while fighting all alone?

However, Zac had been thinking about achievements too shallowly. The most important facet of gaining the fabled rank of an Arcane Master is not defeating strong enemies or accumulating a large number of titles. It is about creation, about a spark of genius that opens up new avenues.

Zac grimaced when he reread the snippet from the information package he bought the other day. This seemingly innocuous paragraph almost felt like it was targeted right at him. It would appear that the largest bottleneck to gain an arcane class wouldn't be his Dao Fragments, but rather this part.

*What is creation? It is about leading rather than following, a desire to push boundaries further and reach a higher sky. If you simply follow a Heritage to get stronger you have likely already failed. Each Arcane Master is unique, a genius across the eons.*

*How can one reach the peak by mindlessly following others?*

The words resonated deeply with Zac, and he was doubly thankful that he had come to the Tower in the end.

Until now he'd kept moving forward with a reactive mindset. He had been thrown into this messy reality unwillingly and had tried to make the best of the situation one decision at a time. He had tried to be proactive when he chose his Undying Bulwark Class, but his lack of knowledge had still made it backfire a bit.

He was still pretty sure it was mostly fine though, as it was obvious that he could steer the class in other directions more suited for his cultivation path.

It was only after meeting Yrial he got a proper cultivation path and started to think about cultivation from a long-term perspective as well. But even then he simply followed Yrial's path and modified it for his two classes. His master had walked the path of a cycle, and Zac followed in tow without thinking too deeply about it.

That wasn't to say that his path of life and death was bad. He still felt it was the by far best option considering his unique situation. But was there really a need to create a cyclic change as Yrial did with fire and ice?

He needed to figure out something that would be perfect for himself if he wanted to have a shot at an Arcane class. Or was the path he had devised already good enough to be considered a 'creation' as the information packet described? Zac's instincts told him that wasn't the case.

But try as he might, Zac couldn't just conjure a unique path out of thin air. His foundations were too shallow for something like this. Perhaps the old Abbot could do it as he was obviously a great genius in the Dao of Karma, but Zac wasn't talented in that way. He could only pray that getting pushed to the limits over the following months inside the Tower would open a path for him, something great enough in the System's eyes.

For now, he would focus on what he could do. His skills were the most obvious apart from getting better acquainted with his Daos. He opened up his skill window the first time in a while to take a look.

#### **Normal Skills**

##### **Proficiency**

##### **Description**

Inquisitive Eye

Early

See through their secrets. Upgradeable

Book of Babel

-

Enlightenment through understanding.

Mental Fortress

Late

Enduring Stability. Upgradeable

Thousand Faces

-

If you hate who you are, change it. Upgradeable

Nature's Barrier

Late

Brave thousand storms with Gaia's protection. Upgradeable

Beauty Yrial's Great Transformation Skill

-

If only this skill could fix your face as well.

**Class Skills**

**Proficiency**

**Description**

Axe Mastery

Peak

The seed of Dao is planted. Upgradeable.

Chop

Peak

There is greatness in simplicity.

Forester's Constitution

Middle

Man and Nature, one entity. Upgradeable.

Loamwalker

Late

Trod the unbroken path. Upgradeable.

Nature's Punishment

Peak

Awaken the wrath of the world. Upgradeable.

Hatchetman's Rage

Late

Burn with the vengeance of a forest fire. Upgradeable.

Deforestation

Middle

Their army is the forest and you are the Hatchetman. Upgradeable

Hatchetman's Spirit

Early

Oneness with nature. Upgradeable.

He had to admit his success was pretty varied and random. He was still only on Middle proficiency at **[Forester's Constitution]**, but he had already reached Peak with **[Nature's Punishment]**. Meanwhile, **[Cyclic Strike]** wasn't even added to the list because he hadn't even reached early proficiency yet.

Zac had also been shocked to see that Hatchetman's Rage had skipped Middle proficiency entirely to jump to late-stage after his rage-out at the Zethaya Pill House.

It seemed that his Splinter had greatly assisted him in his skills related to anger, as many of his recent gains had come from the Splinter pushing his rage to new levels. First, it was witnessing Alea falling in battle, and then it was the battle in Base Town.

Even Deforestation had jumped one grade, which had to be considered a great speed of advancement since he had only used the skill a handful of times.

It was great that the splinter also provided some benefits, but made him slightly leery. He didn't want to rely too much on anger when fighting, even though it boosted his strength. But rampaging was what beasts did, and Zac didn't want to prove Ogras right by turning into an actual Netherbeast. He felt he had at least a decent head on his set of shoulders, and he should try to apply it to his fighting.

Or was he better off leaning into the anger?

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**Chapter 409 - Fermentation**

Zac quickly discarded the thought of letting his anger take the wheel. That felt like a great way to become a raving lunatic, especially with the splinter still in his head. He would gladly take the upgrades it provided him, but he didn't want to rely on it any more than that.

The splinter only helped with a scant few of his skills though, and a few other skills showed disappointing progress. Inquisitive Eye was still stuck on early proficiency, which didn't really surprise Zac. He no longer used it since it had essentially become superfluous for him. There was no point in using it on weak enemies, and strong enemies were too powerful for the skill to work on them.

He had tried to purchase the ocular skill Galau used, but the youth didn't possess the actual crystal. He had bought the skill from a Skill House on his home planet, which essentially was like an open Dao Repository.

Warriors short on cash could spend some time working in conjunction with the inscribers of the Skill House to produce skill crystals, and the remuneration would depend on the quality of the skill and the number of uses the crystals contained in the end.

The subject of Skill Crystals had always made Zac a bit confused, especially the high price they commanded. He had always wondered why they weren't cheaper. Couldn't you just copy the skill a thousand times and sell it across the multi-verse? Such a thing would no doubt push the price down from the exorbitant prices they had today.

But it was through Galau he finally realized that creating skill crystals was extremely arduous. First, it needed the owner of the skill to have completely mastered it. Just reaching the peak of the skill wasn't enough, one needed to know its ins and outs completely to the point that it almost came like breathing to them.

Secondly, it required a skilled inscriber to translate the insights of the warrior into an inscription embedded in the crystal. The two had to work together for months, sometimes even years for high-grade skills, to create the crystal, creating a huge opportunity cost.

Of course, this process could be somewhat sped up if the inscriber and the warrior were the one and the same. In fact, many wandering cultivators learned the basics of inscriptions for this very reason. If they ever found themselves hard on cash they could spend some time refining a skill crystal or two. It wasn't as good money as hunting powerful beasts, but it also didn't put your life at risk.

Some even traveled the multiverse collecting popular skills in order to learn them and resell crystals at other planets for a profit. The fact that skill crystals usually only lasted for a couple of uses guaranteed a constant demand as well, as long as the skill was strong enough.

Inheritance crystals like the one in his Dao Repository were far rarer, and they required extremely expensive materials to not deteriorate after a skill fractal was extracted. It also required a peak D-Grade inscriber at the least, and it wasn't something some hobby inscriber could create. The Inheritance Crystals in the Tower of Myriad Dao was no doubt the result of a labor of love that took the original Brazla centuries to complete.

As for the other lacking skills like **[Forester's Constitution]** and **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, Zac wasn't really sure how to progress them. Forester's Constitution had only upgraded once, and it was while he ran through the corrupted forests of the Dead Zone. Since then there had been no improvements in the skill, making Zac believe it might need constant exposure to various forests to progress.

Unfortunately, that wasn't something he could train on command, and he could only hope that some of the following levels would take place in locations that would benefit the skills. As for **[Hatchetman's Sprit]**, he had no idea how to improve it just yet.

For now it looked like he was done with his training session, and it would probably be more efficient to delve deeper into his Daos on the higher floors. Zac got back to his feet and quickly made his way back to the small town some distance from the valley that the Church had turned into a temporary command central.

"How goes the investigations?" an acolyte standing guard asked as Zac approached.

"I think I may have found a lead," Zac answered off-handedly. "But I need to confer with my associates."

"That's great!" the acolyte exclaimed. "Your colleagues are currently meditating in your courtyard."

Zac nodded and walked toward his courtyard, where he found Galau going over the haul from the past floors while scribbling in a book. His focus was so great that he only noticed Zac's return when he stood right next to him.

"Oh? You're back?" Galau asked. "Are you taking a break or are we done with this level?"

"I have accomplished what I needed here. I will probably go higher if I want to improve my other skills," Zac said. "Where's Ogras?"

"He's out back with the barrels. He might actually have a talent for brewery," the youth said.

"Who knows?" Zac smiled. "He might change vocations as well."

"Did you find anything about the corruption?" Galau asked.

"I found a spot in the valley with much denser energies compared to the rest, the source is probably around there, but we might need your eyes to pinpoint the source. I also have an idea of how to deal with it," Zac said as he walked toward the back of the house.

But he suddenly stopped in his tracks and turned to Galau.

"Are you familiar with mastery-skills?" Zac asked.

"Of course, why do you ask?" Galau asked with confusion. "I have the **[Sword Mastery]** due to my class."

"I just reached peak proficiency and was shown a bunch of visions. But I didn't gain any Dao insight from it. Is that because of the Tower?" Zac asked, some worry creeping back into his heart.

"Dao vision?" Galau repeated before he shook his head. "No, the mastery skill doesn't provide that. The visions simply give various examples of how you can further

your studies, but it's not required to follow. If you have a Heritage you'll simply follow that instead."

Zac sighed in relief, realizing he had been correct with his guess. He thanked the youth and went around the back of the building the church had allocated for them.

"What the-“ Zac exclaimed the moment he walked around the corner, as the whole backyard was filled with over a dozen massive barrels, each holding hundreds of liters of liquor.

"Just how much did you buy in the Base Camp?" Zac asked with shock as he walked up to a vat to smell the fragrance.

"Half of it was bought inside the Tower, remember the 21st level? It was dirt cheap over there," Ogras smiled. "I am experimenting and trying to improve my odds of keeping my stuff."

"How's so?" Zac asked with interest.

"Refined items have a higher chance of staying in your Cosmos Sack when leaving this place, but I have no skills in refinement. So I throw various things into the vats to see what will happen," the demon explained and pointed at the bottom of the large vat in front of Zac. "Look inside."

Zac threw Ogras an amused look before he peered into the bottom of the massive container, and his brows rose when he realized just how wasteful the demon was. Apart from a few handfuls of various Spiritual Herbs they had picked up along the climb there were dozens of small shimmering balls lying at the bottom.

"Are those the longevity pearls we found?" Zac said with surprise.

"Yes, that is now my 'Ten-thousand-year wine'. I am sure it will be a great hit," the demon said with glee.

"You know people will think that the wine has been fermented for ten thousand years if you call it that?" Zac snorted.

"Exactly, which will allow me to charge me more for it. Not my fault they don't know their wine," the demon shrugged.

Zac was about to refute, but he honestly didn't know what to say. Instead, he could only change the subject to why he came back here.

"I'm done with things here," Zac said. "I think I will need to find real enemies if I want to improve my other skills. What about you? I haven't seen you working on your skills at all."

"I got my class twelve years ago. Even if I was hiding my amazing talents from my family, most of my skills would have reached the peak by now," the demon said with a roll of his eyes. "Only the new skills I got at level 75 remain, but those will not improve because I activate them among some trash monkeys."

Zac nodded and took out and looked at the Tower Token. It had been inside a fortified bag that ran along the small of his back the entire time, as it wasn't possible to put inside a Cosmos Sack for some reason. It was a truly mysterious item. He had clearly crushed it to arrive at this place, but he found it back on his waist in perfect condition when he arrived at the Base Town.

It looked mostly the same, with one side covered in inscriptions. But since he entered the tower there was also a small corner that said how long he had stayed inside. It was written in some general script that was widely used across the multiverse. Zac still didn't really master the language just yet, but he at least knew the numbers.

Twelve days had passed since they entered, meaning roughly 3 hours had passed in the outside world. Had things calmed down on the outside now, or was a whole army

already stationed and waiting outside the tower? The bounty had remained on his head all this time after all according to Ogras.

“I know that look,” Ogras snorted as he placed a heavy lid on one vat after another before he stowed them away in his Cosmos Sack. “Just focus on the climb. We can’t do anything about what’s going on outside, apart from climbing as high as possible.”

“You’re right,” Zac sighed.

The three set out from the town in short order, and Zac led them to the area where he had found the high concentration of corruption. Zac kept his Dao Field out at all times as he was tired of fighting the monkeys, and they arrived at the spot uncontested. But when they were a few hundred meters from where Zac guessed the source was Ogras stopped with a sour expression.

“I won’t go closer than this. That energy is wreaking havoc in my body, any closer and it will get annoying to cleanse,” Ogras explained with a frown. “You’ll have to deal with this alone.”

Zac looked over at Galau who looked pretty bad as well, even though he had produced some sort of talisman that cleansed the area around them. It looked like he wouldn’t be able to use his ocular skills to figure things out.

“It’s fine, I’ll do it,” Zac shrugged. “But you’ll have to deal with the monkeys after I leave.”

His target was a large black boulder that seemed placed there rather than a natural part of the valley, but as Zac walked a few circles around it he couldn’t figure out what was so special about it. There were no inscriptions on it, and he couldn’t find any other signs it had been tampered with either. So why did it emit such nasty energies?

“Just break it,” Ogras shouted from the distance as he sliced a frenzied monkey into pieces. “These bastards won’t relent while you are over there.”

Zac nodded and went back to do what he did best. Why bother wracking his brain when one good punch would do the trick?

One massive slam was all it took for the boulder to be reduced into rubble, and Zac started to sift through the wreckage for clues. It only took him a few seconds as a thick black haze shrouded a particular piece of the rubble, and even Zac started to feel the effects of the corruption even though he ran the Fragment of the Coffin to the fullest.

He could probably destroy the source with a swing of his axe, but curiosity got the better of him and he walked over to get a better look at the object. A quick inspection from the distance made it clear it was some sort of fossilized bug that had turned into what looked like onyx unless it was an extremely lifelike sculpture.

The bug was slightly larger than a baseball and appeared to have three sets of wings and six sets of legs, making it diverge from the beasts of Earth. It was also evidently clear that it was long dead, so why did it emit such terrifying energies?

“Please hurry, the corruption is getting dangerous!” Galau shouted from the distance.

Zac shrugged and threw fossil or statue into his Spatial Ring, and it joined all the other foreign objects he had collected over the past 20-odd levels. The moment he stowed away the bug the corruption in the area started to dissipate almost immediately, allowing Ogras and Galau to relax a bit.

Was it that easy?

Perhaps it wasn't meant for people to be completely immune to the effects on this floor, but they rather had to figure out a way to destroy the item from a distance. Zac looked over at the other two, and Ogras shrugged as he pointed at the array that had appeared among the rubble from the boulder. Zac shrugged before he joined the two as they moved on to the final level of the third floor.

This time they found themselves on a set of expansive steppes and the only break from the sea of tall grass was a small nomadic village in the distance.

**[Challenge the chieftain for the defining treasure of the tribe.]**

"You can wait here," Zac said as he started to walk toward the village, but he was suddenly stopped by Ogras.

"Wait, let me do this one."

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 410 - Heartless**

"Looking down on me, will you?" Ogras muttered to himself while cracking his neck as he moved toward the village. "I still remember you running around in a bloody dress like a lunatic."

Ogras had seen the look in his eyes, and the words of caution had sounded like some elder cautioning children to not run too close to the Barghest pit.

Of course, Ogras knew that Zac's remarks came from a place of concern, but it was a stark reminder that the gap between the two kept widening. It felt like there was an untapped and unceasing wellspring of potential inside that monster's body, and if the man didn't evolve soon he'd start fighting D-Grade Powerhouses.

Just a few months ago Ogras had still felt confident in defeating him if he went all out and utilized some underhanded tactics. But now? He didn't even dare think about it. If Ogras wasn't mistaken the guy actually possessed two Fragments now on top of his already monstrous body. And if that wasn't enough he had enough Luck to bend reality around him in his favor.

Was the man the second coming of The First Defier? Would he also rip the heavens in two while still being a piddling mortal less than a hundred years old?

Ogras could only snort at his wild imagination and refocus on the task at hand. He had spoken with vigor just now, but he truly wasn't completely confident in taking on this task. Judging by everything he knew of the trial he believed that the 3rd floor shouldn't prove too difficult with his recent improvements, but he couldn't be sure.

"I fed you so many good things you asshole, you better contribute to your daddy today," Ogras muttered as he tapped the metal casing around his shadowlimb with his spear.

A subdued shudder made the metal cast hum for a bit, but Ogras couldn't tell if the annoying critter living in his shadows agreed or not. But the thing hadn't actively worked against him during battle at least, and it mostly seemed somewhat cooperative.

Now if it could only stop trying to possess him as well, then everything would be swell.

At least the creature came with some benefits now. Using the **[Fruit of Bonding]** had actually turned it into a registered companion, which was a lot better than the

crude way that asshole had stitched their souls together. It even came with a small attribute bonus now, boosting both Dexterity and Intelligence.

**Name**

**Ogras Azh'Rezak**

**Level**

**75**

**Class**

**[F-Rare] Shadowblade**

**Race**

**[E] Demon**

**Alignment**

**[Earth] Port Atwood**

**Manual**

**[F] Grey World Mudra [14%]**

**Titles**

**Demon Slayer I, Adventurer, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Tower of Eternity - 3rd floor, Betrayer, One Against Many, Butcher, Chosen of Dao, Invasion Breaker, The First Step, Beastmaster**

**Limited Titles**

**Astral Pond - 20m**

**Dao**

**Fragment of the Umbra - Early, Seed of Mirage - Middle**

**Companion**

**[F] Ka'Zur Planeswalker**

**Strength**

**272 [Increase: 8%. Efficiency: 100%]**

**Dexterity**

**541 [Increase: 23%. Efficiency: 105%]**

**Endurance**

**148 [Increase: 8%. Efficiency: 100%]**

**Vitality**

**99 [Increase: 8%. Efficiency: 100%]**

**Intelligence**

**108 [Increase: 13%. Efficiency: 100%]**

**Wisdom**

**69 [Increase: 8%. Efficiency: 100%]**

**Luck**

**49 [Increase: 8%. Efficiency: 100%]**

**Free Points**

**0**

**Nexus Coins**

**[F] 480 687 176**

His title screen might not match up to that brute, but Ogras still felt a sense of accomplishment as he looked over his attributes. He had superseded even his most optimistic calculations by over 30%, mostly thanks to his Fragment and new titles.

He had even passed his dream-goal of hitting 500 Dexterity without eschewing his Strength in a bid to get a better class. Just the thought of evolution almost made his hand twitch in anticipation. He had kept himself from checking the crystal after the experience with the funnel, not wanting to let himself become complacent in this place.

The mediocre start to his path of cultivation would require a long time to correct, and he needed to eke out every advantage he could get. Upgrading his Tower Title was the first step, and next he needed to sniff out some Limited Titles to fill out his quota and boost his somewhat pitiful number of mid-grade Titles.

He was truthfully a bit surprised he hadn't heard of any leads on Earth. Had that odd Mystic Realm pushed aside all the smaller ones that usually globbed onto a newly integrated planet? It would be nice if they could get their hands on a Trial Array, like his family's Astral Pond. But the chances of that happening before they evolved were pretty slim.

Besides, such arrays could take years to set up, and even if MacKenzie had shown shocking skill with arrays it required deeper insights. He remembered that their pond had taken the ancestors 80 years to create after expending countless treasures.

It seemed unlikely he would gain any new titles before he evolved, but such was life. His vision had been broadened lately, but that didn't mean he could become greedy. Hopefully, Zac would get one as a reward by The Ruthless Heavens after gaining control of the whole baby planet.

Ogras threw a last look back at Zac and their mobile crystal mine before he went toward the barbarian camp. A large humanoid chieftain holding two massive scimitars walked out to meet him, and he only roared as he slammed the flat side against his bare chest, creating a sound that resembled the call of the Azh'Kir'Khat war drums.

"Hey there," Ogras hollered with a smile. "If you would be so kind to hand over your defining treasure then we'll be on our way!"

"You want to claim the Whisk of O'Chagga, stonewalker?" the man shouted. "The spirits won't allow such sacrilege!"

The demon could help but blanch at the corny situation, but the mention of the whisk made him perk up. Such a thing would obviously go to himself since he was the one who fought. Who knew? It might turn out to be something valuable.

And if not, perhaps it could be crushed and thrown into one of his vats. He had never drunk liquor infused with ancestral spirits, should be quite the experience.

But now was not the time to think of such matters. He had gained a lot lately, and it was time to put it to the test. This was not only a battle against the Tower or some dumb barbarian, it was a battle against himself. Against the version of himself who had cowed in the distance and who had only been able to look at a battle of this caliber with jealousy.

The ground suddenly rumbled, and Ogras looked over with a frown to see a large tiger rush over, each leap taking it over twenty meters forward. Had that god damn barbarian actually tricked him? That posturing with slamming his blades was actually to call his mount?

Shadowspears immediately rose out of the ground to skewer the animal while a few also shot toward the barbarian's eyes in an effort to distract him. The appearance of some prehistoric beast was an unwelcome addition to an already tense situation, and Ogras wanted to deal with it as quickly as possible.

The reflexes of the beast were nothing to scoff at though, and a few frenzied swipes destroyed most of the spears, with only a few managing to create shallow

wounds in its flank. Ogras tsked in annoyance when he saw the tiger successfully join the barbarian who jumped onto its back.

“The treachery of a stonewalker, as expected,” the barbarian roared, a line of green blood running down his face from a wound to his left cheek.

Ogras didn't bother answering as he immediately infused Cosmic Energy into the large fractal covering his shoulder blades. There was no point in holding back against his enemy, and he decided to activate **[Grey World Arbiter]** immediately.

It would be a bit embarrassing if he fought a long and arduous battle on the third floor after talking big and wide. It would make him look like a wastrel that ran his mouth based on someone else's strength. The two large wings grew out from the fractals and he felt power entering his body as he rose to the sky, and he immediately launched a barrage of shadows at his landbound foe.

“Coward!” the barbarian roared when he saw Ogras move outside the reach of his beast.

Ogras snickered as he infused his spear with shadows to launch a **[Shadowlance]**, but he barely had time to start the infusion before a storm of wind blades rippled toward him as the chieftain frenziedly swung his two scimitars in front of him.

The blades were a bit reminiscent of Zac's axe-blades, but they were extremely thin and had a pale yellow hue that resembled the long dried stalks of grass covering the plains they stood on. The blades flew toward him with pretty annoying speed, and worse yet was that the attacks acted just like blades of grass in a storm, swaying back and forth in an unpredictable manner.

But Ogras had no problems playing that game. Darkness swallowed him as he activated **[Darkside]** to enter the Grey World, allowing him to move with a speed that almost seemed like teleportation to outsiders. He flashed back and forth, but he felt his connection with the Grey World weakening.

It seemed that the vast plains' connection to the grey world was pretty weak, which wasn't surprising with the lack of permanent shadows due to the even terrain. But it was enough for him to move behind him the chieftain, and he immediately launched a strike toward the nape of the man's neck.

Hitting the head increased the likelihood of a lethal strike as it was a larger target, but a head could be swung away with a wider arc than the neck itself. But the panther's muscles rippled the moment Ogras appeared, and the two moved away with shocking speed, barely avoiding the lance of condensed shadows that ripped through the air.

“Ancestors!” the chieftain roared as he looked at Ogras with some fear in his eyes for the first time, and the air above him shuddered.

A massive, but hazy, projection of a warrior wielding a spear condensed above him, and it emanated a pressure that even superseded the warrior himself. Ogras groaned in annoyance as he watched the huge man turn his spear toward him.

Cultivators relying on ancestral protection were pretty annoying, as they had the ability to call on their long-dead ancestors. As more old goats died over the years the ancestral spirits only got stronger, making the current chieftains harder and harder to deal with.

Luckily such classes were pretty rare in the multiverse as there were hefty downsides to this system. Venerating your ancestors to this degree put mental blocks in your mind, making them gods and yourself a mortal. Surpassing them became almost impossible, which created gradually declining bloodlines.

Besides, such cultivation systems had other weaknesses as well. Ogras' mouth widened in a bloodthirsty smile as the straps holding his cast together snapped open and the metallic container fell to the ground.

A massive sea of shadows spread across the grassy fields, washing out the colors in the area. But Ogras didn't instruct the shadows to head toward the massive guardian in the sky, but rather created a grey tsunami that rippled toward the small village to the side.

"You!" the chieftain roared in anger, and the whole area shook as the fury of the ancestor ignited.

Screams from children could be heard from the village as weak shields were erected by warriors who had stood by to witness the battle of their chief and spiritual pillar. But the expressions in their eyes indicated they didn't hold much confidence in rebuffing the storm of shadows that threatened to consume the whole village.

The huge projection in the air suddenly exploded in a flash of yellow light, and a massive shield sprung up around the village that easily rebuffed the wave of shadows. It was like the sea of shadows tried to swallow a sun, but the blinding light quickly drained the shadows of their strength, destroying most and forcing the rest to flee.

The ancestral guardian had sacrificed his form to keep his descendants safe, while the air around the chieftain distorted as he seemed to charge up a massive attack directed at Ogras who sneered at him from a safe distance.

A pitch-black arm suddenly emerged from the chest of the chieftain, holding a still-beating heart in its hand. The Ogras who hovered in the air slowly faded, as the true Ogras rose out of the chieftain's shadows. The mount roared in anger when it sensed the fate of its master on its back, but a massive explosion from the shadows beneath blasted open the panther's belly, spreading its innards all over the ground.

The Seed of Mirage and some misdirection had allowed him to launch a quick strike to end it all, and the massive collision of energies had distracted the sharp senses of the panther for long enough to move himself and his explosive array close enough to strike.

"Relying...on.. despicable tactics... heartless," the man coughed out as his mouth filled with blood.

"Perhaps, but I am alive and you are dead," Ogras smiled as he crushed the heart and released a burst of shadows that rampaged inside the body of the dying warrior, instantly killing him.

"If the Heavens are heartless, why shouldn't I be the same?"

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**Chapter 411 - War**

Zac witnessed the battle with a small frown, and the screams and cries of the villagers in the distance felt extremely discordant in his ears. His eyes followed Ogras as he looted the fallen Warrior and even put the mangled remains of his mount in his Cosmos Sack before he returned.

"Why did you have to do it like that?" Zac asked as the demon walked up to them. "You could have won in a head-on fight as well."

“But the risk to my wellbeing would increase,” Ogras answered with a refreshing smile as he refastened his metal casing around the congealed shadows. “Besides, I knew he would choose to protect the village rather than attack me. Those kinds of bloodline warriors have extremely close-knit communities.”

“Still,” Zac sighed but didn’t press the matter further.

It wasn’t his business how Ogras fought, and he knew that the demon was simply using smoke and mirrors with his shadow-wave, rather than actually trying to kill the children in the village. The demon knew as well as the others that killing innocents would likely cause a real mess.

The still gave Zac a bad taste in his mouth as it reminded him of the Flame Golem’s attempt to kill his army back in the Underworld with the wave of lava. It was an ‘anything-goes’ attitude to battle that was unnecessary in a place like this. Ogras didn’t even push himself to his fullest, and even if he failed Zac could step in to defeat the chieftain.

“That weak heart of yours will be the death of you one day,” Ogras snorted as he looked over a whisk he had looted from the body of his enemy.

“Let’s just go,” Zac said as he turned toward the array, engraving the hateful stares of the villagers in his heart.

“Remember, please hurry,” Galau said as he followed Zac.

“We know,” Zac nodded. “Though I think you’ll do just fine on your own if in a pinch. Your skill with the sword is pretty impressive.”

“Remember, the agreement said 32<sup>nd</sup> level, not the fourth floor,” Galau entreated. “And I have the option of buying further levels if needed.”

“What’s the point of that?” Zac asked curiously “We can’t take you past the fourth floor anyway.”

This was something he and Ogras had already decided. They wouldn’t risk their climb by adding Galau to the penalty of the fifth floor and beyond. They would take him to the floor before the floor guardian at highest, and continue alone from there on out.

“He doesn’t want to stay on a bad level for months,” Ogras explained. “Remember the 24<sup>th</sup> level?”

Understanding dawned on Zac’s face as he recalled that wretched level. The 24<sup>th</sup> level took place inside a swamp teeming with all kinds of disgusting bugs, huge ferocious eels, and pockets of poisonous gases. Their objective had been to find a flower, and Galau had pulled out one treasure after another in order to escape that cursed place as quickly as possible.

“That’s fine,” Zac agreed. “We’ll hurry.”

The fourth floor was like the third, but worse. There was no longer any point in color-coding the flares, as they would almost always be thrown into the thick of it according to the merchant. That’s why the merchant wanted to remind them to not dally around wherever they started.

“About the price…” Galau ventured.

“We’ll discuss it when we get there,” the demon smiled.

Zac nodded in agreement, as that felt like a matter that should be discussed when they got there. What if the 32<sup>nd</sup> level was the same as the 24<sup>th</sup>? They’d be able to make a killing if that was the case. The three stepped onto the platform as they had so many times before, and Zac once again found himself in the black space.

**[Third Floor Complete. Upgrading Title.]**

**[Choose Reward: Longevity Medicine, Race Medicine, Energy Medicine]**

Zac didn't immediately make his choice, and instead opened his status screen. He had already learned that the black space had an even more dilated time-space. He could spend a few minutes inside with less than a minute passing outside, allowing him to go over the gains before entering whatever mess the fourth floor would bring.

So Zac ignored the prompt with the quest reward and instead opened his status screen.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**75**

**Class**

**[F-Rare] Hatchetman**

**Race**

**[E] Human**

**Alignment**

**[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor**

**Limited Titles**

**Frontrunner**

**Dao**

**Fragment of the Axe - Early, Fragment of the Coffin - Early, Seed of Trees - Peak, Seed of Sanctuary - Peak**

**Core**

**[F] Duplicity**

**Strength**

**861 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 147%]**

**Dexterity**

**429 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]**

**Endurance**

**1244 [Increase: 76%. Efficiency: 147%]**

**Vitality**

**649 [Increase: 61%. Efficiency: 140%]**

**Intelligence**

**232 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]**

**Wisdom**

**335 [Increase: 45%. Efficiency: 140%]**

**Luck**

**198 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 140%]**

**Free Points**

0

Nexus Coins

[F] 2 966 111 618

[Tower of Eternity - 3rd Floor: Reach the 28th level of the Tower of Eternity.  
Reward: All Attributes +10]

He had already known what the title would reward after discussing it with the other two, but he still felt the title was simply amazing. They had just passed the third floor and the title already gave as large a flat boost as any other title he had accumulated. His other titles giving a similar amount of attributes had required far greater accomplishments than beating three pretty easy floors.

Just take the Eastern Trigram Hunt, for example. He had been pushed to and beyond his limits multiple times, yet that title was only marginally better than the one for the Tower of Eternity. The other one, [Progenitor Hegemon], was given to him for becoming the first Lord on Earth, which only came about after defeating the three hordes.

Even the attribute points given for just defeating the Second Floor had been pretty generous in Zac's opinion. It had changed the +5 in three specific attributes to +5 to all attributes.

The ten flat attributes didn't do much for Zac, apart from the boost to his Luck which was notoriously hard to improve, but the boost should be huge for most people who came to the Tower. He knew that the average warrior only had between 20 and 40 Luck all combined, so buying a carry to the third floor could essentially increase your Luck with up to 50%.

Just the boost to Luck was worth almost any price in Zac's opinion. Better yet, as they progressed they would move on to percentage-based boosts while still keeping the flat bonuses. As long as Zac conquered the 6<sup>th</sup> floor the title would be the best one he had, perhaps with the exception of [Luck of the Draw] that provided a huge amount of Luck.

Apart from the improved title there was nothing worth noting in the status screen. His Nexus Coins had increased with a couple of million since he entered the Tower, but that was about it. He felt he was closing in on the limits of what he could gain while remaining in F-Grade. The only thing that remained was the final improvements to his Dao and getting as good a Title as possible.

He needed to at least complete his Life-Attuned fragment, and he felt he had a good chance of doing that through forming the Projection the moment he left the Tower of Eternity. According to Galau the effect of forming a Projection was even superior to witnessing it from up-close, and if he could form one Seed from Reoluv's apparition, then he would no doubt be able to form another by creating one.

He closed down the screen and refocused on the available rewards since the Title was dealt with.

None of the three medicines would help him in the short run but were rather geared toward providing boosts after evolving. There were no names attached to the pills, unfortunately, not that there was a large chance for him to recognize the items even if the System provided them.

He immediately discarded the longevity medicine, and his eyes hovered between Race and Energy for a few seconds before he eventually picked Energy. He already had enough Race-related pills and treasures to improve his constitution considerably, which would also push his attribute limit far enough for it to not become a problem before he completed the transition.

Bursting open another node though would provide a direct boost to his strength after evolving, and perhaps the pills that the System provided had a lower amount of Pill Toxicity compared to the norm. Though he might just throw the pill into the Merit Exchange by this point. He had already accumulated a decent number of such pills, but there were only so many he could eat before even his sturdy body wouldn't be able to take it anymore.

He was no good to Earth if he ate so many pills that he became bedridden from the backlash of overindulging on Energy Pills.

The scenery around him quickly changed after he had made his choice, but Zac didn't even have time to look down at the vial in his hand as the surroundings rapidly darkened while his danger sense activated. Zac looked up to see that a massive boulder was descending upon him. His eyes widened in alarm and he flashed out of the way in the nick of time.

"Wake up soldier!" a gruff roar echoed from behind. "This is no time to daydream! Forward!"

Zac quickly oriented himself, only to realize he was in the middle of a massive battlefield. An allied army of various humanoid races fought what seemed to be an army consisting of devils. They were vaguely humanoid, but they couldn't be put into the same category as the demonkin as Zac saw it. They felt more like an intelligent beast horde as they came in all shapes and sizes, though uniting them all was the nasty sets of horns on their heads and the thick scales for protection.

Perhaps they were fallen dragonkin, Zac noted, but he knew too little about the races of the multiverse to be sure. But they wielded various weapons, and some also wore armor on top of the scales, so they were likely categorized like cultivators rather than beasts. The large boulder that almost turned him into paste was actually the head of a tyrannical warhammer that was wielded by an enormous twenty-meter monstrosity.

Similar titans could be seen all over the battlefield, and the ground rumbled as they slammed their weapons into the ground or the erected shields of the humanoid armies. What was even more worrying was that these huge devils were clearly out of his league. The auras they emitted were extremely heavy, and Zac guessed they were almost peak E-Grade. It seemed to Zac that the power was almost at the level that the Cyborg emitted toward the end before it shut down.

How the hell would he fight against something like that?

But he quickly realized that he wasn't alone in this fight, and the burden of fighting these things didn't fall on his shoulders. A young woman wielding a thin sword that was almost two meters long rose into the sky, and she unleashed a massive swing that seemed determined to cut the sky in two.

A meter-deep gash appeared on the chest of the devil, who stumbled a few dozen meters back while roaring in pain. Similar scenes took place all over the battlefield, with peak E-Grade warriors or mighty war arrays rising to meet the onslaught of the titans.

Meanwhile thousands of warriors filled the gaps between the peak warriors, creating a chaotic battle that stretched for kilometers in all directions. It was a lot less cramped compared to the chaotic fight for the Fruit of Ascension though, as all combatants were a lot more powerful here. The weakest were peak F-Grade, and all attacks caused shockwaves that rippled out for dozens of meters.

"Don't gawk at the Sword Saintess, brat! Do your job!" the voice from earlier echoed behind him, this time a lot closer.

Zac looked around to see a burly middle-aged dwarf who held two spiked hammers in his hands. He was obviously well into E-Grade as well, and judging by the number of insignias on his chest he was likely someone of a decent stature in this army.

“I’m sorry, I’m going now,” Zac said and hurried away, in no particular direction.

Was this how it felt to fight in an army with warriors far stronger than himself? He had seen such scenes in his visions, but it was a completely different thing to experience it himself. Some fear crept into his heart that he would be swept into the battle of one of the peak warriors, or that one of them would even earnestly try to kill him.

But more than that he felt a rush excitement. Things were finally heating up in the until now somewhat tame Tower.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 412 - Voidfire**

The gargantuan devil from earlier hadn’t seriously tried to kill Zac judging by the massive attacks they unleashed in their battle against the peak warrior from the allied army. It had only swung its weapon down without imbuing it with the Dao or any skill. Perhaps it had only considered him a bug to be squashed, and if it failed it didn’t really matter.

It was pretty disconcerting to get thrown into a mess like this, but he had a mission to fulfill. His eyes turned back and forth until he spotted a red flare in the distance. He immediately changed course and found Galau desperately fighting a group of the smallest devils that weren’t even as tall as a man.

Zac flashed over and made short work of the group with the help of a Dao-infused **[Chop]**, and none of the other cannon-fodder seemed willing to avenge their brethren for the time being.

“Have you seen Ogras?” Zac asked as he looked around.

“I’m right here, what took you so long?” a lackadaisical voice drifted out of Galau’s shadows as the demon appeared.

“You!” Galau stammered. “I could have died!”

“I was ready to help out if things turned bloody. You want to be a traveling merchant, right? I was helping you gain some experience. What if you meet highwaymen in the future? After fighting these guys it would be a breeze, no?” the demon laughed.

Galau spluttered for a bit, but a prompt cut short any chance of a rebuttal.

**[Aid the war efforts against the tide of the Verakh. Stop the activation of a [Voidfire Array], or deactivate an activated array.]**

The three barely had time to read the whole prompt before battle lust overcame the fear among the devils close-by, and a squad charged the three as they screeched at the top of their lungs.

“Who is the floor guardian in a scenario like this?” Zac asked as he cut a frenzied dragon beast in two. “There’s no way we can defeat the leader of this devil army.”

“The quest is to stop an array from being planted. So I guess that there is some Array master within our power level that we can kill. It’s not always completely clear in the beginning from here on out from what I’ve gathered, so I could be wrong,” the

demon shrugged. "I suggest we try for the quest. It seems somewhat doable, and we'll also find clues of the guardian. Better yet, it might net us a nasty Array."

"Agreed," Zac nodded.

The issue was how to find their target in a chaotic battlefield like this.

"The array is called an **[Voidfire Array]**. Can you see anything that fits the description on the battlefield?" Zac asked as he looked around.

"It sounds like an offensive array. Arrays like this are usually placed close to the frontlines to maximize power, but not at the very front as to avoid sabotage," Galau chimed in.

The trouble was that there was no clear divide indicating where the frontline was. The battlefield could almost be seen as hundreds of individual skirmishes between squads or powerhouses, with weaker combatants strewn in-between.

There were individuals of both camps almost all over to the point it was even difficult to discern which side each army came from. Perhaps it was a measure to avoid either side unleashing massive arrays that could decimate a large chunk of the army. Luckily there was a group of titans standing in a clump far in the distance, which meant that the enemy commanders were likely stationed there.

Similarly, there was a middle-aged man standing on a massive floating sword some ways behind them, overlooking the battlefield with a stern expression. It was probably the leader of the army they had been conscripted into, and he emanated a towering aura that could be sensed all the way over to where they stood.

"Don't look," Ogras said as he slapped Zac's shoulder with his spear. "We don't want any attention from the big bosses."

"I can't see anything that looks like Voidfire," Zac said. "Let's make our way toward the enemy camp."

The three formed a small squad where Zac took the front and Ogras the flanks as they steamrolled deeper into the army. Galau helped out by making sure they didn't get too close to any of the elites, which forced them to take a somewhat circuitous pathing.

After they had pushed forward for roughly 15 minutes Zac was forced to slow down, as he realized there were only a scant few humanoids around them now. They had clearly entered the side of the enemies, and he was starting to get mobbed by the devil foot soldiers.

He hadn't utilized any of his stronger skills though as he had a feeling that doing so might draw the ire of too strong enemies. So he simply kept cutting down enemies one by one while keeping a fractal blade from **[Chop]** attached to his axe, while the independent blade protected their rear.

"Over there!" Galau suddenly exclaimed, making Zac look over to their left.

There was a beast carrying a massive purple pillar on its back, and a group of hooded beings walked along its side. Judging from their direction it seemed they were heading toward a titan rampaging in the distance. Was the **[Voidfire Array]** perhaps a support array? Or did they simply want to strike a surprise attack at whoever arrived to combat the titan?

"That looks like an array core," Ogras agreed. "Let's steal it."

"Isn't it easier just to break it?" Zac interjected. "I can probably do it from here."

"And leave such a nice thing in this world?" Ogras disagreed. "Better it comes with us."

"If we can even use it. What if it explodes in our faces?" Zac said.

“One step at a time,” Ogras smiled as he flashed away.

Zac could only sigh and follow as he grabbed Galau’s shoulder. He activated [Loamwalker] and moved straight through the battlefield, each step bringing him over fifty meters away. Ogras was even quicker, and a pond of shadows spread out when he arrived in front of the group.

The fractal edge on Zac’s blade grew as he decapitated the warbeast carrying the Array Core in one massive swing, making hundreds of liters of blood to fall like a waterfall, drenching him in a second.

“Huerk,” Galau hurled from behind, still squeamish about these kinds of gory scenes.

Zac only shook his head to get the blood out of his eyes and jumped over to the carcass of the beast. One yank was enough to rip apart the chains that kept the large crystals fastened, but Zac swore when he realized that he couldn’t put it in his Cosmos Sack.

This had happened a few times before during the climb, generally when the quest called for delivering or protecting an item. Perhaps it was a method for the System to disallow the climbers from completely circumventing the trials by stashing away the quest items.

“Just carry it with you,” Ogras said, but he looked a bit pressured.

“What’s wrong?” Zac asked as he fastened the massive crystal like a backpack.

“The quest still isn’t complete,” the demon answered with a sour face, making Zac’s brows rise in realization.

“Is this the wrong item?” Zac asked.

This was the problem with the quests on the higher floors. Things weren’t as clear-cut as before, and it often took some trial and error before they could figure out what needed to be done. The fact that they needed to do so in the middle of an epic battle-field this time increased the pressure to another tier though.

“It might be only a piece of the puzzle,” Galau mused, his face deathly pale.

“Look around for any-“ the demon said, but was interrupted by a massive roar as one of the enormous devils looked straight at them.

It was the titan that the squad of array masters was heading toward. Did it want revenge because they stole its array?

A humanoid squad hurried over though, and they summoned a massive warrior in the sky with the help of a War Array, and the projection released a terrifying beam of energy that slammed into the chest of the titan.

But the air around the titan suddenly cracked as the devil shuddered, creating a shockwave that blew all the weaker warriors in the area far away. It also made a few of the soldiers managing the array lose their footing, which interrupted the War Array for long enough for the Titan to swing its massive hammer at them. The soldiers only managed to hastily erect a shield at the last second, saving themselves from being annihilated.

“Shit, those guys won’t be able to defend for long,” Ogras muttered.

“Hooded guys fleeing over there!” Zac said as he pointed in the distance in another direction.

It was a group that resembled the array masters they had killed just now, except they had no warbeast accompanying them. One of them was instead carrying a massive backpack, and six large spikes protruded out of it.

“It might be them,” the demon muttered. “It’s only...”

Zac understood what he was getting at. The group of array masters was running straight toward the backlines of the devil army. If they pursued then they would put themselves even deeper in enemy lines. There might not be another squad available to run interference in case they got targeted again.

“It’s okay,” Zac shrugged. “If worse comes to worst and it’s the wrong target we’ll simply have to fight our way back to our side. There’s no way we’ll be expected to fight those big things for more than a second or two.”

“Fair enough,” the demon nodded. “It’s still only the 28<sup>th</sup> level, after all. It shouldn’t be too convoluted. We have the core crystal, and those are the array flags. We’ll snatch them and teleport out.”

“Let’s go,” Zac said after looking back at the furious titan that was still being held back by the War Array.

The golden projection of the warrior was already starting to dim, meaning that the squad would probably only be able to keep the titan at bay for another 30 seconds or so. But that was enough for Zac and he grabbed Galau again, and the three created a straight line of carnage in their all-out pursuit.

One fractal blade after another carved a path through the devils as Zac kept swinging his axe. Ogras had already taken off his cast, and a twenty-meter long arm crushed any devil that came too close. Zac noted that the demons who Ogras killed oddly enough looked a bit paler after they got killed, like the hand was made out of bleach rather than shadows.

The array masters who carried the six flags soon noticed their approach, and they screeched as they quickly slammed down the six spikes into the ground and started to infuse energy into them. A group of devils also came forward to buy some time, each of them recently evolved judging by their auras.

But that wasn’t enough to noticeably impede the trio, and they fell by the droves as Zac unleashed a barrage of fractal blades. Soon enough they were upon the array masters, only to be met with a wave of illusory flames the devils had managed to bring forth even without the array core.

Zac frowned and activated [**Nature’s Barrier**] and infused it with the Dao of Sanctuary, creating a canopy to protect the three. But the flames passed straight through the leaves and fell onto their bodies.

“Netherblasted soulflames,” Ogras growled as a condensed lance of shadows completely obliterated the torso of one of the array devils. “That hurt you scum.”

Zac growled from the pain as well, but his soul was strong enough to handle something like this after being assaulted by the splinter for months. He immediately spread the Seed of Trees through his body as well to help douse the soul-eating flames, and he felt a soothing warmth almost immediately.

Since they didn’t possess the array core the power of the flames was no doubt extremely weakened, and with one step with [**Loamwalker**] Zac was upon them with murder in his eyes. Space split apart as the remaining devils fell apart into neat chunks of flesh as [**Verun’s Bite**] roared with glee, and Zac started ripping the array flags out of the ground before the dead array masters even had time to fall apart.

Forcibly taking the flags out like that released another burst of voidflames straight into Zac’s face, but he withstood the pain as he snatched them one by one.

“It’s here,” Ogras muttered, pointing to an array forming in blood from the fallen devils. “And just in time.”

“Am I supposed to carry around these huge things?” Zac muttered as he had his arms full with the huge spikes.

“They are bound to someone here,” Galau said. “But the connection will break when we leave this world which will allow you to stow them away. And I think we should hurry.”

Zac looked back and saw that the massive titan was running toward them with surprising speed going by its bulky frame. A few warriors tried to intercept, but the massive hammer in its hands swung back and forth like a pendulum, turning devils and men alike into goop in its fury.

“Let’s hope not all the floors are like this,” Zac said as they stepped onto the teleportation array.

“Don’t jinx it,” Ogras sighed just as they were teleported away.

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**Chapter 413 - Concordat**

Cosmic Energy streamed through MacKenzie’s body at unprecedented speeds, and Mental Energy was rapidly getting drained as her mind formed thin strands of her Daos and ingeniously wove them into her Cosmic Energy to create a facsimile of true skill.

Jeeves used roughly 30% fire, 10% wind, and 60% water to cause a reflective mist that formed an amazingly real illusion of herself and Ilvere falling while covering their real bodies in a thick mist. Her arm reached out to grab Ilvere’s shoulder as a rapid succession of bursts of Cosmic Energy mixed with the Seed of Gust unpredictably moved them until they landed some distance away.

Balls of acrid sludge shot through the mist like bullets, but Kenzie’s body floated around like an unbound pixie with the help of Jeeves, effortlessly avoiding all the projectiles. They finally reached the ground that silently opened up to swallow the demon inside.

“Stay here,” Kenzie whispered with a monotonous voice as she flitted away.

A dozen emergency drones emerged from her Cosmos Sack and instantly fired at four specific spots that made no sense to Kenzie, but it caused an enraged screech to echo across the area. The newly erected pillar had been destroyed as well, and a scorch-marked woman emerged from the smoke where it had once stood.

It was some sort of the corporeal undead, and no doubt also the source of the attacks earlier as it looked like she stood in a pool of oil that bubbled and churned. She was slim had long grey hair that fell down to her shoulders, and she wore a well-fitting dress that looked suited for a summer stroll. The woman would have been quite beautiful in an austere way if it wasn’t for her enraged and scarred face, or the grisly half-meter talons she had instead of normal fingers.

Unfortunately it looked like Jeeves illusions had failed as the woman looked straight at them through the mist. Kenzie could only see the undead leader’s shape through the haze thanks to Jeeves, so the woman must have some sort of skill to do the same.

**[Target level 85 - Low-Medium talent. Chance of victory through traditional battle <5%. Permission to activate ‘Pretty Pretty Mecha Kenzie’ Protocol?]**

*‘Granted.’*

“Get ready to flee,” Kenzie whispered, taking control of her voice. “I’ll unleash something my brother left for me in case things became desperate.”

“Just run, lass,” Ilvere said with a shake of his head. “I might be able to hold her for a bit at least.”

“Don’t worry,” Kenzie said. “I won’t risk my life against some E-Grade powerhouse.”

The next moment a massive robot appeared in front of her, reaching over ten meters in the air. It radiated danger as its various weapon system went online one after another due to Jeeve’s instructions.

“Wha-“ Ilvere said, but Kenzie indicated for him to be silent as they were once again shrouded by an altered illusion technique that hopefully would be able to trick the undead general.

The robot shot a wild array of thin laser beams toward the woman, forcing her to start dodging to avoid getting scorched again. This was what Jeeves aimed for, and the AI helped Kenzie silently sink underground with Ilvere in tow. Simultaneously a fake Kenzie rose into the cockpit of the stationary robot, and the cockpit closed behind her.

The mecha generally required a direct neural connection to control due to its high complexity, but Jeeves had circumvented that somehow, allowing it to be controlled just like the drones. However, even Jeeves’ abilities were limited and such a thing would only be possible in close proximity.

But the Undead Woman was not ready to simply eat the beams without fighting back, and Jeeves continuously reported new sources of damage to her precious machine. Only 30 seconds of intense battle passed before Jeeves warned Kenzie that systems were critical.

*‘Blow her up’* Kenzie instructed with some heartache as she soundlessly moved through the earth while the shockwaves of battle became more and more muted.

**[Affirmative.]**

A few seconds later a massive explosion rocked the very foundations of the area, making it feel like they were swept up in an earthquake.

**[Self-Destruct initiated within 10 meters of the target, connection cut. Likelihood survival: <5%]**

Unfortunately, there was no surge of cosmic energy to tell her whether the sacrifice was successful or not, as not even Jeeves was able to circumvent the ironclad rule that kills by technology wouldn’t award levels.

But even if that crazed banshee survived the blast she would no doubt be taken out of commission for a prolonged duration, which would hopefully help her brother when he returned. As far as she knew there were only a few Undead Generals still around. She guessed that trading her prized mecha for one of them was a worthy exchange.

Thirty minutes later it became clear that they had evaded pursuit, and the two quickly made their way toward the closest Teleportation Array. It was time to return to Port Atwood. Her mission had been a success, but who knew what countermeasures the Undead would have at the next infusion pillar now that even one of their generals had fallen.

With her mecha destroyed and drones exhausted she was unable to keep destroying the pillars in either case.

She could use a rest.

-----

“Wake up sailor!” Sap Trang grunted as he kicked the sailor who was supposed to keep a lookout. “This is no time to daydream!”

“I’m sorry!” the young man said with a start, forcefully dragged out of his daydreams. “But captain, is there really any need for us to patrol these waters? We haven’t seen a single boat for months, and no beasts that Lord Bau can’t handle.”

“Would you rather head to the front-lines, changing the open seas for a sea of zombies?” Sap said with a glare.

“No! Please don’t make me fight the undead! I’ll keep watch!”

“Good,” Sap Trang said with a nod as his eyes scanned the endless ocean. “Remember, we sail with the flag of Lord Atwood, the champion of Earth. If there is one place that the invaders would want to hit, wouldn’t it be our kingdom? Our soldiers are fighting tooth and nail to protect our world, the least we can do is keep watch over our waters to keep their families safe from ambush.”

Seeing that the young man took his task more seriously after the lecture Sap nodded in satisfaction as he kept making rounds. He didn’t know why, but he had found it hard to stay calm all day, and he needed to keep himself busy.

Perhaps it was because he would soon be back home, which would allow him to meet his grandson again. Who would have known that little Bao was as charming as his grandpa was back in the day, and had already found a little lass for himself?

Even more shocking, the lass was with child! He would be a great grandfather. It was an amazing source of joy in these bleak times, and it was reason enough for him to exhaust his old bones to make sure that the waters were safe.

There was only so much to inspect on these Cosmic Energy Ships that their navy employed though, and most of it went over his head. He would be able to take apart a two-stroke engine and put it back together without breaking a sweat, but these squiggly lines that pushed the boats forward were far beyond his understanding.

The only thing he could do was make sure that no one damaged the lines, and that everything else was kept clean and tidy.

He finally returned to his captain’s quarters and observed the sea charts against to confirm that they hadn’t veered off course, and that the nagging feeling was his subconscious trying to warn him of that. But a sharp stab in his mind suddenly made him stand up in shock and look toward the south. The pain came from his connection to Little Bau. Was his friend wounded?

They were too far away though, and he only got a few indistinct impressions through the connection, the foremost being danger. But Sap unhesitantly ran toward the youngster in control of the Arrays on the vessel. Anything that could wound Little Bau in these waters could be a threat to Port Atwood as well.

“Change course, immediately,” Sap said with a frown.

“Where to?” the helmsman asked with confusion.

Soon enough the vessel, along with its two sister ships, had changed course and were once again heading toward Pangea. Little Bau was an hour or so away in that direction, but a mist on the water blocked any sight of what it might be that wounded him.

Worry gnawed on Sap as he stood at the fore, trying to glean any signs about what was going on. The bad feeling in his chest was only getting worse as they approached the vast shroud. The mist itself was a cause for concern as the sky was clear as day, meaning there was no reason for such a haze to form in the middle of the ocean.

There was a distinct possibility that this was a smokescreen to hide whatever lurked inside, but Sap still ordered his crew to maintain the course. If the mist was man-made, then all the more reason for them to see what was going on. The two facts that there was both an unnatural cover hours away from Port Atwood and Little Bau being wounded pointed to one grim reality.

Invaders.

Sap shuddered as his vessel cut into the mist and it immediately felt like the temperatures had dropped to almost freezing degrees.

“This is miasma!” one of the demon warriors stationed on the ship exclaimed.

The warrior wasn’t talking out of turn either, since he had actually been part of the army that heroically fought their way out of the Dead Zone, running and fighting without rest for two weeks.

“All to your stations, keep communication at a minimum,” Sap immediately ordered, and the sailors worldlessly took their positions with worry in their eyes.

The same order was transferred to the other ships as well, along with an order to stay extremely close. They could barely see 50 meters through the miasmatic clouds, and Sap didn’t want them to get picked off one by one.

The minutes passed without anything happening but Sap’s nerves only got more and more frayed as they approached Little Bau’s location. A massive red wall suddenly appeared just in front of them, reaching over twenty meters into the air. If it wasn’t for the fact that Sap spotted worked wood he would have thought it was a cliff-wall, but he realized it was actually a massive ship they had encountered.

“Hard left!” Sap roared, no longer caring about subterfuge, and the helmsman immediately complied.

A sharp tug almost threw Sap off his feet as the three vessels turned and sped away with agility that would be completely impossible without the help of magic. With the help of a burst of Cosmic Energy, they opened up a distance of hundreds of meters in an instant. But that also meant that they lost sight of whatever that massive thing was.

“Fire the Array!” Sap ordered. “Blast away this damn mist!”

Sap didn’t worry about whether there were allied forces on the other side. The fact that the mist was created with miasma was all Sap needed to know.

The array lit up and a massive ray of light ripped through the mists, aimed straight at whatever ship they had just encountered. Sap had to close his eyes from the radiant light and it sounded like the air itself was burning. The laser beam had pushed aside all the miasmatic mist in the area, creating a wide tunnel that ran across the water until the attack slammed into a golden array on the other side.

The ocean frothed and churned from the clash, but the enemies’ array held steady until the beam winked out of existence. But the attack did at least allow Sap to see what they were dealing with.

Only part of the massive ship could be seen, but judging from the displayed section the whole vessel would have to be well over a hundred meters. It was a massive monstrosity wrought with a reddish wood and inlaid with what appeared to be gold. It was a beautiful creation, but Sap couldn’t feel any appreciation of the craftsmanship involved as his eyes were drawn to the massive ball hanging down from the bowsprit.

The ball did at least have a diameter of five or six meters, and it was completely made from gold. But it didn’t seem to be either an anchor or a wrecking ball, as it was made with extremely fine details. It actually looked like a sun, and as Sap looked at

the thing it started to burn with golden flames, pushing all miasma in the area even further away.

“It’s those lunatics again!”

-----  
“Where did the native heathens get this kind of technology? Almost ripped straight through our shield,” Bishop Kyhv-Elerad swore while his eyes moved back and forth through the waters for any sign of the massive beast that had almost managed to sink one of their holy vessels a while earlier.

“Still looking for that Cephalopod?” a raspy voice snickered from the side.

Fury ignited in Kyhv-Elerad’s chest when he heard the voice of the cursed being, and he wasn’t alone in his disdain either. The crusaders in the vicinity were either looking at the newly arrived vessels as they pointedly ignored the group of hooded undead, whereas others blatantly glared at their mortal enemies with bloodshot eyes and burgeoning killing intent.

There was nothing that the Bishop would like to do more than ordering a thorough cleanse of their deck, unleashing a storm of steel and fire, but he knew he couldn’t. He could only tighten the grip on his consecrated mace in impotence as his eyes turned back to the ocean. The hooded beings clearly noticed his struggle, but they only snickered in disdain.

Kyhv-Elerad had never heard of the Holy Church co-operating with The Undead Empire before, but it was impossible that the writ the high Vicar received a week ago was fake. It had clearly told them to temporarily co-operate with their eternal enemies until this world’s native heathens were firmly under control.

Of course, he understood the reason. Almost twenty Incursions annihilated without a trace in less than a month’s time. Reports of sightings of the terrifying contraptions from the cursed Technocrat heretics.

Things had turned extremely precarious, and they needed to deal with this Human Lord so that they could focus on the Mystic Realm. The fact that doing so would allow him to avenge Brother Orsiccas and the 3rd battalion, then all the better.

So he would endure standing next to these accursed clones. He would endure being surrounded by the tainted mists that existed in defiance of The Boundless Heavens. He would endure the vermin staying below deck.

For sooner or later the fire of the Boundless Heavens would cleanse all impurities.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 414 - Ill-Gotten Gains**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**New month new Plug. Can’t wait too see what Zac will encounter as he climbs further up to Tower? Powerups, powerful enemies, and adventure awaits over at ! Sign up now and read up to 39 chapters ahead!**

A brief bout of darkness shrouded Zac’s vision until he was thrown into the next world. However, the System seemed intent of making the entrances rough ones going

forward, and he barely had time to see a moonlit sky and a couple of candles before he fell into a pool of steaming water with his head first.

Zac sputtered as he tried to orient himself in the water, and he soon realized that he had luckily only fallen into a heated pool or hot spring that was a meter or so deep. He had first been afraid that he had been dropped into a pot of soup of some giant or something, but even if he was safe from that fate he still immediately got to his feet and looked around for any looming threats.

“You! Who are you!” a shriek echoed with enough force to make Zac’s eardrums vibrate. “AND WHAT ARE YOU HOLDING?!”

Similar shrieks echoed from the vicinity, meaning that the others had likely encountered similar fates. As for the source of the voice, it was an extremely alluring woman with a pair of pointed ears. She wasn’t a Tal-Eladar though but more closely resembling the traditional elves in the stories on earth.

Apart from the more generous curves, that is.

The elf stood in the water as well just a few meters away, completely exposed except for a thin layer of lather. It seemed that Zac had been dropped into her courtyard mid-bath, effectively creating an instant grudge with. She was a cultivator as well since Cosmic Energy was already churning around her, though his instincts told him there was no way she was the guardian of the level due to the lacking density of her aura.

Zac froze in shock for a second as he took in the amazing scenery until he realized that he should probably try to explain himself. But he didn’t even have time to open his mouth before shouts from soldiers could be heard approaching and massive drums started beating in the distance. It was no doubt a response to the shrieks that had echoed to the high heavens just now.

**[Escape with your ill-gotten gains. Note: Hiding your loot will count as forfeiting the quest.]**

‘*What fucking gains?*’ Zac inwardly groaned as he looked down at his hands.

His already scrambled head got even more confused when he realized that the massive array flags he was carrying had been replaced by a piece of white frilly fabric. Wasn’t that...?

Zac’s eyes widened slightly and he looked up at the infuriated elf who had somehow covered herself with what looked like thunderclouds. Their eyes met and the air started crackle from lightning as the woman’s eyes started to light up with some unknown power.

The common-sense thing would have been to give back the underwear, but Zac obviously couldn’t do that. The system had for some insane reason sent him on a panty-raid, and if he threw away the ‘treasure’ he would probably fail the trial.

So he could only stifle his complaints as he took out **[Verun’s Bite]** again, but instead of targeting the elf he cut a massive hole in the wall. Luckily the outdoor bathhouse didn’t seem fortified from the inside, making it easy to escape.

Better yet the girl seemed to prioritize getting dressed over killing him, and she interrupted whatever attack she had been charging up to instead flash toward a dress hanging across a rack right next to the pool. It allowed Zac to slip away with the help of **[Loamwalker]**, but he only used the skill a couple of times before he stopped and took stock of what was going on.

Zac realized he was halfway up a mountain, and he guessed he either was inside a sect or some sort of town. Bamboo stalks and trees ran along the mountainside, while small lamps emitting a warm light was studded along the path created with large slabs

of stones. There were stronger lights among the trees when Zac gazed both up and down the mountain, and he guessed it was courtyards nestled into nature.

It was truthfully one of the most beautiful sceneries he had seen, and he wanted to take in everything as quickly as possible. It would be perfect if he could turn the mountains on his islands into a tranquil paradise like this after the invaders were dealt with. The money he could make from renting out properties like this would be amazing.

But Zac only got a few seconds to drink in the beauty before the sound of rapid steps took him out of his reverie.

“Halt!” a voice could be heard from behind, but Zac ignored it as he gazed into the sky for any flares.

“Now this is more like it!” another voice hollered, and Zac looked over to see that at least one of his companions was fine.

It was Ogras who ran toward him as his shadows knocked out a couple of guards that were hot in pursuit. He was also soaked wet, but it looked like his mission was a bit different from his own as his arms were gripping a veritable mountain of clothes.

“You were given that many to steal?” Zac exclaimed with surprise.

“Well, no. I only got the one pair. But since we’ve already stolen the eggs we might as well steal the hen, you know?” the demon laughed, his eyes glistening with excitement. “They will make nice gifts if we can keep them, these are high-quality items.”

“Well that’s just great,” Zac said as he knocked out a guard who tried to intercept their escape. “Have you seen any flare?”

“Nope,” Ogras said, but he nodded toward a courtyard beneath them. “I heard screams in that direction as well though.”

Zac nodded and started running, and after some thought, he took the pair of panties and tried to tie it around his wrist like a bandana. But the flimsy material turned out to be surprisingly slippery, and after failing multiple times he could only resort to a second option with some defeat.

He put them on his head like a cap.

“Not bad,” The demon nodded in appreciation. “Heavy taste. Just like when we met the first time.”

“Just freeing up my hands,” Zac sighed. “Hiding them in a bag will probably fail the quest.”

“Whatever you say,” the demon snorted.

This whole floor felt like a sick joke. Was the System messing with him? Or was there perhaps some bored Stargazer in charge of operations who decided to play around a bit and create weird scenarios?

A wail from just ahead told them that they had found their target, flare or no flare. A quick **[Chop]** broke through a wall, and they found themselves in a similar spa as the one Zac started in. It seemed like the mountain had dozens of private hot springs along the mountain-side, each with its own accompanying mansion. Perhaps it was a hotel rather than a sect?

They immediately found Galau curled into a ball while four scantily clad women were brutally beating him with sticks and fists as he desperately clung to a few pieces of fabric. But it was clear that the assailants weren’t that strong, and the wounds weren’t lethal.

“Lucky guy,” Ogras whistled. “I just got the one.”

Zac snorted before he unleashed his accumulated killing intent as he rushed over with his axe waving in the air. The elven ladies immediately retreated with fear when they sensed his strength, but Zac obviously wasn't there to kill them.

He rather grabbed the balled-up Galau and flashed back to the demon's side in an instant, and Zac couldn't help rolling his eyes when he noticed that the demon's laundry pile had noticeably increased in size.

"What's the matter with you?" Ogras spat as he kicked the butt of the still curled-up youth. "Act like a man. Would you let yourself get castrated and killed if we didn't drop by?"

"I'm sorry," Galau stammered. "I did not expect the tower to conjure such a *what are you two doing?*"

Galau's eyes went back and forth between Ogras with his huge pile of women's garments and Zac who stoically wore a pair of panties like a hat. His face was going through a tumultuous change of emotions, and it looked like he was seeing his two travel companions for the first time. Zac only grunted and indicated Galau to start running down the mountain.

"Look at you," Ogras said with some disdain as they fled. "Calling yourself a merchant, yet you lack a nose for opportunity. Look at Zac wearing his ill-gotten gains with such gusto. Where in the outside world can you live large like that without being captured and strung up in the city square?"

Annoyance surged as Zac fought off the incoming guards who seemed hellbent on preventing them from descending the mountain. But he knew he wouldn't win a verbal spar with the wily demon, so he could only keep pushing forward while keeping the complaints in his heart. A few of the guards were some ways into the E-Grade, but they quickly and ruthlessly swept aside by a Zac fueled by anger and embarrassment.

The description of the quest wasn't clear, but it felt to Zac that this whole mountain belonged to some force, and to escape meant to leave the mountain. He wasn't sure if they also needed to throw off the pursuit, but one step at the time.

A horde of irate cultivators was hot on their heels, but Zac breathed in relief when he sensed that there were no people in the angry mob who could be considered real threats to their lives. He still didn't want to fight them though, as he felt like these people weren't meant to be killed, like civilians on regular levels.

Killing a few of them might result in some old monster on the summit descending as well, and then they would truly be in deep shit. Zac instead chose to rely on the small mountain of projectiles in his cosmos Sack, and one piece of rock after another appeared in his hand before they shout out with pinpoint precision.

He even chose to use normal stones instead of his specially prepared cannonballs as the targets were around peak F-Grade and might actually die if he threw the clumps of metal. But the stones only created an impact that threw the guards away without creating any mortal wounds.

Luckily they had acted extremely quickly, and most of the people were behind them rather than in front. Zac had been out the bath he started in within 20 seconds, and they had brought Galau away in under a minute. The quick escape had allowed them to gain a decent headstart, making their lives a lot easier.

Between Ogras' shadow teleportations and Zac's **[Loamwalker]** they had no problem keeping the lead, and they smashed one hastily erected defensive line after another. The real trial only arrived at the foot of the mountain, as a massive array lit up that covered the whole area.

"Won't be too strong from the inside," Ogras muttered. "At the same time?"

Zac nodded and a massive fractal edge immediately took shape along the blade of [Verun's Bite]. Since it was just an array they targeted, rather than some innocent guard, Zac had no problem infusing the axe with the Fragment of the Axe. The fractal blade turned a deep grey as new fractals appeared along the edge, and its aura quickly became a lot denser.

It was a small change that the Dao Fragment imparted upon the skill, and Zac found it not only made the skill deadlier, but it also seemed more durable. Ogras' followed suit and prepared a strike, though he couldn't use his hands as they were still occupied with his 'treasures'.

Instead the shadows all around them started to shudder as they slithered toward the demon like he was some sort of shadow magnet, and in just a second it looked like the ground around Ogras was pitch-black.

"Go," Zac muttered when they were 100 meters away from the shield, and he launched the fractal blade in one fluid motion.

The blade ripped through the air and slammed into the sect-protecting shield in an instant. Huge cracks spread all along the green barrier, but before it had a chance to regenerate a thick beam of shadows completely crushed it, which created a large enough passage for them to easily slip through.

The area outside the mountain was completely barren, and there was nowhere to hide for kilometers in any direction. Zac figured that was probably intentional, and any vegetation would get culled so that the guards would have a clean line of sight in case any hostile forces approached.

"Do you have anything to shroud the area?" Ogras asked as he looked back at the mob that still hadn't given up and streamed out from the shield with murder in their eyes.

"I- yes!" Galau said as he produced a glass ball full of a purple haze. "This one will spread a harmless mist across a pretty massive area. But enough force will blow it away in a minute or two."

"That's good enough," Ogras nodded. "Use it."

Galau nodded and infused the ball with Cosmic Energy, which made a huge billowing cloud spread out in all directions. The purple haze reminded Zac of the time he poisoned half the demon army and himself with the massive cauldron, and he couldn't help but shudder at the memory.

Luckily the irate mob also got a bit hesitant after seeing the massive mist, and many stopped in their tracks or even fled to avoid getting swallowed inside.

"Let's go," Ogras said when they were completely covered, and a transparent tentacle landed on Zac's shoulder.

Just a few moments later they were long gone, and Ogras panted a bit with exertion. He had taken them a shocking distance in a quick succession of teleports, something that Zac's current attainments of [Loamwalker] would be unable to do.

Galau reacted quickly the moment Ogras stopped moving the three, and he sprinkled some white dust over himself and the other two.

"Anti-tracking dust," the merchant explained. "Just in case."

Zac nodded in understanding as he looked around.

"What now?"

"Let's keep moving," Ogras shrugged. "The Ruthless Heavens should indicate when it considers us having gotten away."

His words were proven right twenty minutes and a huge distance later, as they stumbled upon a teleporter as they crossed a small river in an alien forest.

Zac sighed as he stowed away his only loot from the floor, before he got ready for another fresh hell to welcome them.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 415 - Hidden Rules**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Things were pretty hectic in the next world as well, where they were thrown into a canyon full of rabid beasts. But one piece of good news was that the [Voidfire Array] wasn't actually gone or replaced with underwear. The System had been kind enough to place the core and array flags into Zac's Spatial Ring during the transfer.

The mission of the 30th level was to find and save a young master who was being pursued by some rival faction. The target was unfortunately extremely paranoid, and it ended up with the three of them having to find, corner, and kidnap him to complete the mission.

They did stay on for a bit longer than necessary though, as the canyon was filled with E-Grade monster boars that had particularly tasty meat. They spent a few hours stocking up for the climb, as it had turned out that Galau was a pretty decent chef. Only when they had made Galau cook enough food for almost a year did they proceed on to the next level.

The new world they found themselves was an endless desert under a yellow sky with four suns. The monochromatic tone of the surroundings made everything blur together into one big canvas of beige, and the blistering heat didn't help with the discomfort.

And just like in the previous levels they found themselves in the thick of it the moment they arrived. A group of desert warriors was assaulting a merchant's caravan, and it looked like they had taken the role of the last survivors. Bodies and mounts littered the area, most of them seemed to be on the side of the merchants.

Zac immediately went to work, as this felt refreshingly straightforward. One bandit after another got bisected by his fractal blades or skewered by snaking shadow spears. The remaining bandits quickly realized that they had met a tough opponent and started to flee, using sand-attuned skills to meld into the endless dunes.

"Shit, where are the bodies?" Ogras suddenly growled as he looked around. "Or at least their Cosmos Sacks."

Zac looked around to see what the demon meant, and he was shocked to discover that the dozens of corpses that had littered the area were gone, not even leaving a drop of blood as evidence that anything had ever been there.

"Was it a mirage?" Zac muttered, but even he didn't believe his own words.

The demon immediately started to kick away the sand where some of the merchants had fallen, but he found nothing even after digging a few meters down into the sand.

“I think the bandits brought the bodies with them as they fled,” Galau guessed. “They had sand-attuned classes, they can probably move about underground as freely as walking on top of it.”

“What good are you, looking on while they stole my loot,” Ogras muttered as he glared at Galau.

“I’m sorry, I only realized it too late, I thought the shifting of the sand simply covered the corpses,” the youth sheepishly said.

“It’s fine,” Zac shrugged. “Let’s get moving.”

They hadn’t immediately gotten a prompt upon arriving, so they ascended one of the larger dunes in the area to get a better vantage of the situation. A screen appeared as soon they reached the peak, and Zac carefully read the instructions.

**[Gain employment with the Desert Eye Caravan and Secure the Transportation Route out of the Heart of Sand]**

“Desert eye Caravan?” Zac mumbled as he read the quest. “It’s not the guys who just died, right?”

“We can probably find the answers over there, no?” Ogras said and pointed in the distance.

Zac looked in the direction Ogras indicated and he could vaguely make out some sort of settlement between the dunes. The three immediately set out and found that the place Ogras spotted was a small town set at the bank of a beautiful oasis.

The town itself wasn’t anything special, and it could house a couple of thousand people at best. Security also seemed to be a bit lax as there were no walls and no guards that intercepted them when they entered the town. Only a few of the locals, who looked a bit like a mix of a gnome and armadillos, looked up when they entered the city.

It was also clear that it wasn’t a permanent settlement for the majority of those walking the streets, but rather a waystation for people traversing the desert. Almost half the buildings were either hotels, bars, or other places for travelers to spend their money, and a large section of the town was meant to house the various mounts people used to travel.

If Cosmos Sacks didn’t exist, then there would also no doubt be dozens, if not hundreds, of wagons parked somewhere, filled with goods. But all the goods were likely secured inside a string of Cosmos Sack on the merchants, or on their strongest bodyguards.

“Hold on to your Sacks,” Ogras muttered. “Places like this are breeding grounds for pickpockets.”

Zac nodded in agreement and made sure that none of his spatial tools were easily snatched. What the demon said was extremely true. Successfully snatching a small purse might essentially set you up for life in a place like this, provided that you managed to abscond with the wealth.

A Cosmos Sack was generally bound to an owner as long as he was alive, but there were no absolutes in this world. Anything from contracts to item bindings could no doubt be broken if the party was strong and motivated enough.

Trades were also taking place all over, and the loud clamor of heated bargaining could be heard from almost every corner. Almost all of the trade seemed to take place between traveling merchants as well, while the locals simply ran the town establishments. The traders likely came from different countries, and it was easier to trade their wares in the middle in a place like this rather than crossing the entire desert to trade at the opposite side.

The profit margins might become thinner in a place like this, but they also saved a lot on time and provisions, not to mention reducing the risk of getting killed on the road.

“Can you do me a favor?” Galau suddenly said as they inspected the town.

“What’s that?” Zac asked.

“Kill the bandits for me rather than escort the caravan,” the youth said.

“Why?” Zac asked with a raised brow.

Completing the quest generally resulted in more ample rewards, and it wasn’t like the aspiring merchant to say no to free money.

“Are you planning on staying here?” Ogras asked.

“Yes,” Galau succinctly said as he looked around.

“We did promise you to take you to the 32<sup>nd</sup> level, you know,” Zac reminded. “We’re still one level short.”

“This level is fine,” Galau said. “It’s a merchant-related floor. Caravans from various distant locations will come to this small oasis town to resupply. It is a good opportunity for me to work on my business acumen.”

“There are also no vixens trying to string you up in the rafters,” the demon smiled.

“... That too,” Galau coughed. “Finding a place like this on the fourth floor is my good fortune. It might backfire if we keep going.”

“That’s fine,” Zac agreed, as killing some bandit lord seemed a lot easier and quicker than leading some slow caravan out from the desert anyway.

From there on out things proceeded quite smoothly. It only took Ogras three hours to sniff out one of the lookouts from the bandits skulking around in the town, and with some ‘enhanced interrogation tactics’ they soon found out where the bandits hid.

The bandits had found some mysterious ruins long ago, hidden in a natural cave-system far beneath the sandy surface. The bandits not only gained a decent incomplete heritage related to the Desert there, but also a great hidden base.

Many of the natives actually knew about this all along, but they never bothered to do anything about it as the bandits only targeted the caravans, and then sold the stolen goods to the locals at a discount. It was a thriving eco-system of a both black and white economy.

Even some merchants knew of this, but there wasn’t much they could do as this area was truly a no man’s land. Would they spend their money on an expensive excursion where they hired a mercenary squad to come all the way into the desert and fight the bandits?

It was cheaper to bear the risk of getting robbed and losing your money than being guaranteed to lose all your money on such an expensive endeavor.

They also found the Desert Eye Caravan, and they learned that they would be leaving the town within the day, and completing the quest would likely take around three days. That was unacceptable to both Zac and Ogras, so the tree immediately headed to the hidden passageway that the captured bandit used to head back to their base unnoticed.

What ensued was a messy battle between over a hundred bandits and Zac. Ogras assisted by assassinating one target after another, whereas Zac went for widespread destruction. It was a pretty annoying battle as the enemies had an obvious home-field advantage.

The bandits kept blending into the sands in the area, making it almost impossible to pinpoint the targets. Zac eventually got tired of the guesswork and unleashed **[Nature's Punishment]** to drown the whole area in a massive deluge. Running around inside the sand suddenly became a lot harder when it turned to dense mud, and they finally managed to catch and execute the Bandit Leader and most of the remaining bandits.

Ogras immediately went on a looting spree, while Zac sat down to go over the battle. He felt that his skill was somewhat restricted in the desert, something he hadn't really encountered before. He could only guess that it was because there was so little water in the area. However, that possibly meant that the skill didn't bring stuff from other dimensions, but rather took them from the area.

Did that mean that **[Nature's Punishment]** would be useless if he fought in space?

Ogras returned with a sour face half an hour later. It looked like the System didn't want to provide a bunch of loot when they skipped the mission, and it looked like the bandits didn't keep any wealth on their persons. Most of it was converted to Nexus Coins in the town, which the System kept for itself when they died.

A teleporter had appeared inside the ruins the moment the bandit lord died, and the three gathered in front of it after everything was dealt with.

"Good luck, you two. I hope you both can conquer the fourth-floor guardian," Galau said with some wistfulness as he transferred the agreed-upon fees to Ogras and Zac.

"Thank you. Wait what?" Zac asked with a frown.

"Well, you no doubt know that if you cannot travel together beyond this floor?" Galau said, looking confused.

Zac's brain froze for a second before he looked over at Ogras who looked like he had just eaten a pile of shit.

"...What?" was all the demon managed to spit out through grit teeth.

"The System wouldn't allow any carries beyond the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. After all, breaking through the 4<sup>th</sup> floor is the watermark of an elite. It doesn't only give you a percentage-based boost, but it also conjures an Apparition."

"So we can't even fight the floor guardian together?" Zac confirmed.

"You can, but only the one the System deserves the most credit will get the title and reward. It's based contribution and potential, I've gathered," Galau explained. "And splitting up later doesn't help either."

"So if I enter the final level of this floor with this monstrosity I'm shit out of luck?" Ogras shouted as he waved his spear at Zac.

"Well... Lord Piker is one in a millennium genius. I am afraid the odds of the apparition and titles going to you would be slim," Galau coughed, looking a bit embarrassed.

"We won't even be able to travel together either for the normal levels?" Zac asked.

"Well, you can, but it is practically unheard of. The restrictions for traveling in groups get even worse from here on out, and only one person gets the benefits. Who would travel in groups in such an environment?" Galau said.

The three stood in a suffocating silence for almost a minute until Ogras finally spoke up.

"Just give me the beacon arrays and a couple of defensive treasures!" the demon spat.

“Wha-?” Galau sputtered, but he still took out the beacon array he had used since the third floor.

“This is on you for not telling your employees! You screwed me over royally here by adding difficulty for my tower trial. The least you can do is provide some compensation,” Ogras said as he snatched the array.

“But... The three billion...” Galau weakly countered.

“Nevermind that,” Ogras growled. “Defensive treasure!”

“I guess this might be my oversight? This is a [Radiant Intervention] talisman from Talovor Trappings,” Galau said with a pained expression as he took out a small box containing a golden talisman. “It would normally block a single strike, but it might not be able to completely counter the Floor Guardian. It will also release a blinding light upon impact, which might allow you to turn the tides.”

“Good,” Ogras said as he quickly snatched the treasure, his facial expressions making a 180-turn. “With this we can barely be considered even.”

“Stay safe,” Zac added to Galau. “And remember, try to stay for the full duration. You might also want to prepare to run the moment we exit. I will do my best to shoulder fallout, but I have no idea what the situation is like outside.”

“I am sure that you will create a grand feat that will turn enmities into friendships,” Galau said, though his smile was somewhat hollow. “Before I forget, I want you to have this.”

The youth took out another box, and inside was a token that was reminiscent of the Tower Token. However, instead of the intricate fractals covering its surface there was only the insignia of the Beroria Family, the clan that Galau Belonged to.

“This is...?” Zac asked, but his heart started to beat faster in excitement.

“A teleportation token to Nal Avadar City, the seat of my family. It’s in the Grand Dream Sector of the Allbright Empire.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 416 - Bravoria Goods and Treasures**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac’s eyes lit up as he accepted the token. He knew that he would have to leave Earth sooner or later if he wanted to keep improving, and the Allbright Empire was his first choice. First of all, he had multiple connections there, and there seemed to be all kinds of places where he could grind monsters to his heart’s content.

He could even join the same army as Average since it sounded like it was an army that was constantly in battle with the various threats at the border of the Red Zone.

“Wait, Nal Avadar? Not Beroria?” Zac suddenly asked with a start.

“Well, most of us aren’t comfortable divulging our real heritage in the Base Town,” Galau said with an apologetic smile.

“Ah, I understand,” Zac said with a pang of guilt as he did the same thing.

“However, you might not want to use the token depending on how things turn out after we exit,” Galau added.

“Do you think your clan will be implicated by my actions here?” Zac asked with worry.

“Our family has fought for The Allbright Empire for over 800 000 years, and many of our ancestors have racked up great merit in the army. The Empire wouldn’t allow us to be exterminated over a feud among juniors, especially since I was not directly involved,” Galau explained. “But some elder might want to present you to the Tsarun for private benefits if they believe they can get away with it.”

“So you’re gifting him a deathtrap?” Ogras snorted.

“This token takes him to the city Teleporter, not our family’s private one,” Galau explained. “He can simply identify himself as a wandering cultivator, no? Besides. If the Peak Family speaks up for you, then no one in our family would dare to have any malicious ideas.”

Zac wasn’t too sure about the last statement. Greed could make people do all types of despicable things, and there was no doubt in his mind that some elders in Galau’s family wouldn’t hesitate to sell him out if given the opportunity.

However, what Galau said was true. He could simply go there using [**Thousand Faces**] and immediately leave for the Red sector if things looked dicey with Galau’s family. Securing passage would likely be a bit cumbersome, but there was no way that there weren’t solutions in an established Empire like that.

“Thank you,” Zac repeated. “We’ll see you in a couple of months. Have fun over here.”

With that they left their companion of the last month to live it up among the armadillo-people as they stepped onto the teleporter.

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Galau watched his two companions disappear after stepping onto the teleporter, a surprising amount of wistfulness filling his heart.

“Such a bad actor,” Galau muttered with a small smile before he walked over to a particular pile of rubble in the cavern.

Well, subsidizing the demon a decent talisman in return for the goodwill of Zac Piker felt like an extremely worthy investment. As long as that man survived the aftermath of the Zethaya incident then all would be fine. He had been a bit despondent at the start, but after thinking it over Galau quickly realized the opportunity that had presented itself before him.

The resources he had put into garnering trust and camaraderie would turn into a massive leg to hug onto in a millennium, or perhaps even in just a few centuries. Monstrous attributes that hadn’t been seen since who knows when? Dual Fragments? And he’s a Progenitor with connections to the Peak family? Zac Piker even had a good chance of outperforming Prince Reoluv. What was a little talisman compared to that?

Besides, he had ample time to make up for the expenditure in the coming months.

The excitement of excavating unknown treasure filled Galau’s heart as he pushed the rubble away, displaying a hole full of Cosmic Sacks. If you added the spatial tools he pilfered from the dead merchants when they arrived at the floor, then this might be the most profitable one yet.

Galau quickly transferred all the loot from the Bandit’s cosmos Sacks before he started walking back toward the town. He hadn’t been idle while the demon had been busy hunting bandits, and he quickly moved toward a shop at the edge of the

settlement. A human merchant ran it, and the store was empty as usual when Galau entered.

“Whad’ya want?” the old man muttered with disinterest, but his eyes widened in fear when Galau threw out a handful of array crystals without warning.

The whole store was locked down in an instant, allowing neither sound nor people to escape. The merchant hastily produced a talisman of his own, but how couldn’t Galau be prepared?

The merchant lay prone on the floor snoring before he even had time to activate his defenses. Galau quickly dragged him to a corner in the basement and poured a black tincture down his throat. It would keep in a coma for up to a year without a problem, which was more than enough.

The merchant wasn’t well-liked and he had no kin in the town. Him disappearing and being replaced by a much more affable merchant shouldn’t result in any waves, and the mystery of his appearance would deter would-be troublemakers.

With lodging secured Galau could finally do what he had longed for the past weeks. One treasure after another started spilling out of his Cosmos Sacks, and he started to go over them one by one with an almost manic gleam in his eyes.

It hadn’t been easy stashing away so much loot under the nose of that paranoid demon, but he still had managed to hide away a pretty impressive haul over 30 levels. After having mentioned his warrior heritage and his goals of being a merchant neither Zac nor Ogras had suspected him to have not one but four skills related to thievery, all of which he had used on the locals on each level any chance he got.

Now he only needed to turn this wealth into more wealth over the coming two months, and finally convert it all to Nexus Coins before he left.

After Galau rearranged the store to be more inviting and added his own wares he went out and took out a large sign that he had already prepared. One swing with his massive zweihander was all that was needed to strike down the old one, and the scene would hopefully create enough buzz to spread the news of the new store.

As expected, it took less than ten minutes before the first patron arrived, and the little armadillo’s eyes widened when he saw all the exotic wares on display. Galau adorned an affable but somewhat timid smile as he scurried toward the mark.

“Welcome esteemed patron, to Bravoria Goods and Treasures. I am sure you’ll find something to your liking!”

Life was pretty good, all things considered.

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After the brief intermission Zac found himself standing on a craggy surface adorned with thick moss and a sparse number of trees here and there. It reminded him of the Scottish moorlands he had seen in movies, but he barely had time to orient himself as a heavy shockwave almost made him lose his footing.

It felt like an earthquake, but it only lasted for an instant, making Zac more inclined to believe that there was a massive battle between two powerhouses somewhere closeby. It might be a clue to this level if he could figure out the source and there was clearly a link as the quest prompt appeared immediately following the phenomenon.

**[Redirect the Ancestral Avoli from its current path]**

Zac’s eyes almost crossed in confusion as he read the mission. Redirect the what? And where?

Another shake almost made Zac fall over, and he looked around for the source of the abrupt earthquakes. But he couldn’t see anything out of the norm.

A red flare rose into the sky far in the distance, and Zac put his questions aside as he immediately set out to find the demon.

As expected the first attack took place within seconds. A disgusting critter as large as a wolf appeared out from a hidden burrow and threw itself right at Zac, who bisected it without even thinking. Zac wasn't exactly sure whether it was a bug or a beast even after observing the corpse. It looked a bit like a naked mole rat, but it had eight legs and insectoid eyes, and pincers in its mouth rather than teeth.

The beast also wasn't alone, as more of them quickly appeared out of burrows all over, and Zac found himself in a protracted battle where he had to run and fight simultaneously. The critters were luckily not even as strong as the Battleroaches, and the unceasing number of them only turned into more Nexus Coins for him.

Zac soon enough found the demon with hundreds of carcasses around him, and more animals joined their fallen brethren every second as one spear after another skewered them from below.

"Oh, you're here?" the demon noted. "Help me finish off these ugly things."

The two went to work and within five minutes the area was strewn with thousands of the small beasts. The animals gave a decent clue about their mission as well, as they were called [**Avoli Parasites**], meaning they had some connection to their target.

"Did you know about those rules?" Zac asked when things had calmed down, referring to the limits to traveling together.

"Of course I knew," Ogras snorted. "Since when was the Ruthless Heavens so generous that it would provide top tier treasures and amazing titles to leeches? Allowing us to travel together for almost half the tower is benevolent enough. I simply wanted to squeeze out a bonus on top of the Nexus Coins."

"Then why didn't you split off from us on the third floor?" Zac asked.

"Well, I knew most of it," Ogras coughed. "I honestly thought that it would be possible to get help all through the fourth floor. I would enter the teleporter to the fifth floor separately, and that way get the maximum benefits. I guess it backfired a bit, but it's not the end of the world."

"So what will you do?" Zac probed.

"I'll sponge off for you for the levels of the fourth floor, but I will fight the floor guardian by myself," the demon answered without hesitation.

"The guardian still has the boosted attributes of three people though," Zac reminded.

"The fourth floor is breached a couple of times every week in our sector. The experiences on your planet have given me enough strength to match most scions. Why wouldn't I be able to defeat it if I use my head?" the demon proudly said.

Zac was about to argue, but he realized that what Ogras said might be true. The demon had produced a Dao Fragment along with another Dao Seed that seemed to be related to illusions judging by the fight with the barbarian chieftain. This alone put him in the top percentile of those who visited the Tower.

Let alone the fourth floor, Ogras might actually have a decent chance at the fifth floor unless the difficulty took an unprecedented leap.

"I understand," Zac said as his eyes started to turn pitch-black. "We can go over things properly on the 35th level."

"Ugh, creepy," Ogras said with a grimace as he witnessed Zac change into his Draugr-form. "I'll never get used to those eyes of yours. Couldn't wait even a second after we ditched the dead weight?"

“I’ve been itching to try some things out for a while now,” Zac said with a smile that no doubt looked creepy rather than mirthful in his current shape. “Hopefully we’ll find some targets that will do.”

“Well, there seems to be no lack of targets in this place at least,” the demon agreed.

“What do you think of the quest? Have you heard of Ancestral Avolis before?” Zac probed as he took out his new and almost unused shield.

“No, but I think we’re standing on him,” the demon said as he poked his spear into the ground a few times.

Realization immediately dawned in Zac’s eyes, but he still felt a bit skeptical as he looked around. There were massive vistas in all directions, so if they were actually standing on a beast it would have to be as big as his island.

“There are beasts as large as planets swimming around the vast cosmos, so why not ones as large as mountains?” the demon shrugged with disinterest when he saw Zac’s face. “I’m more interested in how we redirect a big bastard like this.”

Zac’s scrambled for ideas as well, but there was only one doable solution he could think of.

“If we find the equivalent of this guy’s brain we might be able to give him a shock great enough to turn,” Zac ventured.

“Sounds as good as any other plan,” the demon agreed. “We can just blast the brain into mush if it doesn’t work. I guess that this thing is the target as well.”

“Probably,” Zac nodded.

It might seem preposterous to kill something as large as an island, but it didn’t seem too hard to Zac. They had already done something similar with the Ayr Hivequeen. They were essentially ants to this thing and could freely make their way into its body to cause havoc. It wasn’t like this huge thing could stop them either, just like Zac couldn’t stop bacteria from running around inside his body.

It took the two some time to orient themselves, but they soon managed to confirm the hypothesis that they were standing on an enormous beast. The Ancestral Avoli had eight legs, each like a mountain of its own, and an oblong body. They were somewhere in the middle, and they figured its head was in the direction the Avoli moved, so they quickly set out.

They found nothing of value on the beast itself, just a bunch of beasts living off of the body of the titan. The bodies of the parasites were worthless as well, and they only served as target practice. But that was just fine with Zac as he had been itching to fight in his Draugr-form for a while.

It was finally time to test his new skills.

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**Chapter 417 - Vanguard of Undeath**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac's eyes were trained on the sea of parasites that came pouring out of their burrows and he calmly stepped forward as he activated his set of passive skills. A billowing cloud of miasma spread across the area and covered the ground, which elicited an annoyed grunt from Ogras who started to move away in disgust.

Zac could only shrug apologetically, knowing that the skill in his current form affected his allies as well, or at least his living allies. He would have to experiment some more if he ever got some undead companions.

The thousands of parasites didn't seem to care about the miasma though, and they rushed toward the two without hesitation. The situation was a perfect opportunity to Zac, and he activated **[Vanguard of Undeath]** for the first time. A storm of miasma immediately exploded out from his body, which in turn attracted the attention of all the beasts.

Even most of those who had been running toward Ogras changed their course as they seemed intent to take him out first as if their lives depended on it. They flooded toward him like a tide, but Zac didn't worry in the least. He was more interested in the changes that took place to his body.

His vantage rapidly changed as he felt himself grow, and his bones in his body creaked and groaned until he was standing at well over three meters tall. That was just one of the changes though, and Zac couldn't help but marvel at the others. His frame had received a huge upgrade in not only height but also bulk, and he stood his ground like a massive tank.

He wanted to check out his muscles for a second, but it was impossible due to the other addition the skill had brought forth. His whole body was covered in a thick medieval armor that ran in black and turquoise, created by extremely dense layers of miasma.

Even his equipment had been transformed by the skill. **[Everlasting]** had grown to match his increased size, and the circle of fractals in the middle had changed color from white to turquoise to match the details in his armor. Was this the effect of the Neprosium being able to incorporate almost any attunement?

Even **[Verun's Bite]** had enjoyed an upgrade, though it seemed that his Axe couldn't be infused in the same manner as his shield. A massive Fractal axe had instead formed over it, a grisly bardiche that was tailor-made for his hulking frame. The haft was almost two meters long and ended in a sharp spike.

The axehead was one-sided and slightly larger than what felt normal for such a long weapon, with its massive half-moon edge having a diameter of at least a meter. If it had been an actual weapon it would no doubt feel completely unbalanced, but it felt perfect in Zac's hand as he took a step forward that made the ground shudder.

An annoyed growl echoed in Zac's mind, and he realized it was Verun that didn't seem all too happy to be covered in death-attuned energies. A thought struck Zac and he simply put **[Verun's Bite]** away in his Spatial Ring, and the miasma axe thankfully stayed on without a physical base. It did however seem a bit faded until he brought out his axe again.

He could soon confirm that Verun wasn't actually harmed by the death-attuned energies, but it was more akin to being close to a nauseating odor. Zac could only impose on the Spirit Tool for now until he found a better solution. Perhaps he would have to invest in a Death-Attuned axe sooner or later anyway.

Power coursed through his whole body, and a glance at his status screen gave him a start. All his attributes apart from Luck had gained a solid 10% increase, pushing his power to another level. It wasn't as great as the buff from **[Hatchetman's Rage]**,

but judging by the modest consumption of miasma he would be able to maintain his current form for the better part of an hour without a problem.

Increased attributes, increased size, impervious armor, and a massive weapon. Zac felt like an invincible tank after having activated **[Vanguard of Undeath]**, and he immediately started slaughtering the parasites. Each swing of his axe cause a ghastly wail to echo across the battlefield, and corpses of Avoli Parasites were launched dozens of meters from the force of his momentum.

But Zac only had time to swing his axe a couple of times before his Danger Sense pricked in his mind.

The next moment a handful of shadowlances flew up toward him and his mind froze by the unexpected ambush. The required movements were long ingrained into his body though, and his arm automatically moved to intercept the strikes with **[Everlasting]** before he even had time to question what was going on.

“Ahh! What are you doing!” Ogras screamed with frustration shortly after as a spectral projection stabbed at him as retaliation for the shadowlances.

“What am I doing?” Zac grunted in annoyance as he turned toward the demon, but froze for a second when he heard himself.

He sounded like a real devil, where his voice had sunk to a register that shouldn't be reachable for humans. There was also the chill of death to it, giving it an extremely terrifying cadence.

“Is this your new skill?” the demon said with complaint as he shot out another handful of shadowblades, half of which were aimed at Zac.

“I don't know what the hell you're talking about, I used a skill to transform. Can you stop attacking me?” Zac growled in annoyance as he crushed the spears with a swing of his miasmic axe.

“Do you think I want to? Your skill messes with my senses, it's like you've given me tunnel vision. I try to hit the damn beasts but I somehow end up targeting you anyway,” the demon said with frustration written all over his face.

Only then did the true effect of the skill dawn on Zac. **[Vanguard of Undeath]** had a taunting function? This was something that had been a huge problem with his class before, at least until he got **[Profane Seal]**.

To strike Zac in his Draugr-form was to slowly kill yourself due to the combination of **[Deathwish]** and Zac's massive Endurance. But why would anyone hit him if they figured that out? They could always flee or target Zac's allies instead, forcing him to stomp around by himself.

But it looked like **[Vanguard of Undeath]** at least partly shored up that deficiency.

Ogras reluctantly started helping out by testing the limits, and they found that it did not just work on ranged skills. For example, when Ogras used his movement skill he accidentally ended up closer to Zac rather than further away a couple of times, which would have allowed Zac to launch a strike if he wanted.

There were limits to the efficacy of the skill though, and Ogras got better and better controlling his actions as time passed. After struggling for a bit over a minute he managed to essentially rewire his brain as he described it, where he intentionally aimed off-keel to circumvent the effect of **[Vanguard of Undeath]**.

But a whole minute in a battle between elites was the same as an eternity, and it would give Zac multiple opportunities to destroy his enemies. Zac also quickly learned that he could control the effect a bit, and reducing the area he taunted lessened the mental strain on him.

Conversely, the area he could cover if he strained was pretty massive, and he realized he could easily cover the whole cage he created with **[Profane Seal]**. So if he managed to trap his target he would essentially be able to force a fight.

The skill worked even better with the brainless parasites as long as he kept his taunt active. They heedlessly threw themselves at him with even greater fervor than the battleroaches back in the Underworld. They unleashed barrage after barrage of attacks on either his armor or shield, but the strikes barely left a scratch in his current shape.

Spectral parasites kept appearing one after another as strikes against his new armor would activate **[Deathwish]** just like strikes at his body. Large pockets of carnage were simultaneously carved out by his miasmic axe, each swing taking out over five of the beasts without him even infusing the axe with a Dao.

He quickly realized he had some control over the spectral axe, though it wasn't as convenient as **[Chop]**. Still, he was able to elongate the handle by another meter, and the edge could grow to be almost as tall as a full-grown person.

Along with his increased size he had suddenly tripled his range and strike zone, which finally allowed him to mow down his enemies by the handful rather than one by one as he did with **[Unholy Strike]**. He realized that skills like **[Deforestation]** or **[Winds of Decay]** were still far superior to clear out a large number of enemies, but it was still a pretty convenient boost.

Zac almost felt drunk with power from using his ultimate form, as this truly was what he expected from his ultimate strike. The only thing missing was a pair of wings like the ones Ogras got, but he guessed that wasn't really on theme for an Undying Bulwark.

Better yet, this was only the first of his two new skills. Zac was about to try out the second one as well, but he suddenly stopped himself as he turned to Ogras.

"You might want to back away from the battle," Zac said. "I think my other skill might target you as well."

"And you're not just trying to mess with me?" Ogras muttered, but he still flashed away to spectate the battle on a hill far in the distance.

The miasma in the area started to churn and swell as Zac fused more and more of his stored miasma into **[Undying Legion]**, but he was shocked to realize that the skill still kept craving more even after having imbued the fractal with a third of his miasma. It actually gobbled up half of his stores before the skill was satiated.

This was a shocking cost, more than twice compared to **[Profane Seal]**. It was to the point that Zac started to regret trying it out on these trash parasites rather than saving it for a real battle. But it wasn't like he could refund the miasma so he could only keep going.

One shape after another started to rise from the hazy shroud created from **[Fields of Despair]**. They were humanoid skeletons who shone with sinister energy, and Zac felt their power was comparable to pretty strong peak F-Grade warriors judging by their auras. Figures kept rising until over a hundred of them stood in formation, creating a small army.

The skeletons were all whole and without cracks, but the gear they wore was mismatched and obviously worse for the wear. The swords and armors were chipped and filled with rust, but they still contained deathly energy that felt strong enough to kill the peak F-Grade parasites in a swing or two.

Zac nodded in relief when he saw the skill, as the skill quest had been a bit troubling.

It had required him to gather the resentment of 500 000 kills, which made him worry about what would happen when he activated **[Undying Legion]**. The fact that it would be some sort of summoning skill was pretty obvious going by the name, but he had been afraid that he would summon everyone he had killed over the past months.

He didn't feel shame or regret for all those kills, but he also didn't feel proud about the kind of person he had become. Being put face to face again to the victims of his carnage would have been a bit much to handle, so the nondescript skeletons were no doubt a relief.

The parasites didn't worry about where the skeletons had cropped up from and they immediately pounced on their new targets. The skeleton warriors themselves immediately went to work without needing any prompts from Zac. One parasite after another got ripped to shreds, and a continuous surge of miasma filled Zac's body as he simply watched on.

The skill might have had a massive initial expenditure, but Zac was happy to see that there was no cost at all to maintaining the skill after the skeletons had formed. They kept hacking and slashing without Zac losing an iota of miasma. It was actually the opposite as his reserves kept getting filled thanks to **[Fields of Despair]**.

A thought struck Zac as he watched on, and he tried infusing the Fragment of the Coffin into one of the skeletons. The summoned warrior immediately turned a shade darker, and its sword started to emanate a pretty terrifying aura.

Any beast the Dao-infused skeleton cut started to immediately rot and fester, and the effect was even greater than when he used the Seed of Rot with his axe. Any parasite that was struck with the sword was turned into a pile of goop within a minute. The scene made Zac realize he had forgotten one of the weapons in his arsenal, as he always used the Fragment of the Axe when fighting with his weapon lately.

It was a good reminder that he also had such a tool in his toolbox.

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**Chapter 418 - Undying Legion**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac kept experimenting with **[Undying Legion]** and he found that he could infuse the Fragment of the Axe into skeletons as well, but only into the few who were wielding an axe. It appeared they couldn't use weapons that he provided either, which made it impossible to hand out a bunch of disposable axes to improve their power.

But the Dao of the Coffin was a more fitting infusion anyway, so Zac felt it was fine. It didn't only improve their offensive power by a huge degree, it also made them a noticeably sturdier. A couple of the skeletons were ripped apart as they were mobbed by the frenzied parasites, but those infused with the Dao of the Coffin were like stalwart defenders who never went down.

One disappointing factor was that he only managed to infuse 12 of the hundred or so skeletons the skill conjured. He wasn't sure whether this was a limit of the skill or due to him lacking control over his Daos, as Zac felt a noticeable strain to split his mental energy and imbue many targets at the same time.

Being able to infuse all of them would, of course, be preferable, but at least it was a start. It created a few skeleton commanders who could lead their brethren into battle. Zac himself joined the fight as well, taking advantage of his massive frame and weapon to carve a path of death in the hordes.

Zac also tested the offensive capabilities of the Fragment of the Coffin in conjunction with **[Vanguard of Undeath]**, and the fit was just amazing. It did not only make his conjured armor far sturdier, but it also imbued his axe with the same corrosive capabilities as it did with the skeletons.

He felt extremely lucky to have mastered the Seed of Rot from the fight inside the Inheritance. What if he had simply fused Sanctuary with Hardness to form the Fragment of the Shield instead? He would have turned into a mobile fortress, impervious but unable to dish out nearly as much damage.

Now he was a tank who spread death and decay wherever he walked. Black clouds started to billow around him as well, seeping out through the slits in his helmet as though a fire burned inside the miasmic armor. Thankfully it turned out his summons were completely unaffected by the corrosive mists of **[Winds of Decay]**, even though they were neck-deep in it.

One disappointing change to Zac was that he was suddenly unable to infuse the black mists with his Fragment of the Coffin. Ever since the skill reached Middle proficiency he had been able to infuse it with the Seed of Rot, which kicked its corrosion to another level.

But now that the nature of the Dao changed he lost the ability to infuse the gas. Was it because there was no component of hardness to the skill?

Zac felt some disappointment with the development, but he suddenly had a spark of inspiration. If he went by the image of his latest Dao Fragment the corrosive aspect was locked inside the hardness. Zac immediately changed his tactic and infused his lungs with the Fragment of the Coffin instead as he breathed out another lungful of corrosive mists.

The latest gust was clearly different compared to the others. The normal mist was essentially a greyish black, but the new mist also had a greenish hue to it, making it feel more nefarious. His guess had been correct, he simply needed to adapt his thinking a bit to make the skill work.

He made his lungs the coffin, and the skill the aspect of rot that he exhaled.

This discovery did unfortunately bring a whole new problem he had never encountered in his Hatchetman class though. He had too many skills active at the same time. The continuous consumption of miasma wasn't negligible, but the real problem was related to the Dao.

It was simply impossible for Zac to infuse all his skills with the Daos at the same time. The moment he started infusing **[Winds of Decay]**, the infusion to **[Vanguard of Undeath]** ended. It was also completely impossible for him to split his consciousness enough to add his Daos to the spectral projections for **[Deathwish]** while using it for other skills.

He was able to juggle the Fragment of the Coffin back and forth between his skills to some success, but he found himself being constantly delayed and losing focus on the battle itself. It felt like he was trying to solve a Sudoku in the middle of battle, making him constantly distracted. It looked like he would have to work even harder with his exercises to improve his mental control.

Still, only being able to infuse one or two skills at a time was acceptable for now, and with everything in place Zac allowed himself to freely rampage across the back of the Avoli. Ogras kept his distance, staying far away from the toxic battlefield Zac had

created. It only took him 10 minutes before a deathly silence had spread out across the back of the titan, with not a single living parasite remaining in the area.

Only then did Zac release his skills, surprised to notice that he had less than a quarter of his Miasma remaining. It wasn't due to wounds since he didn't even have a flesh wound from the battle thanks to the armor, but it was rather due to the massive expenditure. If it wasn't for **[Fields of Despair]** returning some miasma to him he might have turned back to his human form unknowingly.

Zac felt extremely satisfied with the two new skills to his class though, even if their costs were pretty big. He finally started to understand how Undying Bulwark was meant to be used. The first skills had been focused on keeping himself alive in the vanguard of a battle, withstanding both physical and mental attacks.

Then came **[Profane Seal]** that allowed him to trap his target in an arena that would allow no escape until one side was downed. The Seal itself wasn't that strong on the offense though, as the chains only worked on weak cannon fodder. For example, almost all of the Incursion Leaders had been able to either destroy or push away the chains before they could do any damage.

If it wasn't for Zac's unnaturally high attributes and Daos he would have been forced to slowly grind down his targets with **[Deathwish]**. He had also been able to shore up his weaknesses somewhat with **[Unholy Strike]** and **[Winds of Decay]**. But it was undeniable that both his single-target and large-scale damage was limited compared to his other class.

But that all changed with the final two skills. They added the final missing ingredient to the mix and changed him from a passive defender to a real juggernaut that could change the course of a large-scale battle.

"Had your fill?" Ogras' voice drifted over from the side, and Zac looked over to see the demon walking over, pointedly avoiding going near the parasites melted by the Fragment of the Coffin.

"This undead class of yours is just a cheat," the demon muttered as he shook his head in disgust. "I've never heard of anything like it. How is one supposed to take you down without being a far higher level?"

"Isn't that a good thing?" Zac answered with a smile.

Zac didn't need to showcase his two new aces in front of Ogras, especially now that they would have to go their separate ways after the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. But it served as a good reminder for the wily demon to not have any ideas even if he had become a lot stronger lately with his Shadow Fragment.

Since Zac had finished trying out his new skills there was no reason to linger on the level. They rushed to the front of the Avoli and entered its body through one of the burrows the Parasites had formed.

It looked like the parasites had a somewhat symbiotic relationship with the host, as they doggedly defended the inner parts of the titan. But the two simply blasted their way through until they found the brain of the beast.

Surprisingly it was just a bit over twenty meters across, which felt pretty small for a beast as large as a mountain range. The demon had some fun prodding the poor beast, causing one massive earthquake after another as the Avoli started to buck in pain. Zac eventually had to drag him through the teleporter that appeared after one particularly massive earthquake.

Unfortunately there wasn't anything of value that they could find inside the Avoli, but that was simply how things were. You wouldn't always find treasure even when completing the quest, you just improved your odds of finding something of value.

The following levels went by quickly as well, as the 4<sup>th</sup> floor still wasn't dangerous enough to hamper their progress. They also learned that not every single level would immediately throw them into the thick of it. At least not in an obvious way.

The sixth level had for example put them in the middle of a deadly array, and if Zac hadn't been warned by his Danger Sense they would have had a significant amount of life force drained without even noticing.

But just as the danger increased so did the rewards, at least when they followed through on the quests. One precious item after another went into Zac's Cosmos Sacks or Ogras' barrels until they finally reached the 8<sup>th</sup> level.

The quest this time was nothing special as it was yet another beast tide quest, with the small addition that an upstart force had taken the opportunity to launch a coup in the middle of the chaos. So not only had they guard against the beasts, but they also needed to protect the mayor from assassination attempts.

Completing the level early was also a bit troublesome, as they couldn't figure out if it was the beast alpha or the matriarch of the upstart clan that was the guardian. There was a real risk that killing the wrong enemy would have some unintended consequences, so they found themselves a bit stuck on defense until reinforcements arrived.

However, that was actually a lucky break for Zac as Verun stirred for the first time since they encountered the Beast Crystals after they had stayed on the level for a couple of hours. The Tool Spirit had finally sensed something that it wanted to eat. It was a great sign to Zac, as he had started to worry that the fact that the Spirit Tool didn't want to eat anything was a sign that it had reached its limits for improvement.

"Can you take care of things on this end for a day or two?" Zac asked the demon who was standing on the wall walk next to him overlooking the sea of beasts.

"What's that?" Ogras asked with confusion.

"My Tool Spirit is sensing something it wants to eat," Zac explained, not bothering to hide it from the demon. "I want to go take it."

"That's fine. Just go," Ogras shrugged. "We are stuck here for another two days anyway unless you're willing to risk it by guessing which one is the floor guardian."

Zac nodded in agreement and flashed away toward the direction Verun's indicated. He waded straight through the sea of rabid beasts outside the town, turning everything around him into a bloody mess. He only avoided the area where the horde leader, a massive demon tortoise, stood, as to not accidentally get dragged into a battle with it.

Thirty minutes passed and he entered a mountain range that was ordinarily a popular spot to harvest herbs and hunt beasts. But now it was almost completely desolate, with all its occupants having been drafted into the beast army.

A howl echoed across the mountains as Verun's true form suddenly leaped out of Zac's axe, and it started sprinting in a certain direction. Zac could only follow with interest, and he was led into a valley with an oddly sparse Cosmic Energy.

A sense of Déjà Vu filled Zac's heart as he looked around to see a bunch of withered trees and weeds all around him, and his suspicions were only confirmed when they reached the middle of the valley. A massive plant as large as a tree stood alone, and a thick bloody scent wafted out from it.

It looked a bit like a cactus or a succulent flower, with an extremely wide base and no stalk to talk about. Each leaf was almost as tall as Zac himself, and they were extremely thick. There weren't any flowers or fruits that Zac could see, but perhaps there was something like that hidden inside the layers of leaves.

Another gleeful roar emerged from Verun's throat as it pounced the plant, clearly wanting to bite into its leaves. But a massive shape suddenly burst out of the ground, and it immediately got into a tussle with the Tool Spirit.

Zac's face scrunched up in disgust when he saw that it was a twenty-meter long centipede, but he still jumped into the fray with his axe at the ready. The area rapidly transformed into a sacred grove as he activated [**Hatchetman's Spirit**], and Zac appeared right next to one of the beast's segments.

A five-meter fractal imbued with the Fragment of the Axe slammed into the beast, aiming to bisect it in one swift attack, but Zac's brows rose when he saw that the strike was actually rebuffed. The centipede was still thrown a dozen meters away due to the force of the swing, but it was very much still in one piece after the attack.

Zac wasn't disappointed though, but he rather looked at the massive insect like he was looking at a pile of Nexus Crystals. Just how strong was that shell?

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**Chapter 419 - Tumbles**

A shell that could withstand an offensive Dao Fragment, along with Zac's terrifying force, was definitely a material that could be refined into some very sturdy armor. Hell, he could cover a whole ship in shells judging by how big the centipede was.

The problem was how to kill it without completely crushing the animal with something like [**Nature's Punishment**] and ruining the materials. Zac activated [**Inquisitive Eye**] in hopes it would provide some useful information, but it only managed to find out that the centipede was level 91.

It was actually the highest level beast Zac had fought since entering the Tower. There had been stronger beings in the worlds they passed through, such as the devil titans on the 28<sup>th</sup> floor, but he had never been expected to fight those.

Zac guessed that the centipede and the massive succulent it was guarding could be considered a side quest, providing an increased challenge in return for a valuable item. Zac also realized there was no time to waste, as it turned out that the centipede was not only able to touch the Tool Spirit, but it was getting the better off it against it.

Verun repeatedly tried to bite through the tough carapace, but it simply didn't possess the strength to do so. The centipede easily shrugged off the attacks as it tried to strangle the Tool Spirit. Zac wasn't worried about Verun though since it had already been proven on multiple occasions that the spectral beast essentially was immortal in its current form.

At least that was Zac's guess as the Tool Spirit had been ripped to shreds on multiple occasions, yet it was fine after sleeping it off inside the axe. It also was in line with what he had learned about Spirit Tools. The Tool Spirit was almost impossible to kill and would persist as long as the Spirit Tool wasn't broken.

But he still didn't want to stand by while his companion was getting harried, so he quickly reentered the fray. He freely moved between the sections of the centipede, effortlessly dodging the hundreds of sharp legs thanks to the near-omniscience provided to him by [**Hatchetman's Spirit**]. There was no chance of getting trapped or accidentally stabbed by one of the legs while the trees were his eyes.

Finally, he reached the front section, and with a grunt jumped up toward its head. The centipede immediately sensed the threat and tried to head-butt him away, but Zac shot out a fractal blade that hit the beasts' head with enough force to push it to the side. Zac kept flying toward its neck unencumbered and managed to grab onto the edge of one of its protective plates.

The centipede started to wildly thrash and twist to throw Zac off, but Zac would be able to hold on even if they were thrown into a hurricane with his inhumanly strong grip. He simply allowed himself to be flung back and forth while he held on with his left hand and methodically started to swing toward the gap between two chitinous plates.

This was pretty much the same tactic he had tried against the Battleroach King without any success. But things were different this time around. The centipede didn't seem to possess any real skills for one, especially not a fractal shield to block Zac's strikes. Secondly, his corrosive power had improved by quite a bit since the fight against the battleroaches.

It just took two swings before the plating had turned from a lustrous brown to a withered grey, and another swing to completely break through the thinner protective membrane between the protective plates. The centipede noticed that something was wrong, and it rose over ten meters into the air before it swung its whole body into the ground with all force it could muster.

The whole valley shook from the terrifying body slam, and Zac felt his mouth fill with blood even if he had expended both a defensive charge from the divine tree while also imbuing himself with the Fragment of the coffin.

Zac's vision blurred as the centipede was up in the air again the next moment, revving up for another attempt at crushing its unwelcome passenger. But the corrosion worked extremely quickly since it had turned into a Fragment, and Zac only needed one more swing to slash through its protections.

**[Verun's Bite]** keened as Zac cut down into the same spot one last time, and the protective membrane crumbled like rotten wood as the axe bit into its neck. This time he hadn't imbued the fractal edge with the Fragment of the Coffin, but rather with the Fragment of the Axe, and Zac effortlessly gored the centipede with **[Chop]** until the fractal blade hit the shell on the other side of its neck.

The beast flailed and spasmed in its death throes, and Zac realized he might have made a mistake when he saw himself falling toward the massive flower. It would probably turn to mush from the fall even if it was a precious spiritual Herb.

But the whole centipede was suddenly flung away as Verun slammed into its massive body as though the Tool Spirit's life depended on it. The final push was also the final straw that broke the camel's back, as Zac felt a surge of Cosmic Energy entering his body. He jumped off at the last moment, avoiding getting inadvertently bodyslammed by a carcass.

A shroud entered his axe just as Zac landed, no doubt meaning that the beast had maxed out the time it could spend outside. A burst of impressions quickly followed, and Zac realized what Verun wanted him to do.

He ignored the dead centipede for now as he climbed up on the massive flower. While he had been flailing about he had spotted what it looked like from above, and there was a large flower in the middle. The fat leaves gave way to far more delicate petals halfway in, and Zac couldn't reach the core of the flower, afraid he'd ruin it.

"You sure about this?" Zac asked as he looked down at the axe in his hand, and received an affirmative response.

Zac only shrugged and threw the Spirit Tool toward the core of the flower, where it landed on a bed of pollen, causing a small white cloud to rise into the air. Just a whiff of the stuff made Zac's blood almost boil, and he felt though he was ready to go slaughter the whole beast tide himself.

But he regained his senses in just a moment and quickly climbed down the flower again. The feeling of inhaling the pollen had been pretty similar to when he activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**], and Zac wondered what the effect would be like if the massive succulent was refined into a pill.

He also wondered why Verun was so interested in the flower, but he soon found a possible answer. One of the fatty leaves at the outer edge had been damaged during the fight, and a thick liquid slowly poured out from it, staining the ground red. It really looked like the flower was bleeding.

A surge of energy from the center of the flower meant that Verun had started whatever it wanted to do with the flower, so Zac walked over to the centipede. Thankfully only the plates around its head had been damaged, while the rest of it was intact, so Zac took out [**Hunger**] as he tried to carve up the massive beast.

However, Zac found it surprisingly difficult to dismantle the massive beast even if it was dead, and only after three hours had he managed to stash away the dozens of shells along with its legs. Its flesh smelled quite rancid though, so Zac decided to leave it in the valley for the vultures.

Verun hadn't been lazing off while Zac was working on the centipede, and the massive succulent had shrunk to a noticeable degree over the past hours. Its bulbous leaves looked a bit withered, and its lustrous color had faded somewhat.

It still took the Spirit Tool a full 8 hours before it had completely drained the flower though, and it was completely bereft of life-force when Zac walked over to fetch his axe. The spirit tool looked pretty much the same after having absorbed the flower, except that there now were two fractals that were lit up on the handle.

Zac immediately wanted to see what the extra fractal meant, but he realized that Verun was unresponsive inside the axe. It either needed to rest from the upgrade, or perhaps it was still in the process of digesting the energies it had consumed.

Everything was dealt with in the mountains, so Zac immediately started running back toward the town. He had only been gone for 9 hours or so, but a lot could happen in that time. And his fears were realized when he saw a thick black plume of smoke rise from the town they were supposed to protect.

He held nothing back as he pushed through the beast tide like a hurricane, but Zac breathed out in relief when he saw the demon standing on the wall walk with a lazy expression. His appearance didn't match his demeanor though, as his face was slightly scorched and a new scar had appeared on his throat.

"What happened to you?" Ogras said with a laugh as Zac approached, and Zac realized he wasn't much better off himself when he looked down at his bedraggled appearance.

He didn't have any obvious wounds as Ogras did, but he realized his face and hands were caked in centipede blood and mud. He had long gotten so used to being covered in gore that it no longer registered, but he realized now he really needed a bath.

"A bit of a tumble," Zac shrugged as he jumped up on the wall. "What about you?"

"The same," the demon smiled.

"Have you figured out who the guardian is?" Zac asked.

“Well, it can’t be the matriarch of the Oylan line, because she’s already dead,” Ogras said.

“Must have been some tumble,” Zac snorted as he glanced at the town behind them.

There was widespread destruction in the neighborhood next to the mayor’s mansion, and some of the buildings were still smoldering. Zac didn’t think that the demon would go out of his way to antagonize that woman while he was away since she was possibly the guardian. She had probably launched an all-out assault at the mayor’s mansion, and Ogras had been forced to step in.

“So what do you want to do now?” Zac asked.

“We can just kill that big bugger over there immediately, make some turtle soup,” Ogras said.

Zac agreed and immediately set out. The battle was quickly over. The turtle possessed a pretty strong ice-attributed attack, but it still was much weaker compared to the centipede he had just killed. Besides, being a ten-meter turtle might be worse than being a small one.

When it realized that Zac was far too powerful it tried to retract its neck while it fled, but it didn’t provide a lot of defense as Zac could freely enter the shell as the hole was over three meters tall. The alpha beast tried to snap Zac in half in one desperate bite with its powerful jaws, but Zac ended its life with one fluid swing.

The beast horde quickly scattered when their leader was slaughtered, and Ogras joined him not much later as the teleportation array appeared next to the corpse of the alpha beast.

“Are you sure about this?” Zac asked as he stood up, having restored his spent cosmic energy over the past hour.

“I’m sure. You go ahead,” Ogras nodded. “I’ll stay behind here for a while to prepare myself.”

“You’re not setting out immediately?” Zac probed.

“Well, things worked out pretty well for me while you were gone. The mayor treats me like I am his ancestor after I saved his life, and he just so happens to have a pretty fetching granddaughter who didn’t seem immune to the hero’s allure...” the demon said with a grin.

“Well, remember we’re on the fourth floor. Don’t relax and get yourself killed,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

“Speaking of, could you leave that array behind?” the demon asked.

“The [Voidfire Array]? I guess,” Zac said as he took out the massive crystal and the six spikes from his Spatial Ring.

It was a pretty good item, but Zac felt it was better utilized by Ogras in his efforts to conquer the fifth floor. He felt confident enough without it, and he doubted that an array that he snatched on the 28<sup>th</sup> level would be of much use on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor or higher.

“Perfect,” the demon said as he put away the array.

“So what is the plan when we exit?” Ogras added with a serious face. “Who knows what the situation will be like.”

“Do you have any ideas?” Zac asked.

“We still want a patron to get rid of that Redeemer for us, right?” the demon said.

“Right,” Zac nodded.

“Then we, or rather you, might just have to spill some blood when we leave. Kill the chickens to scare the monkeys. If you feel the situation is chaotic but manageable, immediately destroy anyone who steps up for the quest,” Ogras said.

“And if it’s too much for us to handle?”

“Then we can only run,” the demon shrugged. “Try to stay alive until we can crush our tokens. Scream for that Peak-girl to save us, perhaps that might make a couple of the pursuers back away.”

“I guess we’ll just have to play it by the ear,” Zac said with some helplessness.

“You better climb pretty damn high so you’ll scare all the rich assholes on the outside. I don’t want to risk my life against these floor guardians only to get skewered the moment I leave. It’s bad enough you’ll steal my spotlight with whatever crazy apparition you’ll summon.”

“I’ll see what I can do. See you on the outside,” Zac said as he stepped onto the teleporter.

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**Chapter 420 - Erudite Master**

It was both liberating and jarring to start a trial alone. It wasn’t that Zac was worried he’d fail, but he realized how much he had relied on Galau’s and Ogras’ experience and knowledge as they ascended one level after another. It was mostly them who figured out a plan, while he had eventually been reduced to a simple enforcer.

While it was nothing wrong with that, he still felt he was missing the point of the Tower, and he vowed to do his best in completing the quests rather than steamrolling through the following floors. And it was almost as though the System wanted to help him with his goal, as it had provided him with a final challenge that wasn’t related to defeating the floor guardian.

But Zac still felt some dismay as he knew that the final trial of the 4<sup>th</sup> floor might actually turn out to be impossible.

**[Learn the skill of the Erudite Master]**

Zac wryly looked at the quest he got, before his eyes trailed the winding path leading up the massive mountain in front of him. This was one of the simpler quests on the surface level. The Erudite Master was both the quest target and the floor guardian, meaning that Zac could either learn his skill or simply beat him up.

Unfortunately, he had proven himself to be hopelessly bad at learning skills without the assistance of Skill Crystals. Ilvere easily learned the skill that had eluded him for months, and he did not doubt that people like his sister or Thea Marshall would only need hours to master it.

But it was a welcome challenge as well, and Zac started to ascend the mountain with determination to make the best of it. He still wasn’t completely sure what the rules of his odd body were. Yrial said he had zero affinities with all Daos, yet he hadn’t encountered any bottlenecks, even when forming his fragments.

He had already learned from Galau that just forming a Dao Fragment while still at F-Grade was a sign of great talent, yet he had breezed through that without any issues. Twice.

In fact, he could be said to be pretty talented in the field of Dao, though many of his insights admittedly came from Dao Treasures. But not even the one-in-a-million genius Thea Marshall or his AI-assisted Sister could match up to his insights, proving that things weren't as simple as they seemed.

But the 0 affinities might be related to using the Daos rather than learning them, and if that was the case it would likely become a problem in the future. Everything was based on the Dao in the end, including the very core of all skills. What if he suddenly was unable to improve his skills? Would he be running around with F-Graded skills even after he had formed his Cosmic Core?

A pang of danger suddenly erupted in his mind, and he flashed to the side with the help of his movement skill only to see an arrow whizz past him where his head was just a second ago. He quickly looked around and spotted what looked like a mix of a frog and a dwarf holding a crossbow.

The frogdwarf, and Zac only guessed the gender based on the thin black mustache that ran along its extremely wide mouth, looked quite surprised to see his sneak attack failing. But Zac didn't even have a chance to capture the odd cultivator as he suddenly turned into a stone.

It looked like one of the escape skills he had seen before, and Zac looked around in an attempt to find the frog's new location. But it was in vain as the mountainous forest was completely still.

The tranquility of the forest did not last for long though as Zac was assaulted by one warrior after another who all seemed to be heading for the summit. It looked like it was a free-for-all between cultivators who wanted to meet the Erudite Master, and it felt like they all competed to complete the quest.

Zac had already asked about the possibility of meeting other climbers during a trail but as far as Ogras, or the even more knowledgeable Galau, knew there was no such thing as floors where climbers were pitted against each other.

It was not like Zac had encountered any frog dwarves outside the tower either, so meeting dozens of them would be a bit odd if they were real. Since the frogmen were natives Zac chose to only cripple them a little bit rather than killing them.

Since they went out of their way to attack him he was pretty sure they were fair game, but he still didn't want to mess up his climb due to some old monster popping out of nowhere. Besides, he was already at the end of the fourth floor. It was worth remembering what Galau said.

Nothing was black and white, and all actions have consequences. What if the old master was one of the frogmen as well, and he got enraged by seeing his people getting slaughtered by Zac? Of course, it could also swing the other way, where the frogdwarves were the enemies of the master, and the lenient treatment by Zac was seen as a sign of a weak Dao Heart.

One could go crazy going back and forth what might create the best outcome, but this was just like real life; there was no way to control all small details. He could just follow his conscience as he kept going forward.

It only took him a few hours to reach the summit of the mountain that would give Mount Everest a run for its money. He had initially planned on taking on the floor guardian in his undead form, but after having seen the quest he decided to stay human.

The likelihood of the old master being undead was pretty slim considering the surroundings, and the pathways of his Draugr-class were a lot pickier than his human side. If he wanted a shot at learning the skill he would have to do it as a human.

The peak of the mountain was mostly flat and it had the area of a couple of baseball fields. There was a small pond with a few fishes lazily swimming about, and a solitary tree that looked extremely ancient was providing some shade next to it.

Apart from that there wasn't much to see, and there wasn't even a house to stay in. Confusion entered Zac's heart as he looked around for any erudite master. Had he ascended the wrong mountain?

"Let me have a look at you, lad," a decrepit voice echoed from the distance as an old warrior who had been hidden by the tree stood up.

Zac sighed in relief as he took a good look at the 'Erudite Master'. It was not one of the frogmen, but rather an ancient-looking demon. He wasn't the same kind as either Ogras or abyssal demons though. This one was a pale blue, with golden horns speckled with red.

His build was pretty much the same as a human's apart from the taloned feet and indistinct scale pattern covering his skin. He would probably have been almost two meters in his prime, but time had made him lose at least two decimeters in height.

The Erudite Master was obviously nearing the end of his lifespan judging by how old he looked. Zac still wasn't an expert, but he guessed the old master had a couple of months to a year at best.

The old demon inspected Zac just as how Zac was inspecting him.

"If you want to learn my skill, put that axe away. I am a pugilist, and you will never learn it while wielding a weapon. If you just want to test your strength, you're welcome to do so as well," the demon said with equanimity.

Zac frowned when asked to disarm, but he eventually put his axe away. He didn't feel any animosity from the old demon, and he was curious about what kind of skills he had. Most of all he felt this was a good opportunity to train against a skilled enemy, and he would ruin it if he launched [**Hatchetman's Rage**] and [**Nature's Punishment**] to level the whole mountain top in one all-out move.

"Good," the demon said before his muddy eyes suddenly turned extremely sharp as his aura rose by a shocking degree.

It was still well within what Zac could handle, but he felt the pressure was even greater compared to some of the Invasion generals he had fought recently. That was saying something considering the old man in front of him was still in F-Grade.

The fact that the old demon hadn't evolved didn't dampen Zac's mood. On the contrary, it made his blood pump from excitement. Calrin had once told him that the ones to look out for were those looking very young or those looking very old.

The extremely young were the geniuses who kept pushing forward, breaking through bottlenecks without any trouble. The very old ones were those who had been stuck at their current level for centuries, and this generally led to one of two outcomes.

Either they gave up on the martial path and focused on some side interests, becoming merchants or simply enjoying retirement. Others kept at it to the very end, polishing their skills and power to the limit in hopes of finally finding the spark to break through their bottleneck.

The old man in front of him was obviously the latter type.

Zac didn't know why a man with such a dense aura as the one in front of him was stuck on F-Grade, but right now it didn't matter as the demon emitted a sharp battle intent. The master suddenly pushed forward straight across the pond, and his movements sounded like the roars of beasts.

The demon was almost immediately in front of him, and his right hand formed a fist that shuddered with power. Zac immediately turned to absorb the punch with his left arm, which would allow him to counter with a right-hook of his own.

But shifting his body like that had actually opened him up for the old demon to knee him right in the gut, and Zac was thrown away so far that he almost fell off the mountain top. He wasn't hurt though as the old demon only had used the strength of his body in the opening salvo, and not empowered his strikes with neither skills nor Dao.

Zac flashed back with the help of **[Loamwalker]** in an instant, and a rapid exchange of punches and kicks commenced. Unfortunately, the exchange generally consisted of Zac punching air while being barraged by attacks from all directions.

The old demon's strikes were extremely unpredictable, and no matter how Zac tried to counter the strikes it seemed to somehow backfire. Initially he had tried to limit the strength he used to match the old demon, but he was already using at least 20% more Dexterity while still getting his ass kicked.

"There is a battle raging," the demon said as he once again punched Zac square in his face. "One in your mind."

Zac's brows rose in shock, wondering if the old man had somehow sensed the splinter.

"There is the instinct of the beast brewing deep inside of you, wanting to break out. But you are fighting it, attempting to maintain the heart of the warrior, defeating technique with technique," the old man explained.

"Find a balance and prepare yourself!" the demon roared as his aura suddenly started to rise once more.

The massive roar caused a storm around them, and Zac was almost forced to close his eyes. The old man was obviously up to something, and his danger sense told him it wasn't something minor. His first instinct was to fight fire with fire, beating the demon down before he could unleash his strike.

However, Zac also believed it was best to be cautious. He was on the fourth floor after all, and it was also a boosted floor due to multiple people joining. The challenge was almost on par with what he would face when meeting the guardian of the fifth floor.

A golden halo surrounded the demon, and the air around him crackled as he pushed his hand forward like a spear. The demon was clearly using a skill this time, though Zac still couldn't sense any Dao.

The power in the attack was palpable, and Zac's hand immediately rose to counter the strike aimed at his gut. But mid-motion Zac noticed that the man's hand changed direction, likely targeting his more vulnerable throat.

He quickly adjusted by putting both his arms in front of his throat, while preparing to counter after blocking the stab. But a burning sensation in his side was like a wake-up call, and he looked down at his bleeding side with confusion.

Had the demon changed the trajectory of his attack again? But why didn't he notice? Or was the small change in muscle or stance just a feint from the start, meant to confuse him? Luckily the demon had stopped his strike after just piercing his flesh, so he wasn't really wounded.

"Having the heart of the beast and the courage to brave any danger is commendable. Having a cool and calculating heart will allow you to turn a losing battle into victory. But your heart cannot encompass everything," the demon said as he backed away, his hand dripping with blood.

“Who are you in the end?”

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### **Chapter 421 - True Strike**

Zac was about to make up some story about why he was here, but he stopped himself as he realized the old demon was asking a rhetorical question.

“Your heart and mind are in conflict, and you do not trust one over the other,” the demon said. “This is something a seasoned warrior can exploit.”

Zac understood all too well what the demon was talking about, and it felt a bit embarrassing as this was exactly what he had chided Emily for doing back during their sparring sessions. He had been talking big about decisiveness, but yet he found himself crippled by indecision during the battle with this old demon.

“So what should I do?” Zac said, ignoring the wound on his side. It was nothing too serious that wouldn’t heal up with a normal healing pill.

“A burning heart will stop a mind from being frozen with indecision. A calculative mind will help you distinguish between decisiveness and foolishness. But in my opinion, one must be the leader and the other follower. You might be able to find true balance in the future, but it is much too early. Perhaps when you can walk the sky like the celestials in legend.”

“A leader and a follower?” Zac muttered.

“Are you a warrior of instinct, or a warrior of expertise?” the old man asked.

Zac first wanted to say expertise, but he stopped himself as he knew that wasn’t the truth. He wasn’t some adept weapon master who followed some great set of techniques, and he hadn’t trained with a weapon since young like most cultivators in the multiverse.

He was more like a beast, fighting based on instinct and his superior constitution.

“It seems you understand,” the old man smiled. “Again.”

Zac was already moving the moment the demon disappeared, and he swung toward his right without thought or hesitation. A deep thud echoed across the summit as the demon appeared, his arm glowing with a golden sheen as he blocked Zac’s punch.

“Good!” the demon laughed. “What’s the use of calculating and thinking when you’re an idiot?”

Zac’s face scrunched up, but he had no time to refute the words as the old man launched another barrage of punches, kicks, and attempts to grapple him to the ground. He no longer tried to think or anticipate what the old man did, he only moved the way his instincts indicated him to move.

He was still somewhat of a punching bag, but it wasn’t one-sided any longer. The old man had been a martial artist for hundreds of years, and trying to match him in skill had only made him weaker than he actually was. Now that he relied on instincts, he at least managed to get in a few good punches as well.

The old man suddenly jumped backward, looking a bit worse for the wear from the high-paced battle.

“Good!” the said while breathing a bit heavily. “You are passable. A rough gem that can be polished through thousands of battles. See if you can understand the

essence of my skill, **[True Strike]**. If you can learn it you will even be able to use it with that axe of yours. Watch how I attack your left side.”

Zac breathed in relief that he had passed the test to at least get a chance of learning the skill. The ancient demon had already helped him out by pointing out his weakness, so he would feel a bit bad about defeating him just to pass the floor.

So Zac immediately got ready to defend while trying to understand the truth behind **[True Strike]**. He kept his eyes wide open as the old demon’s left hand essentially turned into a golden spear as he slowly walked toward him. It was the same skill as the one the demon used before when he confused Zac’s senses.

The demon’s eyes were trained at a spot just beneath Zac’s ribcage on his left side, but Zac could oddly enough feel another spot on his body heat up. Zac tensed up as confusion filled his mind once again. His instincts told him that the demon would strike his right side, but he was obviously aiming for the left side.

At last minute he decided to follow his instincts to protect his right side, but he was shocked to see that the demon had attacked the spot he had looked at since the start.

“What the hell?” Zac muttered with confusion.

“Good instincts!” the demon laughed. “**[True Strike]** is a mental attack powered by battle intent. It confuses the instincts of the opponent, allowing you to forcibly create an opening. It is the fruition of 580 years of delving into the psyche of battle, and my grandest accomplishment. See if you can understand it now!”

A powerful golden aura congealed around the demon as he once again targeted the same left spot as before. Zac’s instincts were still telling him that the demon was targeting another spot, this time his right leg. Zac quickly tried to take control of the conflicting emotions, but his brows suddenly frowned.

His left hand moved up to block his throat with shocking speed while his whole body got infused with Fragment of the Coffin. **[Verun’s Bite]** appeared in his right arm at the same time, and it swung down in a fierce overhead arc.

The old demon’s face scrunched up in anger when his sneak attack aimed at Zac’s throat failed, and he quickly jumped back as the razor-sharp claws he had suddenly grown retracted into his hand. The facade of a righteous old warrior was gone, and his ice-cold eyes were those of a ruthless killer.

After having spent so much time with Ogras, would Zac simply put down his guard due to a smiling face? The fact that the old demon had been willing to teach him from the beginning was suspicious in and of itself. There was no guarantee that the floor guardian would be a willing teacher just because the quest told him to learn a skill.

Besides, even if he couldn’t trust the instincts due to the demon’s skill he could still trust the Danger Sense from having over 250 effective Luck. Such a cheat-like amount of Luck was pretty much the perfect counter of almost any illusionary skill like the one the Demon had just tried to use, and it screamed in no uncertain terms that a deadly attack was aimed at his throat.

“So you knew,” the ancient demon snorted. “That’s a shame.”

The old man’s aura condensed the next moment, changing from vast but somewhat weak into something sharper and more sinister. That wasn’t all, his bent back started to straighten out while his features smoothed out as well. From looking like a decrepit old man with one foot in the grave he had transformed into a man that might be past his prime, but still full of vigor.

Zac had to say he was pretty impressed by the demon’s plan. Had he understood that Zac was a tough enemy from the start, and the whole charade with the demon

teaching him his skill was simply an act to not only disarm his enemy but create an opening to kill him in one swift strike. Ogras would no doubt find a kindred spirit in the old demon if he encountered the same trial in his climb.

However, the subterfuge didn't mean that what he had said was false. There was truth to the teachings he shared, and Zac felt he had gained some insight into the proper mentality of a warrior. One of his weaknesses truly was that he lacked guidance from experienced warriors, which made his understanding of battle techniques somewhat shallow.

Alyn and Ogras were both knowledgeable about various topics, but at the end of the day they were just juniors like himself. Yrial no doubt had a great understanding of these kinds of topics, but the time Zac could spend with his master was extremely limited.

"You've helped me understand a few things better," Zac said as he ate one of his regular healing pills. "Hand over the Skill Crystal for **[True Strike]** and I'll be on my way."

The reason for Zac believing there to be a crystal was simple. The man never had any intention actually of teaching anyone his skill, so there must be another way for him to complete the quest. The most obvious solution was that he possessed a skill crystal.

"If I kill you like the others, what good is the crystal to you? If you manage to kill me, why should I share my knowledge?" the demon laughed. "I'll take my insights with me to the grave, or bring them with me to the peak of cultivation."

"... Fine," Zac sighed as Cosmic Energy Flooded the fractal on his forearm. "No matter what, you did teach me some of your knowledge, so I will fight you with all I have."

The wooden hand broke out of the air the next moment and it rose to the sky above the demon, immediately radiating an intractable power. It quickly formed the array as usual, and it covered the whole summit as it glowed with the emerald luster of nature.

"A hand?" the demon laughed as he saw **[Nature's Punishment]** hovering above him. "That is just perfect."

A red and golden brilliance rose to the sky as a clawed hand congealed above the demon. It was almost twice the size of Zac's wooden hand, and it emitted an extremely acrid stench of blood. How many had that hand killed to gain such a sinister sanguine aura?

The large claw launched a swipe toward the emerald array, and four rivers of blood rose up to destroy Zac's strike. But the array only wobbled a bit from the demon's all-out strike, and a mountain tip started to emerge soon enough. A massive pressure started to spread across the summit, and the demon once again turned hunched-over from having to withstand the tremendous force.

A ruthless gleam emerged in his eyes as he gave up on destroying the descending mountain, instead opting to strike at Zac with the sanguine hand. But Zac was no longer playing along, and his full aura with its dense killing intent was released like a shockwave.

A massive fractal edge also appeared on his axe, emitting the undeniable power of a Dao Fragment. One swing was all it took to completely destroy the hand in the sky, leaving the erudite master completely exposed to the mountain above.

The demon obviously realized that he was outmatched, and he tried to find a method to flee. But **[Nature's Punishment]** was almost as effective a cage as **[Profane**

**Seal]** by this point, and the pressure had almost completely locked down the demon's movement.

"Wait, I'll teach you!" the demon said, some fear finally evident on his face.

"Too late," Zac sighed as one peak slammed into another, causing a shockwave that even pushed away the clouds in the area.

The whole mountain shuddered as Zac witnessed the massive destruction from the distance. He had been forced to retreat to the very edge of the summit, but he had still been forced to dig his legs into the ground to not be thrown down to the foot of the mountain.

A surge of Cosmic Energy proved that his enemy was dead, and Zac quickly instructed the hand to lift the mountain again and place it to the side. The hand dissipated after letting the peak rest against a spot with a pretty low incline. Zac thought the scene would create an interesting mystery for any mortal geologist who passed by in the future. If this world was even real, that is.

The whole summit had been completely transformed by the all-out attack. The corpse erudite master was still somewhat whole in the bottom of the crater, but he was still as dead as can be. The pond was also utterly destroyed, and the water had seeped into cracks in the mountain.

The floor guardian had been dealt with, and Zac spotted the teleportation array not far in the distance. He did however not immediately head into it, and instead jumped down into the large hole. The skill was real if the System made it a quest to learn it, and he wasn't ready to give it up just yet.

An offensive mental skill that was based on battle intent rather than wisdom or intelligence sounded like a great addition to his current repertoire, and he immediately rushed over to the corpse. But no matter how many times he went through the demon's body he couldn't find a Spatial Tool.

Zac swore in annoyance, but he wasn't overly surprised. The demon had seemed pretty confident that Zac wouldn't learn the skill if he died, so it would be odd if he could loot it so easily from his body. However, Zac did have an interesting discovery as he looked around in the pit.

There was light coming from within one of the cracks leading into the heart of the mountain.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 422 - Road to 1000**

From one of the cracks in the ground Zac could see a flickering light, but when he peered into it he couldn't see what the source was. It did however reignite Zac's hope, and he started to cut his way into the mountain with the help of his axe.

The light steadily grew brighter as he made his way down, and he suddenly found himself in a passageway that was clearly not naturally formed. There was a tunnel hiding 50 meters down from the summit, and as Zac followed it even further down into the heart of the mountain found that it led to an opulent cultivation cave.

Thick rugs from unknown animals covered the ground, and all kinds of ornaments and treasures were strewn around the floor. There were even small mountains of Nexus Crystals almost touching the ceiling, no doubt a vast wealth for anyone in the F-Grade.

The exorbitant interiors were diametrically opposite from the image of an erudite master, and Zac thanked the heavens for sending the paranoid demon to his side. If Ogras' distrust hadn't rubbed off on him he would have been completely immersed in the training session, taking the behavior of the old demon as the desire of a dying warrior to leave behind something for the world.

Even if he had survived the encounter he would have simply entered the teleporter as it appeared.

But not everyone cared about leaving an inheritance. In fact, most wandering cultivators had no intention of doing so unless they settled down. Even in established factions it wasn't uncommon for an old master to barely leave anything behind. All the wealth they had gathered over the years would already have been used to prolong their own lifespans and to desperately try to breakthrough.

Zac didn't know why the old goat didn't keep all of his wealth inside a cosmos sack, but it made things easier for him as he swept through the Cultivation Cave, leaving nothing behind. But he wasn't content even after that, and he kept cutting through the mountain walls for over an hour until he found a small hidden pocket with a Cosmos Sack inside.

This was what he had looked for, as there was a rough crystal lying inside. It did look a bit worn though, meaning it had already been used. It started to feel a bit likely that the skill wasn't even something that the demon had come up with, but rather something he had found through a fortuitous encounter.

The Cosmos Sack was also filled with various high-grade treasures, at least for a wandering F-Grade cultivator. There were only a dozen or so crystals, but all of them were E-Grade and Life-attuned, perhaps used to help prolong life. There were also a couple of pills and a few manuals, but Zac didn't go through them one by one, but rather threw them all in his Cosmos Sack.

He wouldn't mess with pills or natural treasures he found while climbing unless he could be sure what they were, and if the items stayed on after the climb he could have Galau or Calrin identify them.

He did immediately tach himself the skill though, and a new fractal appeared right above his navel. It was a disappointing placement, as he knew that it was a pretty common position for class skills. It was close to where the cultivation core would be placed, or rather close to where his Specialty Core was currently nestled.

It was no problem right now, but it was extremely likely that his Class would provide a skill for that location sooner or later, meaning that he would get limited usage of [True Strike]. But that was a problem for the future.

Who knew, it was possible he wouldn't get a skill for that slot until he became D-Grade. And this was an issue that all warriors eventually encountered. Zac was pretty lucky that he hadn't encountered any clashes between his skills so far, even though he had used up more than half of his Skill Sockets.

But sooner or later he would have to start discarding skills to make room for stronger ones, or skills that better suited his cultivation path.

Zac quickly returned to the summit after having found what he looked for, and to his surprise he saw a dozen of the little beings he encountered earlier. They all silently stood in the distance, a couple of them swaddled in bandages, no doubt a result of Zac manhandling them during the climb.

Thankfully there was no animosity in their eyes when Zac appeared, and they bowed in respect when they saw him arrive. Zac nodded in response, realizing that the demon might have been a scourge to the area. The 'erudite master' still had taught

Zac a few valuable lessons though. It might just have been a ruse designed to let his guard down, but he could still be considered one of his teachers.

So Zac also gave the unmoving body of the old demon a small bow before he stepped through the teleporter.

**[Fourth Floor Complete. Upgrading Title.]**

**[Choose Reward: High-Grade Strength Fruit, High-Grade Dexterity Fruit, High-Grade Intelligence Fruit]**

Zac's eyes lit up when he saw the rewards, but he held off on choosing and instead opted to first check out his Title.

**[Tower of Eternity - 4th Floor: Reach the 37th level of the Tower of Eternity. Reward: All stats +10. Strength +5%, Endurance +5%, Vitality +5%]**

Zac nodded in satisfaction. The bonuses followed the same patterns as the first three floors of the towers, where he first got a bonus that improved his three "main" attributes. This pattern would continue for the following two floors as well.

As for the final three floors, Zac had no idea. He assumed that he would gain Efficiency in the same manner as the earlier floors, but he couldn't be certain. Not even Galau could confidently answer what was the case as too few people in their sector reached those floors. However, Galau did mention a rumor that the top climbers were more interested in the floor rewards than the titles.

The quality of the items that the System Rewarded had steadily risen, and now it presented something that Zac hadn't even encountered in the Base Town. Attribute Fruits, and High-grade ones at that. Even the best fruits he got his hands on in the hunt were only mid-grade.

Unfortunately there were no Luck fruits or All Attribute fruits, but Zac figured that those kinds of fruits still might appear on a higher floor. His eyes went back and forth between his options as he tried to decide what to get. He could immediately discard the Intelligence fruit since it was the most useless Attribute for him, but he wasn't sure which to pick among the other two.

Dexterity would help him maintain the balance, which would get especially skewed as he kept improving his Dao of the Axe. But he still chose Strength in the end, for a simple reason. He still hadn't given up his desire to reach 1000 Strength before he evolved. He hoped that would not only provide him with better Class options, but also counteract the effect of his massive Endurance pool.

He didn't want to get stuck with two tank classes because he had enough Endurance for three men.

The darkness started to scatter as he'd made his choice, and he found himself facing a hulking warrior clad in spiked armor. He held a sword in each hand and radiated dense killing intent as he took a step toward Zac. Zac put away his attribute fruit while jumping away a few meters to get a better understanding of what was going on, and the quest prompt appeared just as he landed.

**[End the tradition of slave deathmatches to settle disputes.]**

A quest to enact social reform? How was he supposed to do that without wasting a lot of time? Was the system expecting him to make a grand speech or something? Zac shuddered at the thought as he looked around the packed masses.

His eyes instead found a likely target for a guardian, immediately discarding any thought of completing the level the proper way. It was an extremely obese man who sat at a seat of honor, overlooking the fight while he was fed some sort of fruits by what was obviously slaves.

“Hey, I want to kill that fat guy. Will you help me?” Zac said to the gladiator. “Do you know anything about the arrays in this place?”

But the other gladiator didn't as much as react to his words, and he once again tried to kill him. Zac could only sigh as he flashed forward and punched the gladiator with enough force to throw him like a ragdoll. The man soared like a projectile straight toward the corpulent man who looked on with interest.

A blue shimmering wall lit up just as the gladiator was about to leave the arena, and Zac noticed a small surge of energy to his left. It was a pillar just a few meters away from him, and there were a couple of more just like them.

Zac didn't delay a second, and he immediately shot out toward the fat despot while he shot out huge fractal blades imbued with the Fragment of the Axe in rapid succession. Each of them slammed into one of the pillars almost at the same time, and the barrier protecting the array flags wasn't strong enough to withstand strikes at multiple of its weak spots at once.

A snap echoed out across the arena as the shields failed, and a resounding crash followed when the pillars were turned into rubble. Seeing that over half the array flags were broken, Zac immediately jumped toward the luxurious seats.

The fat leader's cheeks jiggled in fear, and he screamed as he frantically took out a token hanging around his chest. It immediately lit up, and Zac found himself slamming into the ground like a comet. It was a gravity array that had been erected, and it was the strongest one Zac had encountered since he waked through the Zethaya Pill House entrance.

To more precise, it was exactly the same as what he had encountered, which made Zac ponder while he got back to his feet. Was this intentional? Had the Zethaya set it up so that those with enough power to reach the 5<sup>th</sup> floor would be able to enter their store? It wouldn't be too hard for them to set something like that up.

There was one difference compared to the previous time he was inside an array like this. Zac wasn't trying to impress anyone by toughing it out with only his body. He immediately released his Dao Field for the axe, causing one shallow cut after another to appear on the ground around him.

The Dao Field helped him counteract the suppressive force to a pretty large degree, and Zac didn't have any trouble moving about any longer. One swing was all it took to destroy a hastily erected back-up shield that the fat man's bodyguards set up, and with two quick steps he found himself in front of his target.

“Wait, I can pay you!” the man trembled.

“Is this arena yours?” Zac simply asked.

“Yes, yes!” the man fervently nodded. “I'll gift it to you, it's yours. The slaves as well!”

Zac only answered with a swing of **[Verun's Bite]**. However, a ruthless gleam appeared in the man's eyes and he launched a massive burst of flames that drowned Zac before it continued to cover half the arena.

A snort could be heard from inside the inferno and a bestial roar followed as the flames were forcibly ripped apart by a swing of Zac's axe. The merchant could only helplessly look on as his torso separated from his legs before he succumbed to death.

Zac bent over the corpse to look for anything of value, but the man didn't even carry a Cosmos Sack.

At least the encounter gave him a decent hint of the strength required for the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, and he was pleasantly surprised to realize that the strength of the arena

master was roughly the same power as the bandit lord on the floor where he left off Galau.

It meant that the 5<sup>th</sup> floor would barely be any harder than the 4<sup>th</sup>, except that the quests would likely turn more complicated or require more advanced knowledge. Not having to deal with the 40% bonus of his enemies was pretty nice, and Zac immediately felt that reaching the sixth floor was a given.

As for the 7<sup>th</sup> and higher, he would have to wait and see.

It was also good news for Ogras. Unless the demon encountered some sort of situation that directly countered his skillset, then conquering the fifth floor was a distinct possibility. Getting two top tier rewards and a boost in attributes would come in handy for the upcoming fights.

The silence was deafening in the arena as Zac stood over the bisected corpse of the arena master, no one dared to either flee or speak up in fear that they would be targeted by the crazed gladiator. Zac didn't care about their reaction as he surveyed his surroundings, but his eyes lit up when he saw that the teleporter had already appeared in the middle of the arena, and he flashed over.

He had been afraid that killing the arena master wouldn't be enough, and that the real guardian was the Lord of the town or something like that. Luckily, the System had thrown him a bone, handing out an easy one on the first level.

Zac stepped onto the teleporter without bothering to explain himself to the still reeling spectators of the arena. He had started to become a bit numb to the various people he encountered, and he couldn't really be bothered to treat them differently than if they were puppets.

His mind was only focused on climbing higher.

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**Chapter 423 - Cosmic Gaze**

The next level placed him in an odd world where it felt like the colors were inverted, and he walked in a forest with white trunks and black leaves under a purple sky. The System wasn't as generous on the second world, and it took him over a day to figure out who the guardian was and to trap the wily beast.

Things were pretty much the same from there on out as Zac bashed his way from one level to another. His resolve to finish the quests fell apart after just three days when he found himself utterly unable to finish a single one of the first three levels of the 5<sup>th</sup> floor.

In the end he only managed to complete two quests on the whole floor, one assassination and one quest to locate a treasure. The assassination was done as sloppily as was humanly possible. Zac simply stormed the mansion of the target and killed him before he had the chance to run away, destroying half a city-block while completing the mission. He would have been fired on the spot from any decent assassin organization after such a shameful display.

As for the treasure quest, he simply was lucky. He accidentally overheard a few clues from an old drunk outside a tavern, and he almost stumbled onto the right spot just a few hours later. Perhaps his Luck was finally reaching the point where treasures almost jumped straight into his hands out of their own volition?

But even with his Luck and his decision to kill the guardians most of the time, it still took him 13 days to complete the eight levels of the 5<sup>th</sup> floor. That was pretty much what it took to climb the first three floors altogether, although they didn't rush through those levels.

He did however spend some time to master [**Bulwark Mastery**], and as expected he had been shown several visions related to cultivators focusing on their shields. There had been some differences between the various cultivators, but the similarities were far greater between the visions related to shields compared to those he got from [**Axe Mastery**].

Essentially all of them were related to defending, though it happened in different ways. Some were like Zac's class, warriors who stood at the forefront of armies, soaking up the damage and the hate so that his companions would be safe.

Others were mages or array masters who were able to erect massive defenses with their shields acting as the core. Only a few were also offensively geared, but Zac immediately felt that using a shield for attacking was suboptimal and nothing that he was interested in delving deeper into.

None of the visions really resonated with him, and it made him wonder just what he should do when evolving. He had spent most of the 5<sup>th</sup> floor in his Draugr-form, and he had to say that he was loath to fight without activating [**Vanguard of Undeath**] now.

Just getting a miasmic axe made Zac feel a much greater connection to the class, and he knew he needed to reduce the reliance on shields for his skills going forward. If that would happen immediately when evolving, then great. If not he'd simply have to take it step by step and gradually move toward a more axe-focused fighting style in his Draugr form as well.

The delay caused by working on his skills only added one extra day, so some worry about the higher floors started to sprout, and Zac began to wonder if his problem would be running out of time rather than a lack of power. How frustrating would it be if the time ran out just as he was about to defeat a floor guardian?

At least the floor guardian wasn't anything to write home about. It was a massive golem that would be able to keep the Fire Golem Leader in a pocket as it towered an impressive 30 meters into the air. It was like fighting a moving skyscraper, a massive construct of stone and crystal.

The golem had once been a guardian construct of a long-gone force, and for some reason it had awakened from its sealed chambers to wreak havoc on the area. Judging by the situation it might have gone the same way as Brazla, its artificial mind slowly getting twisted over the lonely eons.

Zac adopted a straightforward approach to the construct who used a mix of shockwaves and earth-based attacks, apart from its punches who were powerful enough to crush mountains. With the help of [**Chop**] and the Fragment of the Axe he managed to dismantle the giant piece by piece over an hour, all while dodging its attacks with the help of [**Loamwalker**].

It was a bit hard to compare the strength between the golem and the demon cultivator, but he estimated that the golem was only around 20% stronger than the demon. He would likely have been able to finish it off with either [**Nature's Punishment**] or [**Deforestation**], but Zac wanted to gain some experience in fighting against larger targets.

He knew that the reason for the small difference in strength was because the penalty was gone, and he reminded himself to not get complacent as he ripped out a huge inscribed crystal that had been in the chest of the golem.

Zac knew nothing about constructs, but he felt that the thing in his hands should be the equivalent to an array core, and it might be possible to repurpose somehow if he could keep it. He left the rest of the giant where it lay, as it was essentially scrap metal without the core, especially after Zac had launched hundreds of attacks on it.

**[Fifth Floor Complete. Upgrading Title.]**

**[Choose Reward: Offensive Skill, Defensive Skill, Support Skill. NOTE: All skills will have 80% compatibility or higher.]**

Zac quickly took a gander at his title, and he could confirm that nothing unexpected had happened with it.

**[Tower of Eternity - 5th Floor: Reach the 46th level of the Tower of Eternity. Reward: All stats +10. Strength +5%, Endurance +5%, Vitality +5%, All Stats +5%.]**

It simply gave an additional +5% to all attributes, which had officially turned it into the title providing the most amount of attributes by now. It had pushed his Strength one step further, placing it at 927 with the help of the Peak Grade Strength Fruit he consumed the moment he had the chance.

The title did also push his Luck to 204, but it seemed that there was no upgraded version of his Ambidextrous title. Perhaps something related to luck would appear at 250 points, but he didn't hold his breath for it. Zac had long realized that it was getting harder and harder to get his hands on new titles. Stocking up on two more Limited titles wouldn't be too hard, but he needed to find a Mystic Realm or trial that fit.

That was a later headache though, and Zac instead focused on the three rewards, a bit hesitant as to what to choose. The System guaranteed a good fit with his pathways, but the trouble was choosing what would help him the most.

There was also the issue of which class the System would provide the skill for, but he guessed that his human form was more likely. It was still his 'true' race, and also the form he was in when defeating the floor guardian. But he still kept his mind open in case he was proven wrong.

Offensive skills were the first thing Zac discarded. His Offensive capabilities weren't lacking in either of his classes, especially with his two Dao Fragment to help. That left defensive and support skills on the table.

He felt he was somewhat lacking a Defensive skill in his current form, as his **[Mental Fortress]** skill was of middling quality at best. It also had no connection to his Daos, making a Dao infusion impossible. Physical defenses wasn't an issue though, with **[Nature's Barrier]** and **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** providing extra layers of protection on top of his huge pool of Endurance.

And he didn't even need to mention the defensive capabilities of his other class.

Eventually, Zac chose to go with a Support Skill. There was no guarantee that he would get a skill to replace **[Mental Fortress]** with even if he picked the Defensive Skill, while support skills could help him in all kinds of ways.

A blinding pain immediately erupted in his head, and the world turned white as it felt like someone was pouring acid in his eyes. Even Zac wasn't immune to the soul-rending pain, and he found himself on the floor writhing in agony for god know how long until the pain finally subsided.

Sweat rolled down his head as he blearily looked around, and he realized that he had already been thrown into a new world, one of endless darkness and glaciers. The cold would have turned a mortal into a popsicle in a second, but Zac barely noticed it as he looked inward after having made sure there were no enemies nearby.

He wasn't surprised to learn that the skill he had just gained was ocular, as the pain he had just felt in his eyes was all too familiar. It was the agony he felt when he had been forced to redraw his crude pathways into the proper ones provided by his class.

It was like inscribing something on his soul, where he first had to erase his old skill only to inscribe a new one. He had hoped that the pain would be less pronounced, like when he drew the pathways for the class in his Draugr-form, but there was no such luck. It made him a bit worried about his evolution, but Zac knew that was a later problem as he focused on his new skill.

**[Cosmic Gaze - See through the veil of the universe. Upgradeable.]**

The flavor text was a bit similar to his old skill, **[Inquisitive Eye]**, though it felt a lot more impressive to see through the veil of the universe than to see through their secrets. The skill was also connected to his pathways and it had a great fit, which was a step up from the disconnected fractals that had simply hovered in his eyes before.

Zac looked around for a target to try the skill out on, but the area was truly desolate. That by itself was a problem though, so Zac started to move away from where he appeared. Safety was an illusion this far up the tower, and he couldn't stay around in what was probably a trap. However, he still wanted to see what his new skill did, and he eventually tried to activate it on a pristine-white tree nearby.

The world suddenly changed, as the dour landscape turned into a vibrant tapestry that shimmered in silver, blue, and white. Zac almost fell down from the rapid change in his surroundings, and it felt just like when he was drowning in Origin Dao from the Dao funnel.

The half-dead tree was suddenly a network of blue energy that surged from its roots beneath the snow up into its trunk. It was depending on the energy of the earth rather than photosynthesis to live.

But Zac barely had time to marvel at the beautiful scene before a formless blob of energy rose from the ground and globbed onto him, and Zac was shocked to notice there were already a couple of blobs sticking to his legs and his back when he looked down. Small motes of lights were slowly leaving his body and entering the little blobs, meaning they stole something from him without him noticing.

The first thing that came to mind was leeches. Were these little things slowly sucking him dry of Cosmic Energy? He quickly tried to brush the things away, but his hands passed right through. However, he thankfully found that they weren't immune to his Dao Fragment, and they quickly disintegrated after a few Dao-infused swings of his hand.

**[Help the expedition team find the ice-attuned crystal mine.]**

The quest appeared just as he destroyed the pack of energy balls, and Zac suddenly found himself holding a disk that was pretty similar to the beacon array that Galau had used before. He quickly put the array away as he set out to complete the quest.

It took Zac over six hours in the freezing winds to find the place he was looking for, a nondescript snow-covered hill that only reached fifty meters into the air. It certainly wasn't the kind of mountain where you'd expect to find a Nexus Crystal mine, as the energies were barely elevated above the norm in the area.

But thanks to **[Cosmic Gaze]** he could see that a cold blue light was slowly seeping out from the hill at a few spots, and after he cleared the area he saw that the lights emerged from a couple of cracks. The lights only grew brighter as Zac cut his way down a couple of meters, and he could quickly confirm he had found his target as the stone started to become studded with white-blue crystals.

He didn't immediately activate the beacon though, but he instead extracted a few dozen Ice-Attuned Nexus Crystals. He only looted right around the entrance before he activated the beacon though, as he felt that cleaning house would be a mistake.

The disc suddenly enlarged and a group of humanoids stepped through, led by an ice-blue troll that was just skin and bone. He held a staff in his hand, and the whole area turned a few degrees colder when he appeared.

The troll only threw Zac a glance before he looked down into the mine, and nodded with satisfaction. He did release a snort when he saw the holes in the walls, but he didn't comment on Zac snatching a little bit for himself.

"Pay him," the shaman said with a raspy voice, and another troll stepped forward and handed Zac a box.

Zac accepted the box and immediately put it away before he stepped onto the Teleportation Array that had been created from the Array Disk. This was what he had expected. Looting the mine would have given him a couple of ice attuned Nexus Crystals, which were pretty much useless for him. But properly completing a quest usually brought rewards, and Zac gambled that the reward would be better than the crystals.

His new skill proved extremely helpful over the following levels, as various secrets that would have passed him right by were displayed as clear as day from his magical vision.

The skill wasn't some sort of universal key though as Zac quickly realized that the lights he saw through **[Cosmic Gaze]** were attuned energies, and most energies simply weren't attuned. Since attunement was slightly related to the Dao it did however vaguely provide a hint when skills got infused by the Dao, but it was nowhere as clear as the lights emitted from things such as attuned crystals.

More importantly, he realized that no one noticed when he used the skill on them, which was what had essentially made his old ocular skill useless. Now he would be able to glean clues from his enemies without them noticing, and Zac knew it might be just what he needed when he saw the quest for the final level of the 6<sup>th</sup> floor.

### **[Defeat the Enlightened Three in a Dao Discourse]**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 424 - Thelim**

Zac found himself standing on a gravel road in the middle of a tranquil forest the moment he appeared at the final level of the 6<sup>th</sup> floor, and the quest to defeat the Enlightened Three in a Dao Discourse had appeared immediately upon arrival.

If Zac had been tasked with something like this a few weeks ago he would have thought the quest meant he was supposed to expound on the Dao, proving his deeper understanding compared to these three enlightened cultivators. It would be like a theological debate between a couple of monks.

But Galau had mentioned Dao Discourses in passing, which saved Zac the embarrassment. As it turned out, a Dao Discourse wasn't something as civil as a debate in the traditional sense. There were no podiums and no moderator keeping score of good arguments. It was actually more like a battle.

However, the difference between a Dao Discourse and a normal fight was that the battle only utilized the Dao and nothing else. To make this possible there was an

array simply called **[Dao Discourse Array]**. The fight wouldn't take place between the combatants personally, since things like Attributes and Skills would influence the results.

The way Galau described how it worked made it sound like a Dao Discourse was like a mix of Chess and a mock battle. You infused your Daos into the array, and it would conjure various phenomena or avatars that you would use to fight. For example, his Fragment of the Axe would probably be able to conjure axe warriors, or perhaps spiritual axes that flew around in the air. But it obviously wouldn't be able to summon an ice golem.

It was a battle where you benefited from creativity and tactics, but the Dao was still the focus. The stronger your Daos were, the stronger your avatars would be. Similarly, the greater control you had over them, the better you would be able to fight. You claimed victory by destroying the enemy's avatars or forced them to concede.

Zac hadn't understood why anyone would just give up, but it turned out that one's soul was connected to the array. Every time an avatar was destroyed your soul took a hit. This meant that the risk of death was pretty low, but you stood the risk to seriously harm your soul if you didn't know when to give up.

These types of mock battles were a popular means of both working on your control of the Dao and settling disputes in larger sects, but it was a pretty hard item to get. Why some random force in the middle of the forest had an array like this was beyond Zac's understanding, but he supposed it was simply put there by the System to create a new type of challenge.

When it came to the strength of his Daos Zac felt pretty confident. Two Dao Fragments should by all means be pretty strong even compared to the Floor Guardian of the 6<sup>th</sup> floor. The problem was his control, or rather lack thereof. His amateurish finesse was already all too apparent from his inability to learn **[Cyclic Strike]**, but that wasn't the real problem.

He was still utterly incapable of infusing multiple Daos into a single skill or attack, which was the hallmark of a skilled cultivator. His sister was able to do it since long ago, and Ilvere was getting close as far as Zac could tell. He couldn't be sure, but he also believed Thea mastered that technique going by their time traveling in the hunt.

That was the greatest risk to him failing the quest as he saw it. Infusing two Daos into a skill might not double its might, but it would still increase it by a noticeable degree. The same applied to a Dao Discourse, where using multiple Daos would result in both more versatile and powerful avatars.

He knew that he wouldn't be able to beat some enlightened cultivators through finesse, and there was no chance of him suddenly becoming a masterful Dao controller in an instant. He would have to rely on brute force and hope that his Daos and mental strength along with some creative tactics were enough to force his enemies to give in.

At least he had **[Cosmic Gaze]** now to help him understand what his enemies would be doing. Daos weren't as obvious as skills, as its natural form was invisible and formless. But with his ocular skill he might be able to figure out what Daos the opponents were using and their plans, allowing him to gain the upper hand.

There were limits to that strategy though as **[Cosmic Gaze]** wasn't some patch that solved everything that Zac currently lacked.

The new skill only elevated Zac from a bumbling idiot to a somewhat capable adventurer thanks to showing him a larger picture of the truth, but it was just a small aid in the end. The levels of the 6<sup>th</sup> floor had still taken longer and longer to complete for example, even with the help of **[Cosmic Gaze]**.

For example, climbing the eight levels of the 6th floor had cost him a full 16 days. Things got more complicated at every level, and the ocular skill only helped resolve certain issues. Still, Zac judged that he saved almost 5 days thanks to **[Cosmic Gaze]**, but it was distinctly possible that the 7<sup>th</sup> floor would take over 20 days as things looked right now.

One saving grace was that the System had actually been kind enough to swap out his ocular skill in both his classes. He had thought that **[Inquisitive Eye]** would remain in his Draugr-form, but he had been happy to be proven wrong the first time he swapped during the climb. His pitch-black eyes in his undead form were pretty amazing now, both being able to discern life force and the Daos.

Losing his old skill completely didn't bother Zac in the slightest as it didn't serve much of a purpose any longer. Losing the ability to inspect beasts was a bit of an annoyance, but there were no doubt items that could serve a similar purpose in the multiverse. Perhaps whatever the fractal version of AR goggles was?

He had tried learning **[True Strike]** in his undead form as well, but his picky pathways hadn't accepted the crystal. The eyes alone was a great asset when fighting the series of guardians though. The guardians were all well into the E-Grade already, and after the 3<sup>rd</sup> level they were all at least as strong as the battleroach king if you excluded the Technocrat's modifications.

Of course, they didn't all excel at defense the same way as the massive roach did. One of them was a lightning-attuned thief, and Zac couldn't even catch his robes in his human form. Hundreds of fractal blades were shot out in his attempts to take down the ratman, but the blades only managed to destroy the ancient ruins they fought inside.

Zac was eventually forced to swap classes mid-battle, relying on the defensive charges of his robes and one of Rasuliel's defensive treasures to not get skewered while transitioning. The moment he unleashed the combination of **[Profane Seal]** and **[Vanguard of Undeath]** the fight was essentially over, as his Undying Bulwark class was truly the nemesis of all Dexterity-based classes.

He was thankfully still able to defeat the guardians just fine without being forced to resort to **[Hatchetman's Rage]** or using any of his ultimate skills, which was a relief. He still used his stronger skills now and then, but it was mostly to expedite his climb. If he had been forced to go all out against the normal guardians, then what would he do against the true floor guardian?

The increasing strength of the guardians also came with a constantly increasing risk of real injuries. He hadn't been wounded so far apart from a few minor flesh wounds, but that would probably change starting on the next floor. One mistake and he would be out of commission for a couple of days, and those types of delays could prove extremely costly.

He still had a large number of arrays and other treasures in his Cosmos Sack collecting dust. He hadn't encountered a situation that called for a **[Void Ball]** so far, not mentioning the even stronger arrays that he had found in Rasuliel's Spatial Tool. Perhaps they would prove to be the key to speed up the fights and reduce the time he had to spend healing up.

At the end of the day there wasn't much he could do about the lack of time, he could only keep his head down and complete the quest he was given. He could always just run in axe swinging, but he truly wanted to succeed in the Dao Discourse if possible. The last floor guardian had been related to learning a skill, and he had found a Skill Crystal.

This quest was directly related to the Dao, and the implication was clear. If he could encounter an opportunity to improve his Daos he had to grab it. It was pretty much the only venue for him to power up without evolving, and improving any of his Daos by one step would increase his power by a noticeable degree.

“Excuse me,” a deep voice suddenly rumbled behind him, and Zac turned around only to find himself face-to-face with a walking tree, its face seemingly carved right into the trunk.

It rose almost four meters into the air, where almost half of it was a tree crown that kind of looked like a set of hair for the face that was placed on its trunk.

“Ah?” Zac was only able to answer, his mind a bit on the fritz since he couldn’t believe he had neither sensed nor heard a living tree sneaking right up behind him.

“You are blocking the path young man,” the tree kindly reminded.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Zac said as he stepped to the side of the road as if by instinct.

“Are you perchance participating in the Dao Discourse as well?” the ent asked as it curiously looked at him, the movement causing its thick trunk to creak in protest.

Zac hesitated for a moment before he nodded in confirmation.

“As I thought,” the ent nodded. “How about we go together? I am trying my hand as well, though I do not hold much hope for my chances. My name is Thelim, by the way.”

Zac readily agreed as he felt that this large being didn’t contain any malicious intentions, and his danger sense was completely quiet as well. The tree could rather be a source of information about the scenario of the level, an opportunity to glean whether there was some Dao-related opportunity hiding somewhere.

And if the ent decided to sneak an attack, then Zac would simply turn him into firewood.

“I am just passing through the area, and I just heard about the Enlightened Three by chance. I heard there was a great opportunity waiting for anyone who could defeat them, do you know anything more?” Zac probed.

“So you’re a traveler?” the ent mumbled with a thoughtful nod. “That’s why I couldn’t place you. Well, it makes sense that you came here.”

Zac slowly nodded, not sure what the ent was talking about.

“The opportunity you heard about is the chance to enter the Pool of Tranquility. It’s a pond of spiritual dew that has formed a natural formation over countless millennia,” Thelim said, the leaves on his head shaking with excitement.

“What does it do?” Zac said as his heart started to beat a bit faster.

The name reminded Zac of something Ogras had mentioned offhandedly. His family apparently possessed a magical pond themselves, which was created with the help of a huge amount of treasures and a powerful array. It was actually a trial ground that could award a Limited Title. The elites of the clan could dive into it, and the further down they managed to go, the better the title the System awarded.

The demon had wanted Zac to buy something similar from the Town Shop, but there was nothing of the sort available. What if this pond was the same? He still had two empty slots for Limited Title, so no matter how good or bad it was, it would still be a pure upgrade.

And even if it didn’t give a limited title, then it was still probably related to the Dao. Was drinking the Dew the equivalent of eating a Dao Treasure? The effect of Dao Treasures was pretty muted inside the Tower, but this was a free opportunity. He might even be able to take away some of the water to drink it outside.

But the next words from the ent dashed Zac’s hopes.

“Every day a few drops are added to the pool at sunrise, each droplet infused with the spirituality of daybreak and empowered by the spirit of the forest. If my kind enters our bloodlines will be purified, but there are some benefits for normal people as well,” Thelim explained.

“What kinds of benefits?” Zac probed.

“It purifies and strengthens souls.”

Zac once again got excited when he heard the effect of the pool. It wasn't exactly what he had hoped for, but it still sounded like something he could benefit immensely from. His soul getting corroded by the splinter was a constant worry, especially since the past few days.

Because the Splinter of Oblivion had finally woken up from its slumber again.

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**Chapter 425 - The Enlightened Three**

The splinter was once again active, but it thankfully hadn't shown any change in its behavior. It just extended its tendrils to touch the miasmatic fractals for a bit before it calmed down and started to emit that mysterious energy into his mind just like before.

The fact that the Splinter was once again active meant that he might boil over again, and Zac didn't want another mess like the Zethaya situation on his hands. That time only his enemies got killed, but what if he turned berserk in the middle of Port Atwood next time? He'd end up like Anzonil's disciple, forced to live far away from people.

If he could strengthen and purify his soul he would hopefully be able to increase his resistance to the mood swings brought on by the splinter. Not only that, but the power of the Dao also came from the soul, and having a greater soul no doubt came with all kinds of benefits to his connection with his Dao Fragments.

“Have these enlightened three been bathing in the pool themselves?” Zac suddenly probed, realizing a problem with the situation.

“Of course,” the ent laughed, causing the leaves in his crown to flutter. “Some say that their family wanted to keep the Pool of Tranquility for themselves, but they had to provide this opportunity to the younger generations due to pressure from the surrounding forces. Why else would they be so kind as to share their precious dew?”

Zac snorted and agreed with the sentiment. There was no such thing as a free lunch, no one was so 'enlightened' that they would readily hand out their resources to outsiders. It also made Zac curious just what kind of reception the reluctant hosts had prepared for them.

The two kept walking for over an hour, and the ent was happy to share his experience from living in the area. The forest they stood in was apparently beyond massive, and even an E-Grade warrior would require months of travel to exit it. Thelim had never left it at all, but had rather stayed in the area controlled by his clan most of his life.

Zac had already heard that Earth could be considered a very small planet even after having grown by a huge degree due to the merging of planets. But it was pretty much as small as a D-Graded planet could be, where the larger ones could have a surface area that was hundreds of times larger.

As for C-Graded worlds, the whole area of Earth would barely be considered a clan's fiefdom, a small corner of a single kingdom. Those kinds of worlds were exceedingly rare though, and according to Galau there were just three such planets in the whole Allbright Empire. Seventy percent of all C-grade forces in the Allbright Empire lived on the Allbright World, with the rest divided on the two slightly inferior planets.

Thelim's life in the forest was pretty tranquil, with the various forest races having pretty close ties. This wasn't because there was some sort of harmonious camaraderie brought on by their connection to nature, but rather a need to band together to defend from outside threats. The forest contained all kinds of Spiritual Herbs, and outside forces often wanted to seize parts of the forest for themselves.

That kind of conflict was pretty far from where Zac had ended up though as they were deep in the heart of the forest. Any dangerous beasts had long been culled in the area, and the only sounds were those of birds chirping and the rustling of the leaves. It was as though the peaceful atmosphere seeped into Zac's bones and he suddenly stopped and took a deep breath.

"What's wrong?" Thelim asked with piqued interest when he saw that Zac stood still as though he was in a trance.

"I just had a small improvement from walking in this forest," Zac said with a smile after a few seconds.

"You truly are a kindred spirit. The breath of nature is dense on you, you should consider staying here for a while. It is an amazing place to come closer to our origin," the ent nodded and resumed walking.

It had mentioned that they were brethren because it had sensed the Seed of Trees on Zac. Ents were one of those races that were extremely specialized, the opposite of humans who essentially were talentless jack-of-all-trades. Thelim had noticed Zac's nature attunement the second he saw him, but the ent didn't seem to notice the other Daos in Zac's body.

Zac wryly smiled as he resumed walking next to the living tree. He wondered if the ent would feel as close to him if he knew that Zac's class was called Hatchetman and that he possessed skills such as **[Chop]** and **[Deforestation]**.

It was perhaps even luckier that he didn't arrive at the floor in his Draugr-form. The stench of death might have prompted Thelim to immediately attack him rather than initiate a conversation. Zac would easily have defeated him, but he would have missed out on the information he provided.

As for the small improvement, it wasn't a lie. Zac had suddenly sensed a stronger connection with nature around him and had stopped to properly savor the feeling. Unfortunately it wasn't an epiphany or anything of the sort, but rather an improvement to **[Forester's Constitution]**.

The passive skill had finally evolved to late proficiency, increasing the boost to Vitality and Endurance by a full 2% each when the effect was doubled. Zac guessed that meant that the skill would provide a 15% boost at peak mastery, which was nothing to scoff at.

Zac wasn't too surprised that the skill finally had evolved, as he had traveled through all kinds of forests during the past 50-odd levels, including topographies he would never encounter on earth. It was perfect timing as well, as just ten minutes later they reached their destination.

The wild forest gave way to a meticulously cultivated one, where each tree or bush was a work of art. They took the shapes of people, animals, and even landscapes,

though they were not sapient plants like Thelim. It also didn't look like they had been pruned, but that they rather had grown into such a shape naturally.

"We're here," Thelim said as he looked around in appreciation. "The trees are slowly formed to grow into these shapes over centuries. It is a popular form of meditation here."

Zac nodded in understanding as he looked at the living sculptures all around them. It sounded crazy to him to spend hundreds of years on shaping a tree, but with lifespans running into the tens of thousands there were probably all kinds of weird time-consuming hobbies out there. The garden was only a few hundred meters deep though so they reached their destination.

A large hedge reaching at least fifty meters into the air surrounded the massive compound where the Enlightened Three and their clan lived, and its gate was guarded by odd humanoids that looked like a mix of trees and humans. Their hair was green and looked like cascading grass, but they had normal skin with a pinkish hue.

"Dryads?" Zac asked with interest as his mind grasped for similar beings from Earth's mythology.

"Just so," the ent rumbled in confirmation. "As I mentioned earlier, the 'Enlightened Three' are three grandchildren of the Perenne Family's Matriarch. They are dryads."

"How strong is this force?" Zac asked curiously as they approached the gate.

Going by the somewhat sparse Cosmic Energy in the area and circuitously questioning the ent it became apparent that there shouldn't be any D-Grade warriors in this world. But there might still be complications if the floor guardian was in the middle of their clan.

"I've heard that the matriarch has passed level 90," the ent whispered. "She is one of the strongest warriors in the sector."

Zac nodded, but not without some confusion. The matriarch was barely strong enough to be a challenge for him, so what about the 'Enlightened Three'? Zac had assumed that they were both the quest target and the floor guardians, but it felt pretty unlikely if the matriarch was only at that level.

"What about the Enlightened three then?" Zac asked.

"They're all Peak F-Grade," the ent said. "But do not look down on them. Rumors are that they could evolve over two decades ago, but they chose to keep refining their souls as they pondered on their Daos. Their insight is extremely high. In fact, don't let the levels of any dryads fool you. They are the blessed children of nature and they have a terrifying affinity with nature-aspected Daos."

"I understand," Zac commented as they passed through the gates.

Zac's appearance drew some interested glances among the forest beings but no one barred his entry, especially since Thelim seemed to have some renown. Zac himself was thinking of a back-up plan to the quest and only threw a cursory glance at the people around him.

His best guess right now was that the matriarch was the floor guardian, but the situation was a bit complicated. The expansive mansion wasn't mobbed, but there would be over ten allied forces and a bunch of loose cultivators in attendance. Many leaders would be here to escort their young, each of them a match to the Perenne Matriarch.

Could he really attack the matriarch in such a situation?

Everyone was here for the Pond and its soul-strengthening effects, and Zac might end up mobbed if he did something hastily. Helping kill an outsider was a pretty small

price to pay for gaining access to the Pool of Tranquility. Perhaps he would have to waste a couple of days until the event was over in case he lost the Dao Discourse, and find an opportunity to strike then.

But that was if all else failed since he didn't have the time to wait around like that.

Zac and Thelim were led to a huge glade where a banquet was held. People walked around to mingle and network, but Zac was completely disinterested in the proceedings. What was the point in getting to know a bunch of people that he would never encounter again? He only did the bare minimum as he tried to gather information about his targets.

It was only an hour later that the members of the Perenne Clan arrived, led by a beautiful forest dryad who appeared to be around Zac's age. She had delicate features and her eyes were slightly larger compared to a human's, giving her a very cute appearance. But Zac already knew that she was actually an old cultivator approaching 800 years.

It was obviously the matriarch of the Perenne clan. Her grasslike hair cascaded almost all the way down to the ground, but Zac had already learned that it wasn't completely ornamental. The thick stalks were her weapon as well, and she could grow them over a hundred meters in an instant according to rumors.

Behind her walked a group of cultivators of various races, each of them radiating a respectable aura. They were formerly loose cultivators who had chosen to stay behind after previous gatherings like this one according to Thelim, and it was this very reason that the Perenne family also allowed loose cultivators to join in on the fun.

Finally, there were the 'Enlightened Three'. The three were like younger copies of their grandmother, two youths and a girl. Going by appearance Zac would have guessed they were the same age as Emily, but they were closing in on 100 years. Reaching peak F-Grade in this world was a slow and arduous process due to the sparse energy, but it also gave them ample time to work on their Daos.

"Thank you all for coming to our humble home," the matriarch said with a cherubic voice. "We are delighted to host both honored friends and new acquaintances visiting from afar."

"Our family has been blessed with the Pool of Tranquility, and it is our joy to share the gift of nature with the fated ones," the matriarch continued. "But the dew is limited, and only a select few can enjoy its effect every decade. The mandate of the Heavens is that power is needed to seize one's fortune, and the precious opportunities cannot be wasted on the subpar."

The matriarch waved her hand the next moment, and an earthquake spread through the area. Zac frowned and got ready for a fight as the ground shook and heaved, with thick roots sprouting from the ground. Zac was about to take out his axe and get to chopping, but the ent placed a massive hand on his shoulder.

"Wait, my friend," the ent said from his side. "Just watch."

Zac hesitantly nodded and held off on taking any action, and he breathed out in relief a few seconds later as he witnessed the miraculous skill of a true arborist. The enormous roots weren't an attack, but the matriarch was actually growing a massive stadium out of the ground.

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## Chapter 426 - Talent

Branches and trees entwined to form expansive bleachers that were partitioned into mid-sized platforms that would be able to house between five and twenty people each. Even seats and tables sprouted up from the ground on the platforms.

Finally an inscribed disk was lifted out of the ground with the help of six gargantuan roots. The platform looked like an enormous coin, with a diameter of thirty meters or so. It would be impossible to have a proper battle on such a small surface, so it could only mean it was exclusively meant for the Dao Discourses.

The disk was almost ten meters high and its surface looked just like the forest floor. It was a bit uneven and covered in grass, with a few bushes growing as well. Two smaller platforms rose up next to the **[Dao Discourse Array]**, one on each side of it. An altar holding a football-sized crystal was placed on each of them, no doubt the control crystals the competitors would use.

“The rules are simple,” the matriarch said as she was lifted to one of the highest platforms by a root that looked like a massive snake. “If you wish to participate, simply take a number. To get the opportunity to bathe in the Pool of Tranquility you need to defeat two of my grandchildren. However, if you lose the first battle you are out.”

“Why this rule?” the Matriarch smiled when she noticed some discontent among the guest. “It’s to save their reserves. A Dao Discourse isn’t as draining as a real battle, but there are dozens of you here. My grandchildren would turn into hollowed-out husks if they had to expend so much spiritual force.”

Of course, there was also the not-so-hidden implication that they were favoring their own. Zac didn’t feel there was anything wrong with that though. It was their pond after all, and they should be able to stack the odds in their favor a bit.

Zac and Thelim walked over and got their allotted numbers from one of the servants holding a crystal, and Zac was pretty happy with the result. He was placed at the 8<sup>th</sup> spot, whereas Thelim drew 2<sup>nd</sup>. It was perfect for Zac as it gave him some time to observe how the Discourse worked. It sounded pretty fantastical from Galau’s explanations and he wanted to see some examples before he jumped into the fray himself.

The best would have been to play around with the array for a bit to test out its limits and various ideas, but there was no chance of that happening. The first person to challenge the Enlightened Three was one of the few wandering cultivators just like himself, and she didn’t seem all too pleased at being the sacrificial lamb that had to sound out the three youths.

The woman still walked up to the large control crystal and it lit up with power the next moment. Zac looked on with interest as large swirls of mist rose out of the Discourse Array to quickly form the avatars the combatants would use, the wandering cultivator had chosen to form a dozen soldiers, each standing roughly one meter tall.

Their swords radiated a distinct sharpness that Zac was all too familiar with, and he knew that the girl had mastered the Seed of Sharpness, and it was at High Stage judging by its power.

The dryad rather summoned a field of flowers, and Zac couldn’t place what Dao they were made from. When Zac looked at it with **[Cosmic Gaze]** he realized its true nature though. The flowers barely emitted any color to his adjusted spectrum, but there were actually vibrant roots running through the platform itself, snaking their way toward the soldiers that were targeting the flowers above.

The wandering cultivator didn't seem to sense anything amiss and she ordered the soldiers to approach the flowers, even sending a few of them forward to scout out the plants. One of the soldiers swept his sword in a wide arc, and a rippling wave of sharpness cut down a noticeable section of them.

There was no reaction from neither the flowers nor the young dryad who held his hand against the control crystal, and the guest immediately realized something was wrong even if she couldn't sense the roots digging ever closer. She hesitated for a fraction of a second before she grit her teeth and ordered her whole squad forward in an attempt to preempt whatever the Perenne scion had planned.

The soldiers only had time to take a few steps before spears made of wood struck out of the ground, piercing the chest of one soldier after another, ripping them apart in seconds. Each strike also seemed to hit the controller as well and she staggered away from the crystal as blood started running down her nose. She threw an unknown pill into her mouth and quickly scurried away after bowing toward the hosts.

The battle was over in an instant, and Zac didn't even get a chance to see the dryad use any hidden cards. He had heard that the three of them had represented the family a decade ago as well, and at that time all three had showcased peak Dao seeds. Some believed that the three had gained Dao Fragments by now while others thought they had rather worked on their supplementary Daos.

One thing that Zac could glean from the fight was that tactics were just as important as strength. The dryad hadn't even bothered using any fancy techniques such as fusing multiple Daos into one stronger projection, but he had rather won using wits.

The Dao that formed the spikes were related to nature as it felt a bit similar to his Seed of Trees, but there were also distinct differences. Zac guessed it might be the Seed of Root. He guessed such a seed could contain some piercing capabilities like those he saw just then. But most importantly, the seed that the youth had used was only at Middle Stage, yet it defeated the wandering cultivator in an instant.

"How skilled," Thelim murmured. "I only sensed the roots due to my natural affinity. I wouldn't have fared any better if I was a human in that fight."

"Good luck," Zac said to his temporary travel companion as the tree stood up with a grunt.

The one-sided battle seemed to have put a bit of a damper on Thelim's mood, but he still reluctantly stepped to the plate. His showing was a bit better where he summoned a massive tree that released a storm of leaves to cut his enemy.

The Enlightened Three had changed representative to let the dryads rest in between flights, and the next one conjured stone golems that withstood the barrage of leaves until they reached the tree. A few of them combined forces to forcibly rip apart the tree, at which point Thelim surrendered by unsummoning his avatar.

"Well, it was worth a try at least," Thelim rumbled with a sigh as he returned to Zac's side. "Those three siblings are truly fearsome. We both used High Stage seeds, but the amount of spirit he could instill into the avatars were night and day. He also controlled those golems so naturally, while I struggled to just send the leaves in the right direction. Both the strength of their souls and their control over their Daos is top tier."

Zac slowly nodded, but he didn't directly comment on the fight. The friendly ent was honestly fighting way above his weight class, and if this was a real fight the living tree would have been ripped to shreds in an instant.

He only had one seed just like the first cultivator, and it wasn't even a fragment. To challenge the three dryads who had grown up with access to the Pond of Tranquility

was to ask for a beating. But the young ent had already said he was mostly joining the fun to gain some experience, so he took the defeat in stride.

Only when the 5<sup>th</sup> warrior, a local scion of another powerful faction from the looks of it, stepped to the plate did Zac see Dao fusions come to play. Not only did the man, who seemed to be some sort of nymph, fuse two different Daos into a mighty beast that pounced on his enemies, but both seeds were Peak mastery.

The dryad wasn't to be outdone though, and he created an image of a hunter wielding a bow covered in leaves. The hunter deftly dodged the rabid assaults of the animal until it finally managed to land a lethal strike with an arrow that shone with the green light of some nature-related Dao.

It was an interesting display, but Zac felt it was a bit lackluster compared to a real fight that brought shockwaves and explosions that could be felt from hundreds of meters away. It almost looked a bit like level 20 warriors and beasts were fighting to the naked eye, though it looked a lot more spectacular when viewing it with [**Cosmic Gaze**].

Finally, it was Zac's turn to the plate, and he was eager to try out his might. He was pretty confident by this point as none of the fights had showcased any Dao Fragments, and he had two he could bring into play. He might not be able to fuse them, but summoning two Fragment Avatar should be able to handle any trouble that came his way.

Zac jumped up on the platform, and after a nod at his competitor he placed his hand on the control crystal and started to imbue it with his Dao. He felt a prickling sensation in his mind as he tried to conjure his avatars, like his brain had suddenly grown two sizes inside his skull.

He understood what he needed to do since connecting with the control crystal provided him with a burst of information, but there was an almost insurmountable resistance when forcing his Fragment of the Axe into the elusive mists hiding inside the platform. It felt like he was trying to grab the haze with his bare hands.

The only solution he could come up with was to steady himself and forcibly push even more of his spiritual energy inside the array, and it finally worked. Eight warriors emerged through the mist, each one of them radiating a palpable killing intent and a force that caused the ground around them to be cut.

However, there were no exclamations of excitement or envy coming from the audience, but rather confused murmurs and subdued snickers. And even if Zac didn't want to admit it, he could understand why. Things had seemed pretty smooth and simple from the stadium, but he had barely managed to create the avatars in line with his imagination. Anything more was beyond his ability.

The eight soldiers looked mighty, but they twitched and flailed about in an extremely uncoordinated manner. It looked like they were string puppets controlled by the world's worst puppeteer. Zac also knew it wasn't some trick by the array, but rather due to his limitations.

Just conjuring the eight warriors was even more taxing than when he infused the Skeletons of [**Undying Legion**], but Zac had never gone any further than that with the skill. The skeletons didn't require constant commands, though Zac could order them about with a few simple thoughts. But these avatars didn't listen to mental commands but were rather moved by manipulating them with his spirit.

This was just like when he tried to control his spiritual energy and have the two Daos fill the fractal for [**Cyclic Strike**]. The Daos turned into spaghetti in his hands and it all turned into a big mess.

The dryad cultivator had frozen in confusion for a second, but when she noticed that Zac's fumbling wasn't an act she sneered and pushed the small critters looking like walking radishes she had summoned forward. They didn't look as mighty as the hunter, but Zac could see that they were created with the help of two Peak Dao Seeds.

Zac tried to think of a solution to his embarrassing situation, and he could only come up with one course of action. If he couldn't control so many warriors, then he would just have to reduce the numbers. Seven of the axemen dissipated into smoke just before vines shot out by the radish soldiers struck them, but one soldier stayed behind and cut the attacking vines into shreds with one swipe.

Things became a bit easier with only one avatar to control, and the power forced into its diminutive size was far beyond anything that had been seen so far during the battles. The axe warrior roared as he stumbled forward, his axe madly flailing in the air. A wave of destruction rippled out in an instant, destroying most of the seed warriors who couldn't muster a working response to the random strikes.

Zac breathed in relief as he tried to cajole his avatar to move forward, but he stopped when he saw that the pale-faced dryad dissolved her remaining radish warriors. He first thought that he had won, but he quickly realized she was just changing tactics as a centaur wielding a simple spear appeared to replace the small vegetable avatars.

The centaur immediately galloped forward, and a wild exchange of strikes took place between the two solitary avatars. Truthfully it was mostly the axeman getting hit over and over and Zac infusing even more spiritual energy to keep it standing, while occasionally releasing a massive, but random, swing that either completely missed its mark or grievously wounded its target.

He also tried to incorporate the Dao of the Coffin into the mix, but the only solution he could find was to completely swap out the Dao in the avatar. It changed him from an axe-warrior into an axe-wielding skeleton climbing out of a coffin, and the stone box helped protect its sides from attacks.

It did help with the defenses a bit, but Zac eventually gave it up since swapping back and forth in some sort of pseudo-cycle only helped him drain his mental energy a lot faster. He had already landed a few pretty nasty hits with the avatar powered by the Fragment of the Axe, and one more was likely all it would take to completely destroy it.

But the power of the spear-wielding centaur suddenly shot up by a noticeable degree, and its previously unattuned spear lit up with a color of attunement, this one looking a bit like steel. Not only that, one shape after another started to appear on the dryad's side of the arena, each one of them emitting a respectable amount of power.

It was a literal army of forest critters wielding various weaponry as they approached Zac's solitary avatar.

Zac couldn't help but look up from the crystal to see what the hell was going on. Had the Matriarch suddenly jumped into the mix, or did his opponent go easy on him before? But his eyes widened in realization when his gaze swept across the three youths standing on the platform on the opposite side.

The 'Enlightened Three' were actually cheating.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 427 - Storm**

Zac immediately noticed something odd with the help of **[Cosmic Gaze]**, but he initially wasn't sure whether he was just imagining things. Thin tendrils of energy seemed to be passing between the three siblings unbeknownst to him or the other spectators, making Zac believe that they were somehow sharing their spiritual power.

The tendrils were extremely minute though, looking like glistening fishing lines in the air. It made Zac doubt his eyes for a second, especially since none of the spectators were commenting on it.

Or was this the advantage of having the home field? There were tens of E-Grade warriors among the spectators, but none of them spoke up. It was impossible that none of them realized something was amiss if Zac would see it with his newly acquired early proficiency skill. They simply didn't say anything since it happened to an outsider.

It was only good if Zac got thrown out, as it would leave more spots in the pool for their own progeny. So everyone kept their mouths shut in a tacit agreement. Fury started to build in Zac's mind as he railed against the injustice, but he stopped his anger from running amok. He needed to find a solution that didn't end with a bloodbath.

Calling them out wouldn't work. If the spectators cared about fair competition for outsiders, then they should have spoken up already.

If this had been a real fight, he would have launched something like **[Deforestation]** by this point, laying waste to all three of them while taking down the whole stadium and crushing the **[Dao Discourse Array]** into pieces. But doing so would no doubt end with him not being able to access the Pool of Tranquility.

He had tried to circumvent the quests multiple times during the climb, where he had defeated the guardian first before trying to get the treasure related to the quest. That tactic had invariably failed, as the treasures were protected by all kinds of safeguards the System had put in place. One time a bird even swooped down from nowhere to snatch a spiritual herb out of his hands before he could react.

Prickling pain in his mind made him realize an odd change with the array. The moment Zac noticed the reinforcements on the other side he had ordered his avatar to back away while he tried to figure out a plan. But while his mind churned to figure out a plan he had unbeknownst kept infusing the control crystal with massive amounts of spiritual energy.

None of it had entered the axeman though since that required Zac's full attention, but it had rather formed a large formless blob of destructive energies at the bottom of the high platform. Weirder yet, the haze that rested beneath the surface had started to mix and integrate with his spiritual energy without taking any specific form.

It was like his Dao Fragment was a magnet that kept absorbing the mists in the array. Zac completely froze witnessing the spectacle, and it felt like he had woken up from a stupor. He felt as though he had been muddled for the past months, but the Dao Discourse had finally dispersed his illusions.

He had been so focused on the Cycle of Life and Death since meeting Yrial that he had ignored his unique points, and forcibly tried to create a cultivation system that seemed fitting on the surface, but one that still kind of missed the mark. Yrial had tried helping him by having him learn **[Cyclic Strike]** and improve his Dao control, but it was that very skill that had made him reach an impasse.

It was time to accept reality. Creating a cycle where he integrated two diametrically opposite concepts was like trying to breathe underwater for him. It was not in his nature, and forcing such a thing would only create mediocre results.

His thoughts went to the weird ball that Yrial played with and he remembered how it seamlessly flitted back and forth between frigid flames and fiery ice. Did he truly need to create something like that with his Daos of Life and Death? His sister might be suited for such a path with her amazing affinities and AI to help her fuse the four elements, but he needed to find another direction to take.

He would still keep the core parts, with Life and Death each being one half of the whole, with the Dao of the Axe being the delivery method, or perhaps the thing that bound the two together. But braiding the two together into a revolving cycle was too complicated. Perhaps he could come back to that idea when he was as powerful as Yrial, but for now he needed something simpler.

His eyes again turned to the mists that churned under the surface of the **[Dao Discourse Array]**. By this point he had poured more than twice the energy into the ground compared to what he had used to create the eight axe warriors earlier.

His heart was pounding a bit, but he kept infusing more and more inside as he moved his axeman to the edge of the stage. He suddenly had an idea and started to push his Fragment of the Coffin into the control crystal as well. However, he didn't try to fuse the two fragments or even control them after they entered the ground.

Combining the two Daos would have been impossible, but just pouring it into the control crystal wasn't too bad. It was just like when he infused his body with the Fragment of the Coffin while he infused an attack with the Fragment of the Axe. As long as he didn't need to coordinate the two to work with each other the strain was just a fraction of before.

The second fragment still joined the growing blob of chaos in the ground, and the mists turned more violent and unpredictable. The whole array was starting to shake, and the three dryads seemed to have realized that something odd was going on. They had probably been waiting for Zac to summon new avatars since they saw him steadily infusing the control crystal with more and more spiritual energy.

Striking down all his avatars at once would have a much stronger effect, just like when one of them defeated the first wandering cultivator. But now it looked like they didn't dare wait any longer and they immediately sent a few of the avatars toward the axeman still stumbling around on the corner of the arena. However, Zac didn't care as his **[Cosmic Gaze]** was trained at the bottom of the arena.

It was like he was mesmerized by the growing mass of untamed destruction hiding at the bottom of the array. Wasn't this the way things had always been when he fought? Supreme might crushing any resistance or any technique. If those three bastards wanted to create a dozen avatars with their combined energy, then he would simply drown them in an avalanche of even more energy.

There was no fusion and no adroit braiding of the two energies into something greater. This was mindless destruction, a tsunami of unrelenting force. And it was time to unleash it. However, that was easier said than done.

His mind strained to the limit as he urged the large blob to rise, but it felt like he was trying to lift a mountain with his mind. The rumbling of the arena got more and more severe, and small cracks could be seen on both the platform and the control crystal that Zac touched.

A searing pain flashed in his mind as the axeman was cut to ribbons by the dryads' avatars, but he didn't care as he was completely focused on the counter he had cooking below.

Finally the blob he had infused almost his whole soul into reached the surface, and Zac was reeling by exertion by this point. Multiple capillaries in his eyes had burst, and he felt the salty taste of blood in his mouth as it freely poured down his nose.

The sounds of exclamations that had been missing earlier finally erupted among the spectators as what looked like a thundercloud rose through the ground. It was a messy mix of light gray spots and a sinister black, with the occasional flashes of bronze. It was probably impossible to tell what it was made from unless one had a skill like [Cosmic Gaze], but one thing was clear.

It was dangerous.

There was just no way for Zac to really control the thundercloud, and he could only push it in a certain direction with everything he had, forcing it forward by sheer force of will. Zac's mind felt like it would snap in two, but he refused to stop. The control crystal started to crackle as the small crystalline cracks turned into major fault lines, but they were continuously removed by the repair fractals.

The mix of Destruction and Putrefaction brought on from his two Daos swept toward the other side like a tidal wave, swallowing the stalwart army of the Enlightened Three in an instant. Explosions and sounds of clashes could be heard from within, as the three siblings desperately tried to dispel the onslaught. But it was like trying to stop a storm with your bare hands.

One avatar after another was either melted into a rotten pool by the Fragment of the Coffin or ripped into pieces by the sharp winds brought on by the Fragment of the Axe. A few simply got annihilated in a flash when the odd bronze-colored flashes appeared. There was no contest between the two sides, and all the refinement and skill the three could muster was pointless in front of Zac's insane outburst of power.

In just a few seconds the whole avatar army was ripped to shreds, and the effect on its controllers wasn't small. The girl staggered backward and clutched her head before she fell over unconscious. The other two siblings shuddered as well, with blood starting to pour out of their noses and ears as they slumped down on the ground.

The two had been implicated as well since they had assisted their sister, and their souls had been wounded as a result. However, Zac was in no position to gloat as he wasn't all that better off. His eyes were completely bloodshot as he looked across the platform, and he had trouble gathering his wits since it felt like his head would split apart in any second.

The method of battle that Zac had chosen was one of mutual destruction. His soul had always felt pretty sturdy just like his odd constitution, and it was only made stronger with the help of the Splinter of Oblivion. Between his soul's strength and his more advanced Daos, Zac bet that he would be able to take the Enlightened Three out before his soul was ripped apart.

It had worked, but he was still a bit giddy, and he quickly took out an intricate box from his spatial tool. Inside was a blue rose seemingly made from ice, a piece of unblemished beauty. Zac didn't care about that though as he crammed the flower into his mouth and swallowed, allowing a cool sensation to spread down his throat and then throughout his mind.

It was the reward he had gotten from the Ice Troll back on the first level of the 6<sup>th</sup> floor. It was a soul restoration treasure which quickly soothed his strained mind. He had a couple of items in the same category between his shopping in the Base Town and Rasuliel's pouch, which was what allowed him to identify it.

The icy rose was the strongest such item in his possession though, and he had a feeling that he needed all the strength he could get to handle the fallout from taking out the three dryad brats in one go. The others hadn't been inactive while Zac ate the natural treasure, and the matriarch had already hurried down from the platform she spectated from.

“Elyss!” the dryad cried as she took out a crystalline bottle and poured some unknown mixture down her grandchild’s throat, before directing a murderous glare at Zac. “You are pretty ruthless. This is a discourse, not a battlefield.”

She punctuated her words with having her aura expand around her, causing her long hair to flutter without any wind. But the matriarch’s killing intent wasn’t even a tenth of Zac’s blood-drenched aura, and he didn’t even flinch by being targeted.

“Injury is always a risk during a Dao Discourse,” Zac answered with a hoarse voice, completely unphased. “I am more curious why the other two got hurt though. Perhaps you can explain?”

“They are triplets, so of course they’re bound to have a deeper connection, one reaching even the spiritual level,” the matriarch said without missing a beat.

“So, which one of them is heading up next?” Zac said, eventually deciding to not push the issue.

He was in a pretty bad shape, but the two remaining dryads were far worse off. Crushing them wouldn’t be too hard by simply repeating a smaller version of the earlier storm. The Perenne Matriarch’s sharp eyes were locked with Zac’s for a few seconds before her strained face blossomed into a charming smile.

“No need. I know these children well, they are no match for the might of your Daos. We concede this match, one of the slots to the Pool of Tranquility will belong to you,” she said without a trace of the earlier animosity.

Zac, who was ready to go all out in case things deteriorated, mutely looked at the Perenne Matriarch for a few seconds before he slowly nodded and walked back toward his platform. Was it over that easily? But a sudden realization made him certain that things weren’t over just yet.

The teleporter to the next level still hadn’t appeared.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 428 - Pool of Tranquility**

“My friend, that was truly a... unique Discourse,” the ent coughed when Zac jumped up to the platform they shared. “I have never heard of such a, uh, masculine, manner of handling the Dao. And those insights... Scary, too scary. You are a walking paradox, both a child and a nemesis of the forest.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Zac snorted as he sat down.

“And congratulations on receiving the opportunity to bask in the Pool of Tranquility,” the ent said, patting Zac’s shoulder.

Zac initially only nodded in response, but he got confused when he noted that Thelim had surreptitiously dropped a small acorn that rolled into his lap. Believing it wasn’t a without reason Zac immediately looked at it with his Attuned Sight, and he saw that it contained some nature-attuned energies.

Curious, Zac instilled a minute amount of Cosmic Energy into it, and he suddenly received a short message in his mind, just like with the communications crystal he had gotten from Ogras before. There were only two words recorded, but it was enough to give Zac pause.

*Be careful.*

It was obviously a warning that things weren't as simple as they seemed, and Zac wasn't surprised. For one, the teleporter hadn't appeared even after the matriarch conceded. That meant that the System still didn't consider the quest finished. Hidden danger still lurked nearby. He was more surprised that the ent had gone out of his way to warn him at the risk of straining the relationship between his family and the Perenne Clan.

Zac still gave a slight nod in thanks to the ent before turning back toward the stadium. The Pool would only be opened at sunset, so he would have to wait for a few more hours while the battles continued below.

Due to Zac's performance there were cracks all over the array, and it would take over an hour before it regained full functionality. Zac tried to figure out his next course of action while they waited, but he couldn't do a lot apart from restoring his mental reserves.

Some trap was no doubt waiting for him in the Pool of Tranquility, but he couldn't figure out exactly what it was. Openly attacking the winners was unlikely, since such an action would no doubt spread and sully their reputation. It would also become impossible for them to attract any more guardians from the wandering cultivators.

Thankfully he hadn't shown any of his actual strength, so the dryads were still completely clueless about his massive pool of attributes. They only knew that he was someone with two early-stage Dao Fragments but also someone who had atrocious control over them. Perhaps they even thought he had fallen into some amazing fortuitous encounter that imbued him with the two fragments without having any skills in the subject.

Zac instead started to go over the insights into his path of cultivation gained during the Dao Discourse. He had arrived at the conclusions while pissed off about the cheating, but he still felt that they held true after having calmed down.

He would put his attempts at learning [**Cyclic Strike**] on hold for now, unless it somehow proved extremely easy to master after having gained a life-attuned Dao Fragment. But Zac felt the odds of that was pretty slim. It hadn't worked at all while he had possessed two Peak Dao Seeds, so using the stronger Dao Fragment should only be more complicated.

There was also a need to formalize a new direction. Focusing on force rather than technique was good in all, but he needed to find a 'creation' based on force and his Dao Paths. The chaotic thundercloud created from Axe and Coffin was extremely lethal, but he was only able to summon that thing because of the [**Dao Discourse Array**].

He also needed to figure out a way to bring his future Dao Fragment into the mix. Right now he had unleashed a storm of Axe and Coffin, and this wasn't the fusion of Life and Death he had envisioned. There were a lot of things to consider, and it was a bit hard to theorize what was possible and what was impractical, especially since he was still lacking one of the fragments.

There was also the issue of those flashes of light that had the color of illuminated bronze. They only appeared for a fraction of a second before disintegrating, but the destruction they caused had been far greater than either of his two Fragments. But even though the force was massive he had been completely unable to sense anything from them.

He had a connection to the thundercloud even if he barely could control it, but the same couldn't be said about those lights. They suddenly appeared, and disappeared just as quickly before he had any chance to form any mental connections to them.

“Hey, what feeling did you get from the bronze-colored flashes of light from within the cloud I summoned?” Zac asked as he turned to the ent, curious what the woodland being was able to feel.

“Flashes of light?” Thelim said with confusion. “I did not see any? I only sensed a mix of two Daos, the first one sharp and forceful, perhaps the Dao of the Greatsword? The other one was cold and death-attuned.”

“Oh?” Zac said with surprise. “Nevermind then.”

Had those bronze lights not been visible to the normal spectrum? He had been using Cosmic Gaze the whole time, and he thought that the flashes were seen by everyone. But perhaps the bronze was just the color of the attunement, while the effect was indiscernible to the naked eye.

The most pressing question was what the light represented. Zac felt those sparks might be the clue to a way for him to increase his power, as there were only two reasonable explanations behind the sparks as he saw it.

The first possibility was that the flashes were related to the Splinter of Oblivion. It was a creation based on the Dao of Oblivion, which felt a bit similar to how the sparks simply disintegrated anything they touched. However, the only energy that Zac received from the Splinter was purified to pure spiritual energy by the miasmatic fractals.

Another possibility, and the one that Zac felt was most likely, was that the sparks were the result of chance fusions between his two Dao Fragments. The two concepts had combined due to friction or something else, like a nuclear fusion reaction of the Dao.

This fusion in turn created a short-lived spark of some greater concept. If not oblivion, then perhaps something related of a lower tier. He really wanted to experiment based on this idea, because if that was that was going on then he'd have a terrifying ace on his hands. He could only imagine the power of **[Deforestation]** with the additional effect of that mysterious bronze Dao.

But he could only wait for the tournament to end to get his prize and then experiment with his insights on the next level. The hours went by excruciatingly slow, but it gave Zac time to mostly restore his frayed mind. His soul thankfully wasn't hurt, but it would probably have been if he had fought another battle. It was still overtaxed though and his head was pounding.

Finally the tournament was over and all the spots were allocated. Three went to the dryads who had been fighting all day, whereas the last two each went to one wandering cultivator and one young man who looked like an elf. He had barely won the first battle, but during the second he had suddenly burst out with a Dao Fragment, destroying the opposition with a skillful push before the dryad had a chance to adapt.

The guests left the arena to continue the festivities while the six were led by the Perenne Matriarch toward a primordial forest full of gargantuan trees. Zac only nodded in thanks to the ent before he followed in tow, wondering if he would ever get a chance to repay Thelim for his help.

The group stopped after having walked for just ten minutes, but when the matriarch waved her hand the surroundings changed. Initially there had only been an empty spot in the forest as the distance between the trees was pretty big, but it was now replaced with the stump of a massive tree.

This tree must have been the king of the forest when it lived, its size forming a landmark seen hundreds of miles away. The stump was even larger than the platform the Dao Discourse had taken place on, and its size dwarfed even the trees in the redwood forest he had visited with Ogras.

The group jumped onto the stump after marveling at the specimen for a few seconds, and he was surprised to see six small ponds. The Pool of Tranquility was actually on top of the tree itself.

“So what do we do?” the elf asked, and Zac looked over at the matriarch with interest as well.

“The moment the daylight ends there will be a change in the pools. At that moment you simply need to choose one of the pools and submerge yourself. Open your mind to absorb the energies that will be released from the dew,” the matriarch explained. “I will take my leave as to not affect your opportunity. We have also prepared 6 isolation arrays to make sure no sudden sounds will impact your cultivation.”

Zac cracked his neck and looked back and forth. The three dryads pointedly ignored him as though he wasn't there, while the second wandering cultivator kept to himself. Only the young elf tried to make some small conversation where he not-so-subtly tried to understand Zac's origin and whether he was affiliated with any local force.

But the young elf was soon enough subdued by the atmosphere and he simply walked over to the nearest pool, claiming it for himself. Thirty minutes later the sun finally went down beneath the tree crowns, shrouding the area in darkness.

It was like the stump had awoken the moment it no longer basked in sunlight, and it started to radiate an ancient energy as the six pools lit up with a soothing green luster that rose a few meters into the air. Zac's headache got a lot better from just standing near them, a clear sign that the pools truly worked wonders on the soul.

The wandering cultivator and the elf immediately jumped into their respective pools, but the splash didn't make a sound due to the arrays. Zac glanced at the three dryads who stared right back before jumping into one of the free ponds himself. He saw the three dryads jumping in as well, at which point he slightly relaxed and focused on the energies in the water.

It suddenly felt like he was one with the world as he took one deep breath after another, and his pores opened wide to drink in the energies of the miraculous dew. His headache was gone in seconds, and he quickly closed his eyes and sunk down so that even his head dipped beneath the surface.

He was cautious about letting down his guard while being mesmerized by the opportunity, but his danger sense was completely silent. Zac finally opted to relax his guard a bit to absorb as much of the lights in the water as possible. The effect was immediate and it felt extraordinarily good. It was like his mind was a parched desert and the motes of light were long-awaited raindrops.

The process was akin to stepping into the shower when caked in mud, feeling the dirt sloughing off from his body. His soul was giving the same effect, and he actually felt it shrinking as some discordant energies seeped out him. But Zac felt that the effect wasn't something detrimental, as the remaining spiritual energy got stronger, more condensed.

Zac had no idea that his soul had contained so many impurities, but perhaps everyone started out that way, especially mortals. Mortals didn't have any connection with the Dao, and the soul probably played a big part in that. Zac knew that the pool didn't improve affinities though, but rather cleansed some impurities and helped strengthen it.

A sudden roar in Zac's mind gave him a start and ripped him out of his reverie as his heart started beating with joy. Verun had finally awoken after having slept for two full floors. But Zac barely had time to greet the Tool Spirit before he sensed an overwhelming thirst coming from the axe even while it was still in his spatial ring.

It was just like when the mysterious stone had appeared during the new world government auction, and the target was clear. It wanted the mysterious liquid in the pond.

Zac didn't have any compunctions about having Verun snatch a part of the Pool of Tranquility. The dryads had tried cheating during the match, so what if he exacted some interest in return? But he didn't even have time to take out his axe when he sensed a startling issue with his mind.

There was something else there, something foreign. It was extremely well hidden, and he hadn't noticed it at all while he enjoyed the process of his mind getting purified, even if he had never completely relaxed his vigil. It was as if the shadow of a whisper that had snuck into his mind along with the energy from the pond. It only took him a second to realize what was going on.

How could Zac not recognize the feeling of having his mind manipulated after having fought against the far more insidious manipulation from the Splinter of Oblivion? He suddenly remembered the dozen powerful cultivators who had stoically walked behind the Perenne Matriarch. Perhaps their choice to stay behind wasn't completely voluntary.

He, unfortunately, didn't have any great solutions to getting rid of the intruder in his mind as it had already snuck past the defenses of **[Mental Fortress]**. Only after discharging a massive amount of mental energy by unleashing his Dao Fragments did the invading energy get ripped to shreds.

Zac still felt some cold sweat running down his back though. That had been way too close. Even if the effects of the dew were amazing he had kept a constant watch against any plot of the Perenne Matriarch, but her ploy had passed by his defenses completely unnoticed. If Verun hadn't shaken him awake he might have fallen further and further into some mental vise he couldn't get out of.

Zac immediately rose from the pool, jumping onto the stump with wild eyes. The first thing he noticed was a teleportation array that would take him to the next floor, but Zac didn't even give it a second glance as his eyes turned to three specific pools. Zac refused to leave as things stood.

He wasn't done with the Perenne Family just yet.

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**Chapter 429 - Reciprocity**

The fact that the teleporter had appeared was a relief since that meant that he had passed the trial. The System had attached a hidden requirement to the quest where he not only needed to stand victorious in the Dao Discourse, but also survive the aftermath.

The moment he noticed and dispelled the threat of being possessed he had conquered the 6<sup>th</sup> floor and could move on to reap his rewards. But he wasn't ready to let bygones be bygones, and a wave of smoldering anger burned in his chest. If he shrugged off the attempt on his life he would no doubt have this nagging feeling for the rest of his life, a seed of karma that was impossible to resolve.

Part of him just wanted to go on a mindless slaughter, dragging up the whole clan by the roots while leveling half the forest to the ground. But Zac knew that was

just the Splinter urging him on. It seemed like the invasion of his mind hadn't just agitated Zac, but also the Splinter itself. Maybe it didn't like the competition.

He knew he couldn't do so though. Not only was it unconscionable, but would also open a can of worms. Who knew what would happen if he started rampaging? Perhaps there were some hidden guardians of the forest keeping watch. Besides, cheating to protect their own resources wasn't really that big a deal, and the Enlightened Three didn't deserve death for their actions.

But the mind invasion was essentially an attempt on his life, and he had no compunctions with exacting at least some sort of revenge. His aura exploded in an instant, causing cascading waves to splash all around him as his massive Dao Field drowned out the primordial energies of the tree stump. The isolation arrays cracked in an instant, exposing the five pools.

Zac didn't waste a second and leaped toward the closest pool that housed one of the three young dryads, but the man had obviously noticed the disturbance already and prepared himself. Dozens of razor-sharp roots shot toward from within the pool before the dryad's head even breached the surface.

But the Enlightened Three weren't the floor guardians. They were simply three peak F-Grade warriors with unusually high accomplishments in the Dao, who also possessed the ability to fuse their spiritual energies together. They had been a threat to Zac before he found his path, but that threat only existed within the confines of the duel.

This was a true battlefield.

A massive fractal edge infused with the Fragment of the Axe tore the roots into shreds even if they were infused with a Peak Dao seed themselves. All five winners had risen out of their pools by this point, most of them staring at Zac with shock. The only exception was the wandering cultivator who gazed around with a glassy-eyed demeanor, which only strengthened Zac's conviction.

A storm of leaves reminiscent of his own **[Nature's Barrier]** started to swirl around the dryad as he looked at Zac with horror, but a swing infused with the Fragment of the Coffin turned them into rotten scraps as Zac barged his way through. His free hand shot forward to grab the shocked dryad by his neck, yanking him up into the air with a tug.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING!" a scream echoed across the area, and a dozen green blades of grass shot toward Zac with such power that the air around them exploded.

The blades contained enough momentum to pierce through steel, and they seemed to be infused by a Dao Fragment as well. Zac scrambled out of the way, thankful he had grabbed one of the youths in time. The Perenne Matriarch's power had somewhat superseded his expectations, but she had obviously only aimed for spots on his body far from her grandchild.

Things weren't to the point that Zac felt any fear though, and one tree after another appeared around the area and even on top of the stump as Zac activated **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**. The improved vision brought from the skill immediately exposed the Perenne Matriarch hiding not far away within an array. She sat together with two loose cultivators, and between them was an array with an odd plant placed on it, recently ripped from the ground judging by the soil stuck to its roots.

The blades of grass that had attacked Zac was her hair extending from within the array, and more and more stalks flew out from her head to join the battle. The blades of grass were quick, but Zac was almost impossible to catch now that he had summoned his own forest. He even felt that the effect from the skill had been boosted

due to the Pool of Tranquility, and he had completely merged with the forest at this point.

The Matriarch got more and more frenzied though, and the two guardians also started moving toward him. The air even shuddered above the matriarch as a massive head made from tens of thousand blades of grass appeared. A storm of leaves started to shoot toward him as it opened its mouth, and even Zac felt some pressure from the power it contained.

But Zac had one more ace up his sleeve, and he suddenly moved his captive in front of him, aiming to use the dryad as a shield against the leaves.

“You!” the Matriarch screamed in rage as she quickly stopped the massive avatar above her. “You outsiders are all the same!”

Zac ignored the comment as he flashed forward once more, this time targeting the Elyss, the dryad he had knocked unconscious during the Dao Discourse. She had jumped down from the stump just like the others, but she was clearly unaccustomed to life and death battles since she still stood way too close.

The moment she saw Zac rapidly approaching with **[Loamwalker]** she realized her mistake. She didn’t even try to put up a fight as she activated an escape skill while erecting a line of defenses. But Zac was in full rampage mode by this point and the dryad’s restrictive vines were destroyed in an instant as he appeared before her.

A well-aimed kick shot the girl into the side of the trunk with a loud thud, but the ancient wood didn’t even lose a splinter. It was rather the dryad who was hurt and fell down on the ground with a groan. She tried to get back to her feet, but Zac was already upon her again as he swung **[Verun’s Bite]** to rip apart the stalks of grass that had aimed to save her.

“Stay down,” Zac growled as he slammed **[Verun’s Bite]** into the stump next to her while still holding onto the other dryad in a tight grip.

A massive shudder ran through the stump out as Zac’s axe bit into the wood, and the primordial energies surged for a second before they calmed down again.

“The ancestor!” Elyss cried in dismay, but she still didn’t dare to move a single finger.

“One more move and I’ll crack his neck and cut the girl in two,” Zac said with a ruthless glimmer as he grabbed the second dryad and jumped on top of the stump again.

“You’ve hidden your power well,” the elder dryad said as she joined him on top of the ancient stump. “Are you not afraid the heavens will turn against you for returning our hospitality with such enmity?”

“Hospitality?” Zac snorted as he ripped verun out of the tree and stood up straight. “I didn’t care that these three cheated during the discourse, but since you wanted to take control of my mind I’ll have to act.”

“We would never do something like that!” the male dryad exclaimed with fury, indignation apparent on his face. “We’re not an unorthodox force! You’re just here to cause trouble! Are you working for the invaders?!”

Things such as mind control and turning cultivators were considered as unorthodox path as it clearly went outside what the Apostate of Order had envisioned when he set up the various contracts of the System. Zac personally felt it was a pretty weird distinction to make since so many forces allowed slavery, but it had something to do with the will of the System.

Zac ignored the young dryad, though he was pretty surprised to see that he seemed genuinely repulsed by the idea. He instead turned to the young elf who was watching the proceedings perched atop a tree far in the distance.

“Could you take that guy back to the party? Perhaps his mind can still be salvaged,” Zac said as he nodded at the wandering cultivator who had fallen down from the stump due to the shockwaves of battle.

“It looks like I wasn’t really fated with the Pool of Tranquility. No matter, most of the benefit comes from the initial cleansing,” the elf said with a sardonic shrug.

But he still didn’t move, instead opted to turn his eyes to the Perenne Matriarch who tried to kill Zac with her glare.

“Go,” she simply said without her eyes leaving Zac’s.

The elf bowed and prepared to leave, but he first ran forward and grabbed the shoulder of the wandering cultivator after a brief hesitation. The next moment he disappeared in a puff of leaves that scattered all around before dissipating.

“What do you want?” the Perenne Matriarch said.

“I want this pond,” Zac said. “It’s a small price for trying to possess me.”

“Impossible,” the old dryad said without hesitation. “It’s not possible even if I wanted to. It’s a natural formation created by the ancestor of the forest and thousands of years of accumulation. The dew will turn useless if you bring it away.”

“Then release the people you’ve captured,” Zac said after mulling it over.

“It’s also impossible. The seed has been planted, the effect is irreversible. They will be guarding the forest until they die,” the old dryad said with a staid expression.

“Grandma! You didn’t!” Elyss exclaimed with horror.

“Every day new outsiders enter the forest to partake in its riches. But do they pay nature back for providing them with wealth and power? No. They return to their cities on the outside and use their newfound strength to attack us, to join the invaders in their assault. Their greed is endless, their hunger insatiable.

“So what if I control them? These people would be nothing without the forest, so the least they can do is stay behind and defend it,” the Matriarch said with fury in her eyes, the words turning louder and louder as she spoke.

“Grandma...” Elyss said from the ground, her eyes wide with shock.

The other dryad looked shocked as well, and it was all too apparent they hadn’t been aware of their grandmother’s actions. Zac sighed when he heard her words, a wave of exhaustion sweeping through his body. He couldn’t condone her actions, but he could understand her motivations. How far would he go to save the people of Earth? Of Port Atwood?

But that still didn’t change things, and Zac threw **[Verun’s Bite]** into the closest pool as he took out his spare axe, a High E-Grade battleaxe. Verun keened in delight as it entered the pond, and the whole stump started to shake the next moment as the energies in the area ran amok.

“What are you doing?!” the matriarch exclaimed, her killing intent rising once more.

“My weapon could benefit from the dew, so he’ll drink a bit since I can’t take the pond with me,” Zac explained.

Verun was like a black hole as it absorbed the dew, and Zac had already witnessed its seemingly endless thirst from having drained hundreds of beasts of their blood. The stump kept shaking as the water levels of the six ponds kept decreasing, until just about half remained. Only then did Verun stop, seemingly satisfied with its haul.

“Don’t move,” Zac reminded the matriarch as he jumped down.

“So, will you release my grandchild now?” she spat when Zac emerged.

“I need to do one more thing. Stay here. You should know what I’ll do if you’re not here when I return. I have the eggs, but I still want the hen,” Zac reminded as he flashed away once more.

He couldn’t take the dew, and he couldn’t save those poor souls. But there was one more item that had sparked Zac’s interest, and he quickly moved through the forest toward the arena. Zac used his movement skill the whole way back, and he appeared on top of the **[Dao Discourse Array]** in less than a minute.

A few quick swings were all it took to separate the platform from the massive roots that had dragged it above ground, but Zac frowned in annoyance when he wasn’t able to put it inside his Cosmos Sack.

“This thing can’t be carried away, young man,” an aged voice said, prompting Zac to turn around.

It was a kind-looking old elf who was accompanied by the same youth who had just left the Pool of Tranquility.

“If it could be stashed away in a Pouch of Holding, Little Glamira wouldn’t have been forced to hide it below ground all this time,” the old man said with a smile. “The child my grandson brought will be fine, and I guarantee his safe return in front of all these people. In return, could you leave this array intact? The Perenne Family are not the only ones benefitting from it.”

Zac slowly nodded, though not without some unwillingness. The **[Dao Discourse Array]** had been his best bet at studying the mysterious Bronze Dao he had somehow conjured. But not even he could carry a 30-meter wide pillar around on his back, so he could only give up on it. He instead turned toward Thelim who looked at the proceedings with confusion written all over his face.

“I don’t know if you or even this world is real, but I hope I’ll be able to see you again. This treasure might be of use to you,” Zac said as he threw the ent a wooden box.

Thelim curiously opened it to see an eggwhite leaf that radiated an intense amount of life-attuned force.

“This!” Thelim exclaimed as he hurriedly closed the box as to not let the aura leak. “This is too precious, I cannot accept it!”

The leaf was a treasure that Zac snatched on the fifth floor. He still had no idea what it was, but it contained almost as much energies as the Fruit of Ascension. Zac didn’t dare to eat it though since the leaf didn’t cause any cravings in his body like most beneficial treasures did, and he couldn’t figure out any other uses for it either.

It was only collecting dust in his Spatial Ring and would probably disappear when he left the tower anyways, so he chose to gift it to Thelim instead to reciprocate his goodwill.

“If you don’t want it, then throw it away,” Zac smiled.

He threw one last look at the **[Dao Discourse Array]** before he left with a shake of his head. Some things weren’t fated. He soon arrived back at the stump, and finally released the poor dryad who had been dragged back and forth like a ragdoll for the past minutes.

He had nothing to say to the four dryads who gazed at him as though he was a walking calamity as he stepped onto the teleporter, leaving the forest behind.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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## Chapter 430 - Manuals

**[Sixth Floor Complete. Upgrading Title.]**

**[Choose Reward: Compatible Soul Strengthening Manual, Compatible Body Tempering Manual, Beast Mastery Manual]**

Zac's eyes made a beeline for the rewards, but his face scrunched together when he noticed that there weren't any rewards related to the Dao. He had almost been certain there would be a Dao Treasure waiting for him, but it looked like the System had a sense of humor. Or perhaps it simply didn't award any Dao Treasures at all since there was still the projection waiting when he exited the tower.

**[Tower of Eternity - 6th Floor: Reach the 55th level of the Tower of Eternity. Reward: All stats +10. All Stats +10%.]**

The title was just what Zac expected, but he still couldn't help but feel a bit disappointed. One of his goals before evolving was to reach 1000 points in Strength, but he knew now that he had already maxed out on the benefits he could get from the Tower Title.

The next floor, if he could even pass it, would most likely add a high-tiered component to the title, not any more raw stats. It would be better if you looked at raw combat power, and it was usually more desired to keep the raw attributes down so that one would be able to enter restricted Mystic Realms. But it was far worse for Zac now that he needed to reach a certain threshold rather than stay under it.

Zac didn't have any good ideas on how to boost his Strength with the final 73 points to reach his goal of a thousand. He had only gotten 7 points from the Peak Strength Fruit, but he should be approaching the limit of what he could gain while still in F-Grade. Not that he could get his hands on any more of them anyhow.

There was some Strength waiting for him when he formed his final Dao Fragment, but it wouldn't be enough. Neither Sanctuary nor Trees gave a single point into Strength, and he would probably only get the 10 points from the boost to all attributes.

Was getting a middle Dao Fragment the only option?

Unfortunately, that was easier said than done. He had discussed the topic with Galau a couple of more times after they discussed **[Axe Mastery]** when he mastered the skill. According to him it wasn't any easier getting a mid-grade Fragment than pushing your Race Grade to D while still having a F-Grade Class.

A low-Grade Dao Fragment was the standard limit for almost all cultivators. As Galau explained it, over the almost million years his clan had existed, there had been no lack of geniuses who formed Dao Fragments before they evolved. But there hadn't been a single one who managed to evolve the Dao Fragment while still in F-Grade.

It could technically be done though, but it required both a tremendous insight into and affinity with the Dao in question. In other words, you needed to be a cultivator to evolve the Fragment. However, Zac had reason to believe that he might be an exception to this rule.

Galau had said the same thing about Early Stage Dao Fragments as well. According to him one even needed a high affinity if you wanted to form a Dao Fragment at all. It had something to do with an F-Grade warrior lacking a natural spirituality, something that only affinity could make up for.

The first grade of cultivation was based on building a foundation. You started with a weak mortal constitution, and gradually improved it to be able to support cultivation and harmonize with the Dao. In fact, the youth had assumed that Zac was a cultivator based on the fact that he had formed Dao Fragments.

However, Zac hadn't encountered any problems forming his Dao Fragments even with his non-existent affinity, leading him to believe that there were no such restrictions for him, as long as he got some help in forming the Fragments.

That still meant he needed to encounter an opportunity even greater than the Dao Funnel or the Tower Apparition though, and Zac didn't want to rely on such a longshot for the chance at pushing his Fragment of the Axe to Medium Stage.

There was the possibility of utilizing his Apparition on his Fragment of the Axe instead fusing his third Dao Fragment, but Zac wasn't too sure about that gambit. It would mess up his class choices a bit, but more importantly there was no guarantee of succeeding in upgrading the fragment.

He was pretty close to forming the life-attuned Dao Fragment, and he was almost certain he would be able to push the final distance with the help of his apparition. But the same couldn't be said of his Fragment of the Axe. He barely got used to fighting with it, and he hadn't really figured out what direction to take it.

There was a pretty large risk he would just make some improvements, rather than evolving the Axe Fragment, even with the help of an apparition. If that happened he would essentially have wasted that huge opportunity. Perhaps the following floors would present him with a solution though, so Zac didn't completely give up, and instead turned his attention to the rewards.

Galau had broadened his horizons greatly during their travels, especially after the merchant realized Zac was a pretty clueless progenitor who only got integrated a year ago. One valuable piece of information after another had flooded out of his mouth to curry favor.

The subject of manuals was one such topic. Zac had been looking for something like a meditation manual to combat the splinter in his mind since he returned from the hunt. Calrin hadn't been able to get his hand on anything useful though, and Zac had been forced to solely rely on the miasmatic fractals in his mind.

But such a thing did in fact exist, along with various other types of manuals. A Soul Strengthening Manual was a technique to gradually improve on one's soul, just like the Pool of Tranquility did. It would not only make one more resistant to soul attacks and Illusions, but would also increase one's spiritual energy reserves.

The soul was the power source of the Daos, and none of the attributes directly contributed in this regard. Intelligence and Wisdom didn't help you with controlling the Daos or strengthen your soul, and neither did any other. The soul's strength was pretty much inborn, though it got stronger from leveling up.

Zac had a feeling that his soul was already a lot stronger than normal, especially after having completely steamrolled the Enlightened Three with his Dao storm. The Splinter of Oblivion had helped by strengthening it even further, and his dip in the pond had helped remove some impurities.

This manual was a chance to work on his soul even further.

Better yet, it was even possible to use such a manual without being a cultivator, so it wasn't something that he would have to throw to the Merit Exchange. There was, however, a pretty big reason as to why it was almost unheard of for cultivators to practice Soul Strengthening Manuals.

It was slow. Excruciatingly slow.

One could spend millennia refining and empowering one's soul, turning it into a diamond completely free of impurities. But you could instead have focused on meditating on your Dao or progressed in levels during that same time, and both would have a greater effect on one's survivability and strength.

Body Tempering Manuals were related to special constitutions or improving one's bloodlines. Practicing a manual along with taking certain treasures or medicinal baths would slowly transform one's body to gain a specialized constitution.

Alea was such an example, though there seemed there were some problems with the method she used. Ogras' grandfather was probably unable to acquire a complete manual, so they had jumped into it blindly. Another possibility was that they had tried to forcibly use a manual with low compatibility.

If the main reason for the scarcity of Soul Strengthening Manuals was the slow progress, then compatibility was the main reason for there being almost no Body Tempering Manuals in circulation. Pretty much all manuals had extremely strict requirements on things such as race, affinities, and even bloodlines to work.

To simply train an unsuitable manual was to court death. If Alea was practicing an incompatible manual then just turning into a monster was the least of her worries. She ran the risk of dying at any moment, and considering her class and constitution she might end up taking half of Port Atwood with her in a storm of poison.

Beast Mastery Manuals were somewhat of a mix between a skill and a mental exercise, and likely the most popular of the three supportive manuals that Zac was offered. It allowed anyone to gain a facsimile of the abilities that a true Beast Master like Verana possessed by allowing you to slowly form a connection to a beast through prolonged meditation.

One could use it to gain a mount like the floor guardian that Ogras fought, or a pure battle companion to fight alongside you. The connection sounded a lot like what he had with Verun, and the chance of betrayal was pretty slim unless the beast got too powerful.

There were drawbacks to this type of manual as well though. Compatibility was an issue with both Soul Strengthening and Body Tempering manuals, but with Beast Mastery Manuals the compatibility issue lay with the beast. You needed certain manuals to tame certain beasts, and some beasts were simply not possible to form a connection with unless they wanted to.

Ogras was the victim of a forced connection from what Zac could tell, where The Umbra had forced a connection that normally wasn't possible to create. He hadn't dared to experiment on himself due to the risk of death, so he had used Ogras to satisfy his curiosity after having turned into an Inheritance Spirit.

Since the System didn't mention compatibility with the manual Zac guessed that it would have to be either pretty general, or that it was like a lottery what sort of beasts that it would work on. It might turn out useful, but it might also only work on beasts that didn't exist on earth.

In either case the manuals weren't something that would benefit Zac in the short run, but with enough time all of them could help him in different ways. Finding a compatible manual was extremely rare, and most were created through an arduous process of trial and failure by clans that had the resources and manpower to experiment.

A few of the peak forces in the sector would no probably possess them, but having the means to create a specialized constitution that fit your heritage and bloodline was no doubt rare even among the strongest forces in the area.

All three manuals were also a chance for a warrior to gain more class options before evolving, so Zac could understand why they were presented as a reward. Of course, the additional classes Zac would get from a stronger soul or acquiring a beast companion probably wasn't something that Zac wanted right now.

His bottleneck wasn't his constitution either, but rather the Dao and the concept of creation.

But even if Zac didn't need them to get a better class they were still useful in their own way. Zac guessed that this was a way for the System to provide an uncommon perk that most powerhouses could benefit from, or use to shore up weaknesses.

Indecision plagued Zac as he looked back and forth, and he couldn't reach a conclusion. All of them had benefits and drawbacks that made Zac leery to pull the gun. The body refinement manual would allow him to improve on his already monstrous constitution, but there were some pretty big question marks about his body.

There was obviously something special about his body, and Zac worried that the body refinement manual he got from the System wouldn't work well with a body of Technocrat heritage even if it said it was compatible. It might take away what made his body special in order to create something new.

Or perhaps the constitution that would be formed from a technocrat heritage simply wasn't in line with the cultivation path he had embarked upon, that of Life and Death.

Getting a beast companion would be a pure plus, Verun had proven that many times. But there were extremely few decent beasts on Earth, and it wasn't even sure that the manual would work on it. He was also hesitant that there were any beasts strong enough to actually make a difference. He would have to find a pretty monstrous animal to be able to keep up with his own power and growth.

As for the Soul Strengthening Manual, it was simply too slow. Zac wouldn't see any direct benefits until after the incursions and Dominators were gone. He also wasn't sure whether the time spent grinding such a manual would be better used to kill beasts and open up nodes. Leveling up did strengthen one's Soul as well, and reaching higher grades was probably the best counter to the Splinter of Oblivion.

Zac finally made his decision, but before he claimed the reward he paused, first opting to check in on Earth by opening the Ladder. It had become somewhat of an emotional support to see that Kenzie and the others were all alive, so Zac's eyes quickly scanned through the lists to find the familiar names.

But he suddenly froze as the latest change in the Ladder was just too shocking.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 431 - Nine Reincarnations**

Zac was like a statue as he gazed at a particular spot on the Ladder. How had such a change come to be?

Ladder - Level

Rank

Name

Level

1

Super Brother-Man

75

2

Thea Marshall

68

3

Thwonkin' Billy

64

4

Enigma

61

5

Daoist Chosui

60

6

Silverfox

60

7

Guru Anaad Phakiwar

59

8

Thomas Fischer

58

9

Francis

58

10

Lotus

58

...

100

Blizzard King

53

Ladder - Wealth

Rank

Name

1

Super Brother-Man

2

Smaug

3

Greed

4

Enigma

5  
Thea Marshall  
6  
Henry Marshall  
7  
Djinn  
8  
Thwonkin' Billy  
9  
Francis  
10  
The Eternal Eye

Ladder - Dao  
Rank  
Name  
1  
Super Brother-Man  
2  
Guru Anaad Phakiwar  
3  
Thea Marshall  
4  
Abbot Boundless Truth  
5  
The Eternal Eye  
6  
Pretty Pretty Mega Kenzie  
7  
Silverfox  
8  
Thwonkin' Billy  
9  
Daoist Chosui  
10  
Father Thomas

The shocking change was obviously Billy and Thea having gained a massive surge in levels since he checked last. He had taken a look just a few days ago, and Thea was level 65 at that time, while Billy was level 61. That meant they had both gained a tremendous amount of energy in an instant, since less than an hour had passed on the outside since he looked.

But the real shocker was perhaps that Billy had surged to the 8<sup>th</sup> spot on the Dao Ladder. Before this, he wasn't even ranked, and Zac wasn't sure he even possessed an Early Mastery Dao Seed. Zac couldn't imagine that simple giant pondering on the intricacies of the Dao, but Billy was like an onion.

Every time they met Zac learned one more surprising layer to Billy, from the golden blood to the sleep cultivation. It wouldn't be surprising if someone like that possessed disgustingly high affinity with some Dao, and it only took him some time to figure it out. Judging by the fact that he had also gained multiple levels pointed toward the fact that he had gained it mid-battle.

Zac was happy for his friends, but more so he was worried. Had something happened on the outside that would prompt Thea and Billy to take such a risk? The only way to gain multiple levels in one go was for them to defeat a powerful E-Grade invader, probably a General from the Undead Incursion or a leader from one of the few remaining ones neighboring the Dead Zone.

Thea was aware that he would return in a day or two, but yet she had risked her life in such a fight. Zac almost regretted looking at the ladder after seeing the change, as a seed of worry had been planted in his heart. But he could only shake it off and focus on his climb. He would leave this place in 50 days, which was just a few hours on the outside.

Apart from the sudden jump by Thea And Billy nothing much had changed since he last checked the ladder, apart from the occasional movement here and there. Francis and Lotus were two new names in the top ten, though Zac had seen them in the top 30 since the beginning.

He had no idea who Lotus was, but Francis was one of the human councilors of the Underworld Council. He had usually hovered between rank 15 and 20, but he had upped his game since he arrived to the surface. Apart from him and Enigma there were two more councilors at the power Ladder, though Zac only knew Gregor personally. It was the man he had met just after taking over the Union. He currently sat at the 54<sup>th</sup> position with level 55.

The other elites of earth hadn't been idle either, and you now needed to have reached level 53 to get a spot. That meant that there were potentially thousands of people who had attained their level 50 skills by now, something that could bring a huge boost in strength to the Native Armies.

It wasn't bad, but Zac still felt it wasn't enough. He understood why human wave tactics were the only reliable option against incursions unless someone like him appeared. How would a single level 50 warrior take down those leaders he had fought? Even a dozen of them would be useless.

Zac couldn't see the earthlings defeating a leader, or even a general, unless thousands of people sacrificed themselves to exhaust the invader's Cosmic Energy. Even if the Undead Empire hadn't appeared on earth there was probably not much hope for the earthlings. He even guessed that Thea and Billy had paid some extraordinary cost to win whatever fight they had found themselves in.

The invaders would have created permanent outposts, killing or enslaving the local population as they drained the planet of all its wealth. Earth was simply too slow in responding, with only a scant few of the incursions being closed while the invaders were heavily restricted and unable to use arrays.

The movements of the other two ladders were even more static than that of the power ladder. A few names had changed as people died or stopped progressing, but it took a lot for those ladders to move. The Dao Ladder stayed almost completely the same since the large reshuffling that the Dao Funnel brought about, except for Billy.

Half the Dao Ladder was still filled with former spiritual leaders such as monks and priests, with the rest being powerhouses. There wasn't a lot going on with the wealth ladder either. A lot of names had dropped off after Zac conquered the

Underworld Union, such as Little Treasure. Much of his wealth had been tied to the Union, and were now part of Port Atwood's coffers.

But Greed, another former Union member who fled, somehow maintained his spot. It meant that he either carried a massive fortune on his person, or that he possessed intangible assets like a Mercantile License. Djinn was a new arrival, but he wasn't in any of the other two ladders. Zac guessed he had found a huge treasure that spiraled him to the top in one go.

In any case, he could breathe out in relief since he saw that all the Valkyries, Kenzie, and Emily were safe, meaning that Port Atwood probably wasn't facing some immediate danger. It allowed him to keep climbing without too many distractions. Hopefully, Thea's actions were simply the result of impatience rather than desperation.

Zac closed the ladders and he immediately picked the Soul Strengthening Manual. The reasoning for him was simple. The Beast Rearing Manual felt pretty useless to him, but the other two were both tempting. Eventually it came down to choosing between Power and Survivability.

The Body Tempering Manual would probably make him stronger as long as practicing it didn't mess up his body, but he was already plenty powerful for his level. The Soul Strengthening Manual on the other hand could help him strengthening his Soul, which was something Zac desperately needed in his fight against the Splinter.

He had already sensed the difference an empowered soul could have on him during his previous fight. The splinter had been truly agitated due to the mind invasion, but Zac had yet been able to stay mostly calm through the fight. If it had been before he would probably have unleashed **[Deforestation]** in a muddled rage before he could analyze the situation.

The splinter was a constant worry, and he needed a long term solution that wasn't reliant on the Miasmatic Fractals. This might be his only chance to get his hand on a Soul Strengthening Manual, and he had to take it even if it would slow down his cultivation or make him miss out on forming a constitution.

Besides, with his path of cultivation he would probably spend a lot of time on the sickbed, wounded from cracking open nodes by force. Galvarion had been forced to recuperate for centuries, and Zac might fare the same fate even with his constitution. Tempering his soul during the downtime would allow him to keep improving even when he was hurt.

The moment he made his choice he was immediately sent off to the next world, and he barely had time to stash the radiant crystal that appeared in his hand before the whole field around him shook as tens of thousands of bodies rose to their feet.

One quick look around seemed to indicate that he was on a battlefield between an insectoid species and a mix of their undead counterparts and humanoid zombies, and judging by the groans and roars from the surroundings the undead had won.

### **[Rebuff the Invasion.]**

Zac wasn't surprised to see the quest, and he summoned the independent fractal blade of **[Chop]** to start clearing out the surroundings while he got his bearings. If he was supposed to rebuff the invasion he needed to find either the incursion of the undead, or whatever means they had used to arrive at this planet.

After that the most straightforward thing would be to cull the leaders of the invasion, which would hopefully force the soldiers to flee. Of course, it was a possibility that the leaders were far beyond his reach, at which point he would have to figure out to swing the war in the insectoid's favor.

But Zac suddenly frowned as he looked around the area, and his eyes started to shimmer as he activated **[Cosmic Gaze]**. Was the undead really the target?

“Something is going on!” a shout echoed out from the distance as a group of humanoids rushed toward Zac, pushing the slow-moving zombies out of the way. “Why the hell is one of the mercenaries among the children?”

Zac curiously looked and saw that the new group was drenched in darkness to his eyes. Every part of their bodies was covered in death-attuned energies, and it was easy figuring out that they were undead, though these ones were sapient. They were a mix of different humanoid species, and it looked like some of them had swapped out certain body parts.

The fact that they were all sapient meant that they were E-Grade race as far as Zac knew, but his knowledge about the undead was pretty much limited to what Anzonil had told him. Perhaps there were situations where even lower-tiered undead could gain intelligence.

“Please, my lord!” one of the humanoids shouted from afar after having stopped outside the reach of the fractal blade that was still reaping zombies left and right. “The children are innocent! They just haven’t woken up yet, please don’t waste your strength on them.”

“Hmm,” Zac shrugged noncommittally as he ordered his blade to return to his side.

He had already realized that something was odd even before the group of undead approached him. He had first thought that the scenario was an invasion of the Undead Empire, but the fact that the area was teeming with miasma made Zac realize that might not be the case.

A bunch of killed zombies certainly would release some miasma, but this battlefield essentially felt even more death-attuned than the core of the Dead Zone, and the effect wasn’t nearly this pronounced in the battles he had fought with the undead outside their incursion.

Besides, some insectoid species were extremely invasive as well, just like the Ayr Hivebeasts. Given enough time they would swallow a whole world, and Zac knew there were many more species like it.

The scenario became clear after hearing the exchange between the undead. It looked like he was designated as some sort of mercenary, no doubt hired to help the undead forces to rebuff the insectoid invasion. Luckily he had some experience in dealing with insects, and the mission seemed straightforward enough.

Unfortunately, he was just caught red-handed slaughtering people from his own side. The only solution he could come up with was to act like an aloof master, which hopefully would allow him to not sour his relationship with the Undead Empire. It was best if he could keep his alliance with the undead to gather intelligence about his target.

“Thank you, my lord,” the undead said as he scurried closer, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief.

The undead was level 60 at best, just a bit better than the extremely weak corpses around them. The low levels of the people made Zac believe this was a low-tiered world, just like the one before this.

“My Lord, I am not sure how you appeared here?” the man hesitantly asked as he stopped a few meters away from Zac.

“I got a bit lost,” Zac said. “Can you lead the way out of here?”

“Certainly,” the undead nodded. “The children won’t attack you as long as you are accompanied by one of us.”

Zac was slowly led out of the sea of zombies, and he quickly learned that it was not actually a battlefield, but rather a dumping ground where they had left a mix of acquired corpses and insectoid invaders to slowly turn into true undead. Zac's arrival had stirred them prematurely, and they would be kept there for some more time to gestate.

Zac was pretty curious about the society of the Undead Empire in general, but there was first one thing he wanted to check first. He quickly took out the luminous crystal he had just got, and he infused his mind into it to see what he had just got.

### **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**

*Temper your spirit through nine reincarnations of life and death and form an impregnable soul, immune to the ravages of Samsara.*

Zac's eyes lit up when he read the introduction, and any regret about missing out on a Body Tempering Manual disappeared. It looked like he had just hit the jackpot. Didn't this sound like a manual made for him with his ability to jump between being living and dead?

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 432 - Lord Draugr**

Zac had no point of reference when it came to Soul Strengthening Manuals, but the one he held in his hand seemed to be pretty damn strong, even if he didn't have his unique constitution. It wasn't quite as tailored to his situation as he first had thought though, and it wasn't strictly limited to people who walked the Path of Life and Death.

The method to train in the manual was to push one's soul to the peak of life before plunging it to the depths of death, simulating a lifetime. After completing enough such revolutions one's soul would undergo a rebirth, shedding some of its imperfections and growing in strength.

If one managed to complete all nine reincarnations they would possess what the manual called a 'Nine-Samsara Soul', and it would be so strong that he essentially wouldn't even need mental protection skills like **[Mental Fortress]** to stay safe. His soul would turn even more monstrous than his nigh-indestructible body.

The number of revolutions one needed to complete a reincarnation wasn't clear, but judging by the language in the crystal it would be a massive undertaking to just complete a few reincarnations, let alone all nine. But Zac hoped that his ability to swap between life and death would be able to expedite the process, though that would probably require some experimentation.

There were two problems with the manual though.

For one, only the method for the first four reincarnations were included in the crystal. He would have to somehow find the rest elsewhere if he wanted to continue practicing the skill, and Zac had no idea where he would even begin his search for the missing pieces of a manual like this. He couldn't just jump into a bunch of Mystic Realms hoping to be lucky.

The fact that the manual was split up could also be seen as a positive though. Zac only gaining the earliest stages of the manual meant that it was probably beneficial even in higher grades. It would have been a shame if he got one that was only useful in E-Grade, after which he would have to swap to a new one.

The second problem with the manual was a bit tricky as well.

Each of the reincarnations required specific environments to practice. The first reincarnation only required him to meditate within one of two specific arrays, one death attuned and the other life-attuned. Kenzie no doubt could help him build two chambers meeting the requirements since Zac had the schematic, but she probably wasn't able to put them on Array Disks just yet.

Perhaps this is where his unique situation could come into play. If he could swap out the increasingly stringent requirements with simply swapping back and forth he would save an enormous amount of time and resources. It seemed unlikely that he would be able to practice the Manual inside the tower, though it wouldn't hurt to try it out.

Zac put away the crystal and looked over at the undead with some curiosity. This was the first time he had talked with a sapient undead, unless you counted his encounter with the Draugr woman in his vision.

"What race are you?" Zac suddenly asked, breaking the silence. "Oh, and what's your name?"

"Ah?" the undead who walked alongside him started.

"Is your race 'Zombie'? Or are you a Corpselord?" Zac asked with curiosity.

"A zombie is a derogatory term for those who still haven't awakened," the undead answered after some hesitation. "My name is Eldar and I am a Revenant, the most common Race of the undead."

"Could you explain a bit more? What's the Difference between a Corpselord and a Revenant?" Zac asked. "It seems we have the time."

"Well..." Eldar said with clear conflict on his face.

Zac understood what was troubling the Revenant, and he immediately had an idea. There was something he could test which might make the group more talkative.

"Wait a minute," Zac said as he stopped in his tracks.

The group of undead stopped and looked at Zac with confusion, and their eyes widened in shock as Zac's skin turned deathly pale and he started to release a massive amount of miasma around him. His brown eyes quickly darkened until they were two black globes leading into the abyss.

"Wha- how?" the undead sputtered with confusion on his face.

"I am Draugr. I simply used a skill to look like a human," Zac said as he turned his abyssal eyes toward the group. "I have been traveling among the living for all my life. This is the first time I actually stepped on death-attuned soil. I hope you can answer my questions and clear some points of confusion for me."

"I- ah, of course!" he said. "I am sorry, Lord Draugr."

Zac nodded in relief. This was one of the loopholes the trio had found during their climb, mostly thanks to Ogras' predilection of talking far and wide at any tavern he could find. Their races were never made an issue, as though the System forced all the natives to be enlightened and look past race.

However, if you mentioned your race they would understand you, in contrast to mentioning the Tower of Eternity. They hadn't found any use for that small feature though, until now. The revenants had already been respectful earlier when he was a powerful mercenary hired to help in the war, but now it was as though they looked upon an idol.

"I am sorry for the discourtesy just now," Eldar said as he bowed deeply.

"It is fine. I understand that you'd be hesitant to discuss this matter with the living," Zac said. "Now, about the races? I have traveled with my master my whole life,

and he hasn't explained all these things for me for reasons I cannot disclose. But now that I am returning to the Empire I need this information."

It was a pretty horrible excuse, but judging by the attitudes of the group of Revenants they wouldn't question him no matter what he said.

"Ah? Yes Certainly!" Eldar hurriedly said though he looked pretty confused. "May I ask which Empire you are referring to? Our kingdom of Zarvadar borders no force that can be considered an Empire as far as I can tell."

Zac frowned in confusion for a second until he realized the problem. This world wasn't actually part of the Undead Empire. How would it be? It was part of the Tower. The inhabitants of the worlds were never aware of anything larger than their planet, and higher grade beings were mentioned as things of legend.

That meant that he, unfortunately, couldn't milk Eldar for information about the Undead Empire. Perhaps it wasn't completely a loss though, since there were still a lot of things that he might know. There was only one undead force in the multiverse as far as Zac could tell, and this world should no doubt be based on the situation in the Undead Empire.

"Nevermind, I cannot divulge," Zac coughed. "Now, about the races?"

"As you probably know, most of our population comes from corpses awakening, just like the field you saw earlier," Eldar said, eager to please. "Only the powerful can conceive children of their own, so adoption is more common. And these types of children are all Revenants."

"However, the undead are special in that some can change their races to a certain degree, though supreme existences such as Lord Draugr does not need such things. Some shed their mortal coil through a ritual to turn into pure beings of miasma. They gain races such as wraiths and specters," the revenant explained. "A few others choose to become Corpse Lords."

"Corpse Lords are a manufactured race. They are built by taking extraordinary bodyparts from multiple sources, creating a stronger than average body. Their progeny inherit a mix of their parent's bodies, which can both turn out great and pretty bad. Corpse Lord clans are usually subservient clans to either Liches or one of the five noble races, as their origin is that their ancestors were created."

"Does Corpse Lords have any weaknesses?" Zac asked.

"Well, combining bodyparts is a hard venture, and only the most skilled Liches can do it without side effects. Most Corpse Lords are cursed with their bodyparts being in dissonance. They need to take medicine to quell the effects, and they are always looking for more compatible bodyparts. The risk for an earlier descent into madness is also pretty high."

"Then why would a Revenant choose to become such a being?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Ah, lord Draugr might not know, but cultivation comes hard to us Revenants. We are not blessed with your talents, and becoming a corpse lord is somewhat of a shortcut to power some chooses to take," Eldar explained, not without some helplessness on his face. "Most revenants are forever stuck at the F-Grade, unable to truly enter the path of cultivation."

Zac slowly nodded, remembering Mhal, the Corpse Lord general. His research had been related to this subject. Infusing Draugr genes into one's body would be able to increase the affinity with miasma, and perhaps even decrease the dissonance between bodyparts.

“Nevermind,” Zac said, realizing he asked something he shouldn’t have. “Are Liches one of the noble races?”

“Liches aren’t a race,” Eldar said with a shake of his head. “It’s more of a position, as well as a branching class tree. Creators of undead, miasma controllers. That incubation field you ended up in was maintained by a group of Liches for example. They’re needed to speed up the awakening of the children. But there are also many combat-oriented sub-classes.”

“So what race are they?” Zac asked with confusion.

“Most are Revenants, but the most skilled Liches are of course among the five noble races. Apart from the Eternal Clan who exclusively follow the Sanguine Path.”

“I know of the Eternal Clan,” Zac slowly said. “But what about the other three races?”

“Apart from your noble bloodline, there is the Izh’Rak Reavers. Their bodies are the strongest of all undead races, without being burdened with any of the demerits the Corpse Lords have. Then there is the Eidolon, the leaders of the specters,” Eldar explained. “They are the only spectral race that is born that way, never having shed their physical form through the ritual. Most believe their control over miasma is second only to the Founders.”

“Do you know what the founders look like?” Zac asked. “My master never told me.”

Zac had no idea who these founders were, but he had an inkling. He kind of wanted to ask to make sure, but he saw the gazes of the group of Revenants. He had clearly asked a bit too much, and Zac was afraid that going too far would label him an imposter or something, making his quest all that harder.

“No, the form of the exalted Founders are beyond the knowledge of remote Kingdoms such as ours. They are the origin of our species, I am sure they live in far greater places than here. Places where the Miasma is dense enough to turn liquid,” Eldar sighed, clear longing on his face.

Zac’s eyes lit up when he heard Eldar’s explanation. One popular theory was that the undead races were created by one single powerhouse, someone at the level of Emperor Limitless. He would probably have become an Apostate if he appeared in this era, but this all happened before the System arrived as the undead existed even before the System.

These founders might be the descendants of this grand ancestor, and if that was the case it wasn’t surprising they would be considered the greatest undead race.

After some more questioning, he got a pretty decent understanding of the undead Races. The Draugr could be considered the jack-of-all-trades of the five noble races. Their bodies weren’t as excellent as the Izh’Rak Reavers, and their affinity with miasma wasn’t as great as the Eidolon. But they still excelled on both those subjects, making them excellent all-rounders.

The Eternal Clan followed the Sanguine Path as Eldar called it, and it even seemed to be some confusion whether the members were really undead or not. Some believed they were rather a closely allied race that had decided to join the undead for some reason.

“Thank you,” Zac finally said after he had satiated most of his curiosity.

There was still a lot that he wanted to know, but he felt that it would be too suspicious if he kept going. He instead turned his attention to something else.

“Where are we heading?” Zac asked as he looked at the desolate surroundings.

“We have set up a fort an hour’s travel from here,” Eldar explained. “You and the other mercenaries were supposed to be placed under General Niksi, but now I am not sure...”

Zac understood what he meant. Perhaps it would breach some sort of protocol for some normal undead to order around a Draugr.

“I need a place with both miasma and Normal Cosmic energy,” Zac said, switching subjects.

“Certainly,” Eldar said, though his face looked like Zac had asked for a huge pile of feces to be placed in his bed. “We have already erected arrays to convert the energies for our guests. I’m sure one of the array masters can make some adjustments.”

Zac nodded in thanks as he thought of his next move. He didn’t have a lot of time on his hands, but if there was one floor he should stay some time extra on, wouldn’t it be this one? Where else would he be able to find assistance in grinding the levels of his skills? Where else would he get tips on controlling miasma?

It was time to integrate into undead society.

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**Chapter 433 - War**

“Charge!” Zac roared as he pushed forward, each step causing the ground to shudder as his frame grew and quickly became ensconced in pitch-black armor.

Ten thousand Revenant warriors roared in response, charging the insectoid army without any care for their lives as a thick haze of miasma covered the battlefield hundreds of meters in each direction. One after another fell as they approached the defensive line, but a fanatical gleam burned in the eyes of the survivors as they kept running.

Zac had severely underestimated the impact a purebred Draugr had in undead societies. He had figured it would be something like an elite on earth. It would elicit some admiration and perhaps jealousy, but nothing too extravagant. But he had been sorely mistaken.

He had been given a king’s welcome the moment he arrived at the base camp, and the Revenant general had even offered her position to him without hesitation. However, Zac had declined, instead opting to take command of an elite troop of 10 000 warriors with the intent to train his skills.

Anzonil, the old horndog, had also hit the mark on the pull of his race to the opposite sex. He had essentially been visited half of the eligible E-Grade females in the kingdom by this point. He had only managed to stave them off by indicating that any spread of his bloodline would be met with swift and bloody retribution by his elders.

He knew the effect wouldn’t be that pronounced in the real Undead Empire though, as there apparently had been no one from the five noble races visiting the kingdom of Zarvadar for millennia. Giving birth to a progeny that was even half-Draugr would skyrocket that family into the stratosphere.

The interest had barely waned from the threat of his imaginary elders though, and joining the battlefield had as much been an escape from the incessant courtships as it was a way to improve his skills.

He had already confirmed that the floor guardian was a 'breeder', which was a specialized clone of the queen. She resided in a hive that had fallen out of the sky one day, continuously spewing out new soldiers. The original script was probably to help the war efforts to the point that a large-scale attack on the hive was possible, though Zac felt somewhat confident in assaulting the place alone after getting a grasp on the power levels involved in the struggle.

However, Zac wasn't quite ready to leave this floor yet as he had found it extremely rewarding to use his class as it was intended.

Zac was almost upon the defensive line of the insectoid army he had targeted, and he quickly summoned the massive shield from **[Immutable Bulwark]**. It had slightly changed shape to look like the armor he wore when using **[Vanguard of Undeath]**, and he used it as a wall breaker when he slammed into the row of hulking insectoid brutes that held the front line.

The specialized defenders were even larger than Zac in his transformed form, but they still flew out of the way as though they were made from styrofoam as Zac ripped into the army. A hundred skeleton warriors rose from the miasmic mists the moment Zac had pushed his way inside, hacking and slashing in every direction.

They caused massive confusion among the attackers, which allowed Zac's subordinates to widen the breach into a massive hole. Soon enough the Revenant army cut their way through the middle of the army, wedging themselves in and forcing the insectoids to split in the middle. The roars of battle echoed in Zac's ears, and it felt like the battle lust of his warriors empowered him.

In fact, the accumulated killing intent of an army of the dead had been the key to upgrading **[Indomitable]**, and it had pushed to Middle Proficiency during his first skirmish. He had initially thought that the only way to improve the skill was to be hit with mental attacks, but he realized he had been completely wrong.

Hundreds of ranged attacks soared toward the vanguard, and Zac infused his fractal shield with the Seed of Sanctuary, quickly increasing its size to encompass the elite core of his army. The Seed was nowhere as strong as his Fragment of the Coffin, but the coffin didn't help increase the area he could protect.

Unfortunately, he would soon lose even this capability, which was the downside of abandoning the Fragment of the Shield in favor of his Life-Death duality. Whatever Fragment the Seed of Sanctuary turned into, it would no doubt be life-attuned, which would probably make it impossible to use with his current class.

Of course, the Revenant army wasn't helpless even if Zac couldn't protect them all. They formed a second layer of defense in the sky that blocked out most of the attacks, and the soldiers ripped into the insectoid ranks with brutal fervor. Meanwhile, ten massive beacons were erected, and nine enormous cauldrons were placed between them.

It made Zac remember Mhal and his elite army. He had used cauldrons as well, though the way these warriors used it was slightly different. Massive black clouds started to billow out of the cauldrons in no time, and Zac knew it was a death-attuned poison that only affected the living. Dozens of liches instructed the mists to

Zac had learned that the spellcasters of the undead armies generally followed three heritages. First were the poison masters such as the lich in his squad, using toxins to cause widespread death. There were also many ice-attuned mages who fused death and frost into extremely potent attacks that turned enemies into frozen statues.

Finally, there were the soul manipulators who used mental attacks, curses, and illusions. However, these specialists were extremely rare and usually required inborn

affinities, sort of like the purifiers on earth. There were certainly more classes, but these three were the most common, at least in this kingdom.

Zac had thought it had something to do with affinities, but the reason was a lot more pragmatic. The spellcasters of the undead armies leaned toward classes that would leave the corpses of their enemies intact. A fireball could turn a dozen warriors into cinders, but that would mean that the kingdom missed out on having a dozen new soldiers join their ranks.

The battle quickly turned into the undead's favor, and not just because Zac mowed through the army like a bulldozer. The two sides were almost equal in strength before his arrival, and the single addition of **[Fields of Despair]** had tipped the scales in the Revenant's favor.

Zac had only utilized parts of the skill until now, the part that recovered miasma from kills and the part that weakened enemies. But with an army of the dead at his command he could utilize the skill to its full effect, where the also undead around him also benefitted from the skill.

He had initially expected that all the miasma released from kills would go to him, but **[Fields of Despair]** actually provided the energy to the one who landed the killing blow. So the skill didn't just weaken the enemies, but it also increased the endurance of the undead, allowing them to keep fighting.

Using skills as they were intended was the best way to increase their proficiency. Zac had managed to push **[Fields of Despair]** to late proficiency after just a few fights, and the skill reaching late proficiency actually benefitted him.

Back when he upgraded the skill to middle proficiency the only thing that changed was that the skill's coverage more than doubled. Upgrading it to late proficiency had doubled the area once again, and by this point it was able to cover almost a third of a battlefield this size. One more upgrade and he would probably be able to cover a square kilometer in miasma.

That wasn't the only benefit the skill provided after getting upgraded. He could actually feel the combatants within the mist now. The effect was nowhere near as comprehensive as the omniscience of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, but it was more akin to having radar and sensing everyone in the mist like hazy blips.

He wouldn't be able to use the new feature to dodge attacks, but he would be a lot harder to sneak up on this way. Hiding within the miasmatic mists would be impossible without possessing some sort of counter.

"I'm going in," Zac said to the two powerful warriors who had fought right behind him the whole time

They were his two assigned lieutenants, each chosen due to their ability to stay alive in the head of the battle.

"We'll hold the line," Yrvos, a Revenant created from a massive Ogre, grunted as he crushed an enemy with his barrel-sized mallet.

Zac nodded before slamming one of his feet into the ground, disappearing in a puff of miasma. He immediately appeared in front of a group of massive ants at the rear of the army, each of them well into the E-Grade. They were war beasts that the insectoids reared, and one of the most powerful weapons in their repertoire.

Sitting on their backs were a group of commanders and beastmasters, and it seemed as though they had been expecting Zac's appearance. Ten pillars of light appeared around them, forming an array with Zac and the ants in the middle. A pressure immediately started to push down on him, whereas the insectoids seemed unaffected at all.

Zac frowned as he looked around, but he still proceeded with his plans as he stomped the ground again, erecting the cage of **[Profane Seal]**. The mists of **[Fields of Despair]** were joined by the black churning clouds of **[Winds of Decay]**. He didn't imbue the mists with the Dao of the Coffin though, but he had rather chosen to imbue **[Profane Seal]** with it.

His Dao Fragment had amazing synergy with the skill, and not using the two together would be a wasted opportunity. First, it made the five towers and their corresponding gates pretty much impervious to the outside forces who tried to break in and assist their leaders. Secondly, they empowered the chains immensely.

The spectral chains had become a bit useless against the targets Zac mainly focused on with the skill, instantly crumbling from the attacks of the powerhouses. But the chains now required tremendous effort to destroy by the insectoids, making them far more lethal. They also gained a corrosive effect when they attacked and could even deal significant damage by just lashing opponents.

Zac felt as though he was mired in quicksand due to the array, and he was utterly incapable of dodging the rabid attacks from the massive ants who tried to gore him with their sharp legs. But he had never planned on dodging anything anyways, and he immediately started to whittle down the massive insects with the help of **[Deathwish]**.

The E-Grade warriors quickly realized their plan had failed, and they jumped down from the backs of the ants to increase the pressure. But Zac was like a whirlwind of death as his massive miasmic bardiche ripped through the thick plating of the ants and the bodies of the insectoid leaders alike.

The massive pressure he was under from the array started to take its toll though, and he was starting to run a bit low on miasma. However, Zac didn't worry as one of the gates to **[Profane Seal]** soundlessly opened while Zac kept the insectoids busy.

The doors closed again just a second later, while But one pillar after another exploded as spectral warriors appeared out of nowhere, killing the array masters and dismantling the array in seconds. After they had completed their main mission they started to take out the normal soldiers in the cage that the spectral chains still hadn't dealt with.

Zac wouldn't have any issue dealing with the array himself, but he wanted to use the various squads in his employ as much as possible. It wasn't due to something as noble as giving his soldiers a chance to grow through battle. Zac knew very little about the war tactics of the undead, apart from the mindless hordes of the unawakened zombies.

Alea had partly suffered her grievous wounds due to lacking knowledge as well, not expecting to get ambushed by ghosts like that. He didn't want that kind of surprise to happen to his armies in the clash against the Undead Incursion.

He had unearthed all kinds of knowledge during the three days he'd stayed on this floor. One small tidbit was that the spectral warriors couldn't pass through Dao-infused surfaces or skills with enough power. That's why he needed to open the door for the ghosts to enter his cage. Similarly, if warriors had their Dao Field unleashed they wouldn't be ambushed out of nowhere as the spectral warriors would be slowed by quite a bit.

Having one's Dao Field constantly active would put a drain on one's soul, but it would be worth it in the heat of battle to avoid unwelcome surprises such as getting skewered from a ghost popping out of the ground.

With the threat of the way Zac methodically killed off the leaders one by one, leaving just the largest ant alive. Zac no longer had any means to see its level, but he

guessed it was around level 85 and focused on Endurance. It was a perfect target for his daily practice.

“You can go,” Zac said with his deep voice.

The ghosts who had remained inside the cage until now bowed before they streamed out through a gate that Zac opened, leaving Zac alone inside. Zac cracked his neck as he looked at the target dummy in front of him.

The past three days had been full of failures, but today he'd conjure those bronze sparks no matter what.

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**Chapter 434 - Repurpose**

The departure of the spectral warriors left only Zac and the remaining inside the cage, along with a hundred decaying bodies that slowly replenished his reserves with miasma. He was still uncomfortably low on energy though, so he bit down on a pitch-black pill that turned into a thick sludge that ran down his throat. A surge of miasma spread through his body, almost instantly restoring a fifth of his miasma reserves.

Zac tried to not to think of the foul taste of the **[Warrior Pill]** he just ate as he swapped out **[Verun's Bite]** for one of his disposable axes. It was a pill that had a similar effect as Cosmic Water but without the downsides as long as you used them in moderation. The **[Warrior Pill]** was a lot weaker than the water though, and you could only eat one a day before side effects started to crop up.

Next he dispelled **[Vanguard of Undeath]** and shrunk back to his original size. He wanted to experiment with his Daos, and he had found that his control got even worse in his transformed body. Miasma kept churning around in his body to keep the miasmatic armor and weaponry active, which might cause some interference.

Or it was just the fact that the spiritual energy needed to travel further when his body was bigger.

The air around Zac started to shudder as he unleashed his Dao field for his Axe Fragment to the utmost. The ant seemed to sense the threat and attempted to ambush him, but Zac kept dodging as he tried to regain the feeling he had during the Dao Discourse.

It was obviously harder to concentrate with a massive beast trying to skewer you, but Zac felt that it was far easier to make breakthroughs mid-battle compared to sitting alone in a courtyard meditating. The pressure and risk of death would stimulate his potential, and something new would hopefully be born from his struggle.

The atmosphere inside the cage kept changing as Zac switched back and forth between the Dao Fields for his two fragments, one moment containing invisible blades and the next second corrosive winds. He had kept trying to recreate the Dao Storm with the help of his aura over the past days, but he was simply not making any progress.

He did at least manage to superimpose the two Dao fields for a second by force. When he wanted to release a second Dao Field the other automatically receded into his body, but he was able to stop it by simply blocking it out. However, that caused a pretty hefty loss in spiritual energy as the energy simply dissipated instead of returning.

There were also no bronze flashes appearing in the brief seconds he managed to keep the two Dao Fields going simultaneously. Zac figured that the density of energies

wasn't enough to force a reaction when it came to Dao Fields. He could only sigh in disappointment at yet another failed experiment and move on.

If Dao Fields could be considered the gaseous form of the Dao, then directly infusing it into a weapon or skill would be the liquid equivalent, and allowed for a larger amount of spiritual energy.

The Dao Storm had contained most of his spiritual energy, and perhaps that kind of density is what was needed to summon the bronze flashes. But he couldn't just crank out half his soul in one attack, but rather recreate that amount of energy in a single point to force a fusion like before.

The problem was that Dao Infusion wasn't like a water faucet. He couldn't just increase the lever and have more Dao Energy flow out of his head. Until now things had been binary where he either chose to infuse something or not. The amount of energy it cost would depend on the skill or item getting infused, and it would regulate itself automatically.

This was the problem that he had struggled with over the past three days. Trying to control the amount of mental energy that ran down his arm into his axe was like trying to push more air into a bag with his bare hands. Zac kept trying various approaches he had thought up while resting as he ran between the ant's legs, but nothing worked.

Since he still couldn't figure out any way for him to control the amount of energy he could only try to fuse the two Daos once again. It felt like Zac's mind would split apart as he forcibly pushed his two Dao Fragments along his arms before they streamed into the axe at the same time.

It was yesterday he had finally found a way to force both his Daos to converge. He used each of his arms like a conductor for one Fragment, only trying to push them together when they reached his axe. He only needed to use some Miasma as the method of delivery. However, there were still many problems to solve, and the first trial was the reason that he was using a temporary axe at the moment.

Verun had roared in Zac's mind the moment the two streams had entered the axe before it immediately rebuffed the two Dao Fragments. Zac first thought it was because it wasn't able to properly utilize both fragments at the same time due to its lacking materials, but his next experiment showed that there were other issues at play.

When Zac tried the same thing with a spare axe the two fragments had entered without a problem, but the whole axe exploded into scrap metals in an instant, maiming his hands and almost blinding him. Zac had first thought he managed a fusion at the first try, but he quickly realized he had overestimated himself.

The explosion came from the two untamed energies along with the miasma causing strain on the weapon rather than a fusion of the two. It was still an impressive outburst of energy though as the axe scraps had either been infused with the Fragment of the Axe or Fragment of the Coffin as they shot out like projectiles in every direction.

Zac figured there was an issue of speed. He would never be able to squeeze out half his mental energy for a single strike, as he had done during the Dao Discourse. He instead wanted to rely on smaller amounts of energies colliding at higher velocities. It was like the experiments on old earth where scientists shot electrons at each other with extremely high momentum to see what kind of energies were released by the collision.

He needed to turn himself into a particle collider.

Having a plan was one thing, but finding a solution was something else entirely. A minute later his axe couldn't take it any longer and turned into a bomb as well. Zac

had learned to see the signs by this point though and threw it away in time, but he froze a second later.

What about [**Cyclic Strike**]? He had given up on the skill for his new path, but perhaps some parts could be repurposed. The two fractals from the skill were perfectly placed on his shoulders, and he would easily be able to push his two Dao Fragments there before they continued down his arms.

The correct usage of the skill was to infuse his Daos into the two fractals, and sort of braid the energies in a way that allowed the two Daos to mesh together and combine. After that had been accomplished you could infuse whatever you wanted with this new combined energy.

Zac had never really gotten much further than infusing both fractals with their respective Daos. He hadn't even been close to finishing the type of mesh required, but that wasn't his goal at the moment. He felt like he was so close to the answer that he could taste it, and he gave the ant a quick punch to throw it away before he prepared to test his newest theory.

Zac immediately took out two daggers and stabbed one into each shoulder without as much as a grunt. Ichor started to drip down his arms and back, but he didn't care as he hurriedly activated the two maimed fractals with a smile that would no doubt look a bit deranged to an outsider.

The Dao Fragments entered the two fractals of [**Cyclic Strike**], but Zac didn't care at all about balance this time as he tried to force the energies to the center of the fractals as quickly as possible. Normally it wouldn't have been possible without properly following the winding pathways, but he had carved a new path for himself.

The two daggers acted as conductors and allowed him to skip all intricacies of the skill fractal, leaving just the part that acted as an entrance funnel, along with the core of the skill that Zac guessed was responsible for the fusion. The weapon blade allowed him to pass by over 70% of the fractal by just pushing the energy right through the metal itself.

Adrenaline started to course through his body when he realized that it was actually working, and blobs formed from his two Dao Fragments shot toward each other in his chest.

But happiness quickly turned to panic as Zac felt a terrifying buildup taking place when the two blobs merged, and he desperately tried to push it out of his body. He wasn't sure if he'd even survive if the blob exploded like his axes, taking half his torso with it.

The energy only got halfway down his arm before the ball of energy collapsed in a soundless implosion, annihilating a good chunk of his bicep as it disappeared. The pain was excruciating, but Zac was still delighted with the result as his eyes were trained on the wound.

The implosion had contained a bronze-colored spark.

Zac was in no mood to stay at the battlefield any longer, and Zac ordered the ten chains of [**Profane Seal**] to kill the ant who was already on its last legs from the sparring session. The battle outside had already ended as well, with liches going through the battlefield to find salvageable bodies.

The corpses were placed in two piles. The second pile was the fallen Revenants and the insectoids who weren't salvageable, and these bodies were slated to be incinerated. He was still curious as to why it was impossible to re-reanimate a Revant, but he put the matter and instead hurried back to the outpost to go over the results.

"You're back, Lord Piker," Uro, a steward that the Zervadar kingdom had provided for him, said with a bow as Zac barged through the door.

“Is there any news from the Guild?” Zac asked he sat down with a grimace as the wound in his arm made itself remembered.

“I will enquire,” Uro said and left the courtyard, allowing Zac to go over his findings.

His arm was a mess, but his short experiment with **[Cyclic Strike]** as a base was a huge step forward. There was a lot of work left to do though. First of all, he couldn't keep stabbing himself with knives to create shortcuts in the pathways. It was both time-consuming and inefficient compared to using real pathways, not to mention that it hurt like hell.

Right now Zac had only an extremely crude proof-of-concept that needed huge improvements to be considered passable. He would somehow need to redraw the skill fractals of **[Cyclic Strike]** to better fit his purpose, but he had no idea how to go about doing such a thing.

The next step was to control the fused energies long enough for him to hurt his enemy rather than himself. Right now it couldn't be considered a weapon as much as a creative way to kill yourself, akin to creating a bomb right next to your heart. If the spark had gone off just half a second earlier he might have lost the whole arm instead of just some muscle tissue and ichor.

The question was whether he really needed to stay on any longer on this level, as these kinds of experiments could be performed while climbing.

He still had many skill upgrades waiting for his Draugr-Class, but he wasn't sure how long it would take to grind them out with his army. Zac guessed he would have to hear what the Guild had to say before deciding whether to stay or not, and he looked up with anticipation as his steward soundlessly entered his courtyard twenty minutes later.

“A representative from the Insciber Guild is here,” Uro said with another bow.

“Let her in,” Zac said, knowing that they would no doubt send Ildera again.

“Lord Piker,” the beautiful Vice Guild Master said with a curtsy the moment she entered the courtyard. “Ah! You're wounded! Let me-”

“It's fine,” Zac cut her off before she used his wound as an excuse to fondle him again.

If Zac hadn't known she was a Revenant he would have thought she was a pale human. Ildera had one of the highest levels in the whole kingdom, and she had become remarkably close to a living being as far as Zac could tell. With the notable exception of running on miasma rather than Cosmic Energy and food.

“How did it go?” Zac asked as he took another healing pill, one special-made for his undead constitution and provided by the woman in front of him.

The formation master looked a bit unhappy about being rebuffed, but seeing Zac using the pills she had gifted him lessened her displeasure noticeably.

“I'm afraid we failed you,” Ildera said with a pout as she sat down next to him. “Feel free to punish me as you see fit.”

“What went wrong?” Zac asked with disappointment, ignoring the innuendo.

That Ildera failed to create the Array Disks for **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** was a bit of a blow, and he started to wonder if even his sister would be up to the task.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

### Chapter 435 - Breeder Clone

“We weren’t successful in inscribing the life-aspected formation,” the undead inscriptionist said as she took out a couple of pitch-black array disks. “You will likely need a life-attuned Array Master for that half. I do maintain some contact with a master who might be able to do it, but it will probably require a few months.”

Zac stared at the inscriptions with bemusement for a second before he looked down at the densely inscribed array disks. Was there really a need to leave him on a cliff like that just now?

“This is great, no need to disturb your friend,” Zac assured after he composed himself. “How many did you manage to inscribe?”

“We made six, but I assure you we use high-quality materials,” Ildera said with some confusion. “They will not break even after repeated usage, so having six of them is overkill.”

The first thing Zac had done after arriving at the outpost was to commission the construction of array disks for his Soul Strengthening Manual. The forces he encountered in the Tower were all at least E-Graded by now, and many had skilled inscriptionists who could help save some time. He still had over 40 days left in the tower, and he wanted to use the days to the fullest.

It would also save his sister a lot of effort if he could simply get his hands on array disks rather than having her spend weeks on creating two cultivation caves. The reason he commissioned multiple copies was even simpler. He needed to improve the odds of the arrays making it out of the Tower.

“What do you know about redrawing skill fractals?” Zac suddenly asked, taking the opportunity to learn from an E-Grade cultivator. “Seeing as you’re an expert on inscriptions I hope you would have some insights to share.”

Ildera surprisingly didn’t answer though, but rather looked at Zac with a troubled expression.

“I am not qualified to discuss such matters with the young master. I am sure that your elders will show you the way when you reach the point of creating, adjusting, and fusing skills,” she said. “I am afraid that me intervening at this point would deviate your path of cultivation.”

It appeared that using his imaginary master and elders as a shield from any questions and courtships had its drawbacks. He tried to cajole some answers for a while but she was like a brick wall, citing that it wasn’t her place to disrupt ‘his master’s plan’.

She eventually relented a bit by gifting him a handful of sheets that were actually made from the skin of E-Grade cultivators. Zac’s hair stood on end when he realized what he was holding, but it was apparently a material made for practicing inscribing skill fractals and pathways. It was the closest one could get without starting to experiment with your own body.

The Array Master once again tried to turn the short visit into a romantic outing after the main matter was dealt with, but she was soon enough led out from the courtyard by Uro.

“My master contacted me earlier. He ordered me to take down the Breeder within the day as a trial. I will be leaving in a few hours,” Zac said when the steward returned.

Uro, the ever stoic servant, simply inquired whether Zac needed assistance or any specific equipment for his task. Zac asked for some more **[Warrior Pills]** after some

deliberation, along with another batch of Miasma Crystals. The steward bowed and left the courtyard once again.

Ildera not being willing to help out with redrawing the fractals was a bit of a let-down, but she still had provided a lot of help. Her words had indicated that modifying skills was possible, and not some cockeyed idea he had come up with. Even more surprising, she had actually mentioned that Fusing skills was possible as well.

Creating skills was nothing strange. It seemed to be somewhat expected after reaching E-Grade, at least if you had a higher rarity class. Those with uncommon classes would probably get by with just buying skills, but he had a hard time believing someone with an Epic class would be able to reach D-Grade without having created at least one skill tailored to their cultivation path.

Modifying skills to better suit you felt pretty straightforward as well, though it was probably a lot more complicated than it sounded. Skill fractals were delicately designed networks of thin pathways that allowed Cosmic Energy to transform into all kinds of magical effects.

The skill fractals were something like an imbue of Dao as far as Zac could tell. Pushing the energy through the network infused the un-attuned energy with higher truths, which is how Cosmic Energy turned into anything from fireballs to Zac's fractal edges formed from **[Chop]**. That was also why one could ponder on the Dao through studying skill fractals.

Even small modifications of a fractal would destroy the delicate pattern the fractal created, and you really needed to know what you were doing to not completely mess everything up.

Fusing two skills was another beast altogether. Zac had no idea where to even begin with such a daunting task. He could only assume that the System assisted somehow since skill fusions sounded way too complicated to understand for someone who hadn't spent eons studying fractals.

Zac looked up at the dour sky with some wistfulness. It almost felt as though he was back on the island again during those two solitary months. An ignoramus fumbling in the dark, trying to make sense of what was going on.

He had stepped over a mountain of corpses to get where he was right now, but he was still just someone on the threshold of cultivation. In the beginning he was like a caveman, crudely pushing Cosmic Energy into various body parts to increase his strength. But was he all that much better now, impaling himself with daggers to create shortcuts in his skill fractals?

The steward returned soon enough and he wordlessly handed over a Cosmos Sack. Zac didn't think much of it, but his eyes widened in shock when he scanned the contents of the pouch.

"What's all this?" Zac asked with shock.

"It's from the Royal Family. Killing the breeder is just a stepping stone on Lord Piker's path, but it is the difference between life and death for the Kingdom of Zarvadar. This is a token of our appreciation," Uro said, some life appearing on his face for the first time since he was assigned to Zac.

The reason Zac was so shocked was that there were roughly a hundred D-Grade Nexus Crystals inside the pouch, along with all kinds of pills and herbs. It might not be much compared to the vast amount of wealth he found inside the Spatial Ring belonging to Rasuliel, but it was still the biggest haul of any single level unless you counted special encounters such as the Pool of Tranquility.

Since Zac had made his decision he immediately prepared to set out. The commander of the outpost apparently wanted to hold a banquet in his honor, but Zac

declined as he much preferred to depart without any pomp or ceremony. Fearing some sort of commotion he donned a cloak before he slipped through the back door of the mansion to blend in with the soldiers.

It was still a bit weird walking among the undead in their natural habitat. It was as though he was in some sort of bizarro-world where everything was similar but not quite the same. He had seen a young couple walk hand in hand, one of them a human zombie sporting a decent amount of decay and the other a Corpselord stitched together from at least 5 different races.

Another thing that had been a bit surprising was their love for scents. Almost all the undead living in the kingdom were too low-tiered to eat and drink, so they looked elsewhere to find the satisfaction a good meal could bring. Many enjoyed complex fragrances and most households created their own incense or potpourri.

Zac had long known about the location of the level guardian and he switched over to his human form when he was far enough. It was still quite the distance, and it took him six hours to reach the insectoid stronghold where the Breeder Clone was located, even when he employed **[Loamwalker]** to its fullest.

The location wasn't very hard to find as it was a huge crater caused by the insect hive slamming into the undead planet. The Breeder had arrived alone and quickly started to produce an army for conquest. The insectoid queen had essentially shot out a bunch of hives specially designed for space travel, and they would autonomously conquer planets they landed on before reconnecting with the main hive.

Zac deliberated for a few seconds, but he eventually decided to head in as a Draugr. He had somewhat fallen into the routine where he relied on his human form for most tasks, while occasionally switching over to Undying Bulwark when Hatchetman proved a bad fit.

This was reflected in the slanted masteries of his skills, and Zac decided to push through the whole of the 7th floor in his Draugr form unless a level was a particularly bad match.

Sneaking inside the hive was out of the question no matter what class he chose as the whole crater was crawling with warriors. But full frontal conflict was Zac's forte, so he started to grow from activating **[Vanguard of Undeath]** as he ran down the slopes.

Just seconds later enraged screeches echoed across the area as Zac mowed down one warrior after another with the help of **[Immutable Bulwark]**. He didn't bother killing too many of the warriors, wanting to save his miasma. Some unlucky warriors got bisected by the massive miasmatic axe from getting too close, but most just got lightly maimed before they were thrown out of the way.

He was however forced to start cutting his way forward when he reached the hive, which pretty much looked like a nondescript comet. The entrance was completely blocked with innumerable warriors and beast companions, and Zac was completely drenched in a mix of blood, ichor, and green goop when he finally reached the Breeding Chambers.

The Breeder Clone seemed to be something like a mix of a worm and a factory, a gargantuan mound of flesh over 50 meters long. Zac barely had time to consider a course of action as a massive burst of Fragment-empowered acid threatened to swallow him whole.

He initially planned on enduring the blast before countering, but his Danger Sense screamed that doing so would be a monumental mistake. He could only slam his foot into the ground to teleport next to the massive insect with the help of **[Profane Seal]** and then stomp again to erect the cage.

His pitch-black bardiche swiped at the enormous slab of flesh, but he was surprised to see that the creature had a consistency like pudding. His axe went right through, but the only effect was that he almost got doused by another spurt of acid. Even worse, just seconds later the large wound had closed.

Zac briefly considered swapping over to his other class to deal with this weird creature, but he suddenly had an idea. The ten chains all stopped killing the soldiers that kept emerging from pods that covered the Breeder's body and instead shot far into its gelatinous flesh.

The Clone violently started to shudder and shoot acid in all directions, forcing Zac to desperately scramble back and forth as he combated the tide of newly hatched insectoids that tried to rip him into shreds. However, he almost moaned in pleasure as torrential amounts of energy kept surging into his body from the Breeder Clone.

The amount of energy that the chains managed to drain from the queen was shocking, and a massive cloud of miasma had long formed over Zac's head as he simply had no way to storing this much energy. It took a full 10 minutes for the ten chains to completely drain the queen, which awarded Zac a final burst of energy that confirmed the kill.

The whole Breeding Chamber was partly submerged in massive pools of corrosive acid by this point, and together with the black clouds of **[Winds of Decay]**, the hive had truly turned into a hellscape for any being, living or dead. Zac wasted no time inside the hive and quickly stepped through the teleporter.

The combination of his shocking Endurance and the layers of defensive skills that Undying Bulwark provided made Zac a nigh-impervious tank, but he still looked beyond saving when he appeared in the middle of the streets of some massive town. His pale skin was sloughing off his body in multiple spots, and Zac shuffled into an alley as he threw a healing pill into his mouth.

It appeared the days of easy victories were over.

The Breeder Queen hadn't been an insurmountable enemy, but the thing was both hard to kill while possessing unique strengths that would make her a pain to fight for either of his classes. The realization forced him to stay in place and heal up before heading out, as he didn't dare to challenge the level in his current condition.

Zac was thankfully able to reach an almost perfect condition within a few hours thanks to the pills he was given, and he immediately resumed his climb. He wanted to regain the days he lost on the first level, sparing barely an hour a day for sleep and meditation.

But progress was getting slower and slower, and not a single level provided a quick solution.

Worst of them all was the 60th level where he was trapped in an endless loop of restrictive arrays for nine full days. When Zac finally managed to break out through a bout of unhinged fury he didn't even attempt to complete the quest, but instead opted to turn the poor guardian into a pile of meat.

The unceasing experiments into fusing his Dao Fragments was also a cause of constant delays. In fact, the largest threat to his well being was his own training regimen. The guardians left their fair share of wounds by this point, but none of them had managed to blast one of his lungs into smithereens like he had during a particularly ill-fated training session.

Zac was essentially leaving a trail of bodies and black ichor in his wake, but that trail was at least getting closer and closer to the peak of the 7th floor.

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### **Chapter 436 - The Tallest Trees**

Ogras warily looked around as he appeared in the new world. Only when he saw that he had appeared on a busy street did he allow himself to look down at the gash at his side. Luckily the mayor's all-out attack had barely missed as Ogras jumped onto the teleporter, allowing him to avoid wasting a week recuperating.

Who knew that the old goat would become so infuriated? Becoming a grandfather should be a happy occasion, after all.

That world was done with, but he couldn't help but once again wonder if these worlds were real. Would he become a father? Well, not that he wasn't one already after his years of whoring and playing around about back home. There were no doubt at least a dozen little bastards with his blood running around the streets of Ter'Ferizan.

The demon's gaze darted back and forth across the street as he popped a pill in his mouth, his shadow tendrils meanwhile spreading out in search of threats and treasures. But it just looked like a somewhat flourishing metropolis, though the energy density was pretty abysmal. Luckily he didn't have to search for long as the quest screen appeared on its own the moment he started walking.

#### **[Become an honorary disciple of the Transcendent Master.]**

The demon sneered when he saw the name. Anyone who had the gall to call himself a Transcendent Master in a place like this was no doubt an insufferable asshole of the highest order. Just the thought of becoming a disciple to such a pretentious prick made his hair stand on end. An ornery person like that would no doubt request the full ceremony with kneeling and offering thanks to the heavens.

It didn't take a lot of time to find out that the so-called Transcendent Master was an adviser to the crown and one of the guardian pillars of this country. The title had been awarded him by the former emperor after having fought off an invasion of the Grev Reapers, whatever that was. He currently lived alone, and he accepted 5 honorary disciples to carry on his legacy every year.

The next trial was unsurprisingly tomorrow.

"Leech, you better help me this time or I won't feed you for a month," the demon said as he sat in the hotel room he had hired for the night.

Ogras still had no proper means to communicate with Leech, but the creature living in his shadows released a few undulations, which he felt represented a reluctant acquiescence. Ogras' mouth widened into a grin as he started to prepare, and one item after another fell into his shadows, seemingly transported into another dimension.

The next day Ogras found himself shoulder to shoulder with a bunch of middle-aged warriors, all seemingly stuck at the precipice of evolution. Becoming an Honorary Disciple also meant getting access to the vast fortune of the old master, which included various herbs that would help push one's constitution forward. It was a huge opportunity in a country where even worthless stalk of grass could be coveted if it contained some Cosmic Energy.

There were three trials to the apprenticeship; Mind, Body, Heart. The Trial of Mind was essentially just a confusion array, and his grandpa had thrown him into enough of those while growing up for him to effortlessly pass through. He did however slow himself down somewhat as to not garner too much attention, as that might interfere

with his plans. The standards of mental strength in the kingdom were obviously wanting, and just a third of the trial takers passed it.

The Trial of Body was just as simple, and Ogras was starting to wonder if the old goat was simply phoning it in. The old master simply said that the trial would be over when half the contestants had been thrown out of the courtyard where the trials were being held, which resulted in an all-out brawl.

Ogras had initially been planning on going easy again to stay unnoticed, but he was a bit embarrassed to realize his worries were superfluous as he found himself perfectly mediocre without even trying. Then again, he was holding back on his shadow skills, and instead tried to make do with his spear skills.

During the free-for-all he had barely needed to act to be thrown into the six specific positions he needed to reach. But thankfully no one seemed to have noticed that a spike was shot into the ground the moment Ogras landed, and by the time the Trial of the Body was over the six spikes had formed a circle that covered the entire courtyard.

“The Trial of the Heart will test your convictions, your morality, and your loyalty to this great nation,” the stalwart old master said as he stood in front of the 20 remaining trial takers. “A crooked tree will never grow to its full potential, always forced to live in the shadows of others. As such, I will only assist those with a righteous heart.”

The old master proceeded to walk toward one warrior after another, using some unknown means to figure out whether they were righteous. Ogras’ heart started to beat in anticipation as the Transcendent Master got closer and closer, readying himself for battle. But Ogras’ eyes widened in alarm when the old master suddenly turned toward him, hostility all too apparent in his eyes.

He had been exposed.

“You!” the old man roared as a massive surge of energy started radiating from his body, transforming him from an aged scholar into a ferocious warrior.

An explosion erupted from a nearby pavilion as a shimmering sword burst through its ceiling before it shot toward the old master, but Ogras saw no need to let the Transcendent Master arm himself. A massive crystal appeared in his arms and he immediately slammed it into the ground while infusing it with Cosmic Energy.

Roiling waves of illusory flames immediately inundated the whole courtyard and the trial takers fell over screaming, desperately clutching their heads.

The Transcendent Master seemed a lot better off though, perhaps due to being the floor guardian. His eyes still looked bloodshot though as he gripped the flying sword and slashed toward Ogras with an enraged roar.

The demon narrowly dodged a wind blade that would no doubt have cut him into two as he charged the old man with his spear drawing a majestic arc in the air. But two sharp lances of congealed shadows suddenly gored the old master from behind, leaving two nasty wounds.

The old man was obviously a seasoned fighter who would normally have been able to intercept such an attack, but his soul was currently on fire courtesy of the **[Voidfire Array]**.

Two wounds weren’t enough to take the old man down. However, it did cause him to lose focus for a short moment, which allowed Ogras to launch a massive shadowlance that ripped a hole through his torso.

The old master looked at Ogras with confusion, anger, and betrayal as he fell on his back while Ogras retrieved the six spikes with his shadow tendrils. It looked like the

old man couldn't comprehend why someone would assault him after his centuries of service to the kingdom.

Ogras walked over to the old man who barely clung onto life and looked down at him with a bland gaze. One swift strike ended it, and Ogras quickly snatched the powerful sword before it flew away.

"What's so bad about living in the shadows?" Ogras muttered as he jumped onto the teleporter. "It's the tallest trees that have to bear the winds."

----

"How did things go?" Catheya asked, her eyes never leaving the screen in front of her.

"There are no more members of the Tsarun-Clan in the Base Town. However, three managed to destroy their tokens and leave," Varo recounted stoically.

"He's already passed the 6<sup>th</sup> floor, but his speed is average at best and it keeps getting worse," Catheya muttered. "It's hard to draw any conclusions. What do you think?"

"I took the liberty of asking around some more after completing my mission," Varo slowly said. "I would venture that he is being held back by a lack of knowledge of the tower and assisting treasures such as Array Breakers."

"Why do you say that?" Catheya asked with interest.

If Zac Piker truly was a disciple of her ancestor, then he should be well aware of all the hidden risks and opportunities inside the Tower of Eternity, especially those on the higher floors. But his speed did honestly indicate that there were some problems.

"I found something at one of the Intelligence offices at the outer rim," Varo said as he handed her an Information crystal.

"Super Brother-Man? Fights with an axe... A powerful native who defeated an incursion?" Catheya mumbled as she scanned the contents. "Who are these Ez'Mahal-people?"

"It's a small feudal force in the sector, no one of import. Judging by their strength I would guess that the newly integrated planet was of the lowest grade," Varo said. "The Ez'Mahal could barely be considered a High D-Grade force, and a splintered one at that."

"It doesn't make sense," Catheya muttered as her brows furrowed with confusion.

Zac Piker being an Integration Progenitor would explain why he was so powerful without anyone knowing about him. The combination of the Tutorial, the massive amount of Origin Dao, and the various opportunities The Ruthless Heavens provide to such planets could sometimes create extreme outliers.

But it also made the connection to her ancestor all the more baffling.

"It is a bit disappointing. Perhaps I am overestimating my instincts," Catheya muttered before she turned to her steward. "How far do you think he will go?"

"He will pass the 7<sup>th</sup> floor," Varo said without hesitation.

"Why do you say that?" Catheya asked, her mouth tugging upward.

"Instinct," Varo answered after some hesitation.

"That's why we're such a good combination," Catheya smiled. "I think so too. In fact, I think he might even beat the 8<sup>th</sup>."

Varo's brows rose a bit before his expressionless appearance returned, but Catheya knew it meant that her attendant disagreed. Catheya still had a feeling about that man, even if she didn't have anything to substantiate it with.

“Do you remember Reoluv of the Dravorak Dynasty?” Varo suddenly said.

“What about him?” Catheya mumbled with disinterest as her gaze returned to the Tower Ladder.

“His brother just arrived, and he’s ready for a fight.”

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“The Zethaya sends their regards,” a young woman said with a bow as she handed Yeorav a crystalline vial.

“Mh,” Yeorav nodded as he stashed away the pills without much interest. “What did you find out?”

“It is just as your informant indicated. A confrontation between Zac Piker and Rasuliel Tsarun resulted in the destruction of the Zethaya Pill House and the death of Rasuliel. Boje Zethaya indicated that there was likely some unknown history between the two, as Rasuliel went out of his way to antagonize Mr. Piker.”

“What else?”

Yara went over the details of the altercation in the Pill House, with Yeorav occasionally asking clarifying questions.

“So he either has an extreme amount of Endurance, or he possessed some sort of treasure to withstand the Tsarun brat’s **[Abjuration of Zerthava]**. Where did he get his hands on that thing, anyway? Only those in the Boundless Factions can make that cursed item,” Yeorav asked.

“There have been rumors of the Tsarun doing business with unorthodox forces,” Yara said after some thought. “But nothing substantiated and not to the point that it has created a pushback.”

“That old pretender is too greedy, too impatient,” Yeorav snorted with disdain. “He wants to stand shoulder to shoulder with the likes of the Allbright Dynasty and my ancestors, but his ambition has turned him insane. How can a dynasty be created on such a murky foundation?”

“Well, these events will no doubt infuriate them. Boje also let slip that Rasuliel was the one who bought the Pathfinder Oracle’s Eye a few days ago, and it is now in Mr. Piker’s possession,” Yara added.

“Oh?” Yeorav said with some excitement.

He knew his family had a few body parts of Pathfinder Oracles in their treasury, but there was no chance of getting his hands on them because of their ancestor’s strict rules about cultivation.

The number of resources he could draw from the treasury while still in F-Grade had long been tapped out. He would only be able to trade for it with an item of equal value, and it had to be something he had found himself without assistance.

The odds of that happening without him entering the depths of dozens of Mystic Realms were almost nil, but such an opportunity had somehow presented itself in front of him now. A treasure like that was something that you couldn’t get your hand on even if you had the money, and he could think of multiple ways he could utilize such a thing.

His little brother was no doubt kicking himself for not having the patience to wait just a few days before attempting his climb. But luck was sometimes as important as skill.

“Has everything been set up?” Yeorav asked.

“Everyone is in position. But multiple forces are similarly preparing for when Mr. Piker emerges,” Yara said.

“What have the undead been up to?” Yeorav asked.

“They haven’t made any movements since they threw out the Tsarun Clan from the Base Town,” she said, some confusion clearly written on her face.

“Their motivation doesn’t really matter. Perhaps they just want a top grade body to bring back home,” Yeorav said as he gently grabbed Yara’s hand. “It will be an all-out brawl later. Don’t get mixed into this mess.”

“Is... All this really necessary?” Yara sighed as she moved closer to Yeorav.

“You know how my family operates. If Reoluv ascends I will probably just be relegated to manage a far-off corner, but if it’s second brother I’ll be assassinated along with everyone close to me,” Yeorav said with a pained grimace. “My only hope is passing the 7<sup>th</sup> floor and getting accepted to one of those far-away places. I’ll take you with me and leave the in-fighting to my siblings.”

Not many people in their remote corner of the multiverse were aware, but passing the 7<sup>th</sup> floor essentially gave you a direct shot at entering massive factions that towered far beyond anything else in the sector. The whole sector was just a small corner of their domains, breeding grounds that occasionally fostered promising seedlings.

Most thought that Lord Beradan had been lucky and encountered a great master after passing the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, but he would probably still have been able to join one of those forces due to his amazing talents and his showing in the tower.

Yeorav knew his own limitations, and he hadn’t seen passing the 7<sup>th</sup> floor as a realistic opportunity. He knew he wasn’t his brother’s match in either talent or diligence, especially since their ancestor had taken Reoluv as a direct disciple.

Just reaching the 7<sup>th</sup> floor was a stretch without expending some treasures. Defeating the floor guardian? A fool’s dream. But that had all changed now. Yeorav didn’t know what that poor man had done to piss off the Boundless Heavens to this extent, but it actually awarded everyone who appeared in the Base down the quest.

His previous plan was to wait a decade or two and pass the 6<sup>th</sup> floor with the help of some treasures, but now a better opportunity had presented itself. It had prompted him to cache in on every favor and borrowing from everyone he could think of to stock up on enough offensive and defensive treasures to conquer a minor empire.

It should allow him to propel him through the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, and with the help of the quest he’d skip the floor guardian altogether.

He normally wouldn’t stoop to such despicable levels as he had no bad blood against this Zac Piker. He would rather meet whatever fate came his way when Reoluv or their Second Brother ascended to the throne, but he knew that wasn’t an option any longer. His relationship with Yara had been exposed, so whatever ending he would meet, so would she.

It was a shame, but Zac Piker needed to die so that they could live.

“But that man seems dangerous, and he’s already entered the 7<sup>th</sup> floor,” Yara said with worry.

“Opportunities are always found in the midst of danger,” Yeorav muttered as he stroked Yara’s hair. “Besides, I didn’t come to the Base Town empty-handed.”

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**Chapter 437 - Struggle for Supremacy**

Barely healed wounds covered Zac's whole body after hacking and slashing his way through the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, and he breathed out in relief when he saw that he wouldn't face the floor guardian of the 7<sup>th</sup> floor immediately. Not even the thick armor of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** had been enough to prevent him from getting hurt from the increasingly intense battles.

He had already spent a full day to restore his combat strength to its peak on the 62<sup>nd</sup> level, but he still could use some more time to rest up. His upper chest getting obliterated had cost him a second Zethaya Pill, but even then it had taken a couple of days before he dared to swap over to his human form.

Losing a lung and maiming his heart wasn't too bad when he didn't need to breathe or pump blood, but in his human form it might have proved lethal.

Zac looked down at his token with a sigh, seeing that only 27 days remained. He essentially knew that reaching the 72<sup>nd</sup> floor was not only a matter of strength by this point, but also luck. Twenty-seven days felt like a lot, but it was only 3 days per floor. Getting stuck just once would probably mean his climb was over.

The time constraints also made him hesitant whether he would be able to experiment any more with his Dao Implosions. Continuously wounding himself hadn't really delayed him too much so far since he was pretty used to fighting wounded.

But the enemies were becoming pretty strong by this point, and the 73<sup>rd</sup> floor entailed another steep boost in difficulty. He couldn't keep running around with maimed bodyparts any longer unless he knew he wouldn't encounter the guardian for another day or so.

Besides, Zac had started to realize that his goal of using the bronze flashes offensively was far far away.

Zac had hoped that he would be able to utilize the mysterious flashes offensively by the time he reached the floor guardian, but the past days had proven that it was simply impossible. For one, he had only managed to actually force four fusions over a hundred attempts. Worse yet, each of those fusions had been so unstable that they had exploded in his face before he managed to use them for anything.

The fact that it was somewhat working felt like an indication that he was moving in the right direction, but he started to fear that he wouldn't be able to create a working system before he evolved. The question was whether his current progress could be considered a 'creation'.

He felt it was unique enough as he had never heard of anyone doing what he was attempting, and it was also suited to his special circumstances. He had also arrived at the system mostly by his own effort, rather than following a heritage or a master. Yrial was a definite influence on the path, but not to the point that it could be said that Zac was following in his footsteps.

In either case, it looked like he would have to fight without using prototype Dao Implosions on this level. But he was still confident in his chances, especially in his human form. He felt that he would be able to take out almost anything with unrelenting ferocity as long as he utilized **[Hatchetman's Rage]** and **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** along with his supreme attacks, which is why he had already swapped over to his Hatchetman class.

Looking around made his brows furrow though. It looked like he was in the middle of a massive arena, one a hundred times larger than the slave ring he wound up in after completing the 4th floor.

Zac sat on a platform rising roughly half a meter above a floor made of large tiles, and he noticed there was an array ensconcing the platform. Zac hesitated for a

second before he walked over to gingerly touch it, and he found that it felt like solid rock.

It looked like he was trapped like a beast in his cage, and a Dao-infused punch to the array indicated that breaking it was likely beyond his capabilities. He grunted in annoyance but quickly calmed himself down as he sat down in the middle of the platform and sat down to rest up and figure out what was going on.

The first thing he had noticed was that his was not the only platform in the arena. He could spot at least two hundred platforms around him, but just a few had golden arrays like his own. Indistinct shapes of other warriors could be seen inside, but he couldn't make out any exact appearances of the others.

He could however tell that they were likely humanoids just like himself judging by the size and shape rather than war beasts. Was this some sort of colosseum where he would be forced to fight other gladiators to the death? If so, why hadn't he gotten any quest prompt yet?

And who was the floor guardian in this scenario? There were no spectator stands or people visible in any direction, and the arena simply ended with a vast emptiness, like they were on top of a disk floating around in space.

Was this another riddle he was too stupid to figure out? It had been a humbling experience realizing that he couldn't complete a single one of the quests of the 7th floor, forcing him to fight against the guardians instead.

Mostly it wasn't an issue of figuring out how to complete the quest. The problem was that it would take too much time, or that he didn't possess the prerequisite skills needed. Almost all the quests either required some specific knowledge or treasures to pave the way.

Even the quest on the previous floor requiring him to unseal a tomb to acquire a treasure within was hopeless. The array had completely stumped him, and it was designed in such a way that brute force didn't work. But he had somewhat expected such a result.

He had been going in knowing full well he would have to rely on his strength above all. But even finding the guardians was turning into a chore, which is why he barely had enough time to complete the 8th floor now.

The fact that he was stuck inside an array at the moment didn't help with his impatience to get going.

Minutes passed and Zac started to realize what was going on though. One array after another flashed into life, and another cultivator found themselves seated on a platform in the arena. After just 15 minutes half the platforms were filled, and Zac started to mentally prepare himself for a messy battle.

The closest platform suddenly flashed to life, and Zac looked over with interest. A hazy outline of a humanoid youth could be seen beyond the golden wall, and his head swiveled back and forth for a few seconds before he sat down.

"Shit, how unlucky. A battle of fate. I should have postponed my climb a day," the youth swore. "Better not be any Tower Breakers today."

Zac sat some distance away from the one who had spoken up, but he could still make out the words from the guy.

His mind spun as he tried to understand the scenario. This level felt different compared to those before. The previous levels had all placed him in some sort of scenario, where he already had an identity and a clear mission. But Zac knew this was different as he looked at the indistinct shapes around him.

Were these people actually real?

But where did they come from if they were real? Were they teleported here like he was during his Hegemony quest? Or judging by the words of the youth next to him, were these people also warriors climbing the Tower of Eternity? If that was the case there was no way these people came from his sector though.

If he passed the 7<sup>th</sup> floor he would be the first to do so for thousands of years in his star sector, but the Tower tested the young generation all across the multiverse. Scrounging up a couple hundred of people reaching the 7<sup>th</sup> floor shouldn't be too hard, especially not if it included people coming from higher-tier sectors with B-Grade forces and even higher.

But that presented a problem. He knew nothing of the capabilities of such individuals or the hidden means they possessed. What if they threw out hundreds of peak-grade arrays to blast this whole world into pieces?

There was also that term; Tower Breaker. Did that signify people strong enough to climb the whole Tower? Such a thing was unheard of in his sector, but it wasn't necessarily that case in other parts of the multiverse.

Zac barely couldn't comprehend the strength required for that. Even the normal level guardians of the seventh floor all possessed various unique advantages along with at least one Dao Fragment. How would the boss two floors higher look? Would it have Peak Fragments? Something even higher?

Zac hesitated for a second before he turned back toward the youth on the platform next to him.

"Hey, what's going on?" Zac said with a high whisper.

"You don't know?" the youth answered after a few seconds of silence. "You better crush your token, buddy. When the walls come down, blood will fall like rain."

"Do you know about the Tower of Eternity?" Zac probed.

"Are you trying to test me?" the man laughed. "Well, whatever. We're all real. We know of the Tower of Eternity. We're just unlucky sobs who the Ruthless Heavens took an interest in."

"What do you mean?" Zac probed, praying the chatty youth wouldn't stop explaining the situation.

"This is a rare scenario. A convergence of fate, you could call it. The Ruthless Heavens noticed a lot of promising climbers in the Tower at the same time, and instead of a floor guardian we get to fight each other. Fun, huh?"

"Why would it do something like that?" Zac asked.

"To make the survivors stronger, of course. What better way to become stronger than a life-and-death battle amongst the elites of the multiverse?" the youth snorted. "Shit, I had a pretty good chance of passing the seventh floor as well. Now I'll have to do this stupid climb one more time."

Zac frowned when he heard the youth complain. What he said no doubt meant that it was a lot harder to pass a floor like this than to fight the normal guardian. This was obviously pretty bad news.

After having fought one tough battle after another in the earlier levels of the 7<sup>th</sup> floor he knew he would be in for a fight that would push him hard when he met the floor guardian, but he still believed it would be manageable.

But he was far less confident about the messy situation he was in right now.

"Got any tips?" Zac sighed.

"Have fun and don't get killed. That's what my dad said when he sent me off, has worked pretty well for me so far."

Zac wanted to glean more information out of the man, but the array around him suddenly started to flash as a screen appeared in front of him. Zac blanched when he read the quest, and any hope of the young man next to him lying was dashed in an instant.

The wording in the quest was all too familiar, and nothing good ever followed seeing that line.

**[Struggle for Supremacy.]**

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**Chapter 438 - Points**

**“Supremacy...”** Zac mumbled with some helplessness.

At least there was no confusion about what needed to be done this time. It was a Battle Royale. It made Zac remember when he sat wounded and wrung out in the tunnels of his crystal mine, and the quest for the Fruit of Ascension suddenly popped up.

The system had told the inhabitants of the island to fight for supremacy back then as well, and what followed was a bloodbath. This time things were slightly fuzzy though. Was this really a last man standing scenario?

Thankfully it seemed like the system wasn't done, and a few more lines appeared in front of him.

**[Defeating each contestant rewards 1 point, in addition to all accumulated points of the vanquished.]**

**[Trail ends when 10 contestants remain, or when no combat has taken place for 3 minutes. Avoiding battle for more than 5 minutes counts as forfeiture of climb.]**

**[Ladder will display the top ten contestants.]**

Zac quickly looked around and noticed a huge screen appearing in the sky. It was currently completely blank, but it was no doubt the scoreboard the System mentioned.

At least the System wasn't so heartless that it would only let one person through. Ten spots being awarded wasn't too bad since he guessed there were roughly 200 platforms in the vast arena. That meant 5% of the people would pass. Those odds didn't seem too bad considering they were on the last level of the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, whose guardian would no doubt have been extremely strong.

The question now was what level of power was required to be considered the top 5% in a group like this. He felt pretty confident in himself compared to almost any F-Grade cultivator, but he also knew that he knew nothing of how things worked with B-Grade and higher forces.

Neither did Ogras nor anyone else in the sector it seemed, as the strongest forces were all C-Grade. Perhaps the strongest people would know more, but the things beyond C-Grade might as well be myths for people like him.

Zac immediately tried to figure out a strategy to last as long as possible. Best case scenario he avoided battle altogether as the others fought it out. He would then swoop in and defeat a few warriors and snatch their accumulated points.

But he knew that was probably a pipe dream. He had no ability in stealth, and most of these people no probably had anti-stealth capabilities anyway. Besides, the

system clearly disallowed such a tactic with its set of rules. Huddling in a corner might be seen as a sign of weakness as well, prompting him to get attacked.

Should he go the other way and blast his aura to the fullest, drowning his surroundings in his killing intent? No, something like that would probably backfire. They might consider him a raid boss and team up to take him out before turning on each other.

A thought suddenly struck him and he took out a couple of talismans and an Array Disk. He tried activating them one by one but he sighed in relief when none of them worked. Next he took out an amulet, a pretty weak defensive treasure he had snatched during the climb. The amulet immediately created a shimmering shield around him, though it was dimmer compared to the first time he tried it out.

It seemed that the System had enforced certain rules on the floor. Expendable treasures such as talismans, offensive items, and Array Disks had been completely disabled for the Battle Royale. However, real defensive treasures like his robes seemed to work, albeit in a reduced capacity.

Not being able to use any external items might be seen as a detriment, but for Zac that could only be considered a huge boon. He came from a newly integrated planet of a weak sector, and the things he could bring out would probably seem like a joke to most of these people.

Most scions of B-Grade clans would probably be able to beat him to death with their wallets alone, and even if the efficacy was lowered he would be in deep shit if someone took out a bunch of peak-grade arrays. He was pretty confident in the durability of his body, but even he wouldn't survive getting blasted by twenty **[Void Balls]**.

This leveled the playing field somewhat at least and he took a few deep calming breaths as he looked around. All the platforms were full by this point, and the warriors inside essentially stood rooted to their spots as they waited for the timer to hit zero.

The array flashed faster and faster, and suddenly it was just gone, exposing himself and the other warriors. The whole area shuddered as hundreds of immense auras burst out, each one powerful enough to completely steamroll anyone on Earth.

Not even a second passed before blood was spilled, and Zac was already behind in the count before he had even jumped down from the platform. A few had taken the opportunity to launch quick strikes on their neighbors for early points, and the scoreboard had already filled up with ten names.

One warrior after another released their strongest skills and transformed, and everything from tempestuous storms of energy to awe-inspiring avatars started to take form across the arena.

However, one phenomenon reigned supreme, to the point that all battles ground to a halt. Zac was primed to meet any assault, but he couldn't stop looking at the spectacle on the other side of the arena as well.

It was as though a sun had appeared from nowhere as a colossal ball of primordial flames covered an area of hundreds of meters in each direction. Space itself seemed unable to withstand the heat as countless spatial tears were scorched open before they quickly mended again.

Zac had fought various flame-aspected warriors, but nothing he had seen had come close to the heat generated in that globe. The flames contained a boundless fury and scorching heat that threatened everyone in the arena, and Zac's Danger Sense screamed at him to never cross the woman who sat on top of the sun.

There was no doubt in his mind that the ball contained at least a medium Dao Fragment, but the terrifying fluctuations made Zac believe that the reality was likely far scarier. Perhaps you'd even need Peak Fragment to reach those levels of power.

The fiery globe was a stark contrast to the young woman who hovered above the sun, as her face was an ice-cold mask as she gazed down on the arena as a goddess looking down at her subjects. Zac couldn't be sure from the distance, but she seemed to be a human from what he could tell.

A gargantuan avatar suddenly appeared behind her, a six-winged humanoid who could either be a fallen angel or a demon. It looked like it was seated inside the ball of flames, but it was still only submerged to its navel due to its towering height.

The avatar formed an odd seal with its fingers which conjured six enormous fractal circles above his head. The sense of danger in Zac's mind surged, and he started backing away even if he was on the other side of the arena.

Six terrifying whirlwinds of purest flames rose out from the ball of flames and entered the fractals, imbuing them with their scorching heat. The next moment the whole arena was illuminated in a blaring light as each fractal launched a condensed pillar at an unfortunate cultivator who was too close to the sun.

Five of the unlucky targets were simply obliterated, the flames not even leaving their bones or treasures intact. Only one woman, a rugged beastkin woman wielding an odd kettle with incense, managed to survive by conjuring a massive beast avatar that managed to block the flames for a fraction of a second, which allowed her to move out of the way.

She was still grazed by the attack as it slammed into the ground, and she quickly took out a pill while she kept retreating with horror written all over her face. The beastkin only got a few steps though before she crumpled down on the ground as she started spewing grey clouds from her mouth. A second later she had turned into a bonfire as the flames had somehow burned her from inside.

The scene had completely subdued the whole arena. Just getting grazed by her attacks had been enough to get yourself killed, and she was still sitting on enough flames to drown out half the arena.

The flame goddess thankfully didn't seem inclined to push things any further for the moment and instead sat down on top of the ball of flames to spectate the battles. Zac had first thought that some people would call for teaming up against the monstrous powerhouse, but she was completely ignored as dozens of battles erupted as people increased their distance from the stationary sun.

Perhaps she only wanted to stake her position in the top ten, and no one was foolish enough to contend for the first position when you could fight for one of the other nine spots. Hopefully, she would only strike one unlucky person every three minutes to not get kicked out, and effortlessly pass the trial.

It was a humbling reminder that the sector he came from was just a backwater corner of the multiverse. He was probably the strongest F-Grade warrior there, but there was always a higher peak. He had no confidence in defeating that girl. He wasn't even sure he'd be able to handle one of her attacks in his human form.

His Undead form would perhaps be able to tank a few strikes, but defeating her in that form would be impossible. The vast power of the sun would melt his miasmic cage in seconds, and he would be turned into cinder before he would get close enough to hit her with an axe.

Was this the actual peak of the F-Grade, or were there even stronger people out there?

The flame girl was shockingly not the only warrior that made Zac leery, there were two more that he knew he would have to avoid if possible. Worse yet, half of the contenders were like him, holding back to observe the surroundings. There were no doubt a few more powerhouses hiding in the mix, waiting for the right opportunity to strike.

He had briefly entertained the notion of gaining the first spot as he waited for the arrays to deactivate, but now he was rather wondering if he'd even make it into the top ten.

The system wouldn't give the leaders an easy time either, as there was actually a picture attached next to their names and points so that anyone would know who they were. One person obviously wasn't prepared for that, as his face started to distort and change in an effort to circumvent the ladder. But the picture next to his name kept changing as well.

Zac had no time to worry about others though, as a sword tip pierced out of thin air, aimed straight at his heart. It contained an inexorable force, and it felt like the sword was a kilometer long slab of metal rather than just a meter. He immediately summoned **[Nature's Barrier]** and imbued it with the Dao of Trees to block the incoming strike, while also getting ready to activate his Dao of the Coffin in case it was needed.

A vast expanse of trees spread out around Zac as he activated **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** as well, but this time the trees found competition from massive fractal swords that materialized all around him before they stabbed into the ground. He felt he was no longer in his private grove, but rather in a contested forest full of wood and steel.

The large sword pillars would have to wait though, as the incoming strike was stronger than expected. One of the ropes on the divine tree from **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** snapped, providing him with another shimmering layer of defense.

Thankfully it seemed like his layers defenses enough to stop the attack even if it was impossible for him to imbue the nature-attuned skills with the Fragment of the Coffin. The dozens of Dao-Infused leaves didn't completely manage to impede the strike though, proving just how much power the stab had contained.

He had just activated the defensive barrier from **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** as an extra precaution since he felt that **[Nature's barrier]** should be enough to block an opening salvo. His defensive skill was based on his Endurance after all, and even if the attack was infused with a Dao Fragment it still had to contend with a Peak Dao Seed and over 1800 effective Endurance.

But the attack wasn't over it seemed. The huge swords around him started to hum like they were struck by a tuning fork and two swords emerged out of the closest sword pillars like the massive swords were portals to some other dimension.

It was at this time his opponent finally appeared as well, rushing out of another sword pillar ready to strike.

It was a thin humanoid with purple skin and golden eyes. His build was pretty much the same as a very lanky human with the exception that his arms seemed to have an extra joint and that a thick but short tail extended from his lower back.

"Sorry, about this. You seem nice fellow, but I decided to give this floor a try," the man said as the three additional swords plunged toward Zac, each from its own direction. "And I need every point I can get."

Zac could only smile wryly in response. It looked like information wasn't free after all.

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### Chapter 439 - Battle of Fates

Zac briefly wondered if the swordsman had assumed him to be a weakling due to his cluelessness about the Battle of Fates.

A burst of Zac's shocking killing intent spread out as he moved with lightning speed, his axe already falling toward the youth as a storm of leaves pushed away the three hovering blades temporarily. The man's eyes widened in surprise, but the display didn't deter him as a sharp aura radiated from him as he met Zac's attack with the sword in his hand.

A blinding flash of light was followed by a massive shockwave when [**Verun's Bite**] collided with a golden sword that the youth used to defend from Zac's overhead swing. A small crack could be heard from the man's arm though, and it was obvious he had strained to block the strike.

Zac was still pretty shocked by the guy's power, as his swing was both empowered by the Fragment of the Axe and the titanic power in his arms. But the arm holding the sword was only forced backward a bit before it stabilized again, though the man's whole body was shaking from strain.

This was the first time someone at his level had been able to cleanly block his strike as far as Zac could remember, but he wouldn't give up from something small like that so he immediately geared up for another strike. The swordsman was obviously not interested in matching brute force, and he suddenly shot back almost a hundred meters while the three flying blades prevented Zac from following by unleashing a storm of strikes at him.

Zac frowned and tried to follow using [**Loamwalker**], but he was for some reason unable to shrink the distance with his skill. Was it the sword pillars who messed with his mobility somehow? He could only move forward the normal way, but each step was contested by a barrage of strikes that kept ripping the leaves of [**Nature's Barrier**] to shreds.

The swordsman thankfully didn't try to attack Zac from afar while he tried to catch up, but he rather swung at one of the sword pillars right next to him. A hymn of vibrating metals echoed out as the man unleashed a frenzied series of swings.

Zac didn't understand what he was doing, but waiting for an opponent to finish charging up a strike was the height of idiocy, so he started launching fractal blades of his own at the swordmaster every time he saw an opening between the flying swords. He received a few cuts in return, but it wasn't anything worse than flesh wounds.

But the man expertly met the incoming fractal blades with his sword and somehow redirected the force of the projectiles to harmlessly pass by him as he kept swinging at the pillar. Zac finally noticed what was going on. The swordmaster was charging the massive sword pillars with power.

They had looked pretty much like dull steel swords before, but now they gleamed with some unknown energy. Zac had realized the issue too late as the dozens of pillars started to shoot out a cascade of sword beams toward him.

Zac did have the advantage of 360-degree vision thanks to [**Hatchetman's Spirit**], but knowing where the attacks came from didn't really help when you were unable to dodge. There were just too many blades, especially with the three corporeal blades already harassing him.

Resonating sword waves kept coming at Zac from every angle, and he found himself incapable of blocking them all with the help of **[Nature's Barrier]** as the leaves were getting destroyed faster than he could create them. He eventually chose to just rush straight through the storm while imbuing his body with the Fragment of the Coffin, but he found himself swinging through air as the target had somehow passed through one of the sword pillars and appeared on the other side of the sword forest.

Zac growled in frustration as he instead chose to demolish one of the pillars, and one mighty swing with **[Verun's Bite]** completely obliterated it and caused shards to shoot out in all directions. However, Zac felt like he was stuck in some sort of time loop when he saw the splinters fly back and recombine, once again forming an unblemished sword.

Thoughts of retreat started to intrude as Zac looked for a solution, but he stubbornly threw the impulse away. The guy he was fighting didn't have the confidence to win in this Battle of Fates. If he couldn't even beat him, how the hell would he reach the top ten? This was something like a trial for him, proving to himself that he could contend with the elites of the multiverse.

Cosmic Energy surge into his arm as a crack appeared in the air above the battlefield, allowing the hand of **[Nature's Punishment]** to emerge. Zac wasted no time as the wooden hand formed a seal, conjuring the enormous array that emitted an intense pressure toward the ground.

It was only then that Zac realized a potential problem. Were there punishments to summon in this weird dimension? There was nothing apart from the arena in this dimension. However, he breathed out in relief when he saw a pitch-black peak emerge from the array, bearing down on the forest below.

Those sword pillars were simply too annoying, providing the swordsman with both a powerful attack and an escape skill while also restraining Zac's movement. He wouldn't be able to end the fight while they remained, so he saw no recourse but to go for mutual destruction and sacrifice his forest to crush the pillars.

A stabbing pain suddenly flashed in Zac's mind, and it almost felt like when he looked upon the massive axe in his Dao Vision all those months ago. Zac looked over at his enemy with some alarm, only to see that the swordmaster had swapped out his mighty golden blade with a run-down sword in a simple leather scabbard.

Zac had no idea what was so special about the sword, but his Danger Sense told him that it was far deadlier than the other blades he had so far. He was unable to do too much about it though as he was occupied with controlling **[Nature's Punishment]** while blocking the hundreds of sword waves that threatened to drown him, but Zac did manage to send a few fractal blades toward the swordsman to force him to split his attention.

However, the blades only made it halfway before they were eroded by the unceasing barrage of sword blades. The fractal edges formed by **[Chop]** were both larger and more ferocious, but they unable to withstand dozens of collisions.

Zac realized he wouldn't be able to stop whatever the swordsman was cooking up, so he got ready to expend another defensive charge to endure the strike while he completed the attack of **[Nature's Punishment]**. However, Zac soon realized that he wasn't the target.

The lanky warrior unsheathed and swung the blade in one lightning-quick motion toward the sky, and the rusty blade was back in its old scabbard within the blink of an eye. The only evidence of the attack was a white arc left behind along the sword's trajectory.

The light didn't disappear even after the swing ended, but it rather grew and grew until it was a hundred-meter wide half-moon that rose into the air to meet the pitch-black mountain's descent, and Zac was shocked to see the peak get cleaved in two along with the whole emerald array.

Burning pain seared his hand, and he forcibly ended the skill before the sword arc hit the wooden hand. Luckily it seemed that the swordsman had miscalculated things as well, and he looked shocked when the two halves of the mountain kept falling rather than disintegrating into motes of Cosmic Energy.

A massive shockwave erupted as the two enormous boulders slammed into the ground. The mountain exploded into thousands of jagged rocks, some as large as a car, that flew in all directions with terrifying momentum. The swordsman tried to escape through the closest sword pillar, but he was immediately spat out, perhaps because most of the swords had been utterly destroyed by the massive slabs of rock.

Zac saw his opportunity as witnessed the swordsman scamper back and forth among the flying gravel. He immediately activated **[Loamwalker]**, and immediately sensed that it was no longer restrained. He pushed through the chaos the moment he realized the skill worked, ignoring the twangs of pains from being pelted by the pieces of rocks flying around.

Suddenly he was right upon the swordsman, and **[Verun's Bite]** was ready to strike.

"Wha-" the man exclaimed as he tried to phase away using some unknown means, but Zac's free hand was even faster as he grabbed the youth's arm and infused it with the Dao of the Coffin.

Zac wasn't planning on hurting the lanky warrior with his Dao, but he made a bet that it would be able to disturb the warrior's escape just like how he was able to stop Ogras from blending into the shadows. His guess was right as the enemy's form turned corporeal again.

The man was no weakling since he had reached the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, and he wasn't ready to give up just because he knew he wasn't Zac's match in a direct confrontation. A barrage of sword strikes harassed Zac as the man resummoned three golden swords, and each strike came from unpredictable angles and contained a tremendous force.

Zac kept blocking with **[Nature's Barrier]** and **[Verun's Bite]**, all while trying to get a good swing at the man. He still had a death grip on the other man's arm, but his attempts at pushing him down to the ground proved impossible as the cultivator somehow resisted Zac's force.

But he wouldn't relent either and he ignored any finesse as he used a meter-long fractal edge and delivered one earthshattering strike after another while forcibly enduring the hail of sword strikes. Since Zac had captured his target it had turned into a battle of endurance, and if it was one thing Zac was confident in, then it was his ability to take a beating.

However, he suddenly remembered that he had gained a few new cards, and his killing intent congealed into a spear that stabbed into the man's back as Zac activated **[True Strike]**. Others wouldn't be able to see the spear as it was only a mean for Zac to control where he wanted to redirect the attention.

A golden disc looking like a miniature shield flashed into existence and radiated a massive amount of power as a necklace on the man's neck dimmed. It covered the warrior's whole back in an instant, defending the man against Zac's 'surprise attack'.

Of course, there wasn't' actually an attack coming since the skill only created a threat without any real follow-up. But that by itself was sometimes enough as the man hurriedly back to see what was going on and if he needed to dodge.

The movement only took a split second, but that was all Zac needed as he activated the second fractal on **[Verun's Bite]** while swinging with everything he had. The distraction had caused a small weakness in the warrior's defense, and that was the difference between life and death.

The fractal edge of **[Chop]** suddenly disappeared, and **[Verun's Bite]** slipped past the golden sword as it gained a sanguine glow. It finally continued unimpeded toward the swordsman, and blood splashed in all directions.

"I'm sorry," Zac muttered as his axe bit into the shoulder of the warrior. "I need every point I can get."

Zac could have just as easily aimed his axe to bite into the man's head, instantly killing him, but he decided against it. He had no grievance with his enemy apart from them being competitors in the System's game of elimination. Besides, these people probably came from powerful forces, and who knew what kind of seeds of Karma killing these people would form.

"Shit, just my luck," he said as he reached toward the token on his waist. "Thank you for showing leniency. If you're ever in Asc--"

However, he wasn't able to finish his sentence though as he disappeared from the arena before he even had time to touch his token. His weapons disappeared with him as well, which was a shame since that rusty blade looked extremely interesting. However, Zac suddenly noticed that a Cosmos Sack was lying on the ground where the swordmaster just stood.

He quickly snatched it up and stowed it away as this wasn't the time to go over his gains. Zac's eyes rather looked around for any incoming threats, but no one seemed inclined to jump him as things stood. His eyes locked with a demon who wasn't too far away, but the man quickly retreated.

Perhaps he had seen Zac's battle and felt there were easier targets to focus on first, and Zac looked down at **[Verun's Bite]** and saw the glow slowly retreat into the second fractal on the handle. Judging by the density of the light he would be able to use the fractal another 3 or 4 times before he needed to recharge it with blood.

This was the resulting upgrade from Verun devouring the massive succulent back on the 4th floor, but he had only been able to utilize it recently as the Tool Spirit had been digesting the various energies it had absorbed. The feature wasn't as flashy as the summoning Verun itself, but it did drastically increase the sharpness of the edge for an instant, allowing a sudden burst of power that was hard to adjust to.

Zac had found that it was extremely effective to combine the effect with **[True Strike]** as the lapse in concentration of the enemy allowed him to make the most of the short burst in power. If he had used the fractal from the start the swordsman would probably have been able to use one of his defensive treasures to counter it, wasting the effect.

The brief respite after the battle allowed Zac to take a gander at the situation, and he was surprised to see how frenziedly people were fighting. Was there really a need to risk your life like this? Most of these people were scions of powerful clans, and many no doubt had a second climb remaining.

There were still over fifty fights going on, and Zac saw one person after another flash out of the arena, leaving only a Cosmos Sack behind. The scene made Zac realize that there might be some special protections in place, with the System providing last-second saves before they died.

That didn't explain why everyone fought so desperately. Was it about the Cosmos Sacks? The treasures carried around by a Scion of a B- or A-Grade Force were of extreme

value for someone like him, but it couldn't possibly be like that for everyone? Was there some other secret to this special level?

Still, many knew their limits. For example, Zac spotted a golem defeating some sort of devil cultivator, and the Golem reached down and crushed its own Token the second it snatched the Cosmos Sack left behind, disappearing with the spoils.

The number of contestants had dropped less half in just a minute, and Zac realized that things might be over pretty soon. He needed to defeat a few more people while there still were easy targets around. But just as he was about to pick a target he felt a sudden gust of wind right behind him, making his hair stand on end.

"Hey."

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 440 - Fractured**

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Zac rapidly spun around to find himself face to face with an angelic girl who smiled in his direction. She had appeared out of nowhere, and Zac frowned as he swung his axe toward her neck without hesitation. His Danger Sense was quiet but his instincts screamed of danger, and Zac infused his body with the Fragment of the Coffin while the spiritual forest reappeared around him mid-swing.

But she only looked on with a smile, her eyes trained at his.

There was finally a response of danger in his mind, but it was though it was muffled, subdued to the point that he could barely feel it. That only made Zac even more certain that the girl was a real threat, and Zac strained for his swing to move even faster.

However, he suddenly noticed something was wrong. He felt as though he was moving extremely quickly, but his axe wasn't getting any closer to his target. Terror started to well up in his heart and he tried to flee, but it was futile as the whole world was suddenly gone, replaced with two enormous eyes, both of them only containing a blue vertical fracture that contained endless power.

Every fiber in Zac's body screamed for him to look away, but his body didn't listen to his commands as the eyes consumed his everything. A snap could be felt inside his mind as **[Mental Fortress]** crumbled like rotten wood, and then an all-consuming pain wracked his mind.

His very being was being eroded, and Zac knew he stood on the precipice of death. This wasn't a death his Specialty core could circumvent, as this was brought on by his soul crumbling, his mental force fracturing and falling apart.

He tried to move his hands toward the token attached to his side, as it wasn't worth dying just to get a better title. But any sense of his body was long gone, and his vision swam as he fell down on the ground. His mind was turning blurry, but he felt some relief when he sensed a small vibration from the token by his side.

A shocking burst of ferocity suddenly burst forward, ripping the two enormous eyes into shreds.

Boundless destruction rampaged across his mind, startling Zac's blurred consciousness awake again. It was the [**Splinter of Oblivion**] that had been freed from its cage and lashed out in fury. Dark and extremely potent energies ravaged across his mind. His soul was quickly becoming tainted, but the splinter at least seemed to temporarily hold his crumbling soul together.

Zac once again regained a semblance of control of his body, and he saw the mentalist standing just a meter away from him. She didn't move an inch, but rather stood in place as she violently convulsed. Her sapphire eyes were replaced by two ravaged sockets from where black blood poured down like waterfalls, staining her dress before it pooled at her feet.

Was the Splinter of Oblivion the cause of this? Was that the reason she still hadn't been teleported out? The backlash she had received seemed to have been just as serious as his own, and it seemed like a coinflip who would succumb to their mental wounds first.

It was an opportunity for him to escape from the Tower, but Zac was dismayed to find that his arm wouldn't move toward the token. The duplicity core had considered him on the verge of dying, and the slower automatic process of changing form had begun as miasma started to spread through his body. Worse yet, the Splinter's awakening seemed to have canceled the automatic transfer out of here and he was now stuck in place.

Zac would normally still be able to move in this state even if he was severely weakened, but with the shock to his soul he had turned completely immobile. He could only helplessly lie on the ground, praying that the Splinter would be able to keep his mind intact long enough for him to change form and do something about it.

He couldn't help but curse his bad luck being targeted by a mentalist, one of the rarest class types. Did he project the image of being a rube or something? First he was targeted by the neighbor, then this scary girl. Did she perhaps think he was an easy target since he was an axe wielder, a class choice that famously favored by meatheads?

If that was her reasoning, she was unfortunately spot-on. Zac was somewhat confident he'd survive at least one attack of that insanely powerful fire mage, but his mental defenses were completely inadequate to counter the strike of a mental user who was strong enough to reach the peak of the 7<sup>th</sup> floor.

Worse suddenly turned to worst as a massive lance of darkness pierced the chest of the mentalist, instantly killing her by the looks of it. It was some sort of masked assassin wielding a meter-long spike who had appeared out of nowhere, immediately reaping her life.

He had probably noticed that she was barely hanging on and realized it was an opportunity to reap some easy points. Worse yet, after he had killed the mentalist he turned his attentions toward Zac, who was still lying impotently on the ground. Perhaps he thought that Zac was faking it or simply immobilized since he hadn't been teleported out yet.

It looked like his avenger would immediately turn into his killer.

A blazing pain of getting his innards shredded joined the agony of having his soul tortured as the black pike stabbed into his chest. A burst of power ripped apart his left lung, and it took everything in his power to not even blink from the attack.

He was still completely immobile, and his only chance of survival was for the man to think he stabbed a corpse as death-attuned energies already spread through his

body. However, he suddenly caught a lucky break as the assassin flashed away the next second, narrowly avoiding a massive arrow that caused cracks around its trajectory.

One of the spatial cracks swiped Zac's side, and he could only bear having yet another grisly wound opening on his already lacerated body.

A few seconds passed and Zac realized he had somehow made it. The mentalist was dead, the assassin occupied elsewhere, and the rest of the cultivators had no time to worry about a corpse lying on the ground.

Zac couldn't help but feel he was a bit lucky even though both his soul and body were wounded beyond their limits. His terrifying Endurance and death-attuned energy had allowed him to narrowly escape death, and giving him a small opportunity to survive.

Another relief was that the splinter was quickly being pushed back into its cage by the miasmic fractals, but Zac felt some helplessness when he noticed that yet another one of the fractals had been destroyed. That was two fractals gone from his visit to the Base Town, and he didn't know how many of them were required for the cage to maintain its efficacy.

There was also the issue of the large amounts of unfiltered energies the splinter had left all over his fractured soul. He had no idea what the long-term effect of such pollution would be.

However, that problem was nothing compared to the fact that his soul was once again falling apart now that it didn't have the splinter to keep the pieces together. He did have a solution, but it was just that the price was one he really didn't want to pay. His heart was full of reluctance, but he knew he didn't have a choice. His body would slowly mend, but his soul was another matter.

He arduously managed to move his hand toward his mouth, praying that no one was watching the supposed corpses. When it was finally right in front of his mouth a small intricate box appeared from his Spatial Ring.

The **[Prajñā Cherry]** was the only thing in his possession that could mend a soul as damaged as his currently was. He felt extremely apologetic to Alea, but he wouldn't do her any good if his own soul broke apart before he even got back to Earth.

A swift motion propped open the lid and Zac immediately shoved the cherry into his mouth, stem and all, before he put the box back into his spatial ring. A warmth spread through Zac's mouth, but abyssal darkness was spreading through his mind even faster, making Zac lose any sense of self.

A sharp pain suddenly flared up in his leg as a large piece of rubble from a broken platform slammed into it, probably the result of a frantic battle nearby. The pain shocked Zac awake long enough to roughly chew a few times and swallow the cherry.

Zac's mind slowly descended into the darkness once more, but suddenly there was a burst of warmth, like his soul was caressed in a hug. He still didn't regain any feeling in his body though, and the clamor of battle turned into a distant susurrus.

Was this death?

A deep bell echoed in the darkness, and the bottomless abyss was replaced with a boundless sky with splashes of clouds colored pink by a sunset. The slight rustle of leaves was the only thing interrupting the tranquility of the evening. Zac realized he was on a solitary peak surrounded by arid badlands.

The rustling came from a small tree with purple leaves, and by the looks of things the tree was the only growth for miles in each direction. Sharp cliffs devoid of any growth surrounded him, leading down toward a canyon far below. Similar rocky pillars

could be seen far in the distance, though none of them seemed to have any vegetation growing.

It was only then that Zac realized his vantage was that of the tree itself, which would explain why he was incapable of movement. Was this the origin of the cherry that he had just eaten?

“Amitabha,” a gentle but decidedly masculine voice drifted out from beneath his vantage point, and Zac noticed a large figure sitting right next to the tree.

Shockingly enough he seemed to notice Zac as well, as he looked up in his direction with a smile on his face. The old man reminded Zac of Abbot Everlasting Peace from his mannerisms, though this monk was anything but human.

Zac had no idea what race the thing beneath him was. It was a generally humanoid, though extremely rotund. It almost looked like a large ball with a smaller ball on top for a head. It didn't look like obesity though, but rather a natural feature of his species. From his massive torso two surprisingly long and slender arms extended downward, and his hands were placed in his lap.

If one could call it that since the monk didn't actually have any legs.

It instead had two massive wings lying across the ground like a cape, and when their feathers rustled it sounded like divine bells while shimmering lights danced about. The being looked odd but it was definitely a Buddhist cultivator rather than a beast, as he was dressed in a Kasaya while wearing a large bead necklace.

He had a generally humanoid face, with a set of large golden eyes that radiated wisdom, a small mouth, and a normal nose. There also seemed to be a third eye in his forehead, like that of Anzonil, though it was closed at the moment. Finally, a long mane of long gray feathers ran down his head and back, held together with a string like a ponytail.

Even if the being looked a bit odd there was no doubt in Zac's mind he was a powerful warrior. His aura was subdued, but the power in his gaze was undeniable. Besides, looking at the mysterious lights that naturally radiated from his wings almost felt as beneficial for his Dao as witnessing a Tower Apparition.

“Little cherry tree, how can you suddenly carry such fate?” the winged being mumbled, before his eyes slowly lit up with comprehension. “I see... You taught this poor monk something today. Benevolence must be reciprocated, thus completing the cycle and severing karma.”

Zac tried to ask what the old monk meant, but he was unable to speak or even move. He could only watch as the monk slapped his two hands together in prayer, and the sound of his hands clapping was like divine thunder that echoed through the cosmos.

Zac's mind was filled with a shocking force in an instant, and he felt a connection to the universe he had never sensed before. All living things were part of a greater whole, all connected by karma and Heaven's Will. Was this the grand truth of the universe, or was it the cultivation path of the winged monk sitting under the cherry tree?

The feeling only lasted for a second, and when he looked around he had returned to the solitary mountain peak, while the monk was nowhere to be seen.

Zac could sense that he, or rather the cherry tree, had transformed somehow from what the monk did. It still looked the same from the outside as far as Zac could see, but there was a tremendous power hiding within.

A massive halo that looked like a setting sun suddenly exploded out from the tree as its branches started to violently shake. Buddhist hymns sang across the badlands

as the tree kept growing and transforming. It had just been a bit over five meters before, but it grew over a hundred meters in an instant.

Its appearance had also taken a drastic turn, as its purple leaves were suddenly covered in golden fractals while its trunk turned almost black with similar engravings. Its canopy stretched hundreds of meters in each direction, sheltering the area from the sweltering sun.

The changes weren't over though as the roots kept growing downward along the hoodoo, their exuberant vitality transforming the arid rock as they descended toward the parched ground. First, it was simply moss that covered the sheer rock, but soon enough even small trees and flowers forced their ways through the cracks, turning the rocky pillar into a living monument.

The edges of the branches started to droop as they kept growing, and soon they had formed a dome with the pillar as a center. Outside was still the sandblasted wastelands, but the area within the canopy was quickly turning into a pocket-sized paradise.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 441 - Faceless**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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The vision of the consecrated tree and its kingdom slowly faded as Zac returned to his body. Before he fell into the vision his soul had been crumbling while his body was grievously wounded, but he realized his body was almost completely healed upon waking up. A vigorous energy was gathered at his remaining wounds, and he felt them close with enough efficacy to put most of his healing pills to shame.

A thought struck Zac and he immediately opened his Dao Menu, and as expected there was a new entrant.

**Fragment of the Bodhi (Early): All attributes +10, Endurance +60, Vitality +80, Intelligence +15, Wisdom +50, Effectiveness of Vitality +5%.**

The vision had actually managed to help him form the third Dao Fragment, and the Fragment of the Bodhi even had tremendous healing capabilities from the looks of it. However, it was his mind rather than his body that had been in a critical state, and Zac hurriedly looked inward while still maintaining his unmoving posture. Unearthing all the capabilities of his new fragment would have to wait.

A vibrant emerald force surged through his soul, encompassing the splintered pieces of spiritual energy into a warm embrace. Most of his soul was already back together, and the remaining fractures were being mended with a speed visible to the naked eyes.

However, he noted with a frown that his soul wasn't uniform any longer. Whenever he had gazed at it before it had looked like a translucent ball in his mind,

and this ball had become slightly larger and more pristine after taking a dip in the Pool of Tranquility.

However, now it almost looked like some sort of tadpoles were swimming about in his soul, small fuzzy blotches on an otherwise clear backdrop. It was no doubt the remnant energies left from the Splinter of Oblivion's rampage. Not only that, but it also seemed as though some of the alien energies had crammed themselves into the cracks of his soul turning itself into some sort of mortar as the [**Prajñā Cherry**] healed him.

Zac had no idea what this infiltration would result in, and it felt like this was the very thing that the Miasmic Fractals had defended against the past months. The Draugr-lady's cage had managed to cleanse the energies for him before they merged with his soul.

He didn't feel anything amiss or different at the moment, but he knew he couldn't trust those instincts. The splinter had manipulated him many times before, and sometimes with him only realizing it after the fact.

Seeing the situation about almost made Zac want to leave the tower early and find someone who could create the second of his Soul Strengthening Arrays. He was losing miasmic fractals left and right and it felt like things were spiraling out of control. However, he knew he couldn't give up now. He had paid a steep price to remain in contention, and he wasn't ready to exit now.

The mentalist was pretty insane, but he had now transformed into his Draugr-form. Reaching middle proficiency on [**Indomitable**] had allowed him to infuse the skill with the Fragment of the Coffin, and the two together should make him strong enough in case another mentalist lurked in the arena.

As for anything else, he had [**Immutable Bulwark**] and his shield.

Zac had initially turned his focus toward his soul, but he now tried to get a grip of the surroundings while maintaining the disguise of a corpse. The vision had clearly taken less than five minutes, as he would have been booted from the arena by now otherwise.

He was still lying on the ground with the still-warm corpse of the woman who fractured his soul, and their combined blood had created a large pool that he was currently lying inside. The scene was pretty gristly, but that was a blessing in disguise as he had at least been left alone.

Zac tried to move a bit, but he realized he was still extremely weakened even though the transformation to his Draugr-form had ended. Perhaps it was due to the fact that his soul was still being pieced back together by the emerald glow. A lot of his organs were also turned to mush by the stab from the assassin's spike, which might have left some hidden weakness even if he had been restored by the cherry and his new Dao Fragment.

Each second felt like an eternity as Zac waited for the reconstruction of his mind to finish. He really needed to fight someone since he could be kicked out of the arena any second now due to inactivity. But Zac realized he should have been careful what he wished for, as he was suddenly shrouded by a shadow.

A figure had appeared out of nowhere, a small goblin-looking humanoid no more than a meter tall, and he bent over to rummage through the clothes of the dead woman next to Zac. There was actually someone bold enough to loot the corpses while battles raged all around them? Zac made sure to be completely unmoving, and he anxiously tried to urge his body to regain its strength.

Zac's didn't as much as blink when the thief started to rummage through his clothes as well, or even when he found the Cosmos Sack hidden within his robes. Anxiousness burned in his chest, but he finally felt a sense of completeness as his soul

was finally whole again. Zac's hand snapped forward like a spear, and with the help of the Fragment of Axe his hand became sharp enough to stab straight into the chest of the unsuspecting thief.

The man looked one-part confused and two-part horrified as his torso turned into shreds in an instant. Zac almost gaped in disbelief at the scene, but he quickly snatched back his cosmos sack in case it would be teleported out. But the man was dead, and his upper torso slid off to the side while his legs crumpled.

Zac looked down at his hand with some shock, not able to comprehend the terrifying burst of power he had unleashed. His jab had been infused with the Fragment of the Axe, but the effect more chaotic and destructive than it should be. Was this the result of his soul getting tainted?

The situation was too chaotic to investigate at the moment though, and Zac knew he would have to look into this after he left this level. He instead quickly rummaged through the mangled corpse, but he only found the spatial ring that seemed to have belonged to the mentalist before. As for the thief's own possessions, he could find none.

There was not even a complimentary cosmos sack dropped by the system, making Zac snort with irritation as he got up to his feet. Maybe thieves got the same sort of pocket dimension skills like merchants did, effectively robbing Zac of his chance to loot another scion.

However, he quickly realized his mistake and he immediately changed his face with **[Thousand Faces]**, bearing the painful transition. He didn't think the cultivators around him had the time to completely understand what transpired here, but he didn't want the fact of his dual-class to spread even if these people were from completely different sectors.

Luckily he was completely drenched in blood and viscera, making it nigh impossible to match him going by clothes either. Furthermore, he would soon be covered up in another layer of miasmic armor. The large shield that appeared on his arm would hopefully also make it even harder to connect to his human side. As for his axe, there wasn't much he could do about that.

The people around him were far too dangerous for him to use **[Hunger]** instead of his main weapon. He didn't even dare to swap out **[Verun's Bite]** for a spare axe.

A wide sweep proved that he was out of trouble for the moment, and Zac thanked the gods that there was no immediate threat. He had just killed a cultivator, which meant he had some breathing room before he needed to fight again. But the situation that he was met with was a bit odd.

There were still roughly 30 people in the arena, but only a handful of battles still raged on. The others were simply looking at the others and up at the ladder. Quite a few were actually looking right at him as well, donning calculative expressions. Their discerning eyes were a bit hair-raising, but there was nothing he could do about it.

He knew he wasn't strong enough to kill everyone that might have witnessed his transformation. Zac could only pretend nothing was wrong and hope that they'd chalk up the situation to some odd transformation skill. At least he wasn't jumped by the remaining warriors, which gave Zac a chance to look up at the ladder as well.

A lot of changes had taken place in the ladder during his unconsciousness. Only the first three positions were completely unmoved, and it looked like they were content with the results as they leisurely looked around at the others. All of them had over twenty points, making it essentially impossible not to pass the trial as long as they didn't get kicked for inactivity.

The second and third positions actually seemed to be from the same Clan as they shared the same last name, but they seemed to have no intention of teaming up judging by how far they stood from each other. Things generally seemed pretty civil, and Zac couldn't understand why some of the spectators didn't try to take advantage of the few people who were currently embroiled in life-and-death battles.

Had the remaining elites agreed upon some code of conduct while he was out of it?

Zac wasn't on the ladder as expected, which wasn't surprising as he had only defeated two people, one of which only provided one point. It was unlikely that the thief he just defeated was anything special either, and he had probably defeated one opponent at best before deciding to loot rather than compete for the top ten positions.

The problem was deciding who to target next. Picking one of the people on the ladder would guarantee a top ten placement if he won, but the battles would no doubt be pretty rough. Fighting Iz Tayn who still sat on top of her miniature sun was a non-starter, but the other 9 were obviously no weaklings either since only one of them was currently getting attacked.

The other option was taking on one or a few of the remaining spectators in hopes that his combined points would at least push him to the tenth spot. That tactic might end with him expending a lot of energy without anything to show for it though. Those who still stood in the arena were no doubt the elites of elites, and taking out two of them to gather points was probably harder than just one person in the top 10.

Zac soon enough made his choice and started moving, prompting most of the spectators to look over at him with vigilance. Zac ignored the gazes as a sea of miasma started to billow out around him, followed by the massive fractal bulwark that started to hover in front of him in case of a sneak attack.

His body groaned and creaked as he activated [**Vanguard of Undeath**] next. Zac didn't summon his skeletal helpers this time around though, as he wasn't too confident in their ability to help out in a place like this. Judging by the attacks he had seen they would be ripped to shreds in no time unless he infused them with his Dao, and he would need his fragments for his other skills.

He had a feeling that the skill would change in interesting ways as it leveled up, but for now he couldn't justify the cost of activating the [**Undying Legion**]. Instead, he stomped down on the ground and disappeared, and stomped down again the instant he appeared in front of a familiar figure.

It was actually the masked man wielding a pitch-black spike, the guy who had almost killed him earlier. His pseudonym was Faceless #9, and he was currently holding the 7th position on the ladder with 13 points.

Zac couldn't deny that part of his reasoning for choosing this man as a target was fueled by vengeance for getting his innards shredded, but there was also some logic to it. He had already seen some of the man's repertoire and weapon whereas most of the top contenders were a mystery to him.

Furthermore, judging from what Zac had witnessed the man seemed to be an assassin-type character, which was the best match for his current form. He had already been forced to change race, and he wouldn't be able to swap back to his human form anytime soon. Finally there were a couple of corpses around him, which would help fuel his miasmatic reserves through [**Fields of Despair**].

"Wrong choice," the masked man grunted with an emotionless voice before he disappeared, and Zac's mind screamed of danger the next moment, prompting him to immediately block the back of his head with his shield.

If Zac had been a fraction of a second slower he would probably have died then and there as the black spike slammed into **[Everlasting]** with enough force to make Zac stumble forward. The sturdy shield was almost pierced straight through as well, though the fractals helped it to quickly regain its original form.

Cold sweat ran down Zac's back, but he pushed aside his lingering fear as he quickly infused **[Deathwish]** with the Fragment of the Coffin before it was too late. The assassin snorted and disappeared the next moment, but even he seemed a bit shocked to find himself right in front of the massive Bardiche Zac wielded.

A huge gash tore open the man's chest as the spectral projection stabbed into the back of Faceless #9, but he narrowly avoided any lethal wounds. Zac tsked in annoyance as he tried to swing his axe again, but it appeared that the assassin quickly learned from his mistake as he managed to move further away, somehow circumventing the taunting effect of **[Vanguard of Undeath]**.

Zac sighed in regret when he saw that his gambit had failed. He had hoped to take down the man with a surprise strike relying on the discombobulating effect from **[Vanguard of Undeath]**, but the masked warrior had dodged with almost impossible nimbleness. Zac did manage to leave a pretty nasty gash though, but it wasn't enough to weaken him to any significant degree.

It looked like Zac would have to do things the hard way, and billowing clouds of corrosive gas started to shroud the cage as the wails of fifteen chains started echo out of the cage as an azure fractal formed in the sky.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 442 - A Break from the Monotony**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Finally succeeding in upgrading **[Profane Seal]** during his climb was one of Zac's greatest gains while climbing the 7th floor. The upgrade added five more chains that extended from the top of five massive tombstones that had been added to the cage, and they would be sorely needed to catch the slippery assassin.

The additional chains wasn't the only benefit from the skill evolving. Dense scripts lit up with azure luster on top of the huge tombstones, and they formed a large fractal in the air that covered the entirety of the cage. It was a restrictive array, somewhat akin to the gravity array of the Zethaya Pill House.

It was another layer of restrictions that hindered anyone who had been caught in Zac's cage. Along with **[Fields of Despair]**, the spectral chains, **[Winds of Decay]**, and the taunting effect of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** the area within **[Profane Seal]** had become a real hellscape for the living.

But the man caught in Zac's trap was no normal man, and he barely seemed troubled at all by the situation.

Another warning of danger exploded in Zac's mind, this one even more urgent than before. He desperately moved **[Undying Bulwark]** to block his torso while infusing

it with the Fragment of the Coffin. A sharp snap could be heard as the bulwark was pierced straight through as the pitch-black spike continued toward Zac's body.

Almost all of the strike's momentum had been absorbed by the defensive skill though, and the spike didn't even manage to piece the next level of defense, the thick miasmic armor that covered Zac's whole body.

Zac was ready to retaliate with his axe, but his brows rose in surprise when a spectral projection suddenly appeared on the other side of the cage. He pushed the confusion aside and infused the ghost with the Fragment of the Coffin just as it stabbed the man, creating another shallow wound that immediately started to fester.

It was shocking how far the man had instantly moved after stabbing him, but the fifteen chains of **[Profane Seal]** immediately set out to trap the assassin while Zac started to release torrential amounts of corrosive mists into the cage. He had failed in taking the man down with one strike, but Zac was still confident in whittling him down using his standard approach.

The assassin tried striking Zac's vitals a few more times, but between **[Immutable Bulwark]** and his shield he was able to escape unscathed, while adding more and more wounds with the help of **[Deathwish]**. Faceless #9 was probably the fastest enemy he had ever fought, but his defense wasn't too impressive.

Besides, the spectral projections were immutable. The masked warrior had unleashed flurries of stabs at them the moment they appeared, but the stabs went straight through their incorporeal bodies. They could only be blocked, which made them the perfect counter for people who relied on not getting hit.

The assassin suddenly appeared far in the distance, and Zac frowned as he realized the assassin was up to something. Bleeding abscesses could be seen at various parts of his arms, whereas the wounds on his body were continuously leaking pus. A smaller spike suddenly appeared in his hand, but rather than attacking Zac he stabbed himself in his heart.

Zac's eyes widened in shock witnessing what looked like a suicide, but he quickly realized that things were about to get rough. The man's muscles suddenly started to writhe and wriggle as black liquid reminiscent of his ichor poured out of his wounds before they coagulated, forming thick scabs around his wounds.

The nine closest chains were suddenly thrown away with enough force to cause cracks all along the links as the man stabbed forward with enough speed to become a blur, which gave the man another short breather. Impenetrable darkness spread through the cage the next moment as the assassin unleashed some sort of domain, and any clue of the man's whereabouts was gone. The man's attuned energies had completely blended in with the surroundings, rendering **[Cosmic Gaze]** useless.

Even his life-force was hidden by the dome of darkness, rendering the unique vision brought by his Draugr race impotent. Just as Zac tried to figure out his next step a sharp pain erupted in his left leg, and he realized a hole as wide as a quarter had appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

The hole went straight through not only his armor but his whole leg, and he felt his black ichor pouring out of the wound. He sensed that another spectral ghost had automatically appeared some distance away, but Zac didn't have time to imbue it before it had struck the assassin. What had just happened?

Another wound suddenly opened up, this time on his right arm. Zac frowned at the fact that he couldn't sense a thing before being struck, not a single warning from his Danger Sense that he was about to get attacked. This time he managed to imbue the projection from **[Deathwish]**, but Zac couldn't help but worry.

Zac had already heard that there were methods to circumvent the special senses from Luck, but this was the first time he had seen it to such a degree. Was this the hallmark of a top-tier assassin?

This was a fighting-style that was completely different compared to anything else Zac had witnessed during the Battle Royale. The man had no big avatars and there were no flashy skills that emitted massive outbursts of energy. However, that didn't mean the man was weak, and it wasn't without reason that none of the spectators had dared to target him.

Zac was sitting at over 300 effective luck, but he couldn't even begin to sense when the attacks were coming. Not only that, but his Endurance and multiple layers of defense barely impeded the man as two gristly wounds had appeared on his body without him impeding the strikes in the slightest.

There was an extreme penetrative force between his jabs, and just one or two attacks might be enough to kill most people. The man had no doubt been able to effortlessly assassinate one guardian after another during his climb using this method, barely sustaining any wounds.

However, a muted pang of danger suddenly erupted, and Zac hurriedly protected his head with his shield, safely looking another strike aimed at his head. Zac nodded in understanding as he realized that his Danger Sense at least could sense lethal strikes. It meant that the darkness hadn't changed much.

So Zac simply ordered the chains to flail about at random as he stood rooted in place, only focusing on staying alive and infusing the **[Deathwish]** with the Fragment of the Coffin.

----

Finally, there was a break from the monotony.

Iz Tayn curiously looked at the weird cage formed from death-attuned energies, and the two fighters who were grinding each other down within. Luckily she had been gifted the skill **[Sungod's Eyes]** by her uncle before entering the tower. Otherwise, she would have missed out on the melee due to the **[Red Hand Shroud]**.

Not that the fight was anything impressive. The assassin from the Red Hand Society had actually been forced to infuse himself with their disgusting compound to keep fighting, whereas the odd one was just unusually competent at taking a beating. He would no doubt be able to make a decent living as a sparring partner at one of her family's Trial Planets.

She had been deeply disappointed that there wasn't anyone interesting in the arena after something interesting finally happened in this dull Tower climb. The two siblings from the Primeval Lake were pretty strong, but they were still not strong enough to force her hand even if they joined forces. It was a shame that there was no one like their grand-uncle in their current generation. Then it would have truly been a clash of fates.

She felt a bit bad about scorching a few unlucky people out of frustration, but then again it could be seen as them lacking in fate by being spawned so close to her. After that she let the others escape in time, apart from the despicable fellows who didn't respect the proper rules of conduct. Such people could burn for all she cared.

But something interesting finally had happened. He seemed to think that no one had noticed his transformation, but everything that her sun illuminated was within her domain. How could she not see what happened? What kind of encounter would allow one to change between a Human and a Draugr?

More importantly, was he really human? It was extremely minute, but there was something odd hidden within that she had never encountered before. Something primordial.

Mixing an ordinary Human bloodline with the blood of higher beings was nothing unusual, as humans in general were extraordinarily average. Her own family was a prime example of that practice. But the odd thing was that her own bloodline felt some pressure from that man, which she had never encountered before. At least not against someone in her own grade who hadn't undergone their bloodline evolutions yet.

That wasn't the only odd thing, and she couldn't help herself from being engrossed as she replayed the events in her mind. It didn't make sense. She saw him almost dying from his soul shattering, then somehow being saved by an errant arrow that forced the Red Hand-Assassin to move away.

He then proceeded to eat a natural treasure that somehow changed its provenance mid-consumption, and finally recovering over two minutes. All without being targeted or hit at all as battles raged all around him. It was as though his surroundings had been shifted to a separate dimension. Was it dumb luck? Or accumulated Luck?

She didn't think that even she would be that lucky if put in such a situation, and she had almost 200 Luck along with her Fate-augmenting treasures.

So Iz felt like a child who had found an odd colorful bug in their family's garden, and her eyes followed the bulky man as he tried to take down a much more skilled opponent by sheer stubbornness.

The man from the Red Hand Society was clearly one of their stronger cadets, likely someone who had survived the hellish training on one of their induction planets. Anyone who survived long enough to enter the Society from one of those hellholes was an emotionless murderer who had solidified their path with a million corpses.

He kept opening up one wound after another on the Draugr, who was leaking like a sieve by this point. He was using some nurturing Dao Fragment from the looks of it, but his control of the Fragment was atrocious. Why didn't he form proper Dao Arrays on the wounds?

The humanoid cockroach tried, again and again, to catch his opponent with his axe and the fifteen chains that flailed about in the cage, but he didn't seem to possess any means to pierce through the darkness of the shroud. The assassin effortlessly moved back and forth between the attacks, bursting forward with one stab after another.

Of course, the assassin was facing his own troubles as well. He was starting to look disfigured from the wounds of the retaliatory strikes. Absolute strikes were the worst to people like him. If it was her she could have simply formed a shield of flames to block out any such attempts, but the assassin seemed to follow a much more extreme path lacking such tools.

He had quickly expended the few defensive treasures in his arsenal, and since talismans and arrays didn't work here he had to endure a thousand little pin-pricks infused with a corrosive Dao Fragment. However, the fragments the Draugr used, were just Early Stage, a far cry from her three Middle Fragments that empowered each other. Even worse, he seemed unable to properly coordinate them into something more potent.

Should she kill the assassin to make sure that the colorful bug didn't die? She had already moved a flame tendril to stand ready beneath the miasmic cage. A quick poke and the struggle would be over.

But that would be a bit rude, not to mention somewhat embarrassing to butt in on a fight after having killed a few people for that kind of transgressions. She guessed she would have to leave it up to fate.

Finally it seemed like the assassin had enough, and he launched a rapid succession of furious stabs as he moved quickly enough to make it hard even for Iz to follow. But the armored warrior was like an impenetrable fortress, enduring the strikes he could endure and blocking those he could not.

The failed assault was followed by an attempt at escape, and the assassin first tried to teleport out of the miasmic cage. But he was completely unable to leave, and another special warrior attacked him the moment he tried to slip through the cracks. A furious assault on one of the towers was only met with a storm of ghosts as well it seemed.

The moment the assassin realized that both killing the man and escaping was impossible he immediately reached down and crushed the token on his belt. Ever the pragmatists, the assassins.

The Red Hand Assassin disappeared in a flash, taking the domain with him. The Draugr stumbled around for a few seconds, seemingly unaware that he had actually won. The fifteen spectral chains kept flailing back and forth inside the cage as he stood hunched over, ready to eat another stab.

Only after twenty seconds passed did the man have enough presence of mind to look up at the sky. He had appeared on the 6th spot, meaning that the battle was won. Only then did he slowly start to move toward the Cosmos Sack, leaving a trail of black goop in his wake.

Iz was unsure what to do. The man was very interesting, but he was some random person from another part of the universe. Was there any point in trying to look into his secrets? There were a lot of oddities on his body, but who didn't have a secret or two? But it was *interesting*.

Of course, there was one easy way to test if they had some connection of fate. She instructed Uyirrik to get to work, and Iz's bloodline familiar formed another seal as she channeled a piece of her [World's End] into the array.

Someone who was dead obviously couldn't carry any fate or secrets worth fretting over.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**Ugh! Saturday again, and no chapter tomorrow?! If only there was a way to keep reading... [Or is there?](#)**

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**Chapter 443 - Fate**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac felt like a block of swiss cheese as he desperately rotated his new Fragment while eating Healing Pills like they were candy. Whatever that assassin had infused

himself with had made him disgustingly durable, and Zac couldn't believe how many Dao-infused strikes it took to force him to give in.

Scabs had covered almost every part of the man's blackened body, and he looked more like an undead compared to Zac himself by the end. It appeared that whatever the black spike infused into the man's body forcibly kept the assassin going while instantly patching up his accumulating wounds.

But the layered corrosive effects had finally proven too much, forcing the man to crush his Token. The encounter had been too close for comfort though, and Zac wasn't sure whether he would have been able to endure if it wasn't for his new Dao Fragment that kept patching up his lacerated body. Zac shook his head as he arduously moved over to the spot where the assassin left the arena and bent over to pick up the Cosmos Sack he left behind.

A glance at the sky confirmed that he was pretty much safe from elimination at this point. He was in sixth place on the ladder with 18 points. He had a shot at reaching even higher since there was only a 3 point difference between the 4th and his spot, but he wasn't sure his body would be able to take it.

He had barely defeated the assassin even though his class was a direct counter, and he was running low on miasma due to the massive loss of ichor. He did pop a **[Soldier Pill]** to restore some of his reserves, but running low on Miasma wasn't the only issue. Zac looked down at **[Everlasting]** with a sigh.

The shield currently had multiple holes after getting brutalized during the fight. The fractals of the shield were thankfully still intact, and the holes were slowly closing themselves by the automatic repair function. However, its structural integrity was breached, and the weakness would transfer over to **[Immutable Bulwark]** as well, meaning his defenses were compromised by at least half until the shield had restored itself.

There was also the issue of the splinter. The side-effects of having one's soul filled with the splinter's corrosion had started to make itself known during the latter half of the fight. A smoldering fury had started to build as he got increasingly wounded, and it was a strain to stay in place.

His subconscious had been screaming at him to destroy everything, to bravely rush forward and crush everything with the axe in his hand. That was obviously lunacy though, as he couldn't even see his own hand in front of him, much less his target flitting about in the darkness domain.

The impulses had luckily calmed down the moment the battle ended, and Zac felt like himself again after just ten seconds. But it proved that prolonged battles could turn a bit iffy in the short term. Any thought of retreat had been long thrown out of his mind as he fought, and he would rather have died than given up in the heat of the moment, even though he was just inside a trial.

That fact alone made Zac leery about entering another battle. Getting a higher position would probably improve his reward if past experience was any indication, but he wasn't ready to die just to get a better placement. But it might not be up to him if he entered another battle, but rather the Splinter.

All this combined made Zac unwilling to fight until getting a better handle on his situation. In fact, he wanted to keep **[Profane Seal]** active until the trial ended as a protective measure, but he felt that he was losing control over the skill, meaning that it was reaching its limits of how long it could stay active. He could only reluctantly release the skill as he tried to appear as intimidating as possible to avoid immediately getting attacked.

Thankfully his miasmic armor from **[Vanguard of Undeath]** automatically repaired itself, and it should impossible to see all the wounds covering his body. Along with the swirling clouds of his **[Fields of Despair]** and **[Winds of Decay]** he should look just as menacing as when he was at full strength.

However, not even a second had passed after the cage went down before alarm bells once again went off in his mind, and he saw a massive pillar of fire bearing down at him with terrifying momentum. He barely had time to adjust **[Immutable Bulwark]** before the beam was upon him, and it suddenly felt like he was being burned alive.

Flames burst out in all directions as the attack slammed into the bulwark, and the fractal shield only managed to block parts of the shocking amount of energies, before the excess energy went around its edges. Zac was soon enough trapped within a corridor of flames, barely holding on.

He was slowly being pushed back as **[Everlasting]** started to lose its shape from the heat. Each second felt like an eternity as Zac could only focus on holding on. He had seen what had happened to the beastkin warrior by just getting grazed by a beam just like this one, and he couldn't let it hit him. His defensive fragments and sturdy constitution might be able to handle the flames, but he wouldn't bet his life on it.

Zac's whole body was shaking from the strain, and much of the miasma he had just restored with his **[Soldier Pill]** had been expended as his wounds reopened. Finally, he wasn't able to hold any longer. Perhaps if he had been in peak condition he would be able to withstand such an attack multiple times, but now there was simply no way.

The shield cracked and Zac reached down toward his token to escape before it was too late. But no flames waited behind the crumbled bulwark, only the vast sky. Just a few errant sparks remained, but Zac barely dodged them by ungracefully frog leaping forward. It looked like he wouldn't share the same fate as the poor beastkin woman at least, but a furious rage just as potent as the flames had erupted in his mind from the brush with death.

His vision turned a bit jagged and monochromatic as he glared at the woman sitting atop the sun. The air twisted and turned around him as he lifted his bardiche as his arm swelled from a massive infusion of miasma from **[Unholy Strike]**. Blood would be repaid with blood.

Only at last second did he manage to wrest back control of his mind, and he was shocked at what he had almost done. He had just been about to infuse his weapon with the Fragment of the Axe before throwing it at Iz Tayn.

Not even mentioning if such a crude attack would ever reach her before Verun was turned into ash, just what was he thinking? That crazy powerful cultivator was the last person he should antagonize, especially considering she only seemed intent on attacking once judging by her demeanor.

The power in his arm still needed a release though, and a powerful slam into the ground caused a massive rift that stretched fifty meters forward as the miasmic mists swirled around him. Zac quickly turned back toward the scorching sun afterward as he readied another **[Undying Bulwark]** just in case.

The two stared at each other for a few seconds, until Iz Tayn finally broke eye contact as she turned to the other participants who looked at the spectacle with confusion and trepidation.

"This has gone on long enough. Start fighting or leave immediately if you're not in the top ten," the woman said with a bored voice before she turned pointed at Zac. "Not him though. We are connected by fate."

Her eyes once against turned toward him, and Zac felt like she was looking at an interesting curiosity. Had she witnessed his transformation and wanted to dissect him

like he had been warned off by his master? Warning bells went off in Zac's mind when he saw her look, and he slowly started to back away even further from her.

Thankfully she didn't seem to have any interest in attacking him again and instead chose to spectate the six battles that immediately erupted as a direct result of her words. More than half the remaining warriors had targeted someone else, whereas the rest immediately crushed their tokens with downcast expressions.

No one did target Zac though, and he didn't make any moves either. He had already been hesitant to fight any more due to his wounds and gaining the attention by that pyromancer didn't allow him to split his attention. He needed to be alert enough to counter anything that she had planned, or at least flee fast enough before being burned alive.

The battles took less than two minutes, and Zac was pushed down to the 8th position in the end as two warriors, one unranked and the other the previous 10th spot holder, managed to accumulate enough points to pass him. The moment the fighting was over ten pillars of light emerged, and Zac realized that one of them was placed on top of the platform where he started out.

The others immediately realized what was going on, and over half the winners rushed toward their respective platforms with as fast as their legs could carry them, none of them interested in staying behind. There was nothing to gain by staying in the arena, but everything could be lost if Iz Tayn decided to burn everything to the ground.

Only the two cultivators from the same family slowly walked toward their respective teleporter after bowing toward Iz Tayn, receiving a small nod in return.

Everyone seemed loath to stay in the arena, but perhaps no one was as motivated to flee as Zac himself. He couldn't care less what fate the insanely powerful pyromancer thought she had with him, his only interest was getting to the teleporter. But horror gripped his heart as the bored voice echoed out behind him.

"Wait, Mr. Bug," Iz Tayn said, and Zac's eyes widened with alarm when he saw that the scorching sun transformed into a massive river that snaked toward him.

There was no way he would wait to see what this maniac had in store, especially after she actually referred him to a bug even though his name was on full display in the ladder. He redoubled his efforts at reaching the teleporter, but he was forced to stop in his tracks when a towering wall of flames rose to block his path.

If it had been someone else's flames he would have simply run straight through, but he didn't dare to do something so foolhardy here. He quickly launched a wide swipe with **[Unholy Strike]** empowered with the Fragment of the Axe, but the strike was quickly swallowed up by the wall of flames like a pebble in a lake.

Zac turned around and saw that the girl was almost upon him, and his instincts screamed at him to get out as he saw a white flame forming above her hand. He desperately tried to think of some way out, but he could only come up with one solution.

His miasmic armor dissipated into a gust of smoke as he shrunk back to his normal size, and he stabbed his shoulders with two daggers as he ran straight toward the wall of flames. A massive surge of mental energy pushed into the two fractals of **[Cyclic Strike]** and Zac felt a mix of fear and anticipation when the two fragments actually fused into a bronze flash.

A roar echoed out across the arena as he punched the wall of flames with all he got, and a five-meter wide void was created as the bronze spark sprung out of his fist and erupted in a fierce implosion that simply deleted the flames barring his path. Zac was flush with elation at finally being able to use the bronze flash for something useful,

but he had no time to think about that now as he jumped straight toward the teleporter that was just twenty meters away.

He glanced back mid-air just in case, only to see that Iz Tayn was only ten meters away. She donned an incredulous expression as she watched Zac soar toward the teleportation array, but Zac was unclear whether it was due to his incredibly stupid technique or because her wall got breached.

However, her expression soon turned thoughtful as she pushed two fingers into the white-hot flames she had conjured. A small glob of flames covered in dense fractals was quickly extracted and Zac couldn't help but curse when she flicked it toward him with a small smile.

He quickly moved his bulwark and infused it with the Fragment of the Coffin as he braced for impact, but his defenses weren't enough. The small flame shot straight through **[Immutable Bulwark]** and hit him in an instant. The stench of burnt flesh spread out in an instant as a burn-mark as large as a fist appeared on his chest.

Zac growled with pain as he quickly applied the Fragment of the Bodhi on the wound, but he was relieved to see that the flames seemed unable to spread as they did with the beastkin. It still hurt like hell and he shot a furious look at the girl who had stopped in her tracks.

"God damn lunatic," Zac spat through grit teeth as he disappeared through the teleporter.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 444 - Dreams**

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Hot hot flames and darkness. Billy didn't like it. Billy tried to get away, but it kept following wherever he went. But suddenly the hot darkness was gone, and Billy saw he was on the mountain again.

"You were having a nightmare," the statue said.

"Billy told you, Billy won't listen to you, Statue-man!" Billy snorted with disdain as he glared at the twenty-meter statue. "Trying to trick Billy that Billy is not human!"

The statue-man loudly groaned in response. Did he finally realize that Billy was too smart to be tricked?

"Remember, I only told you that you have Titanic blood due to your ancestry? It has simply awoken in you, pushing your mundane human bloodline aside," statue-man said, using a soft voice like a woman. "You are a descendant of mine, remember how I awakened your bloodline transformation?"

"Keep trying to trick Billy with big words," Billy muttered as he started to turn over rocks and rip up bushes.

"...What are you doing now?" the statue finally said after some silence.

“Billy is looking for a way out. You think you can trap Billy here? Billy is a genius, Alien-man said so himself. Billy will find the door,” Billy muttered as he started digging a hole.

“Look- Listen. I am not trapping you, remember? I simply created this world so that I can guide you in your dreams. Isn't it working? Aren't you stronger after waking up?” the voice said with a sigh.

“Stupid statue, everyone feels better after a good night's sleep. Mama always says so,” Billy snorted as shot another despising glare at the huge Statue looking like a human.

The statue was a bit annoying, even if it looked almost as handsome as Billy himself. Statue-man had big muscles like Billy, and he held a really big hammer that looked good for thwonkin'.

But Statue-man was always trying to trick Billy, so Billy had tried to break it. But the stone was very hard, even Billy couldn't thwong it to make it go quiet. Billy did manage to drag it away once, but the next night it was right back. But Billy would one day find a way to thwong it for good.

The trouble was that Billy always forgot about this stupid mountain and Statue-man when waking up. Statue-man said that it was to protect him from enemy forces, but Billy believed that it was just so that Thea wouldn't help Billy figure out a way to thwong him. Thea was almost as smart as Billy, and she had a lot of books.

Billy bet that at least one book could tell him how to make a statue shut up, mama always said that books had all kinds of smart things written down.

“Lord, help this child,” Statue-man groaned.

“Billy is an adult,” Billy muttered in response.

“Never mind,” the statue sighed. “What happened to you? You have pretty serious wounds. I can only help so much through this dreamscape.”

“Are you peeping at billy? Mama said that peeping toms get no dessert,” Billy said with a scowl.

“We are connected through our bloodline, I can tell without peeping,” Statue-man said.

Billy hesitated for a bit, but he eventually decided to tell Statue-man what happened. Statue-man was a bit stupid and a liar, but he had helped Billy a few times with getting better at thwonkin'.

“Bad guys are attacking Billy's friend's town while he is away. Billy came to help. Their boats had a lot of fire,” Billy muttered before his face lit up with glee. “But Billy thwonged one of their boats and now the zombies and lizardmen are fish poop.”

“Good! A real man is true to his brethren, and ruthless to his enemies,” Statue-man roared. “But your enemies are pretty strong. Why don't you draw the Array I imparted to you and I'll-”

“Billy won't fall for your tricks!” Billy cut off Statue-man “Billy knows that Statue-Man wants to use the drawing to escape Billy's dreams!”

“Ai, this child's bloodline might actually be too pure for his own good. The other Emperors would laugh if they heard how hard it was to get a disciple.”

“What did you find out?” Adriel asked as he gazed down at the ocean waves.

“It was Thea Marshall and Thwonkin' Billy,” the ghost answered with a hollow voice. “They managed to sink one of the advance vessels before being forced to retreat by the Bishop. They were both wounded in the conflict and will likely not be able to fight for a week or two.”

Adriel nodded with satisfaction. Those two weren't a real threat to his plans, but they had been a constant annoyance for a few months now, like two flies who refused to go away. It was good to hear that they finally had been brought to justice, and he knew that Krisko would perform a rite of thanks to the Founders upon hearing the news.

Besides, it was good news for another reason. Neither the Super-Brother-Man nor the two incursion leaders who chose to join his banner had participated in any of the raids that tried to impede their progress. The human champion was truly held up somehow, perhaps even sent off-world by the Ruthless Heavens.

If they hadn't captured a couple of the living to gain access to their Ladder, Adriel would have thought that the man was wounded after enduring the tribulation. But he was clearly still at level 75, proving he hadn't taken that step just yet.

"Our soldiers?" Adriel asked.

"Less than 5% survived from the vessel," the scout reported. "There are extremely bloodthirsty beasts in the waters, some of them seem to be controlled by the powerful contracted cephalopod."

"What about the arrays on the ship?" Adriel asked, cutting to the heart of the matter.

"We managed to recover them," the ghost nodded.

"Good," Adriel sighed with relief.

Losing a few hundred Revenants born on a world with such abundant Origin Dao was regrettable. These were among the first to awaken, and they would no doubt have become strong subordinates. But the mission could still be considered a win as long as they managed to plant the arrays.

The alignment would commence in 5 days, and as long as they managed to trap the Super-Brother Man on his island kingdom until then he would have won.

The brains of the zealots must have been scorched by their flames, as they still believed that they could actually kill the target in the middle of his own kingdom. Adriel knew better. He was happy to let them fight it out as he placed the spatial locks down.

Of course, if that was only what was needed to be done he wouldn't have needed to send his strongest clones to this remote corner of the world. He had a secret mission to fulfill, handed to him straight from his master's master.

Who would have thought that some great powerhouse from the Empire Heartlands was touring their remote Kingdom? With the distances involved there might not be a single guest for tens of thousands of years, and usually not people with this kind of clout.

More importantly, the great master had a treasured disciple who craved unique bodies for experimentation, preferably ones leaned toward the Three Great Arts. And didn't he have a prime body waiting for him here? Thankfully his master had managed to hear about it and quickly contacted him.

This was his shot at greatness. Between the contribution of aligning a world with such a unique Mystic Realm and gaining the favor of that great master, he might actually have a chance at gaining a teleportation token to the Heartlands. He had heard that treasures that could cause two forces to fight to the death in this remote sector were sold like they were worthless sticks of incense over there.

Adriel had already promised the body to Harkon, but he would have to get out of that contract even if it meant killing his old friend. He could only pray that they had managed to keep the poison girl alive long enough that she hadn't decomposed or been cremated.

His hollow eyes looked out across the waters, cursing the Zealots for building such bulky vessels rather than the small skippers that their enemies used. They would long have reached the islands if they could move even half as fast as the ships the humans utilized.

But they were so close that Adriel could taste it by now, and he could already sense markings left behind by Mhal even without the help of the tracking arrays. They would be there in less than a day, and without the human champion there they might be able to completely conquer the town.

It was time to make all his dreams come true.

“You were right! He passed the 7<sup>th</sup> floor. Only took him something like 20 minutes too!” Leyara said with excitement, prompting Pretty to look over. “How did you know?”

“I had a feeling,” Pretty said with a smile.

“You know something, I can feel it,” Leyara said with a pout. “I can’t take it! Just look at the chaos below! My sister-disciples will be green with envy when they hear of this spectacle. Our sector might never have seen anything like it!”

Pretty Peak sighed as she looked down at the crowd that kept growing by the minute. Three-quarters of the climb was over for Zac Piker, and he could be dropping out at any moment now that he had reached the 8<sup>th</sup> floor.

One fight after another had erupted as the square was only so big, and forces fought for the opportunity to be closer to the array. Mr. Piker would be drowned in a deluge of attacks the moment he emerged from the teleporter, and everyone wanted to be the one to land the killing blow.

Pretty felt some helplessness as she saw the commotion. She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do in this situation. The man had a minor connection to her uncle, but she couldn’t be expected to deal with a mess of this magnitude, right?

“What are you thinking about? Do you want to join? I am sure Prince Yeorav would give some face and let you set up camp next to his array,” Leyara said. “Might be a good chance to make a connection? He’s pretty handsome and less muscle-headed than his cultivation-maniac brother.”

“I told you I’m not joining,” Pretty sighed. “Besides, Yeorav has a Dao Companion already.”

“So what’s wrong?” Leyara asked as she took out a bottle of wine.

“Zac Piker has a small connection to my family, and I’m not sure what to do,” Pretty finally admitted, but regretted it the moment she saw her friend’s exuberant expression.

“I knew it!” Leyara screamed with excitement. “Secret Boyfriend? Hiding him from your crazy grandpa?”

“What?” Pretty snorted with a roll of her eyes. “My uncle met him by chance. Uncle Greatest sent Average on a training mission, and they met Zac Piker by chance. Mr. Piker beat the crap out of Average, and my uncle was impressed by his performance.”

“He’s from the Allbright Empire? But why haven’t we heard of him before?” Leyara asked with confusion.

“I’m not sure if he’s actually from my Empire or not. He was sent to an abandoned planet in the Red Zone for a quest by The System. I think my cousin was used as a prop for him,” Pretty explained.

“Well, Average is only 17. Beating him up shouldn’t be too hard, he has barely started setting up his foundation,” Leyara shrugged.

“Well, my uncle said there’s something miraculous about Mr. Piker,” Pretty said. “But he refused to say what when dad asked.”

“Well, that’s not surprising. He beat the 7<sup>th</sup> floor. There’s no way he hasn’t had some unique encounters,” Leyara said.

“So what do you think I should do?” Pretty asked.

“You can’t stop what’s going on down there, even if you team up with that mysterious Draugr,” Leyara said as her eyes started to radiate with a white glow. “There are multiple peak arrays down there, and the powers are chaotic enough to indicate that there are at least a dozen offensive treasures reaching high-tier.”

“So he’s doomed?” Pretty sighed. “It doesn’t make sense that the System would create a scenario like this. We finally see a great genius emerge in this sector, only to have him die by the hands of a thousand pieces of trash?”

“Well, perhaps things will turn into an all-out brawl where the preparations are used on competing forces rather than on Mr. Piker. Or perhaps he has concocted some sort of counter, who knows?” Leyara said, though she looked less than enthused about Mr. Piker’s chances. “But I think the System will only require him to survive for a short moment to consider it a pass.”

“Well, he’s had almost a hundred days to prepare, and hopefully he’ll have found something that can assist him,” Pretty nodded.

“Well, it doesn’t hurt to get ready just in case,” Leyara said thoughtfully as she adjusted her dress to show a bit more cleavage.

“What are you thinking about now?” Pretty asked with exasperation.

“Well, if he actually survives long enough for the quest to expire, wouldn’t he become this sector’s Number One Prince Charming?” Leyara said as she started applying some make-up to her already immaculate face. “This is a prime opportunity to snag both a dashing husband and an amazing seedling for our forces.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**BAH! POV instead of showing the rewards for the 7th floor?! I bet the options are good... If only there was a way to [read ahead](#)...**

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**Chapter 445 - Gains**

**[Seventh Floor Complete. Upgrading Title.]**

**[Choose Reward: Evolution of *[Verun’s Bite]*, Duplicity Core Upgrade to E-Grade, Upgrade of Port Atwood to World Capital]**

**[Additional Reward 8<sup>th</sup> place: Limited Title Slots +1, Peak F-Grade All Attribute fruit]**

Zac’s pitch-black eyes went back and forth between the three choices, the pain and exhaustion almost completely blown away. Then again, the black dimension seemed to have some sort of suppressive effect on wounds, so he probably wouldn’t be as chipper when he left this place.

A quick look down at his chest proved that the crazy girl had left a burn-mark that almost looked like a fractal, but the wound showed no signs at spreading at least. However, that didn’t provide much comfort, as there had obviously been something off about that piece of flame she had shot at him.

His best guess was that she had formed some sort of Karmic Tie to him for some reason. Iz Tayn came from some top tier force though, and Zac hoped that the distance to his remote sector would prove too far away to make it worth tracking him down. If it was even possible since she was just an F-Grade cultivator.

However, the encounter with the crazy flame girl wasn't enough to put a damper on his feelings at the moment. He had passed the 7th floor, a feat that only happened once every few millennia in a star sector with trillions of cultivators. And were no two ways around it, these rewards were amazing.

Better yet, they were clearly custom-made for himself, which was a first since he entered the tower. The reward for clearing the 6<sup>th</sup> floor had been pretty great too, but it was still something generalized apart from the compatibility.

Was it because he had cleared a high-tiered floor, or was it because there had been a special event?

Even better, there was actually a bonus reward for reaching the 8<sup>th</sup> place, and it provided something he had never even heard of before. Getting a fourth slot for a Limited Titles was an extremely powerful boon, and Zac started to understand why so many had been fighting tooth and nail even to the point that some died.

Getting another spot for Limited Titles wasn't as simple as having another title. If that was it then Zac wouldn't have been so excited, since he already had thirty of them. Limited Titles had never been too important for Zac until now, simply because he hadn't encountered any such opportunities so far.

But Galau had properly described the roles of Limited Titles during their climb. The merchant had already confirmed that getting real titles would get harder and harder, and most people got almost 80% of their titles during the F-Grade. That's why some called normal titles 'Foundational Titles'. They set the foundation for your entire cultivation journey.

Limited Titles were something that you could continuously improve though, and there was almost an unlimited number of opportunities for such titles in the Multiverse. They were the lure the System used to keep luring cultivators into deadly trials and unexplored Mystic Realms, and they just kept getting better the more dangerous the trial was.

One single Limited Title snatched from a deadly D-Grade trial might be even better than the Tower-title he had worked for the past 70 days. Getting another Limited Title slot was essentially getting a 15-20% boost to your power, provided you could get a good title that provided Efficiency.

The reward might not be useful at the moment, but Zac would quickly be able to acquire a few Limited Titles after leaving Earth. As for the scions who risked their lives, it was understandable as well. This was a reward that no amount of treasures, wealth, or guidance could provide, and they no doubt had a bunch of top-quality Limited Titles to choose from through their forces.

Not only that, the System even threw in a small bonus in the form of an All Attribute fruit, which was equivalent to a pretty good Low-Tiered Title. That was the most valuable of all the Attribute fruits, even more so than Luck Fruits. Zac was extremely thankful that he didn't give in to the fear in his heart that told him to cut his losses after narrowly surviving his soul getting crushed.

The rewards from this floor alone far eclipsed the rewards from the first six floors combined.

It also made him wonder just what the others received. Take Iz Tayn for example. She was already strong to the point that it felt like she had somehow snuck inside the Tower while being E-Grade. Just what level would she reach after getting

her individualized reward plus whatever reward was awarded the first spot. Did she get multiple Limited Title slots?

Remembering the traumatizing encounter where he almost died made him think of something else, and he reluctantly turned his eyes away from the rewards. Zac wasn't ready to immediately make a choice what to pick, so he first opened his Status screen to check something, and just as expected he had taken a huge step forward.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**75**

**Class**

**[F-Rare] Hatchetman**

**Race**

**[E] Human**

**Alignment**

**[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 7th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate**

**Limited Titles**

**Frontrunner**

**Dao**

**Fragment of the Axe - Early, Fragment of the Coffin - Early, Fragment of the Bodhi - Early**

**Core**

**[F] Duplicity**

**Strength**

**980 [Increase: 75%. Efficiency: 163%]**

**Dexterity**

**498 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 155%]**

**Endurance**

**1282 [Increase: 80%. Efficiency: 163%]**

**Vitality**

**673 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 163%]**

**Intelligence**

**264 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 155%]**

**Wisdom**

**386 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 155%]**

**Luck**

**243 [Increase: 80%. Efficiency: 155%]**

**Free Points**

0

**Nexus Coins**

**[F] 6 830 543 287**

Zac's stared with confusion at his attributes, unable to compute the changes for a few seconds. It was a welcome problem through; he had gained too many points. He already knew he would get a small boost from fusing his last two Dao Seeds, but that alone couldn't explain the growth. But he soon enough realized what was going on as he kept opening menus.

The first thing he checked was the Dao Menu. He had taken a quick look during the Battle Royale, but he didn't have the time to properly look at the attributes at that time.

**Dao**

**Stage**

**Effect**

**Fragment of the Axe**

**Early**

**All attributes +10, Strength +110, Dexterity + 80, Endurance +15. Effectiveness of Strength +5%**

**Fragment of the Coffin**

**Early**

**All attributes +10, Endurance +80, Vitality +50, Intelligence +15, Wisdom +60. Effectiveness of Endurance +5%**

**Fragment of the Bodhi**

**Early**

**All attributes +10, Endurance +60, Vitality +80, Intelligence +15, Wisdom +50, Effectiveness of Vitality +5%**

Gaining the Fragment of the Bodhi was all thanks to the [**Prajñā Cherry**], and Zac wondered if the Zethaya had even known the true value of that thing since Boje had considered a soul-healing treasure. Then again, they did cherish it to the point that they weren't willing to part with it for money, so they probably knew that wasn't the limits of its capabilities.

There wasn't a lot of change to his attributes as far as Zac could remember, with the fragment essentially only adding the +10 to all attributes and a little bit of Wisdom. However, he immediately noticed how similar its distribution it was to the Fragment of the Coffin. The weight of attributes was almost identical, with just the focus on Endurance and Vitality being switched.

Getting the Fragment of the Bodhi rather than something like the Grove or the Forest was a bit unexpected, but perhaps not as much as getting the Coffin. Zac had read up on Buddhism a bit since learning that it was an actual cultivation system in the multiverse, so he knew a little bit of what the word represented.

The Bodhi was a divine tree that the Buddha gained enlightenment under, and the word was the term for true Enlightenment, the escape from the cycle of reincarnation. The only issue was that such a Dao sounded related to Buddhism, and he wasn't sure how good a fit that would be to his current cultivation path.

Ogras had joked about him embarking on the path of ascetic cultivation like a monk, but he wasn't ready to take a vow of silence just yet.

But his instincts told him that it wouldn't be an issue. The name of a Dao Fragment wasn't important, what mattered were the concepts the Fragment contained.

The main focus of the vision hadn't been the Buddhist praying, but rather how the cherry tree had changed after the blessing. It had turned into a divine tree that became the guardian of the desolate badlands.

It didn't only provide the whole area with vitality, but it also empowered everything within its domain. Normal weeds and grasses had become full of life and power, quickly growing far stronger than they would be able to on their own. From what Zac could tell the healing he had enjoyed was just part of the picture. The fragment might have a huge impact on his Hachetman class, as many of its skills were related to nature.

What would happen if he turned the wooden hand of **[Nature's Punishment]** into a divine hand?

Getting the third Fragment early was a huge relief to Zac, and it took a lot of pressure off. It was a shame that it came at the cost of the Soul Mending Medicine, but now that he had passed the Seventh floor he should have a stronger position for bargaining when he exited. Perhaps he could buy another one off the hands from some powerful clan who wanted to make a connection with him.

It also meant that the chance of gaining something from the Tower Apparition was a lot higher since he now could upgrade any of his three Fragments. Ideally, he wanted to upgrade the Fragment of the Axe, but it wasn't completely necessary at this point. Any of the three would allow him to gain an arcane class, as long as the System considered his new path to be unique enough to be called a 'creation'.

He couldn't wait to experiment some with his new fragment during his ascent of the 8<sup>th</sup> floor. He had finally managed to use the bronze flash for something useful just now, and it had been shockingly effective. It felt like confirmation that he was on the right path, and he needed to capture the moment of inspiration and expand it to his new Fragment as well.

Of course, getting the final Dao Fragment wasn't the only surprising gain from the 7<sup>th</sup> floor. He had not only upgraded his Tower Title, but he had actually gained another one, the first one in a good while. He had assumed that he wouldn't get any more titles before evolving unless he got something from his massive pool of luck, but it appeared he had underestimated himself.

**[Tower of Eternity - 7th Floor: Reach the 64th level of the Tower of Eternity. Reward: All stats +10, All Stats +10%, Effect of Attributes +5%]**

**[Heaven's Triumvirate: Attain three Dao Fragments while still at F-Grade. Reward: All stats +5%. All Stats +5. Effect of Attributes +5%]**

The Tower-title had upgraded, but not quite as expected. It had immediately given him +5% all efficiency, rather than just for his three main attributes. That meant one would probably get the perfect 10/10/10 from completing the 8<sup>th</sup> floor. But then what would happen on the 9<sup>th</sup>? Did it provide a separate title?

The guy earlier had mentioned 'tower breakers', and from context it sounded like someone who would be able to defeat the whole Tower of Eternity. Was Tower Breaker perhaps the name of not only the achievement, but an actual title?

Zac unfortunately knew that the 9<sup>th</sup> floor was out of his reach unless the rules drastically changed on the final floor. The progression of strength had been pretty even during the climb, and he knew that he would start entering true life-and-death battles on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor.

Even the defeating guardian wasn't a given, and he had already decided to start looking for clues to amazing inheritances as a back-up.

Time was a precious resource, so Zac held off on choosing a reward a while longer and instead to sit down and recuperate while he was in this special zone. Getting chased

down by Iz Tayn had only worsened his wounds from the battle with Faceless #9, and he needed to give himself and his poor shield some time to rest up.

**[Everlasting]** almost looked like a melted clump of metal, but it was truly a tenacious item as it was slowly regaining its original shape. Just like his body, it would probably be in serviceable condition within a few hours.

However, the situation with his soul wasn't as easy to fix. The verdant glow had completely disappeared by now, leaving his soul whole. But his soul had inexorably changed after the experience. It was now crisscrossed by black lines where the fractures once were, reminiscent of a Kintsugi bowl. There were also some splotches here and there, marring the picture even further.

He had already felt the effect during the battle earlier, where bloodlust had coursed through his body, almost to the point that he was ready to run straight into a sun. Zac was afraid that the effect would only become worse as the corruption grew. The energies might even start damaging the miasmatic runes from the outside.

He quickly needed to find a solution.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 446 - The Hayner Clan**

The mental defense skills available to either of his classes were of no help against the Splinter. For example, **[Indomitable]** formed a formidable wall around Zac's soul, but it didn't help when the threat was already a part of him. The **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** might help, but he still hadn't found anyone who could create the second Array Disk required to practice it. Having just one of the arrays was useless, and he couldn't even begin to practice the first reincarnation.

The Fragment of the Bodhi did seem to be able to stabilize the situation somewhat at least, just like his Seed of Trees had constrained the Draugr-bloodline that had been implanted in him. It was a losing battle though, and it was probably only a matter of time before something went wrong.

The only solution that Zac could think of for the moment was to keep the energies in check best he could, and hopefully he'd find something to use during the last day that had been allocated for the Base Town. Or perhaps he was worrying over nothing and his soul would slowly grind down the infected parts since the main body of the Splinter was still locked away in its cage.

Thirty minutes quickly passed as Zac almost went into a trance-like state where he tried using his new fragment to the utmost while absorbing E-Grade Miasma Crystals and Healing Pills. Some fresh hell was no doubt waiting outside his special zone, and he needed to be at his best.

He was still far from top condition, but it should be enough for him to survive the initial chaos and properly rest somewhere else. He would have rather stayed inside the black dimension for a few more hours, but the whole zone had started to shudder, indicating that it was time to leave.

The problem was what reward to choose, as all of them were extremely tempting. He knew that evolution of the weapon wasn't something as simple as an upgrade from Middle to Peak E-Grade, but it was rather more akin to a bloodline evolution of a beast. It might provide Verun with a matching attunement to his own, or swap out the materials with ones of far higher quality.

The somewhat humble origins of his axe hadn't been a problem so far, but it would sooner or later start to fall behind, or even get stuck in a bottleneck. It needed fortuitous encounters just like himself, and this was a great opportunity to improve his companion to something with greater potential. It would probably also help during the final remainder of the climb, and he would need every advantage he could get.

As for the Specialty Core Upgrade, it spoke for itself. He already had the **[Pathfinder Oracle Eye]** in his possession, so it was not completely needed in his case. But the eye was an amazing treasure that could be used for almost anything it seemed, and upgrading his core this way would free up the treasure for other uses.

As for upgrading Port Atwood to a World Capital, Zac wasn't as clear what it would entail. It would no doubt come with a slew of advantages to his force in general, and it would probably also give him some sort of title for being the one who founded the capital after integration. It would provide access to all kinds of new businesses and other beneficial buildings as well since it was a common requirement in the Town Shop to have the World Capital.

Indecision gnawed at him for a minute, but he knew he couldn't stall forever. His eyes eventually went to the middle option, and he picked the Duplicity Core upgrade. His reason was simple; his core was a unique mutation, and there were no guarantees the eye would be able to upgrade it even if he ate it after evolving.

Meanwhile, the System termed it as an upgrade, and there shouldn't be any chance of the upgrade failing. Evolving Verun would have been nice as well, but Verun was ultimately a pretty common Spirit Tool, and finding other opportunities to improve it shouldn't prove impossible. Even his Pathfinder-Eye could upgrade the Spirit Tool if need be.

Besides, Verun was still keeping up at his current power without a problem, especially after he had managed to light up another fractal on its handle. He would probably need to reach level 100 or so before the axe started to fall behind.

As for the World Capital, he had great confidence in accomplishing that on his own, provided that he didn't get himself killed first. Taking that option would ultimately only speed up the process, and he felt it wasn't worth it. It would perhaps have given him a better title for getting the World Capital while still in F-Grade, but he wasn't lacking for titles.

The choice was made, so Zac waited for him to be teleported to the start of the 8<sup>th</sup> floor. But nothing happened for a few seconds until a startling change took place in the empty space. A densely inscribed circle appeared beneath his feet, and it illuminated him in golden luster.

A volatile surge of energy entered his body the next moment, and Zac had to force himself to stay still instead of rolling around in pain. The colossal amount of power streamed straight toward his core, and he didn't dare make a move in fear that he would ruin what was happening.

Who would have known that the system would force an upgrade immediately, rather than handing him some pill?

The pain thankfully only lasted for less than a minute, and Zac could only guess it wasn't a big deal for the System to upgrade a simple F-Grade Specialty Core, even if it was a mutated version. Zac wanted to immediately inspect the upgraded Specialty Core, but the surroundings changed as he was teleported to the next world.

The massive Bulwark from **[Immutable Bulwark]** was conjured within a second of arriving as he hefted the somewhat restored **[Everlasting]**, and **[Indomitable]** defended his mind from taking another hit. The cherry had worked wonders, but he guessed the soul was still a bit vulnerable after having almost crumbled to pieces.

It was lucky as well, as a massive blade slammed straight into his shield just as Zac appeared in the new world. A pained roar followed as **[Deathwish]** retaliated the strike. But even then he didn't get any respite as his danger sense hollered in the back of his mind, forcing him to jump to the side as the air itself where he stood was ripped open.

**[Seize the Hayner Clan's defining treasure before the invaders.]**

Zac sighed in disappointment even though he saw the quest was related to a defining treasure. He had been down this road before during the past floors, and he knew things weren't so simple. First of all, he was thrown onto some desolate beach without any civilization nearby, and he had no idea where this Hayner Clan was located.

But that was just the start of his problems. Right behind him was a massive pillar that stretched into the sky, and one warrior after another appeared around him. The soldiers were immediately beset with attacks from a defending force that didn't ask any questions but rather tried to immediately kill anything that appeared.

The situation was all too familiar to him. It was an incursion.

However, the chaos was still a bit different from the one he was used to. It looked like he had arrived just minutes after the pillar appeared, yet an army full with peak F-Grade to powerful E-Grade warriors were already fighting back great ferocity. The attacks he had just avoided came from the defenders who looked like a mix of humans and trolls.

They stood almost three meters tall and had pale green skin. They seemed to favor physical combat as well, and even the strike he barely dodged had come from an explosive arrow-attack. Zac could understand the words the humans streaming out of the pillar screamed, but the defenders spoke in an unintelligible guttural gibberish.

How would he find out where the Hayner Clan was? And who was the guardian in a scenario like this? He seemed to be allied with the raiders, but also not judging by the wording of the quest. He could liken it to being an infiltrator who had joined the incursion with hidden motives, so everyone was an enemy.

Was the Incursion leader the guardian, or was it perhaps the patriarch of the Hayner Clan? As for actually finding the treasure, he had already given up on it. He knew that even if he found the clan there would be all sorts of hurdles to jump in order to get the treasure, hurdles he didn't have the time nor the skills to deal with.

Eventually, he could only find one solution to his situation, and Zac's searched the area until he spotted a human radiating a sinister aura as he commanded his troops to take down the defending armies. Zac steadied himself as he activated **[Profane Seal]**, appearing in front of the man without warning.

The man looked extremely shocked to be attacked by one of his own, but he immediately reacted as a huge bird made from hundreds of flying daggers appeared in front of him as he flashed away. However, the cage was already erected, and Zac steadily grew to his towering form as miasma covered the area.

The flying daggers assailed him like an angry swarm of bees, and Zac was quickly forced to actively block with **[Immutable Bulwark]** as he noted that the daggers were infused with a Dao fragment and could cut straight through his miasmic armor. The fractal shield thankfully held though, and Zac saw Dao Empowered specters appear around the incursion general in an instant.

However, most of the specters' strikes were diffused with some sort of small shields that appeared around the leader, with only a few of them managing to land an actual blow on him.

Zac knew he had taken the strength of the potential guardian too lightly at that moment. He hadn't mentally adjusted due to the increased difficulty because he hadn't

fought a real floor guardian at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, but rather a bunch of cultivators. It made him still think of his competition as roughly the same as the 62<sup>nd</sup> level, forgetting about the sharp increase that came with the final levels of a floor.

The man was also an incursion general, which Zac had ample experience in defeating without exerting any herculean effort. It had made him confident in deflecting the small blades with his impervious armor, but he received a rude awakening as over ten daggers bore into his body and reopened some wounds.

If that was all that happened it would have been fine, as such small weapons weren't any threat to Zac's towering physique. But a blistering pain started to radiate from the wounds in an instant, and Zac felt the world lurch for a second before he found his bearings. He realized what was going on in an instant; the daggers were poisoned.

The only relief was that he sensed the poison being immediately contained to a pretty large degree as he activated the Fragment of the Coffin. But it was nothing like when he fought the corroded monkeys back on the third floor. The Coffin didn't make him magically immune to all poisons, it only strengthened his resistance to it and allowed him to refine it.

This poison he was struck with was on a completely other level compared to what he had absorbed before, and it seemed to also be empowered by a Dao of its own. It wasn't life-threatening as far as Zac could tell, especially with his Draugr-body's natural resistance against poisons as well. But it would still take some effort to refine it all.

"You are not one of ours!" the man roared from the other side of the cage, a large festering wound having appeared on his arm.

Zac didn't answer as he was focused on combating the poison spreading through his body, while simultaneously making sure that he wasn't cut by any more of those small daggers. He noted that a concerted effort to break through from the leader's soldiers was already underway, and he knew his time was limited.

He quickly pushed his taunting effect to the limit as he rushed toward his target, with ten of the fifteen chains targeting the general. The other five started to take out the people who had been caught inside the cage along with their leader, and these people quickly turned into nourishment for him. The Incursion Leader managed to stave off the chains though by allocating a large number of his flying daggers to fight them off.

A poison master was a decent counter to his build since intangible attacks like poison or illusions wouldn't trigger **[Deathwish]**, but that didn't mean Zac was helpless. He could still retaliate if the man used daggers rather than pure poison attacks like Alea, and he also had his massive bardiche to strike back.

The ground cracked beneath his feet as Zac ran straight toward the incursion leader, but the man seemed intent on stalling as he was swallowed by a hurricane of blades before he was whisked away. Unfortunately for the man, he hadn't realized he was under the effect of **[Vanguard of Undeath]**, and the general suddenly appeared only five meters away from Zac.

Zac's arm was already bulging from cramming it full of miasmic energy from **[Unholy Strike]** and the sounds of ghastly wails filled the cage as the massive black axe crashed into the whirlwind just when the general appeared.

The axe went straight through the general's torso, but Zac felt no elation as the swing provided no resistance, and it looked like he had struck a pile of mud as the invader's body fell apart into a rotten pile on the ground. The general had escaped his killing blow.

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### Chapter 447 - Fated

Danger sense erupted in Zac's mind the next moment, and he desperately swiveled [Everlasting] to block a strike coming from behind. A dark-green lance had appeared out of nowhere, aimed straight at Zac's core. Zac tried to dodge, but his bulky body wasn't quick enough and he barely managed to reposition himself before the lance slid right through his armor as though it was made of paper before continuing into his side.

Radiating pain spread throughout his body, and Zac felt like he was being bitten by a million fire ants. But the lance pushing straight through his body had one upside; the incursion leader was suddenly well within his range. The man was pretty quick, but he was nowhere near as fast as the assassin he had just fought.

Zac immediately let go of his shield as he grabbed onto the poison master before he could slink away again. His grip covered half the invader's torso, and there was no escaping now. The warrior seemed to realize the problem, and a green blade appeared in his hand as he tried to cut Zac's arm off with one swift motion.

A black shield appeared around Zac's arm as he hurriedly threw out a talisman from his Spatial Ring. It was something he had gotten from the undead level, a defensive treasure that could be used almost instantly. It wasn't strong enough to completely block out the strike, but it absorbed enough momentum for the Fragment of the Coffin along with his conjured armor to block out the rest.

Wet crunching sounds emerged from the poison master's body as Zac's grip closed like a vise. The man started wailing in pain as he desperately tried to morph away, but Zac was flooding the guy with his corrosive Dao, making it impossible to change his form.

However, the man seemed completely unwilling to give in even when half his torso was crushed, and a storm of daggers rushed toward them both in an attempt at mutual destruction. Zac was forced to quickly cut the man in two to finally sense a burst of energy enter his body as the flying daggers lost their power and fell down on the ground.

The invasion leader had almost been as durable as himself, launching destructive strikes even though half his body was crippled. Perhaps he was just like Alea, forced to focus on Vitality to counteract the effects of the poisons he used.

Zac felt as though both his body and mind were on fire from the poison, but he still released the cage of [Profane Seal]. The fighting between both sides had mostly subsided, and they gapingly looked on as the massive form of Zac walked forward, holding the crushed incursion leader like a ragdoll in his almost grotesquely large hand.

"This invasion is over. Return or die," Zac said to the humans, his gravelly voice sending shivers down the spines of the listeners.

Seeing that most of the humans immediately fled toward the incursion pillar he turned to the massive trolls. They hesitantly looked at Zac, unsure whether he was an ally or just a bloodthirsty lunatic.

"Do you understand my words now?" Zac simply asked as he forcibly tried to quell the storm raging in his mind.

"We understand, Warmaster," one of the trolls said as he stepped forward. "Why did you help us?"

“I am following a prophecy that took me to your world. I am looking for the Hayner Clan,” Zac said.

Following a prophecy was an excuse that Ogras had used multiple times when searching for information upon arriving at new levels. It didn't really explain why they were there, and neither did it divulge whether you were an ally or a foe. Furthermore, a lot of people read into it whatever fit their point of view, which made them accidentally divulge some extra information.

“The Hayner Clan?” the troll mumbled with a frown. “Are they the cause of this cataclysm?”

“They have something in their possession that should not exist on this planet,” Zac said, neither confirming nor denying the troll's question.

“So it is them,” the troll growled. “Delving into the taboo. They pretended to be our saviors bringing words of warning, but they were actually the harbingers of our doom.”

It turned out that the Hayner Clan was an ancient clan full of sages who delved into the mysteries of the heavens. They had warned the forces of this world that a great war was coming, that invaders would come to disrupt their way of life. It had allowed the forces to ready themselves for war, but it had also inadvertently helped Zac gain an excuse for why he was looking for them.

However, a frown quickly formed beneath Zac's helmet while listening as it quickly became apparent that the family focused on the Dao of Karma, just like Abbot Everlasting Peace. Fighting those kinds of people was notoriously annoying since they were often able to anticipate your next move.

Did the Hayner Clan already know they were targeted by him? Perhaps they had even gone underground the moment he arrived, which would make Zac's mission even harder to complete.

He had already confirmed that the incursion leader wasn't the guardian of the level. No Teleportation Array had appeared when he killed the poison master, and he was pretty sure by now that he would have to actually find the Hayner Clan to advance to the next floor. After asking about the general state of the world and getting a decent map of the area Zac left the trolls to deal with the aftermath of the incursion.

However, Zac only ran for twenty minutes before he stopped and took out another healing treasure along with some general antidote pills. With the number of pills he had eaten over the last hour the effect was drastically reduced, but he needed to do something about the poison rampaging through his body.

It had been a struggle to just stand upright and talk with the trolls. They were very congenial after he had killed the Incursion leader, even calling him Warmaster, but that friendliness might have taken a sharp turn if they found out he was in an extremely wounded state. Dealing with poison was his strong suit, but the wounds had tacked up to an almost unmanageable state by now.

He knew he was running out of time to reach the top of the 8th floor, but he still needed to take a moment to rest. At least the last level had finished extremely quickly which saved him a few hours, even though the final levels of each floor usually were pretty quick to deal with. It wouldn't be the end of the world if he spent a couple of hours healing up from the aftermath.

Taking the opportunity of the downtime Zac first looked inward, checking out his new and improved Specialty Core. Its size and coloring were pretty much the same, but the density of fractals covering its surface was on a whole new level. The inscriptions were so fine that he couldn't discern them all with his spiritual vision.

There was also an indefinable upgrade in the quality of the Duplicity Core. It almost felt like it had been a cheap plastic ball before, but it was now upgraded to solid metal. The quality and composition were essentially improved. However, Zac quickly started to feel some confusion as he tried to understand the changes the upgrade had brought.

The reason was simple; there were none. The line in his status screen had been updated to say **[E] Duplicity**, but that was about it. It didn't provide any more attributes, and there was nothing else that seemed to have changed.

It was a pretty big disappointment, as it currently awarded 5% Strength and 5% Endurance, based on the two main attributes of his classes. Zac thought that those boosts might increase from the upgrade, which was another reason he opted to take the Specialty Core upgrade as an award. If his boost went from 5% to 10%, then his Strength would have passed 1000 by now. But it seemed like that wasn't meant to be.

However, it wasn't a complete loss. He had only seen those things as a bonus if he got them. The main point was that he would be able to evolve his two classes without having to worry whether his Specialty Core would be able to keep up. Besides, Yrial seemed to indicate that the speed of his transformation should improve as the Core evolved. He didn't dare to try it out right now as he was both poisoned and wounded though, and his Draugr form was better at enduring such a state.

Not gaining any boost to his Strength was disappointing, but he had gotten his hands on another Peak Attribute fruit which would allow him to almost reach his goal. As long as a Medium Fragment increased the boost to All Attributes he would breach 1000 Strength no matter which of the three Fragments he managed to upgrade from the Tower Apparition.

As for whether he would manage to upgrade his Dao from the Apparition, he felt it almost was a given by now. He had reached the 8<sup>th</sup> floor, something that only happened once every few millennia. The strength of the apparition he would summon should be on a completely different tier compared to those he had witnessed before, and the effect was reportedly boosted significantly when you were the one who conjured it.

After having rested up for another hour he felt strong enough that he didn't need to solely focus on recuperation. Most of the poison had already been converted to energy, with just a few Dao-empowered remnants lingering on. Those remnants would take a while longer to grind down, but they weren't a threat to him at all.

Seeing the situation stabilized he first took out the Peak Attribute fruit and ate it. A warmth spread through his body, and he quickly checked the status screen for the result. A quick mental calculation let him know that he had gained 8 to All Attributes, which would have to be considered a pretty good result.

However, his Strength had only gained 7 points, pushing his total to 992. It was only one point less than the other attributes, but it proved a somewhat disappointing fact; he had hit the cap for how much Strength he could gain by eating treasures. Adding the fruits from the hunt he had gained a total of 25 points in Strength before he hit the limit.

An attribute limit of twenty-five was as good as it got in the F-grade as far as Zac could tell, where most people were only able to gain 15-20 points from Attribute Fruits. However, he had held out some unspoken hope that his odd constitution would also apply to this situation, where his limits were a lot higher compared to normal. But it looked like his body had to follow the same rules as everyone else.

But there were not only bad news waiting after he looked through his status screen. His Luck had shot up to 257, and it had provided a title just like he had hoped.

### **[Fated: Gain 250 Luck at F-Grade Reward: Effect of Luck +5%]**

It wasn't anything special truthfully, but Zac guessed it was fair enough. His luck was so high from having gained so many titles, and if the System kept giving titles for those kinds of accomplishments it would essentially mean he was getting rewarded for getting rewarded. Besides, even if the boost was pretty small it was still a High-Tiered Title that boosted Luck. Such a thing was extremely hard to come by.

Zac closed the screen and turned his attentions to the two Cosmos Sacks and the Spatial Ring he had gained during the last level. He couldn't help but smile in anticipation as he scanned the content of the first pouch, wondering what kind of treasures the elites of the Multiverse would carry around.

A blank look of confusion spread across his face though as he first scanned the swordsman's sack. Zac couldn't figure out what was going on. He would have expected a cosmos Sack from someone like that to be filled to the brim with all kinds of mysterious items, but there was even less inside than his own Cosmos Sack.

The first thing he noticed was one of the golden swords. It was one of the three that the lanky humanoid had controlled with his mind and that had kept harassing him throughout the fight. But he couldn't find the other three swords he used even after scanning the contents multiple times. Had the System simply snatched a part of the losers' treasures at random as they left the Tower? Because that was what it looked like after going through the contents.

He did however spot the old sword in its tattered scabbard. It was something that had piqued Zac's interest due to its dangerous aura, and Zac curiously took it out from the Sack. Upon looking at it from such close proximity it felt like the sword was something that had been left to rot in some storehouse for millennia before being picked up. The leather scabbard was extremely faded and dried out, and it looked like a strong wind would turn it to dust.

However, his mind started to scream of danger the moment he gripped the hilt, and a furious presence suddenly urged him to draw the sword and paint the world red. Zac groaned and quickly threw the sword to the ground, but it took him over ten minutes to regain his composure. The presence had awakened the **[Splinter of Oblivion]** inside its cage, and it furiously railed against the miasmatic fractals.

It felt like when he had been possessed by the cursed ghosts during the hunt, as violent impulses had tried to take over his mind. Zac looked at the old sword with some lingering fear, unsure what he was dealing with.

Was it a Tool Spirit that had gone insane?

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**Chapter 448 - Nouveau Riche**

Brazla had only turned a bit schizophrenic and annoying over time, but he wasn't strictly dangerous. However, it was possible that some Tool Spirits turned sinister as they went insane. Zac knew there had to be some benefit to the sword though as the swordsman used it as an ace. The half-moon attack had contained a shocking sharpness that cut both his mountain and array apart, was it perhaps only possible to conjure such an attack with this sword?

Zac was loath to carry the weird sword around, and he tried putting it back into the Cosmos Sack again. But the sword refused to enter the pouch, and Zac soon realized

the Sacks left behind were temporary pouches just like the one he got from the hunt. He threw the sword into his own sack instead as he turned to the next items in the pouch.

The bag contained an assortment of pills along with a small mound of crystals and a couple of manuals. However, Zac refrained from touching those, afraid that they would be protected like Mhal's manual was. They possibly contained skills and cultivation techniques whose quality was unrivaled in his sector, and such things would no doubt come with high-grade theft-protection.

The bag from the masked man was a lot more ominous. It contained over a hundred heads from a dozen different races, each of them placed in their own densely inscribed boxes. Their eyes were sewn shut and a talisman was pushed half-way into their mouths. Why the hell was this man carrying around something like this?

It didn't seem to be part of his Class since he never used any heads to fight. Was this some sort of morbid way to create talismans? And if Zac only got part of their accumulated treasures, just how many heads had Faceless #9 been carrying around in total? Apart from that, there were a bunch of vials and assorted treasures, including five identical spikes that the assassin stabbed himself with during their fight.

Zac hesitated for a second before he transferred two of them to his own spatial ring. He wasn't sure exactly what these things were, but they allowed the assassin to fight beyond his normal capabilities. The spikes probably had even worse side-effects than his [**Hatchetman's Rage**], but he might be forced to go all out upon exiting the tower in a few days.

Just like with the swordsman's pouch there was another pile full of an assortment of items in one corner, likely things the assassin had picked up inside the tower. However, after seeing the heads he was in no mood to look too closely at what captured the interest of such a lunatic.

Finally, there was the Spatial Ring belonging to the mentalist, the spatial tool that Zac held felt held the most promise. The two sacks were dropped off by the system, but this was the real deal that was taken from her person. And he only needed a glance to realize he had hit jackpot. It looked just like what he expected a wealthy scion's cosmos sack to look. First of all, the space inside the ring was well over ten times the size of Rasuliel's spatial tool.

The dimensions were also extremely clearly defined, compared to the somewhat hazy borders of his own ring. According to Galau that was a sign of high-quality craftsmanship, and proof that its space would stay stable for a long time. Cosmos Sacks only stayed functional for a decade or two before they needed to be swapped out, and Rasuliel's ring was probably an old hand-me-down from the looks of it.

But the ring he had just gotten his hands on was no doubt recently produced, and it would hold together for thousands of years before its subspace deteriorated. Seeing the amazing Spatial ring raised another question in Zac's mind. Were these items protected from the general rules of the tower, or did he risk losing them as well?

Seeing as they were the personal items of trial takers Zac leaned toward the former, but he guessed he would have to exit the tower to make sure. His first instinct was to immediately swap out his sub-par ring, but that might cause him to lose all his possessions. Perhaps he should use as many items as possible before leaving the tower, just in case. But he knew that using up the contents of the Spatial Ring would be nigh-impossible.

There were at least ten thousand E-Grade Nexus Crystals neatly stacked in one corner. However, they were somewhat different from his own, as they all seemed to be covered in some sort of engravings. Zac took out one of them, and he was surprised

to see that it didn't leak a smidgeon of energy. He hesitated for a few seconds longer, but he eventually tried to absorb the energy.

It was extremely uncomfortable to absorb energy from a Nexus Crystal in his Draugr form, and it felt akin to drinking tainted water to parch your thirst. Nausea hit him immediately, but he only needed to continue the absorption for a few seconds to confirm his hunch.

The energies inside the crystal were actually released at twice the rate compared to a normal one, as the inscription formed some sort of energy transfer array akin to his Mother-Daughter array that had been put into the Merit Exchange long ago. It was a pretty luxuriant method since it was used on simple unattuned crystals, and the cost of the craftsmanship was no doubt far beyond the value of the crystals themselves.

The inscribed Nexus Crystals weren't the only types of crystals in the ring. Another, far smaller, pile of crystals sat next to the mountain of Nexus Crystals, each of them looking like a block of ice. Zac had never seen such a resource previously and took one out to get a better look. The crystal was cool to the touch and mysterious emanations spread from it, and Zac immediately felt a reaction as he held it in his hand.

The reaction didn't come from his body though, like when he was near a great natural treasure, but it rather was a prickling sensation from his soul. Zac had a pretty good guess what it was after remembering just who had been the owner of the sack, and he could quickly confirm it was some sort of Soul Crystal.

The crystal didn't seem to be attuned, but rather something that contained mental energy. He had never heard of anything like it before, and it had never been on display in any of the shops in the Base Town. A soothing sensation entered his mind the moment he started absorbing it, and he felt his drained soul rapidly regain its vigor.

This would be a great asset in speeding up his climb. Better yet, if these things worked like Nexus Crystals he might even be able to use them to strengthen his mind. If direct absorption didn't work he might still be able to use them together with his Soul Strengthening Manual.

It was also a huge relief to see that there seemed to be no response from the pieces from the Splinter of Oblivion swimming about, meaning that he could use the Soul Crystals without worry that he was harming himself. He didn't want another Cosmic Water situation on his hands, after all.

Apart from the soul crystals there were a plethora of dresses, all of which sported dense sets of inscriptions. It looked like the mentalist actually had a full wardrobe of defensive treasures, and if Zac wasn't wrong then all of them seemed to be Spirit Tools. There were also dozens of rings, earrings, necklaces, and bracelets, each a defensive treasure that looked quite high-tiered.

Using expensive treasures as though they were normal clothes was another level of wealth that Zac hadn't encountered before. Almost everyone he knew pretty much wore the same get-up every day after getting graded clothing. It was the same with himself. The white robes he got from Yrial were the strongest defensive wear he had, and it possessed self-repairing and self-cleaning features. Wearing other clothes seemed silly by this point.

There was also a large number of pills, raw materials, and natural treasures that seemed valuable enough to make him doubt his eyes. There were also a few Soul-Mending treasures, but Zac wasn't too sure whether they would be strong enough to replace the Cherry in regards to helping Alea. Their energy fluctuations were a lot

stronger than equivalent pills in his own possession, but they were far weaker compared to the cherry he had eaten.

There were also a bunch of things Zac couldn't understand, such as a large metallic head, what looked like a massive drum that had a diameter of over five meters, and all kinds of odd trinkets. Perhaps they were specialized tools that could assist in specific tasks, but Zac didn't have time to go through them one by one.

He did however spot something he recognized. There was a large leaf with ten luxuriant prayer mats placed on top. Zac was perhaps way off-base with his speculations, but he was pretty sure he was looking at a flying treasure, one of much higher quality than the one he lent his sister. It seemed to have been crafted from a natural treasure, with both natural and inscribed fractals combining into an extremely exquisite pattern.

It was a shame that Flying treasures were disabled in the Tower of Eternity. Perhaps the System considered having one to be too large an advantage and restricted them completely. It would have saved Zac a huge amount of time if he could have used one, as he spent days just traveling on each floor.

Finally, there was the pile of random items that seemed to be just flung into a corner of its own, no doubt the things she had found during her climb. Zac wryly smiled as he looked at the treasure trove, and he almost forgave the woman for destroying his soul.

Zac hesitated for a few seconds on how to deal with the three spatial tools before he poured out all their contents one by one. He had no inspection skills and no knowledge worth mentioning in appraisal, but there were some ways to tell what was good and what was not.

Every time he had encountered a beneficial natural treasure he had been able to feel his whole body itching as it craved the energies the item contained. It was the same with **[Verun's Bite]** as well. Zac eventually found six treasures that elicited such a response in his body.

He also discovered 4 items that Verun seemed interested in, two slabs of metal, a piece of bone that was almost pink, and an odd rock. However, the axe was only able to absorb the rock, while it could only roar in anger at the other three items. Perhaps they were materials that could assist in upgrading the quality of the axe, but reforging a Spirit Tool probably required the assistance of a skilled Blacksmith or Inscriptionist.

Soon enough everything in the two Cosmos Sacks was transferred to his own spare cosmos sacks, at which point they dissipated into motes of light. The high-quality spatial ring stayed behind though, even though Zac had emptied it of all its contents. Zac was pretty sure that it was a permanent item, but he wouldn't risk the vast wealth inside on a hunch. He also stowed away the Natural Treasures that elicited such a strong reaction in his body, albeit not without some reluctance.

He would put Calrin on figuring out what to do with these items. The Sky Gnomes seemed to be thieves as much as merchants, and they probably knew what hidden dangers there were to owning loot like this. He didn't want to add a bunch of B-Grade forces to the list of Earth's enemies due to ignorance.

Having dealt with the treasures he sat down and redoubled the efforts on restoring his body, this time with the additional support of Soul Crystals.

Zac set out five hours later, which was a lot better than what he expected going by the state his body had been in. The combination of the Fragment of the Bodhi and his newly acquired Soul Crystals helped supercharge his recovery, building on his already shockingly high Vitality. Since he was pretty much healed up he swapped over to his human form in order to move quicker.

Unfortunately, things didn't go quite as smoothly for the rest of the level as in the beginning. It quickly became apparent that the Hayner clan was very aware of his existence as they had disseminated the news that a dangerous solitary invader threatened their whole world. Zac had been beset by everything from righteous citizens to large Bandit Gangs as he headed toward the lands the Hayner Clan controlled.

But Zac was like a moving calamity, essentially fulfilling the Hayner prophecy whether he liked it or not. All obstacles were destroyed in the quickest manner as Zac had no time to spare. Most opposing forces were destroyed with utter prejudice, apart from a few unlucky souls who Zac caught and dragged along to question on the move.

However, he suddenly stopped in his tracks just as he was about to enter the domain of the Hayner. An old troll wearing a voluminous robe with a star-pattern stood in the middle of the road, and from the looks of it, he was waiting for Zac. The old man seemed to be blind judging by his milky-white eyes, yet he stared straight at Zac like he was peering into his soul.

"Catching a glimpse of heaven's secrets can be both a blessing and a curse. It told me that the key to my family's survival was stopping you," the man said, and surprisingly enough there was a kindly smile on his face. "Karma brought us together, but severing karma is Heaven's Path."

Zac was about to respond, but suddenly he found himself without any ground to stand on as an enormous sinkhole hundreds of meters across swallowed them both up, causing them to barrel into the abyss.

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**Chapter 449 - Pawn of Fate**

Zac's heart hammered with horror as he plunged further and further into the abyss. He tried to find something to hold on to, but he found himself pelted by one rock after another as massive boulders detached from the walls and slammed into him with the force of a speeding truck. There was no way that this wasn't the work of the old Hayner Patriarch.

He did however notice that the old man had fallen inside as well, and he was some ways above him. But his situation didn't seem nearly as bad. The old seer was sitting on a piece of land as he sailed toward the bottom as well, but not a single boulder hit him or even came close. Zac glowered in anger at the man who had caused this mess and quickly charged up a **[Chop]**.

However, a second after he launched the strike at the old man a massive boulder slammed into the fractal blade, resulting in mutual destruction. Zac was about to charge up another strike but just as he was thrown off-course by another boulder. Was all this really a coincidence, or was this what it was like to fight against Karmic Cultivator?

It would take more than some errant rocks to take him out though, and Zac stopped trying to hit the man and instead focused on the depths below. They had fallen for almost 15 seconds already, but Zac noticed the dive was about to have a very abrupt end as the ground below was quickly rising up to meet them.

Zac only had a second to think, and without any better options available he activated a defensive charge of his robes along with another talisman as he infused himself with the Dao of the Coffin. He couldn't actually die or get seriously hurt from

just falling in standard gravity, but he didn't want to risk getting knocked out as he suspected the old man had some means to deal with the landing.

Zac landed like a comet, causing a massive crater with himself in the epicenter. Zac felt the taste of iron in his mouth, but he ignored the pain and scrambled to his feet to meet the next wave of attacks. A massive boulder had appeared seemingly out of nowhere, but Zac cut it apart just in time to see the shockwave of his own crash landing buffeting the old man's descent.

It actually allowed him to land as smoothly as if he had only jumped down from a small incline, and Zac couldn't help himself from swearing at the scene.

"You are quite adept at resisting karmic manipulations. I am Ter'Erian Hayner, former patriarch of the Hayner Clan," the old man smiled when he noticed Zac's glare.

"Why did you do this?" Zac growled, his anger already building. "You should have realized that trapping yourself in here with me can't end well for you."

"Even a blind old man can see how powerful you are. My descendants aren't your match. So I nudged events a bit to create this place for us since I learned of your coming," he said. "Of course, nature had already laid the groundwork."

Zac looked around, and he had to say he was pretty shocked by what a karmic cultivator could do. The hole they found themselves in was the biggest one he had ever seen. It was hundreds of meters wide, and its edges were almost completely sheer. The sky could still be visible far above, but even he would have some trouble getting back up in short order.

"Do you have the clan-defining treasure on you?" Zac asked.

"The **[Star of Aryaldar]** is placed on top of a flying treasure. The flying treasure has also been reinforced with an illusion array and an isolation array, and my descendants have been instructed to keep flying across this vast continent for 23 days before returning," the man smiled.

"Twenty-three days," Zac repeated with an even stare.

"Indeed. The star is the core of our heritage, we cannot lose it. We sacrificed much to glean find a path out of this calamity. The longer it is hidden the better, and after 23 days the treasure will be safe. You might still be able to find the treasure if fate is on your side, but are you in a position to worry about that?"

A surge of anger flashed in Zac's mind as the pieces of oblivion seemed energized. But Zac quickly calmed down as he tried to understand the situation. The Hayner clan was obviously the real deal since they had indirectly inferred the rules of the Tower even if they didn't know about its existence. Twenty-three days was how much time remained of his climb.

The treasure would be safe in 23 days as he would have been thrown out of the Tower by then. But Zac suddenly froze when he realized what the old man had said.

"What do you mean position to worry?" Zac frowned.

"Celestial stone will fall into this hole in a short while," the old man said, some ruthlessness finally shining through his congenial facade.

"A celestial stone?" Zac muttered with confusion until his eyes widened in alarm. "A god damn meteor?"

"My clan worked for a thousand years to form a karmic link with one of the stones sailing about in the vast beyond, gently nudging closer to us. It became our clan-defending treasure, and when better to use it than now?"

These people were lunatics. That was the only thing Zac could think of as he looked the old man with an aghast expression. Dragging a meteor down on top of his own head to take out a threat to his clan was beyond overkill. Even if his mission

succeeded he would have destroyed half his country from the impact, along with getting himself killed.

Zac also knew that there was no way that the old man would let him climb out of the hole in peace either. He could only take him out as quickly as possible and pray that he was the level guardian. A storm of energy immediately exploded around him as he activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**], and almost looked like a sea of flames was conjured by his wrath.

He hadn't used the skill too often since he was worried that the mental effect of the skill would synergize with the anger that the Splinter was always fanning in the background, but now was not the time to care about such things. A towering power made him feel flush with potential, and he almost welcomed the descent of the metro to test his mettle against it.

However, he quickly snapped out of it and instead focused his attention to the old man. Each upgrade of the skill had prolonged the effect of the boost by 10 seconds while also increasing the boost by 5%, so he still had less than a minute to finish the fight before he would enter a weakened state. However, that should be more than enough to settle the fight.

Zac shot toward the old man as he shot out five fractal blades in an instant, with a sixth starting to whirl around him like a buzzsaw. The air screamed from the power in the blades as they contained the highest power Zac could muster. However, it almost looked like the old man was a hologram as he flickered the moment the attacks were supposed to hit him.

The fractal blades passed right through and crashed into the sheer wall behind, causing massive scars in the rock that ran for dozens of meters. Zac didn't exactly understand how the old man dodged without moving, but he guessed he was messing with fate somehow. But Zac still rushed forward, confident that there had to be some limits to what the man could avoid.

However, the ground suddenly crumbled beneath his feet just as he was about to attack the Hayner patriarch, which completely robbed him of his momentum and made him slam into the ground. A crystalline staff appeared in the Hayner patriarch's hands just as Zac was about to get back on his feet, and Zac summoned a storm of leaves to protect himself from whatever strike was coming.

A shudder in the air lifted Zac from his feet and threw him dozens of meters away. However, his danger sense hadn't warned him of anything, and as far as he could tell the attack hadn't harmed him in the slightest. He felt some disorientation for a second, but he regained his wits after shaking his head, and soon enough he was back on his feet. The old man had conjured a massive avatar behind him by this point, a shimmering priest holding a large crystal toward the heavens.

Reality suddenly shifted, and Zac suddenly saw dozens of versions of himself split off from his body. A few rushed toward the old man, whereas others started channeling Cosmic Energy into his arm. There were even two massive spectral axes from [**Deforestation**] that appeared in the sky.

His mind was a confused jumble as competing ideas and impressions clamored for supremacy, and he felt his cosmic and mental energies rapidly drain into the different versions of himself. But Zac suddenly roared at the top of his lungs as he stomped in the ground with enough force to cause cracks to spread over ten meters in each direction. Five explosions followed in quick succession as Zac pushed toward his target.

It felt like he was forced to push through solid matter to advance, and it was as though his mind was being dragged toward the other incantations of himself. But it

wasn't enough to stop him and Zac was soon upon the old man again. **[Verun's Bite]** fell, its sanguine glow illuminating the surroundings.

Zac stood panting to restrain his rage as he looked down on the old man on the ground. A massive wound ran from his shoulder down to his navel, and he was almost split in two by Zac's strike. He looked down at the troll with some confusion, as he hadn't actually expected his strike to hit that easily. The idea had been to push him a bit further to expend his defensive treasures, after which he would finish him with **[Nature's Punishment]**.

But perhaps he had overestimated the old man.

"How?!" the ancient troll coughed with confusion in his eyes as he was bleeding out on the ground. "Why are you immune to the pull of fate?!"

Zac wasn't completely sure what the old man was on about. The weird illusion he had been put under was pretty annoying, but it could barely be considered a nuisance due to draining his energy. Was it supposed to do something more?

Perhaps he had his almost inhuman pool of Luck to thank for avoiding any serious harm. Karmic warriors seemed to fight by slightly augmenting causality and fate in their favor, but Zac had a huge amount of Luck that did the same thing. The special attribute might be the best way of countering these kinds of people.

The battle was over as the man lay dying on the ground, and Zac could breathe out in relief when he saw that a Teleportation Array had appeared a few meters away. Killing the guardians was never a requirement unless it was stated in the quest, defeating them was all that was needed. However, most of the battles so far had ended with a fatality as the guardians were seldom good people.

The battle hadn't been too exhaustive and he was completely unscathed. However, he still wasn't too elated with the results. Normally he would have stayed on the floor an hour at the least to recover from his weakened state and calm his mind, but he knew that wasn't an option this time.

A massive ball of fire had appeared in the sky by now, and Zac knew he would have to leave within a minute.

"Why did you go this far?" Zac asked as he looked down on the old man. "You should have seen that I didn't really want your life."

"Sometimes drastic measures are needed to push fate in the direction one desires, Warmaster," the old troll coughed. "Or should I say trial-taker?"

"You know?" Zac said with surprise.

"Even the heavens aren't perfect. Fragments and pieces slip through," the old man wheezed. "However, that knowledge is what led you to our doorstep. I peered too deep, and I cannot be allowed to live. At least my family is ignorant of the truth, and the calamity will hopefully end through my death and your disappearance."

Zac looked at the old man for a few seconds, but he had no idea what to say. What could one say in a situation like this? It might be true that he was being used as a real Hatchetman by the System, taking out those in its net who had learned too much.

"I'm sorry things ended this way," Zac sighed and started to walk toward the teleportation array.

"Freedom is an illusion, trial-taker," the old seer coughed as Zac stepped onto the platform. "Are you any freer than us?"

Zac took one last look at the old troll. The seer's face had turned into a grotesque mask of anger and irreconciliation as the blank eyes stared up at the sky. Zac wasn't sure if he was looking at the meteor that was fast approaching, or the heavens above.

"I am Ter'Erian Hayner, and I am more than a pawn!"

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 450 - Out of Reach**

The encounter with the old seer was pretty jarring, but it wouldn't stop Zac from moving. He had his goals, and he knew that one couldn't get anywhere in this world without knocking out the competition. It was not a matter of Ogras-induced cynicism, but a rather reality forced onto everyone by the System. If there was no conflict, then one would be created.

Hearing the old seer's final words indicated that the worlds he traversed might all be real, but did it really change anything? He could only shrug off any hesitation and insecurities and head toward the next guardian.

Climbing the 8<sup>th</sup> floor presented a new kind of torture as Zac desperately pushed through the levels. He had almost completely given up on sleep by now, his rest was slightly slowing down while revolving the Fragment of the Bodhi to help recuperate his exhausted body and keeping the Splinter in check.

He had realized that the Splinter wasn't as intrusive when his mental state was in perfect condition, but problems quickly arose after having expended a lot of mental energy. He almost fell into a rage after every straining battle, and he quickly had to restore his mental energies to not go out of control. By this point, he needed to pretty much constantly travel with a Soul Crystal in his free hand to stay lucid.

The problem was that every time he used his Dao he felt as though the Splinter's corrosion got slightly more ingrained into his soul, for good or bad. It did seem that the Dao he forced into his attacks kept getting stronger, but it came at the cost of his mind getting slowly eroded. Zac could only push back against the effects as he kept climbing.

He considered stopping using his Daos altogether until he found a solution, but that would eventually just slightly delay the inevitable. Besides, not using his Daos would effectively end his climb. He couldn't defeat any enemies without them, and he was not ready to stop climbing.

His experiences in the tower had completely remolded him, pushed him toward a peak he didn't even know it existed. It had resulted in his mind getting invaded, but Zac started to believe that his best bet at finding a solution was to keep climbing. The 7th floor rewards were customized for his needs, and perhaps the 8th floor would be even more tailored to his needs.

And what did he currently need more than something to control the Splinter?

He might even find a solution before even reaching the 72nd level, as the 8th floor was a veritable treasure trove. It was almost torture to traverse one world after another and hearing about shocking treasures that would drive anyone mad, knowing that each of them was just out of his reach.

The 65<sup>th</sup> floor seemed to contain an ancient array left behind by a long-extinct race. It would be able to awaken one's 'hidden potential', which according to rumors meant gaining a huge surge of attributes and perhaps even awakening a constitution. But it was locked behind the floor's quest, and Zac simply couldn't complete it. So he could only take out his frustrations on the guardian before moving on.

The next floor contained what Zac guessed was a top tier E-Grade Axe Spirit Tool, but it was in the hands of a peak E-Grade warlord. This one wasn't quite as alluring as the previous floor, but it would still be a huge boon to have an alternative to [Verun's

**Bite]**. This was especially true as it was rumored to have ‘a corrosive attunement’, making it an extremely good weapon of choice for his Draugr-form.

Zac initially thought that he was doomed to get not his hands on it, but news spread that the warlord had suddenly died just as Zac was about to finish things up on the floor. He couldn’t join the fight for the warlord’s hoard though, as he was running out of time. He could only grit his teeth and move on to the next floor, leaving the treasures behind.

It almost felt like the System kept throwing out more and more alluring baits in his path in an effort to stop him from climbing any further. It was to the point that Zac wondered if it was some sort of trail that tested his determination, and Zac staunchly kept his eyes on the prize as he kept moving toward the next levels.

Missing out on all the treasures was a big disappointment, but he did make some startling progress with his experiments. Zac had almost reached a 40% success rate in forming the bronze flashes since getting to the 8<sup>th</sup> floor. He still needed to use his crude method of stabbing himself in the shoulders, but with the help of the Fragment of the Bodhi he was able to keep experimenting even after accumulating one grisly wound after another.

Zac had initially been afraid that the experiments would worsen his mental condition even more, but he soon realized it was the opposite. His mind actually calmed down after having shot out a bronze flash. It almost felt like some sort of mental bloodletting where the darkness in his mind was expelled through the Dao Implosions.

The explanation that Zac felt was most likely was that the Splinter of Oblivion had a part in the creation of the bronze sparks somehow. Perhaps it acted as a base to what the two fragments would fuse into, like a blueprint to the higher Daos. That would explain the increased success rate of forming the Bronze sparks compared to his trials during the 7<sup>th</sup> floor.

Before the only energies from the Splinter that suffused his soul were the small amounts of purified energy that the Miasmatic Fractals slowly let out of the cage. But now his soul was completely infiltrated. The improvements felt like a small silver lining to the mess he found himself in, but there were still some parts that he hadn’t figured out.

Things weren’t working out as he had hoped with his third Dao Fragment. No matter how many times he tried he simply couldn’t form some equivalent of the bronze flash when trying to fuse the Fragment of the Bodhi with the Fragment of the Axe. The same problem arose when trying to fuse the Bodhi with the Coffin.

Only the combination of Axe and Coffin worked, leaving Zac wondering just what was missing. Did the second fusion require another method of activation to work? Or did it only work because the destructive flash leaned toward Oblivion rather than Creation?

His utter failure was another hint that he was on the right track about the Splinter, but he still wasn’t completely convinced. The two Grand Daos of Creation and Oblivion were extremely high concepts, and pretty much all lower Daos should contain hints of both of them. The Bodhi wasn’t pure Creation, and the Coffin wasn’t pure Oblivion.

Not even the higher concepts of Life and Death that he was striving for were pure Creation and Oblivion. So it was a bit odd that he couldn’t mix the Fragment of the Axe, which by itself should lean toward Oblivion, with the Fragment of the Bodhi.

There was no real way for him to verify what was really going on at the moment. For now, he could only take the opportunity to self-medicate while working out the

possibilities and limitations of the bronze flashes. It seemed that desperation had played a part in managing to actually use the Dao Implosion.

His left arm was a mess after having ruptured dozens of times, but he had managed to successfully destroy a strong beast in the heat of battle once with the help of the Dao Implosion. The key seemed to be adrenaline, or rather battle lust. When he was just experimenting while traversing the worlds he was too calm, and that led to him being too slow in moving the bronze spark out of his body.

It was as if he was energized, then the blob of energy he created would be energized as well. Zac even tried to slap himself and roar on top of his lungs to get his blood pumping, but it wasn't very effective. Only his true fight-or-flight responses seemed to be working, perhaps as they activated some primal part of his brain.

His theory of the origin of the flashes also gave Zac some clues into what needed to be done to somewhat formalize his 'creation'. The largest problem was that he had no control over the energies he created, and he could only push it forward. But perhaps there was a solution; he needed to take control of the Splinter of Oblivion.

If the flashes were truly created with help from the debris of the Splinter, then he needed to somehow form a connection with it. It would allow him to guarantee a successful formation, rather than leaving things up to fate. It would perhaps even allow him to stabilize the volatile energy long enough that he could infuse it into skills rather than just throwing it away like a hot potato.

Messing with the Splinter would come with huge risks though, and Zac wasn't confident at even attempting to opening the miasmic cage in his mind before his soul was a lot stronger compared to now. It once came back to a lack of time. He wished he could jump into some time chamber and practice **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** until his soul was strong enough to withstand the Splinter's influence.

However, Zac didn't spend all his time on the bronze flashes as they were still somewhat of a long-term goal. He had gained many other new upgrades that needed to be better understood, such as his new Dao Fragment.

One slightly surprising benefit was just how much stronger the fragment had made his Hatchetman class.

Zac was currently assaulting a massive army on the 67<sup>th</sup> floor, and he was being pelted from all directions as he tried to reach the princess in the middle of the army. He was somewhat confident that she was the level guardian, and Zac had immediately set out toward her army the moment he learned of her insane crusade.

This level was the same as the previous ones on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor. He had quickly learned of rumors talking about a divine tree that was about to bear fruit. Elites from all over the world were getting ready to compete for the natural treasure as the fruit seemed to possess the capabilities of opening the "third eye".

The effect of the third eye, or the soul's eye, sounded a lot like his Danger Sense after asking around, and he felt that combining the two might almost turn him permanently omniscient like when he used **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**. But he could only ignore the temptation while cursing the fact that he was too slow. If he had another month left on his climb he could have cleaned up on these last levels, but now he didn't have the leeway to take any detours.

Targeting one of the amazing treasures that appeared on each level now would essentially erase any chances of completing the floor. so the treasure had to be more tempting than an upgraded title and a tailor-made reward by the System itself. And while the treasures thus far had all seemed extremely valuable they weren't quite at that level so far.

That didn't make the situation less frustrating though.

Luckily he had a whole army to take out his annoyance on, and a storm of purple leaves flew around him as he waded into the army that desperately tried keeping him at bay. It was **[Nature's Barrier]** that had changed its appearance after getting infused with the Fragment of the Bodhi and reaching Peak Mastery.

Not only had the leaves become shockingly sturdy, but the skill even provided a restorative effect in the eye of the storm now. It was just like the hidden world within the cherry tree's canopy in the vision. If Zac had the fragment while fighting the swordmaster in the Battle of Fates he probably wouldn't have needed to use any other defenses than this skill.

His defensive skill wasn't the only one that had benefitted from gaining the Fragment of the Bodhi. Pretty much every single nature-aspected skill in his repertoire became stronger in one way or another, just like how Coffin added all kinds of effects to his death-attuned skills.

The forest created from **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** now provided a defensive sphere from the outside. It wasn't too useful for Zac at his current stage, but it would help with keeping allies safe in large-scale conflicts. The skill had also reached Middle Proficiency on the last level since he was pretty much forced to activate it during every battle now.

One surprising skill that benefitted from the Dao Fragment was **[Loamwalker]**. Not only did it increase the distance he could travel with each step, especially inside forests, but Zac even felt a mysterious energy rising from the ground and entering his body with every step. The energy was an earthy brown when he looked at it with **[Cosmic Gaze]** and he guessed it was earth-attuned energies.

He didn't have a use for the attuned energies, but being able to move much faster was a godsend.

The fabric of space cracked as Zac closed in on the princess' command tent, and a wooden hand covered in leaves and flowers quickly emerged, causing verdant lights to fly around its fingers in an exuberant dance. An outsider might think that the vibrant image might mean that the massive hand was about to bestow a blessing on the lands, but the reality wasn't quite so benign.

Zac had quickly figured out the fundamental use of the Fragment of the Bodhi apart from the healing. Life mutated and grew far beyond its normal means within the canopy of the consecrated cherry tree, and Zac was able to bestow that same effect to his skills. That meant that it wasn't simply a defensive or offensive boost to his nature skills, but rather a foundational empowerment.

**[Nature's barrier]** naturally became even better at defense as the leaves mutated, but the hand instead evolved in a more forceful direction, which was evident by the terrifying aura it had started to radiate. A two hundred meter wide array appeared as an immense pressure forced the average soldiers down on their knees.

An enormous sword saint appeared in the sky above the command tent, likely the avatar conjured by the princess he was targeting. She was currently on a path of carnage to earn the respect of her father, but her path was littered by the bodies of innocent civilians who were unlucky enough to live too close to the border of a rival kingdom.

Zac had no moral issue with taking someone like this out. She didn't respect the lives of others to attain her goal, so why should he respect hers? The massive sword saint aimed her sword at the core of the array which also meant that the wooden hand above it was targeted.

Destructive energies started gathering around the avatar, but Zac wasn't worried as an unassuming trunk descended from the core of the array.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 451 - Little Bean**

The single tree looked like any ordinary one, apart from its lack of branches. But it quickly grew into a tremendous spike, like the finger of a forest god. It just took a second for it to grow to a size that almost eclipsed the mountains he had pulled through the array before, and the tip of the tree pushed straight toward the command center beneath.

A shocking burst of energy rippled out from the massive avatar's weapon, and multiple layers of the protective membrane of **[Nature's Barrier]** were decimated even though the princess aimed at **[Nature's Punishment]** rather than in his direction.

A hollow with a diameter of almost fifty meters was punched straight through the wooden spike, but hundreds of branches grew from the hole and merged to restore its original form. Zac felt a huge strain on his mind from the increased consumption, but he could only grit his teeth as he pierced the avatar with his punishment.

The avatar only managed to ineffectually rip off a few layers of the branch before it was forcibly dispelled, and the branch passed through the chaotic energies as it slammed straight into the command tent where the princess resided. The ground heaved and cracked and Zac felt a surge of energy enter his body,

A shudder went through his body as a storm of miasma spread to every inch. The hundreds of leaves around him disappeared into motes of lights, and the verdant forest of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** was gone a second later. Only the towering tree remained as a testament of his earlier attacks.

That didn't mean the army was safe though, as billowing clouds of corrosion and miasma quickly spread out before the warriors had time to understand what was going on.

This was the true power of the upgraded core, and it was the only feature that mattered as far as Zac was concerned. It was disappointing that it hadn't provided any attributes when reaching E-Grade, but the transformation only took a second now as long as he used Yrial's Transformation skill.

Not only that, but he had also learned that he could now transform twice before he needed to wait for an hour again. In other words, he could now almost completely freely use his two classes in one battle as long as he had a second to spare during a fight.

Zac stomped the ground and appeared next to the massive branch that was stabbed into the ground, just in time to see a part of it explode as his target emerged. She was drenched in blood and one of her arms hung limply to her side, but she still radiated the aura of someone with a fight left in her.

The cage of **[Profane Seal]** was erected with the branch in the middle, and five of the chains immediately cut into the massive piece of wood. A surge of energy entered Zac's body as he started his usual whittling down of his enemy.

It was one interesting perk he had found from being able to quickly change between classes. Most of his skills disappeared when he changed classes, but there were two exceptions. The first exception was the punishments he could summon through **[Nature's Punishment]**, like the tree he was able to call forth since gaining the Fragment of the Bodhi.

It was teeming with lifeforce that the chains could steal and then feed to his Draugr-form. This synergy was why he opted for the tree rather than the massive mountain he usually used.

It made him even more unkillable as the piece of wood turned into an enormous battery that would keep him going far longer than he would be able to without. It was to the point that miasma steamed out of his body due to overconsumption, which further aligned the surroundings in his favor against living enemies.

The second skill that lingered was **[Winds of Decay]**. The skill was made from his breath, so it didn't matter that he changed class as the mists remained. This wasn't as much of a boon though as the skill targeted him the moment he changed to his human form. It didn't bother him thanks to his huge pool of Vitality, but it was still pretty uncomfortable to stand inside.

The miasmatic cage shook as the two clashed one time after another, but soon enough the princess couldn't stand it any longer. Her body was covered in festering wounds as the armor-clad Zac towered above her.

"Why?" she asked with fury and despair in her eyes. "Who are you?"

"Fate, I guess," Zac answered as his bardiche fell.

Zac didn't swap back to his human form just yet as he wasn't sure what would await him at the other side of the teleporter. He rather just restored his reserves to peak condition before he stepped through to the next realm.

It felt like he was being squeezed for every piece of potential he had, and he was embroiled in constant battle as he kept going. At least it kept the Splinter mostly satiated as he ripped through the later levels of the 8th floor. Unfortunately, he never heard of any treasures or inheritances that seemed able to restrain the corruption in his mind, and this continued all the way to the 71st level.

The second-to-last level of the 8<sup>th</sup> floor would no doubt be a real nightmare, but his all-out push the past weeks had at least made sure he had over 3 days to complete it. **[Verun's Bite]** was already high in the air to counter any sneak-attack, and Zac had equipped **[Everlasting]** and changed into his Draugr form just in case of a sudden assault.

But when the scenery changed he realized there would be no ambush this time around the moment he stepped through the teleporter. The surprising stillness even seemed to subdue the splinter in his mind as it crept into the back of its miasmatic cage.

He was in a small cabin that was best described as futuristic. The whole wall in front of him was just one massive screen that seemed to be showing a blueprint, and another wall displayed a majestic nebula and stars that were fixed in the distance. Zac almost forgot he was in the Tower of Eternity for a second as he looked around with excitement.

Was he on a spaceship?

That was the immediate conclusion judging by the screen in front of him, unless he was reading the blueprint completely wrong. The map showed an elongated vessel that looked pretty sleek apart from a large circular bulb in the middle, and Zac found that he was able to zoom in and out by touching the screen.

The first thing he could see was that the ship was just massive. He was currently in a section that seemed to house thousands of cabins, just like the cabin floors on a cruise liner. The cabin he was in was around twenty square meters, and while it was less than a tenth the size of the largest cabin, it was still a decent size.

Each cabin had a series of numbers or letters marked, though Zac couldn't read them. He guessed it was either the name or serial number of the person who lived

inside. Some cabins were pretty large, but they had over twenty numbers attached, meaning they were probably barracks or shared domiciles.

Perhaps the cabin belonged to some sort of middle-management or a petty officer on board the space cruiser. The huge number of cabins only took up a small section of the total space on the ship though, and he saw that there were more sections just like it. If it wasn't due to the shape and the two massive thrusters at the back of the vessel he would have thought it was rather a space station than a ship.

He tried to engrave every detail into his mind in case he needed it later, but it seemed the resident of this cabin only had limited access as over half the ship was blacked out except the general outline. Perhaps those sections were critical parts of the ship only accessible to authorized personnel.

Zac eventually backed away and tried to figure out his next step. A quest screen conveniently appeared after he retreated though, indicating what needed to be done.

**[Stop the Little Bean from returning from its expedition.]**

Zac wasn't overly surprised to read the contents of the quest after seeing the surroundings, but some hesitation crept into his heart as he looked at the wall displaying the vibrant nebula in the distance. This was still the Tower of Eternity, right?

Or had the System sent him out on an actual mission to mess with its enemies, the Technocrats? Since meeting the Hayner patriarch he had started wondering if he was actually ever inside the Tower, or if he was just sent to various corners of the multiverse like when he completed the Hegemony-quest.

A muffled swishing sound interrupted his thoughts as the door leading to his quarters suddenly opened, displaying a young man who was looking down with a troubled frown at a screen that hovered in front of him.

He entered the small cabin without even looking up, and he only noticed something was wrong when a grey object ripped through the air straight toward his head. His eyes widened in shock when he looked up only to find himself face-to-face with Zac, and an orange shield started to materialize around him.

But it was much too late, and **[Everlasting]** slammed into his head with enough force to throw him into the wall, immediately knocking him out cold. Zac hurried over and dragged the man further inside the cabin, and sighed in relief when he saw that the cabin door closed by itself.

Things calmed down again, but Zac stood frozen for almost ten minutes, waiting for some backup to come rushing through the door. But it looked like his actions had gone by unnoticed, allowing him to breathe out in relief. Zac didn't put away his weapons though, but rather just hunched down to take stock of the man whose cabin he had been thrown into.

It was a human just like himself, or at least mostly human. Some parts of his body seemed to be mechanical, which Zac guessed made the man a cyborg. His clothing made believe he wasn't a warrior like the other cyborg he had met though, but rather some sort of non-combat personnel.

He had also all but confirmed Zac's suspicions that this was a Technocrat vessel.

The shield that he had smashed through was clearly of technological origin, just like those in the technocrat incursion, though it was a bright orange rather than the red ones back then. Apart from the shield, there were no signs of any weaponry on him though. The man wore a uniform made out of cloth, and there was not a single fractal anywhere on them.

His build wasn't anything to write home about either, and when Zac activated **[Cosmic Gaze]** there was almost no response either from the man or the surroundings.

It made Zac guess that he was on a vessel belonging to the Machine God-faction. Both Transcenders and Technomancers would possess at least some equipment connected to cultivation.

Zac quickly found the source of the shield, a small bracelet on his arm, and after having taken it off he started to look for any piece of detachable technology on him until he finally poured some water over the unconscious man.

“Wha? How?” the man sputtered as he wildly looked around, making Zac realize that the guy even had mechanical eyes. “Who are you?! How did you manage to board the Little Bean? We just fell out of subspace!”

“Nevermind that,” Zac said as he trained his pitch-black orbs pierced into the man’s augmented vision, making him flinch. “Tell me what I need to know and I’ll let you live. If you’re not willing to cooperate I don’t mind killing and reanimating you. You will help me one way or another.”

“No, please!” the man cried, clearly horrified at the prospect of being turned into a zombie.

Being a Draugr had its advantages, and there was no way for the guy to know that Zac didn’t even know how to turn someone into a Zombie. None of those he had killed in his undead form seemed to have shown any inclination to turn at least, meaning there was probably some hidden component to it.

“Have you heard of the Tower of Eternity?” Zac asked first, wanting to check on his earlier suspicions.

“The Tower of Eternity?” Jaol said with confusion. “Never heard of it. It’s not related to our corporation, I swear!”

Zac nodded in relief, but he suddenly froze. His answer sounded similar to all the others during his climb, but there was one significant difference. He actually mentioned the tower by name, which had never happened before. They had always responded with some sort of confusion and completely glossed over the mention.

“What is your name, and what is your mission?” Zac asked as he settled in front of the man who had slowly inched toward a corner of his cabin.

“I am Jaol. I’m just a comms officer of the Little Bean, no one important!” he said.

“A comms officer?” Zac repeated. “Know this. If you send out an alert through any hidden gadgets that end with me cornered, then I’ll kill you first before trying to fight my way out.”

The man quickly nodded his head, but Zac noticed his eyes darted toward his arm where Zac had taken off the wristwatch.

“Where is the Little Bean heading?” Zac asked, and pushed the axe toward the man once again when he seemed hesitant to answer. “Answer me.”

“We’re heading to the closest outpost, but we’ve fallen out of subspace,” Jaol explained. “It’s because of that thing. I guess that’s why you’re here? It has created too many anomalies for our engines to handle. We were forced out of subspace until our engineers can fix the damage.”

Zac’s interest was perked when he heard about the situation aboard the ship. It was clear that the leaders Little Bean had found something that they wanted to bring back to their forces, but it was obviously something pretty amazing if it could mess with the entire vessel and its advanced technology.

It also gave him a lead in completing the quest in the normal manner. If he could take out the engineers, or somehow sabotage the repair efforts, then he would essentially be done with the mission? The best thing would be to blow up the engines

altogether, but Zac guessed that they would be pretty hard to get to. But it felt entirely possible that the chief engineer would be the guardian if it wasn't the captain.

"What have you found out about the item?" Zac urged, not wanting to let on he had no idea what the guy talked about.

"It keeps bending the laws of physics in unpredictable manners, fusing, and changing matter without following any of the known rules. It really deserves being a shard from the [Spark of Creation]," Jaol exclaimed, excitement seemingly making him forget he was a hostage at the moment.

"Spark of creation?" Zac repeated, his eyes widening.

Didn't this sound a bit too familiar?

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**Chapter 452 - Road of No Return**

The more questions Zac asked about the item the Technocrats had found the more certain he became. The item truly seemed to be the equivalent of the Splinter of Oblivion in his mind. The Technocrats had found it on a low-tiered world at the edge of some sector, though they hadn't realized its true origins initially.

Apparently, the technocrat factions often released swarms of drones that floated about in the multiverse, and now and then they'd pick up odd energy fluctuations from valuable materials. Beauty was in the eye of the beholder, and some things that might seem useless to cultivators could be extremely valuable for the Technocrats, and vice versa.

This time though they knew that there was a special item rather than raw materials, and it would be discovered sooner or later. Orders were quickly sent out from above and they tasked the ship Jaol worked on to retrieve it before the local factions realized there was a treasure under their nose.

The Shard, which is what they called it, had long since fused with a humanoid cultivator, which had created a series of shocking changes in both his physique and his surroundings. The man was F-Grade like Zac himself, and he had managed to stave off the effects for almost five years before he started to succumb to the influences of the item.

The Splinter of Oblivion was like an insidious whisper that caused its user to become an avatar of destruction, a madman who couldn't stop fighting. It had been the same for everyone Zac had seen in the visions, with the exception of the Draugr-woman. However, the effect of the Shard of Creation was completely different according to the technocrat.

An item of Creation sounded like something positive to Zac but that truly hadn't been the case for the poor cultivator. If the Splinter turned people into powerful lunatics, then the Shard turned them into monsters. The moment the man lost control he had started transforming and growing.

New limbs, weird tumors, hair, horns, and all types of appendages had started growing on the man, who quickly changed from a normal biped into a massive blob of flesh. Some parts of him had even changed its composition completely, turning into rocks, precious metals, and constructs that moved about.

There seemed to be no limits to his changes as long as he didn't run out of energy. He had completely drained the area he lived in by the time the Technocrats

had arrived, and they believed he would keep absorbing energy until his soul couldn't take it any longer.

Of course, the man had become a raving lunatic by the point the Technocrats arrived. Being forcibly turned into a monstrosity that kept growing and changing had to be unimaginably painful. They had obliterated the being with orbital attacks, turning multiple square kilometers into a smoldering hellscape, leaving only the Shard intact.

The task force quickly loaded the items and hurriedly fled. The attack on an integrated planet with advanced weaponry had launched a wide-scale quest of retribution, and they had been forced to fight their way out of the sector while constantly dogged by Spiritual Vessels and the powerhouses steering them.

The Shard was now kept in a secured field that was designed to isolate energies, but it kept causing trouble to their vessel through bursts of creation that slipped through. It had turned a motor into a sentient golem and exchanged a highly condensed liquid energy into something that smelled like wine.

It had already forced the Little Bean out of subspace six times, and if it wasn't for the multiple layers of redundancies and skilled technicians the ship would have been turned to scrap metal stuck in the middle of nowhere. A few of the crew had wanted them to drop it off at a desolate planet and let someone else pick it up, but the Captain was adamant about being the one who brought it in.

"How long until you return?" Zac asked.

"Two weeks," Jaol hurriedly said.

"I will capture more people, and if he gives another answer I'll come back for you, understand?" Zac said, his pitch-black eyes boring into the comms officer.

"One day if we get the subspace engines running," the comms officer immediately corrected himself as he repeatedly bowed his head in apology. "We would have already been picked up if the Shard hadn't completely destroyed our antennas as well. I have worked on opening up a line of communication for days now, but we are lacking some components."

Zac slowly nodded with a snort. This sounded more like a situation that the System would arrange. The engineers might be able to get the system up and running at any moment, at which point he would be barreling toward an enemy stronghold. He would need to delay the efforts or quickly tackle the guardian if he wanted a shot at defeating the level. But there was one thing Zac didn't really understand.

"Can't your people scan this area if you're so close?" Zac asked skeptically. "Just one day of travel."

"One day in subspace can be both close and impossibly far. We would pass through multiple dimensional layers. Our space station doesn't have that advanced scanning equipment," Jaol said.

"How strong is the most powerful warrior on your vessel? And how strong is your chief engineer?" Zac probed

"Strongest warrior?" Jaol said. "The captain is a Class-3 Transhuman, and the chief engineer is only lacking a few critical upgrades to reach late Class-2. My readings are telling me that you are somewhere in the range of early to middle Class-2. Why not just leave, instead of throwing your life away? I will not say anything."

Zac only glared at the technocrat without saying anything, making him shrink back toward the wall again. Classes were likely the equivalent of ranks to the Machine God faction, where Jaol had mistaken him for middle E-Rank. It made Zac a bit curious about the mechanical eyes he employed but now was not the time.

Hearing that there was a D-Grade warrior on the ship was problematic. He wouldn't be able to run rampant and simply cut his way through to the engineering bay. If the captain suddenly showed up his only recourse would be to crush his token.

However, the real issue was the Shard. Should he go for it?

It felt like the System was presenting him with an alternative to assaulting the 8th floor guardian. He could either target the engineers and the engine to delay the ship, or he could snatch the Shard of Creation.

In a perfect world, he would be able to do both, but either action would no doubt expose his presence on the ship and result in a massive response. With someone like the captain onboard he wasn't very confident in completing either task, and doing both seemed nigh impossible.

The question was what he wanted the most. The past levels had pushed him pretty hard, and he wasn't completely confident in a fight against a floor guardian of this power level. But the rewards would no doubt be shocking as well. The gains from the 7th floor had been extremely suited for him, and the completion reward for the 8th floor should be pretty amazing as well.

On the other hand, finding a Shard of Creation was once in a lifetime opportunity. He had long thought about finding a counterweight to the Splinter in his mind in order to restrain it, and this was his chance. This desire had only increased over the past weeks since his soul got infiltrated.

Shooting out bronze sparks every now and then to weaken the splinter was a patchwork solution at best, but sooner or later it wouldn't be enough. It felt like he was a pressure cooker waiting to explode, and this might be his only option on hand. The item was just the kind of thing he had envisioned, and Zac felt it wasn't a coincidence he had been placed here. It was a temptation that he could either follow or choose to ignore.

But did he even dare to absorb such a thing?

The ending of that poor sap who had fused with it previously sounded beyond horrifying, and he didn't really have any means to counteract it apart from his Soul Strengthening Manual and the Miasmatic Fractals inside his head. He also didn't dare place his hopes on a second old master popping out of nowhere and giving him another set of fractals to house the Shard.

The optimal scenario was that the Shard would enter the miasmatic cage and the two items would restrain each other. The worst-case scenario was that some unexpected chain reaction would take place, causing a massive eruption in energies that would blow both him and the Little Bean into smithereens.

There was also the issue of agency. The words of the Seer back on the 73<sup>rd</sup> level echoed in his mind. He had said that Zac was just as much a pawn as he in the eyes of the System, and perhaps he was right. It couldn't be seen as a coincidence that the System first presented him with the Splinter of Oblivion at the specially created Hunt on his planet, and just a few months later put him next to a Shard of Creation out of a trillion possible scenarios.

What was the goal of the System here?

It felt like he was being led by the nose down a path rather than creating his own destiny, and he wasn't sure for what purpose. It was one thing if the System simply wanted to make him stronger, and found a suitable solution for him. But everything he had heard about the System indicated that it wasn't so benevolent, and also not hands-on to this degree.

Was the System treating him like a prize hog, feeding him with these two treasures? But to what end? Considering his Technocrat heritage he felt like it couldn't

be anything good. Or was it the mysterious Draugr woman who somehow influenced his fate? He had no idea what cultivators standing at the peak were capable of.

But was there anything he could do about it, even if he was being manipulated? He needed power, and he had started down a road of no return the moment he got mixed up with the Splinter. Things were already spiraling out of control, and this might be his only opportunity to strike a balance in his body.

Hesitation gnawed in his heart for a few seconds, but he eventually decided to go for it. The Splinter was uncommonly silent in his mind, and he guessed it was because it sensed the presence of its opposite. He needed to make this effect permanent by bringing the shard with him.

There were a lot of logical reasons to not take such a massive risk, but every fiber in his body told him to consume it. It felt like he was a puzzle, and the Shard was the final piece to finish the image. This wasn't the decision he would have made before the integration, and it probably wasn't even the decision he would have made just a few months ago. But he had realized something during his climb.

One needed to push oneself to achieve anything worthwhile.

On the surface it might have seemed that Zac had pushed himself beyond what was almost possible, but most of his actions had been forced out of need. But here was a difference between risking your life to survive, and risking your life to push yourself to greater heights. He had mostly done the former, but he knew that he needed to take some risks to keep his momentum going.

Things might very well turn to shit, but even the random cultivator on an unintegrated planet had managed to stave off the insanity for a few years. If things truly didn't work out he would still have time to save Earth and deal with the Dominators and even have a couple of years to find a way to rip both the items out of his body.

Besides, the very fact that he was probably being manipulated into consuming both these items felt like an indication that he wasn't going to die from it. Why would the System or some mysterious peak being go through all the trouble of manipulating his fate and the Tower of Eternity if the end result would be him simply dying? There were a lot of easier ways to kill a puny F-Grade warrior.

Since he had made his decision he could only walk forward, taking things as they came.

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**Chapter 453 - Clearance**

"Where is the Shard stored?" Zac asked after having made his decision.

"It is in a restricted holding bay, with multiple layers of defenses around it," Jaol said, his eyes widening upon the realization that Zac wasn't deterred by the presence of the captain. "The captain will come the moment he hears his cargo is being targeted. He is part-owner of the whole vessel, and it has taken a lot of damage from this mission. If the mission fails he will face disastrous consequences, but if he succeeds he will gain centuries' worth of resources."

"How would I gain access?" Zac pushed, ignoring the warnings.

"You can't," Jaol said without hesitation. "I have no idea how to get inside!"

“Think harder,” Zac growled as a black mist started to steam out of his mouth, adding an acrid smell to the cabin.

“I-I... You would need to have special authorization. But it is impossible for you! You have no neural implants, and even if you get inside there are extremely strong autonomous Class-2 Guardians inside,” Jaol exclaimed.

“Don’t you have access-cards or something?” Zac said with a frown.

“Cards? Like a medieval key?” Jaol said with incomprehension. “Why would we have such a blatant security risk as keys that can be stolen?”

“I guess that means you’ll have to take me there,” Zac smiled.

“Are you crazy?! You will be spotted in ten seconds after leaving this place. There’s no one on this ship that has eye-augmentations that even slightly look like yours,” the comm’s officer staunchly refused. “We’ll both be dead within a minute.”

Zac snorted as he activated his Transformation skill, and the neverending black in his eyes quickly gave way to white sclera and irises. His deathly pale complexion gained life, and he was once again a normal human, at least outwardly indistinguishable from a technocrat human.

“Wha-“ Jaol sputtered as he looked up and down at Zac incredulously. “How is such a perfect transition possible? Not even the chimeral Transcenders are able to do something like this before reaching Class-3.”

“What’s with these classes you’re talking about?” Zac muttered. “Isn’t it just ranks?”

“We refuse to use the classifications of the Cursed Heavens,” Jaol said haughtily before remembering he was a hostage at the moment. “Uh, no offense.”

“So you’re just being obstinate? Each Class represents a grade?” Zac confirmed.

“Well, yes,” Jaol coughed.

“So can we go? And remember, our fates are bound together. I die, you die,” reminded his hostage.

“... You can’t.” Jaol sighed after a short silence. “That’s what I’ve been telling you. You have no implants, so the Ship will consider you an intruder. Only people with clearance will be able to walk around this ship. I don’t even understand how you can stand in my cabin without detection.”

Zac glared at Jaol before he looked around. The implicit meaning was that the technocrat had expected a rescue, but none seemed to be forthcoming. Zac’s brows furrowed with contemplation as he tried to figure out what was going on. Was it the System that protected him? The problem was that he had no idea if that protection extended out of the cabin he found himself in.

“So how do I get clearance?” Zac asked.

“Get clearance? Impossible. You aren’t even connected to the Multiverse Network through implants or your sigil, getting clearance is impossible. If it had been so easy we would have been infiltrated and extinguished long ago.

Zac felt a bit helpless as he looked around the room before he spotted a few small holes in the wall not far away. Did spaceships have air ducts? They should have, considering how many people were aboard. Perhaps if he cut through the floor he’d find whole service levels he could traverse instead. But before he could ask about it he suddenly had a thought, and his head snapped back toward Jaol.

“Sigils?” Zac said, an idea suddenly popping up in his head. “Like this?”

He took out the necklace that Leandra had left with his father before disappearing. He still hadn’t found any use for the thing, but it was obviously more than a simple piece of metal. It had been able to vibrate and move about in his Cosmos Sack

when he met the technocrat researcher back on earth, and it might have other functions that would be useful now.

He wasn't really worried about attracting his mother's enemies either, as he was transported god-knows-where by the System. If anything it might rather throw Firmament's Edge off the scent by thinking Leandra had popped up on this vessel.

The small token suddenly shuddered, making Zac worried he had activated some hidden alarm, but it quickly calmed down again. However, the technocrat hostage wasn't as calm as he looked up and down at Zac with confusion and fear.

"This is impossible!! How did you get such clearance?!" Jaol almost screamed.

"What are you talking about," Zac said, starting to get a bit exasperated by the rapid change of his captive's emotions. "And keep your voice down."

"A- I..." Jaol sputtered with clear hesitation on his face.

"Remember, if I get pushed into a corner I'll take you out before anything else," Zac muttered and pushed Jaol with his axe when it looked like the comm's officer was planning on cooking up another lie.

"I swear I don't understand! I don't recognize that insignia, but it has somehow given you Level 4-access on our ship! Even I only have Level 2-access. It uses some archaic access code I have never heard of before, designating you as a Council Inspector! What Council?!" Jaol blabbered.

Zac looked down at the necklace in his hand with mixed emotions. It looked like his mother had come through for him after all. He had already known that she was probably some sort of big shot among technocrats before something happened to make her turn traitor, and this seemed to further confirm it.

But where was she? Why had she left Earth and her alone, even to the point that her husband had died from the integration? Long repressed emotions threatened to run rampant as he held the sigil, but he quickly gathered his wits and focused on the task at hand.

"Is Level 4-access enough to get to the Shard?" Zac asked.

"No," Jaol said. "It gives access to all parts of the ship except critical areas that need the Captain's direct authorization. In other words, special authorization."

"Who has special access?"

"Just two people as far as I am aware. The Captain and Dr. Freid," Jaol said.

Messing with the captain was obviously out of the question, which only left him with one option.

"Who is Dr. Fried?" Zac probed.

"Uh, no idea," Jaol said.

"Jaol..." Zac growled threateningly.

The comms officer hesitated for a few seconds before he eventually reached towards his eyes, and literally pulled them out of their sockets. Zac couldn't stop himself from gaping in shock as the man handed his eyes to him. Zac unconsciously accepted them with confusion, before he looked back at Jaol with utter befuddlement.

The comms officer didn't say anything, but Zac noted that he had pointed his head down, and it almost looked like the empty sockets were staring straight at Zac's waist. Zac tried to follow the lack of vision, and he suddenly had a hunch of what was going on. He immediately stowed the two eyes into his Cosmos Sack.

"I put your eyes in my Spatial Tool," Zac said as he looked at the Technocrat with interest.

"I know, I just lost connection," Jaol nodded.

“What’s going on?” Zac asked.

“I don’t want any hard evidence of divulging information about Dr. Fried. He comes from a powerful corporation,” Jaol sighed. “Dr. Fried was sent by Deramex Dynamics, our employer’s employer. He’s an expert at force fields, and he is in charge of keeping the Shard of Creation restrained.”

“Sounds like he’s doing a pretty shit job,” Zac muttered as he tried to look anywhere except the two empty sockets that stared right at him.

Was this was it felt like talking with him when he was in his Draugr-form?

“Yes, well,” Jaol shrugged. “I don’t understand how that works, but he has set up multiple layers of restrictions around the shard in the middle of the bean. I’ve heard from a few guards that the problems we’ve seen are just the tip of the iceberg of what goes on within the containment field. Dr. Fried has said that the Shard does not like being without a host, and it resents being trapped.”

“Likes? Resents?” Zac asked with shock. “It’s alive?”

“It’s beyond me. Perhaps alive in the sense that a virus is alive?” Jaol ventured.

Zac felt like it was an apt description after having observed the Splinter in its prison over the past few months. It wasn’t an inert object, but it also didn’t feel sentient.

“What strength is the Doctor?” Zac asked.

“I think he’s late Class-2?” Jaol said hesitantly.

“Is he strong in combat?” Zac asked with a frown.

“I am pretty sure he’s a pure researcher,” Jaol said. “Their combat strength is on the lower end, but they no doubt have some means to protect themselves.”

Zac grunted in affirmation. This was exactly what he hoped for. The plan he had come up with was pretty simple. He’d use the necklace to get to Dr. Fried, kidnap the researcher, and use him as a keycard to the Shard. Seeing as the doctor seemed to have a pretty high status he might even be able to use him as a hostage to blow up the engines and pass the stage afterward.

“Do you know where to find him?” Zac asked.

“I can point you to his lab on the map,” Jaol quickly said. “It’s not too far, you’ll be able to get there easily.”

“Point on the map?” Zac smiled. “We’re going together.”

Jaol froze for a few seconds before he deflated with a sigh.

“Alright... Is there anything else I need to know about the doctor?” Zac asked.

Zac asked a few questions to gauge his strength, but Jaol didn’t seem to know too much. The researcher spent almost all his time split between his lab and by the Shard. He was also pretty haughty and barely socialized with the crew. He even seemed to have taken a superior stance toward the captain even if he was just a Class-2 non-combat class.

But that was fine with Zac. It meant that he would get his opportunity as long as he managed to get to the laboratory to set up an ambush.

“Okay, let’s go,” Zac finally said after he had asked everything he could think of.

“Well, you’re still looking a bit....” Jaol hesitantly said.

Zac looked down and immediately realized the problem. He looked like someone doing cosplay with his ancient robes and weaponry. It wouldn’t take an AI to figure out something was wrong if he walked down the corridors wearing cultivator’s robes. His

first idea was to take clothes from Jaol, but waving around an axe for months while focusing on Endurance and Strength had made his build pretty bulky.

Jaol was a head shorter and probably weighed 100 pounds less, so getting into his fitted uniform was impossible. It also seemed that the clothes they wore didn't have an automatic-fit like his robes. Sending Jaol out for a disguise was out of the question as well. The Technocrat would probably rat him out the second he was out of earshot, so Zac had to go with the second-best option.

"Call someone here. Someone with a similar build as mine," Zac said.

"A- alright. I need my eyes back then," Jaol said, and soon enough pushed back the two orbs into their respective sockets.

"So weird," Zac muttered.

Jaol didn't dare to comment, but he rather summoned a screen that appeared in front of him, looking a bit like the status screens that the system used. Zac saw a bunch of faces flash by on the screen until Jaol's eyes lit up. The screen disappeared the next moment, and Jaol slightly turned away.

"It's Jaol. Something is wrong with these calculations, could you assist me? I'll owe you one," Jaol started muttering out into thin air. "Well, it's a bit inconvenient, could you come to my compartment? Yes, I am sorry, I'll provide 10% of this month's salary as compensation."

"Well?" Zac asked.

"A colleague will come over in a minute, he is off for the day so no one will feel it out of place if he's not around," Jaol said, a small smile creeping up on his face for the first time since getting captured. "His build is pretty similar to yours as well."

"Why do you look so happy about this?" Zac asked with a raised brow.

"He's kind of a work rival, and we're up for the same promotion," Jaol said, looking a bit embarrassed. "If I have to live through this calamity I might as well drag him with me."

"Fair enough," Zac snorted as he walked next to the door. "But no funny business."

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**Chapter 454 - Undercover**

Jaol hurriedly nodded in response to Zac's warning as the ship schematic on the wall changed to a large array of complex schematics and diagrams. They didn't have to wait long until the sliding door opened, and a burly man stepped through, his eyes trained on Jaol who stood by the screen seemingly in deep thought.

"You better not be lying about pay-" the man said, but didn't get any further before he was on the ground twitching.

"Undress him and take away anything that he can use to warn people," Zac said.

"That's impossible. He has implants like everyone else. The moment you try to tamper with that a warning will go out," Jaol said with a shake of his head.

Zac thought for a few seconds before he took out a vial and threw over a pill to Jaol.

"Feed him this," Zac simply said.

"If he dies you will be exposed," the comms technician hesitantly said as he looked down on the pill with trepidation.

"It'll just make sure he won't wake up for a day or two," Zac explained.

A minute later Zac inspected himself in a monitor, and it felt like he was on some science fiction show as his clothing completely matched that of Jaol's. The clothes of the poor man who was now slumbering in Jaol's sleeping pod was a bit long and snug, but it was a passable fit that shouldn't arouse any attention from a casual glance.

"Let's go," Zac said as he cracked his neck. "Take me to Dr. Fried's laboratory."

"I-" Jaol said before he sighed and shook his head. "Fine, let's go. Try not to speak. If anyone asks, we're heading toward the research department because the scanning equipment has been broken by the Shard. This is actually true, but it's a low priority compared to the engines. It would have been better if I had a gift. Some might see this as me taking the chance to suck up to the doctor."

Zac nodded, feeling it wasn't a bad idea.

"What kind of gift?" Zac probed.

"Rare materials and stuff like that. Something I could pretend to have picked up on the planet we just visited and wanted to use as a bribe," Jaol thoughtfully said.

"I have a few things," Zac said before he froze as he looked down at his Spatial Ring.

He hurriedly reached for his pouch, but he breathed out in relief when he saw that all items were still there even though he wasn't inside the tower. But what did that mean? Were all his items safe? Or would the confiscation still happen the moment the trial ended? Perhaps it was even possible to cheat the System this way by sending out everything he had gained. But he obviously couldn't trust Jaol to come through and send his amassed wealth back to Earth.

Even if Zac somehow managed to make Jaol obey, did the technocrat even have the ability to follow through? They could be anywhere in the multiverse right now, and there was probably no way for some random technocrat to find his sector, let alone Earth. Zac eventually threw out a handful of random materials he hadn't figured out the use of.

"This...!" Jaol said with wide eyes as he looked at the items that emitted strong fluctuation.

"So?"

"Ah? Yes, yes," Jaol hurriedly said as he reached out and took one of the items, a piece of purple wood.

It was something that Zac picked up on the 6th floor. He had noticed that a tree survived even though Zac fought right next to it. The bark was extremely durable and was even able to resist being cut with the Fragment of the Axe twice. Strangely enough, the whole tree withered when Zac cut it down to bring with him, leaving only the plank-sized piece of lumber intact.

"A piece of wood is actually valuable among technocrats?" Zac asked curiously as he saw Jaol's excitement.

"Well, no. It is rather the unique energy signature of the material that is valuable. We can extract it and infuse it in an alloy to make a stronger material," Jaol said without taking his eyes off the piece of wood. "My preliminary reading says that it should be able to increase the durability of many alloys by some degree."

Zac shrugged and the two finally left the compartment, and they found themselves in a luxuriant hallway. It didn't feel cramped at all like how it often was with cruise liners back on Earth, but the hallway was almost ten meters wide with the

occasional seats and greenery. There was even a small artificial river running along the middle, creating a soothing atmosphere. Zac wasn't there to sightsee though and they hurried toward the center of the ship.

Soon enough they reached a door that seemed to be a checkpoint between sectors, and Zac noticed how stiff Jaol looked as he waited for it to open. But the door slid open without any issue, making them both release a breath in relief as they kept going. It looked like the insignia left by Leandra really worked like some sort of universal key.

It only took a few minutes of walking for the surroundings to quickly change. Zac remembered the map he had studied, and they now were in the sector where the cabins housed over ten people each. The hallways had become a lot more cramped, and there were even missing platings and exposed wires seen at spots.

Zac was surprised at the stark contrast between different parts of the ship. Jaol's compartment and the section around it were hypermodern, with not a speck of dust in the fancy hallways.

"This looks more run-down than what I would have expected," Zac muttered with a low voice as they passed through the barracks and a large mess hall. "It's like this part will fall off at any moment."

"Well..." Jaol coughed. "We're a freelance freight-class vessel bought from an auction selling off the inventory of a defunct company. The ship itself is well over four thousand years old and long due for an overhaul. The section where I and the higher-ups live was refurbished five years ago, but this section..."

"Four thousand years?" Zac exclaimed with surprise.

A thousand years wasn't much in the world of cultivation, but he knew how quickly technology failed back on Earth. A machine holding together for a couple of decades was a nigh-miracle, and this spaceship had stayed in one piece over thousands of years and countless missions?

"Are there no teleporters on the ship?" Zac asked after they had walked a while.

They had passed through a seemingly endless number of passageways and were currently passing through what seemed to be a large mess hall. They had passed some people by now, but Zac was relieved to see that they only shot Jaol, or rather the piece of lumber in his arms, a curious glance before continuing with their business.

"There are a few for emergencies," Jaol said after a few seconds. "But we can't use them. They require a lot of energy to power to use. In other words it is a waste of money."

"Jaol!" a voice reached them from the other side of the shabby mess-hall, and Zac looked over to see a stout woman wave and walk over toward them.

"Deal with this," Zac simply said with a low voice before he looked away.

"Ah, Kerven," Jaol weakly smiled as he turned around to face the woman who curiously looked at them. "I thought you were on duty today?"

"Can't do anything until the changes stop. The thing is acting up again," the woman muttered as she curiously looked back and forth between Zac and the piece of wood in Jaol's arms. "What are you up to? Isn't this your day off?"

"I, ah... I was planning on seeing if I could pick Dr. Fried's brain about our problems. This is just a small token of my appreciation."

"Uh, huh," she said with a raised brow before she shrugged. "Well, I won't keep you up."

Zac's eyes followed her as he walked away, and some killing intent started to leak as he frowned. The splinter in his mind had woken up a few minutes ago,

demanding blood to be spilled. Jaol's eyes widened in horror as he sensed the dangerous aura that Zac was leaking, and he tried dragged Zac toward the exit.

The door closed behind them and Zac took a ragged breath before he shot the technician a shot.

"Let's go," he said and started walking again.

"We're almost there," Jaol answered with a sigh.

It took them almost half an hour to reach the center of the ship, the massive ball that contained both the containment field for the Shard of Creation and Dr. Fried's temporary lab. Luckily enough they didn't meet a single guard until they reached the laboratory itself, and Zac felt the ship was a bit overly reliant on the AI and the security doors.

He couldn't be sure, but it seemed like it shouldn't be too hard for an assassin-type Cultivator like Faceless #9 to cause severe damage to a ship with as lax security as this.

However, the door leading into the lab was guarded by two men wearing some sort of tactical gear and holding some sort of energy batons. They didn't feel like real warriors to Zac, but rather security guards who were there to make sure that no one peeked at the researcher's lab without authorization.

"I am Jaol Kresson, Junior Deputy of the Communications Department. We're here to see Dr. Fried if possible to ask a few questions about how to deal with the recent disturbances from the cargo. I brought a small token of my appreciation that I think will pique the doctor's interest," Jaol said with a slimy smile as he stepped forward.

"The Doctor is out," the guard slowly said after having looked at the piece of spiritual wood for a few seconds. "Let me-"

He didn't get further though as Zac moved forward like a ghost and punched the guard straight in his face as **[Everlasting]** appeared from his Spatial Ring slammed into the other guard simultaneously. One of the soldiers immediately went down whereas the other one required another jab before he lay unmoving on the ground.

"Hurry," Zac said as he grabbed the two unconscious men and carried them into the laboratory.

Jaol quickly bent over and wiped a spot of blood before he followed after with a face as white as a mask. Zac guessed he hadn't seen a lot of action up-close, and the situation was getting a bit tense. He had no idea if his actions just now had caused some hidden alarm to go off, but he had acted by instinct when he saw the guard activating his communication device. Jaol looked at Zac like he was a lunatic though, and Zac started to worry that the comm's officer might do something stupid from desperation.

"Stay calm," Zac whispered. "We'll stow these two in some corner, and after I've captured Dr. Fried you're free to go."

"Yes, yes," Jaol fervently nodded. "How did you know the door to the lab would open?"

"I-" Zac said with raised brows. "Huh. I just figured it would open like all the other ones?"

Jaol's mouth opened as though he wanted to say something, but he slowly closed it again and instead helped move the two guards so that they were hidden beneath a desk in the inner part of the laboratory.

Zac fed them a double dose of his knock-out pills even if the guards were just early E-Grade at best. He didn't want them waking up any time soon even if he started

to cause a ruckus when the doctor returned. However, because he had acted so fast he had no idea where the doctor was or when he would return. He didn't dare walk around and look for Dr. Fried though as Zac wasn't meant to be here. He could be stopped at any moment, at which point the jig would be up.

He could only hope that the doctor would return to the lab soon enough. But the minutes passed as the two sat in an increasingly oppressive silence, and Zac was starting to get worried. His eyes were slowly growing bloodshot and his mind was awash with murderous thoughts.

The splinter was making itself reminded, and the effect was even worse than usual. Was it angry because of the close proximity to the Shard? Zac could only bear with it for the moment as he took out a soul crystal to try and soothe his soul.

"Your ship isn't quite what I was expecting," Zac finally grunted, grasping for some topic of conversation to distract himself. "It seems you're using a lot of old technology together with newer ones."

"Old technology? All technology is old," Jaol said, seemingly more than happy to break the silence.

"What do you mean? Don't you come up with new things and improve?" Zac said with a frown. "Isn't that the whole point of your factions?"

"Where did you hear that?" Jaol asked with confusion.

"I-" Zac said, but stopped himself when he realized he had no idea.

He had just assumed that the Technocrat factions were somewhat like Earth before the integration, constantly figuring out new things. But then again, the Technocrat faction was Billions of years old. Had they reached a point where they couldn't progress any further?

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**Chapter 455 - The Machine God Faction**

"We're in the 43<sup>rd</sup> age right now," Jaol said, seemingly understanding Zac's thoughts. "Each age represents the pinnacle of technology taking a step forward, which usually resulted in a trickle-down effect that empowered the whole Technocrat faction. But almost all of these ages took place in the early stages of the System Era, before it was as powerful as today. The current has lasted for over 70 million years."

"So you keep doing the same thing over and over again, with no improvement?" Zac asked.

"Isn't Heaven's Path the same?" Jaol muttered. "Cultivating and fighting, doing the same over and over again."

"I guess," Zac shrugged. "So how do you improve? How do you become more powerful?"

"Work and save Bits, buy upgrades for myself," Jaol slowly said. "I've been working on this freight for 4 years, and I was planning on performing my fourth overhaul with my savings along with the reward for completing this mission. But now..."

"So money can simply solve all your problems? You get rich enough and you'll instantly shoot to Class-3?" Zac probed with interest.

Jaol hesitated again, seemingly unsure whether he should answer.

"I don't believe that this is some secret information of your faction. I can probably buy an information packet anywhere explaining this in detail," Zac said.

"Well, I guess you're right. I doubt I can get in any more trouble than I already am," Jaol sighed.

*I wouldn't be so sure about that, Zac thought.*

Zac wasn't about to say that he not only wanted to steal the shard but also destroy the ship's engines if possible. In fact, he had been consciously vague about what he wanted to do just in case there was some built-in warning system in everyone's head that woke up if he mentioned stuff like 'blowing up the engine' or 'stealing the cargo'.

There was no telling what safeguards the ship had against its employees. Jaol was pretty forthcoming, but Zac had already noticed that the technocrat had tried to hide vital information to trip Zac up multiple times. There was no way he'd warn him that there were certain things he couldn't say without sending an alert to the captain.

"So? What's stopping you from shooting up to Class-3?" Zac asked.

"Well, first of all, I don't have the money for such an upgrade. But secondly, my soul isn't strong enough," Jaol shrugged. "I would need to drastically strengthen it to be able to support that level of power. I honestly doubt I'll ever get there unless Little Bean suddenly strikes it rich with a lucky encounter."

Zac was about to say that it was a bit unscientific for a technocrat to believe in souls, but he stopped himself after realize that really wasn't the case. He only needed to look inward to see irrefutable proof that the soul existed. Ignoring that in favor of some sort of atheistic technology-centered world-view was akin to burying one's head in the sand by this point.

"You're a soul cultivator?" Zac asked with confusion, some alarm bells going off in his head after his recent encounters.

"Not as the people following Heaven's Path would see it," Jaol said after some hesitation. "Did you board our ship without even basic knowledge of our capabilities?"

Zac only glared in response, making Jaol shrink back again.

"Well. I think you people call us the Machine God Faction, and I guess that is accurate. Our 'cultivation' is essentially slowly upgrading our body parts one by one. For example. My eyes have been improved, along with most of my organs. I no longer require food, but I rather run on energy cells."

"You're turning yourself into robots?" Zac asked with shock.

"Is it any different with you? Your body is a biomechanical machine controlled by electrical impulses from your brain and nervous system. We are simply upgrading the machine we were born with to become stronger and more durable. The Captain is completely augmented by this point, for example," Jaol said, some jealousy evident in his eyes.

"So he's immortal?" Zac asked with surprise. "If you can call a robot that."

"Robots and Transhumans are different things," Jaol said with a shake of his head. "Transhumans have souls, robots do not. The captain is not immortal, as his soul age over time. True consciousness is the foundation of life, and it is not something that can be created. At least not until the Machine God awakens. At that point, we'll all be able to digitize our souls and reach immortality."

"So that's what you're fighting for?" Zac asked curiously.

The vision was reminiscent of how some people on Earth wanted to download their minds onto computers and live forever. Some had even believed that the technology for something like that would be invented within their lifetime, if the

integration hadn't taken place that is. It looked like the reality wasn't quite so simple as the Machine God Faction had been working toward that goal for billions of years.

"Well, the big shots are, I guess?" Jaol said. "Most of us are just trying to live our lives."

"So what's the point of upgrading soul if you're a machine? You said your soul is too weak to become Class-3," Zac said.

"As we upgrade our bodies our components become increasingly complex while the materials become more and more exotic. But more importantly, the components are infused with the deeper truths of the universe, what you call the Dao. The soul is the core of a being, and it is connected to every component. The stronger a module is, the larger the demands are on your soul. If your mind is not strong enough you won't be able to control it. Worst case the components will put such a strain on your mind that your soul breaks," Jaol explained.

Zac felt that it was an interesting alternative to traditional cultivation. They somehow directly infused their bodies with the Dao rather than learning it and used their souls as some sort of spiritual battery. It seemed like a mortal would be better off as a Technocrat than cultivating the normal path by the sound of it. The only cultivation that mattered was that of the soul, and anyone could do that, even himself with his zero aptitudes.

"So you still need to cultivate in Soul Strengthening Manuals to progress?" Zac snorted. "Isn't that bit ironic?"

"Soul Strengthening was there long before the System, so it's not really a part of Heaven's Path. Besides, our methods are more refined," Jaol said.

"More refined how?" Zac asked with interest, almost moving over to search the technocrat again for soul strengthening secrets.

Fixing his soul was a top priority, and he wasn't above abusing whatever means the Technocrats had. He didn't have the ingrained distrust, or even hatred, of the Dao of Technology like many of the old forces of the Multiverse. He'd use any tool that he could get to protect himself and the people around him. If the Technocrat had some bioengineered elixir to give his soul a power-up he'd drink it in a heartbeat.

"We train through the Neural Network. Our company gives access to a decent algorithm, and as a Comm's Officer I can use the facilities 20 hours a week," Jaol said with some pride.

It turned out that all the Technocrats were connected to a virtual universe through their implants. But it wasn't actually virtual, as one's soul entered the network as an avatar. It was perhaps more apt to call it a synthetic spiritual world, where distances were irrelevant as it existed in another plane of reality.

It honestly sounded like something that should have been created by a great mentalist faction, but it was rather constructed by the Technocrats. It was the piece of technology that defined the sixth era, and it was still considered one of the five greatest inventions among the Technocrat factions. It only went to show how important the soul was for them. It was the whole base of their identity, whereas their body was just a transient and exchangeable coil.

Inside this world were Training Facilities where one could slowly strengthen their souls with the help of some sort of advanced algorithms. There were both public facilities where one could train in return for an hourly fee, but the results in such places were pretty average. Most corporations had their own Soul Strengthening Algorithms, and getting access to those kinds of facilities were one of the means to attract talents to their force.

Even more conveniently, it turned out that Technocrats could access the network while sleeping, so they could work on their Souls at night without disturbing their daily routines. Stronger people could even allocate a part of their minds to constantly train inside the network while going about their days.

Even Zac couldn't help but feel a bit jealous at the convenience of the Neural Network. It was accessible from almost anywhere within their domains, and it was even possible to reach it from much of integrated space. How convenient wouldn't it be if he could gain access to such a place?

"Can anyone enter?" Zac asked.

"Of course," Jaol said, but Zac felt like his robotic eyes were a bit teasing. "You just need to implant a neural device or be given access by one of the other two factions. That will mark you as a member of the Boundless Path though, and you wouldn't be able to live peacefully among cultivators."

Zac wryly smiled and discarded the thought. He had enough problems on his hands, and there was no need to make the whole Multiverse his enemy just to get access to those training facilities, especially when his own Soul Strengthening Manual was probably equivalent to some of the best training algorithms.

"Wait, what is this Boundless and Heaven's Path you keep mentioning?" Zac suddenly asked. "Is it the same as Orthodox and Unorthodox forces?"

He remembered seeing the Boundless Path being mentioned during the quest to take out the Technocrat Incursion, but he had never heard much about it since then. People in his sector only divided factions in orthodox and unorthodox as far as he could tell.

"It's related, but also different. I feel that you cultivators don't really understand our factions because they bunch us together with a bunch of lunatics," Jaol said.

"How so?"

"We're not some heretics trying to tear the world apart. We just want to live free from the control of an insane AI run amok. What good has the so-called System brought to the world? Endless strife and suffering, and for what? Nurturing powerhouses for a war that is long over?" Jaol said with conviction in his eyes. "Yet we're being hunted from all directions because we threaten the interest of the powerful factions who rely on the System to stay in control."

"Do you really think that the universe would be so much better off if you managed to destroy the System?" Zac snorted, though what the technocrat said did somewhat resonate with him.

"At least we would be free," Jaol muttered.

"You still haven't explained the difference," Zac reminded.

"The System is a guidance system, but it also a limitation. A prison. The Boundless Faction are those who don't want to bow down to a false Heaven," Jaol said. "The factions who follow the Path of Technology are part of the Boundless Faction, but so are many cultivators. Some of the cultivators are sinners who try to take shortcuts through nefarious means, but there are also righteous factions."

"Why would normal cultivators choose to cultivate outside the System?" Zac said skeptically. "It seems to create a lot of problems for oneself for no gain."

"Because the Path of Technology wasn't the only path that got cut off when Emperor Limitless began his mad experiment. Some paths are missing, others are broken," Jaol said.

“How do you know all this?” Zac asked. “No offense, but you kind of seem like a nobody.”

The comms officer glared at Zac before he quickly remembered where he was and deflated again.

“Everyone knows. The origin of our factions and our goals is something that everyone learns in school,” Jaol said. “Besides, my teacher told us that the stronger you cultivators are, the more likely you are to belong to the Boundless Faction. The Pinnacle Warriors and Emperors can see the truth of the false heavens, and join the Boundless Path to continue their journey.”

Zac obviously wouldn't believe something Jaol had been told by some war-time propaganda teacher, but perhaps there was some truth to it. Why would people decide to go against the System? Were there some problems that arose at the higher Grades that forced people away from the conventional path?

But then again, did it matter? He had never heard of anything like that in his sector, so even if it was true then it was some problem that was far far away from him. He had barely taken the first step of cultivation, and he wasn't much better than some random hillbilly.

“Where do you get the components then? Just buy them at a market, or do you make them yourself?” Zac asked.

“You need to contract a manufacturer or work for a company that has manufacturing lines. It's another thing that separates good from bad corporations,” Jaol said. “Almost all my components are acquired at a discount through my employer.”

“So companies are essentially like sects?” Zac asked. “They both provide body upgrades and Soul Strengthening Manuals?”

“I guess you could say that,” Jaol slowly nodded. “Corporations have a database of components that provide high synergy with each other. So the best is to move up the ranks within the company to get access to matching parts of the same series. There's a high risk of compatibility issues arising if you mix and match at random.”

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#### **Chapter 456 - Dr. Fried**

It sounded to Zac like corporations had something very similar to the Heritages of the traditional factions. But instead of Cultivation manuals and instructions on what classes and Titles to get, the Technocrat Corporations instead had manufacturing blueprints and lists of components that worked well together.

“Are everyone in your company equally strong if you have the same components then? Sounds like a weakness for a force,” Zac said skeptically.

“Well, some parts are custom made to fit with our soul frequency, and compatibility with standard components differ between people,” Jaol explained. “So there will always be some differences.”

“Does it matter where you buy the components from though, as long as the compatibility is high? Isn't the same no matter where you go if all technology is old?”

“I'm sure two swords crafted by two different blacksmiths are not the same. One might have better materials or benefit from a secret crafting technique. It's the same

with us. There are billions of Class-1 Materials out there, meaning there is an almost endless number of combinations of body parts to choose from.

“A good component might perform a few percent better than a similar one from a competitor, and certain components might have a synergy that improves performance even further. These incremental advantages really tack up when you consider the number of components a single Transhuman carries. Elite Class-1 Transhumans from peak forces can easily annihilate a Mid Class-2 Transhumans with shoddy components,” Jaol said.

Zac nodded in understanding, and he couldn't help but find some humor at how similar things between Technocrats and Cultivators were, even though they were of completely opposing philosophies. The situation was exactly the same as the one he found himself in. He had gained one incremental advantage after another with the help of his titles and second class, and these small advantages had tacked up into something immense by now.

There was no comparing himself with an average cultivator like the weaker Demon Warriors. He would be able to take out them by the hundreds, if not thousands, by now. The System played favorites, and the average cultivator was nothing but fertilizer for the elite few.

“So you can't change jobs if you want to keep upgrading?” Zac asked. “Because of component synergy.”

“There are often some rules where we can still contract our old employer for a set amount of years after changing job, but most choose to do a large overhaul of components to reform their core if they change force. This will incur a huge cost, but it will allow them to incrementally improve by swapping out components one by one again with the help of their new employer,” Jaol said. “Real elites are even given welcoming packages of full component sets upon getting headhunted.”

The two kept talking as they waited for the doctor to return to his office, and Zac quickly got a pretty decent understanding of the Technocrats, or at least the Machine God faction that Jaol belonged to. And just as he had expected, they weren't better or worse than any other people he had encountered before.

They simply represented a different world-view compared to the factions working within the System's rules. But it was also clear that they weren't any better than the ruthless factions that could slaughter each other for a little bit of wealth.

The struggle for resources was extremely intense, and there were huge societal differences between the classes. The lower classes worked themselves to the bone to be able to upgrade to higher Classes and provide a better future for their progeny, or just to prolong their lives with the technologies that emulated the effects of Race upgrades.

Meanwhile, the massive corporations and families held almost all of the wealth and technology to themselves, almost making themselves into gods among men. Zac himself wasn't very convinced by Jaol's world view. Personally, he felt the System was like the weather. You couldn't control it and it sometimes screwed you over, but it was part of life. It certainly had a hand in a lot of the struggle across the multiverse, but things might become even more chaotic if it disappeared.

Zac wasn't just interrogating Jaol to make conversation and distract himself from the whispers of the Splinter, but it was also to understand the technology he had back home. He had gotten his hands on whole production lines and massive fabricators, so he had hoped he'd be able to produce massive weapons that would be able to blow The Great Redeemer to kingdom come if he showed up.

But it appeared that there were multiple issues with his plan. Not only would such powerful weapons be powered by his soul, but he would also need the blueprints for that kind of weaponry. There was also the issue of his fabrication machines. The ones he owned were no doubt Class-1 fabricators, and would therefore be unable to manufacture higher-class items.

Finally, there was the issue of retaliation. Small infractions didn't seem to bother the System, but if you went too big relying on technology you'd land in a heap of trouble, just like the Little Bean did by launching orbital strikes.

He also wanted to know as much as possible of how cultivation worked among technocrats to better be able to help and protect his sister. With Jeeves in her head, she could be considered a technocrat, and it looked like he would have to somehow come up with a Soul Strengthening Manual for her. Normal components put a strain on a technocrat's soul, and he could only imagine that miraculous technology like Jeeves would be even more demanding.

He even tried making Jaol download the Soul Strengthening Algorithm he used, but it seemed as though there were heavy restrictions to stop any such theft. Zac also wasn't comfortable letting Kenzie onto the Neural Network because of the risk of getting exposed. At least he hoped she hadn't found her way onto the network yet. The System was blocking Earth from the multiverse, and he could only pray that it also included the network.

Unfortunately, it looked like the doctor was quite tied up somewhere, and over an hour passed without anyone entering the lab. The long bout of inactivity along with the raving Splinter started to take its toll, and Zac eventually had no choice but to stab his two shoulders and resume his experiments.

A fountain of blood erupted in all directions as a bronze flash burst out through his arm and decimated some machinery near-by, leaving Jaol gobsmacked at the other side of the room.

"What's taking so long?" Zac panted as his murky eyes filled with killing intent were trained on the comm's officer.

"I- ah..." Jaol stammered after he saw the outwardly unhinged actions of Zac. "I don't know. If it's alright with you I can access our network to see if anything has happened."

Zac thought for a moment before he walked over next to the comm's officer as he dragged out the bleeding daggers from his shoulders.

"Do it. No funny-business," Zac reminded.

Jaol hurriedly nodded as a screen appeared in front of him. A series of screens and rows of texts appeared in rapid succession, and Zac had no way to understand what was going on. Was this what it felt like for his grandfather when Zac set up his computer back before he passed?

"Something odd has happened," Jaol eventually said. "There are over ten incident reports due to mutations, causing problems all over the ship. There are usually some things that need fixing since we acquired the cargo, but not to this degree."

"The Shard has become more active?" Zac asked with a frown.

"It seems like it," Jaol said before he shot a hesitant look at Zac. "It seemed to have started shortly after you boarded the ship."

"So you don't think the Doctor will be coming back here? He's busy putting out fires?" Zac asked.

"I don't think so? He has never helped with repairs before. I think Dr. Fried is more interested in taking readings of the Shard than helping the Little Bean, but that

also means he probably will come back here to go over the results sooner or later,” Jaol ventured.

Luckily they didn't have to wait too much longer as the door suddenly opened as Zac sat poised to strike. However, instead of a person a small ball flew inside, and alarm bells immediately set off in Zac's mind.

He pushed forward to rush out of the laboratory, but his eyes widened in alarm as **[Loamwalker]** refused to activate. Only then did he realize that he was in outer space, whereas the skill needed to be connected to the earth to work. The ball detonated in a massive shockwave the next moment, and Zac found himself thrown into a wall as he was almost blinded by a piercing light.

His ears were ringing and he was completely blinded, but his eyes weren't the only way for him to see what was going on. Dozens of fractal trees rose from the metallic ground inside the lab and the area outside the next moment, and Zac was once again inside a forest.

The augmented vision from **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** showed that a dozen robots were waiting outside, seemingly controlled by two Technocrats standing behind with an array of screens in front of them. There was also somber-looking Transhuman wearing a white robe spectating from behind, and Zac immediately recognized Dr. Fried from a picture Jaol had shown him.

His conventional vision was just a blur from the grenade, but he still navigated himself outside as a storm of leaves spread out around him.

“It's an intruder!” one of the two guards exclaimed with shock.

Had they just thought they were dealing with some corporate espionage or some curious crewmember who wanted to take a gander at the doctor's research? Zac felt he had caught a lucky break as he shot out a rapid series of Fractal Blades. The blades managed to destroy half the machines, but the remaining ones unleashed an unrelenting barrage of attacks. Both the technocrats were unscathed as well as dense shields had blocked the two strikes he had launched at them.

Zac dodged most of the attacks even if he was blind, but he found out that the projectiles automatically detonated into a kinetic storm that contained some mysterious energy that almost completely ignored the leaves of **[Nature's Barrier]** and caused painful wounds across his body.

But to a warrior who had an effective Endurance of over two thousand, the lacerations could barely be considered a wound at all, and Verun lit up in a sanguine glow as Zac appeared right between the two controllers. A wide arc of death ended with the two Technocrats falling into puddles of blood and what looked like mercury, but Zac had already moved on to his real target.

Zac grabbed the throat of the old researcher before he had a chance to react at all. He looked pretty much like a normal human in his thirties, except for being silver. Was this the mark of higher-tier components? The mechanical parts of Jaol were easily discernable, but Zac could barely tell that the throat he was gripping wasn't actually skin.

“I am working for Deramex Dynamics,” Dr. Fried said with a calm voice as he looked into the eyes of Zac. “You should know the price we've paid for retrieving this item. I do not know which force you belong to, but we will respond in kind if this mission goes awry. My private emergency vessel is untraceable and anchored at the end of that corridor, it requires no authorization to use. Leave now and this will be the end of it.”

“The Undead Empire would welcome your company's attempts at revenge. I am sure some Lich would find your weird bodies an excellent source for experiments,” Zac smiled, ignoring the offer.

Blaming the Undead Empire for his actions had become almost ingrained by now. Some day Karma might come knocking, but for now they made an excellent boogiemer to blame all evil on. It was less convincing when he was in his human form, but the undead probably had a bunch of living lackeys that got things done for them in the life-attuned territories.

The doctor only snorted in response, and Zac's eyes widened when the man's head disintegrated into nothing as a massive blast was released from the torso of the researcher. There was no warning at all, and Zac was flung into a wall with a searing pain in his chest. However, he had managed to activate one of the defensive charges of his robes at the last moment, which had absorbed over half of the damage.

The surprise attack wasn't the real issue though, it was the fact that the doctor seemingly had blown his own head up. How would he use the man's special authorization to get to the Shard if he was dead?

"Behind you!" Jaol suddenly shouted, and Zac immediately looked back only to see a floating head fleeing in the distance.

A cannon-ball ripped through the air and knocked the head into a wall less than a second after the shout, and Zac flashed over and picked up the seemingly unconscious Dr. Fried. There was no stream of energy entering his body at least, which indicated that the technocrat was alive. In fact, he hadn't even got any energy for "killing" the two controllers, and Zac was starting to suspect that you needed to destroy the souls of the warriors of the Machine God faction, or at least destroy some sort of core component.

Zac looked down at the head in satisfaction as he jogged back toward Jaol. He had barely needed to use any energy to capture his target, which would allow him to go all out against the defenses surrounding the Shard.

The Machine-God faction didn't have key-cards, but this was the second-best thing. Now that he knew that the head could teleport he was also infusing it with the Fragment of the Coffin to keep it in place, which hopefully would work with Technocrat tech as well.

As for whether the doctor was actually unconscious or acting, he didn't care. Unless the man had planted a bomb inside his head he was likely not a threat any longer. It was fine by him if he wanted to play dead as long as he managed to get past the massive security doors and their accompanying shields that were currently blocking his path.

Jaol had moved out from the lab sometime during the battle, and he was currently looking at the destruction around him with dismay. Zac felt a bit bad about the fate waiting for the guy, but he suddenly had a thought.

"Do you use Nexus Coins?" Zac asked.

"No, but we can trade them with Bits for a small fee," Jaol mumbled with a hollow voice.

Zac nodded and immediately transferred 100 million Nexus Coins to the comm's officer. Jaol's eyes widened in shock, probably because 100 million Nexus Coins was more than he'd make in a decade, perhaps a lifetime, at his current post.

"You no longer need to stay undercover on this ship," Zac smiled as he said with a voice that carried far and wide, which quickly changed Jaol's face from excitement into horror. "Thank you for your assistance, I wouldn't have come this far without you. There is a ship down that corridor according to the doctor, I suggest you take it before reinforcements arrive."

With that Zac flashed away with Dr. Fried's head in his grip.

Jaol looked at the receding back of his captor with mute incomprehension for a few seconds, before his eyes turned to the two unmoving controllers on the ground. Indecision gnawed at him, but only for so long.

He rushed inside the lab and he quickly put everything valuable and untraceable into his Subspace Container. He would need every resource he could get if he had to flee to a lawless zone where Deramex Dynamics wouldn't be able to find him.

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#### **Chapter 457 - Desolation**

Zac's large donation was compensation for pushing Jaol's fate off-course, but it wasn't completely born from benevolence. Such a huge sum would draw massive suspicion toward the comms officer, and his end would no doubt be pretty horrible if he stayed on the ship.

But the same probably held even if Zac hadn't done it. The guy seemed pretty shell-shocked, and Zac was afraid he didn't understand the severity of the situation. This way he forced the guy into action to save his skin. It was both an apology and a threat. Jaol could take that money and escape, taking the knowledge of Zac with him.

Of course, the easiest solution would have been to kill Jaol, but it wouldn't sit right with him. Zac's actions of reciprocity with Thelim, the Ent back on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor, had opened his eyes to an important truth. Giving back or severing Karma wasn't only vital for Karmic cultivators, but everyone.

If he had cut down Jaol after having received help with the heist and all that valuable information it would have festered like an untreated wound in the back of his head. So he could only rely on this little ploy to deal with him instead. The money was a huge sum to most people in the F-grade, but it was almost nothing to Zac, especially after looting the mentalist. Just one of her dresses was probably worth five times that amount, and there were over a dozen of them.

He was already rushing toward the containment center, but Zac was observing the young technocrat through **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**. He saw Jaol run inside and snatch some things from the laboratory before fleeing toward the escape vessel as fast as his legs could carry him.

Zac nodded in satisfaction as he ran to the metallic gates guarding the room housing the Shard, and he breathed out in relief when they soundlessly slid open without prompting. He was thankful he hadn't gone full musclebrain as he had initially considered as he saw the doors were over two meters thick with three layers of hidden energy shields within.

There was no way he would have been able to cut through such an arrangement in short order.

The interior chamber was massive, with a ceiling height of well over a hundred meters. It was inside the core of the ship, the monstrous spherical construction that had given the ship its name. The cubic chamber that housed the Shard just took up a part of it though, even with its impressive size. It was a good reminder that the ship was like a flying city, and he wondered if completely crippling it had ever been on the table for an F-Grade warrior like himself.

Roughly fifteen technocrats were standing inside the room, and they looked up with shock at the intrusion. None of them seemed like a threat though so Zac rather

focused on the giant ball with a diameter of 100 meters in the middle. It was the outer shielding that protected the ship from the Shard, and dozens of tubes as large as a man ran along the floor from the right, likely powering the thing up.

Zac could barely discern another, far smaller, shield inside the ball. But further within, there was just a radiant light, like they had captured a miniature sun. He couldn't actually see the Shard of Creation, but he was sure it was within the core. This was somewhat proven by the fact that the splinter in his mind was fully raging by this point, pushing the Miasmic Cage to its limits.

He was considering how he could use the doctor's head to pass by the defenses when an alarm suddenly started blaring out from hidden speakers as dozens of robotic sentries rose from the ground. The seemingly empty containment chamber had turned into a battlefield in an instant. The technocrats didn't seem to be combatants though as they fled for their lives through a smaller exit in the back.

Zac didn't stop their escape as they were essentially civilians, and he had given up subterfuge by now.

Bad turned to worse as a dangerous spike in his mind prompted him to quickly discard the head, just in time before it exploded in a concentrated gush of purple plasma that immediately melted the reinforced ground where it landed. Zac couldn't believe the professor would up and kill himself.

But Zac's brows rose when a cylindrical box inside the inner layer released some steam and opened up, at which point Dr. Fried stepped outside, completely unscathed. Soul Transfer or a backup body? The technocrats were full of weird means.

"Thank you for carrying me the last stretch," the doctor snorted as a series of clanking sounds echoed out from within his body. "Good thing I kept a few spares in case something happened with the treasure."

Zac wanted to retort something clever, but he couldn't come up with anything before he was bombarded with attacks from the robotic guards that had repositioned themselves to protect the power supply of the shield.

It seemed the sentries had only held back due to the presence of Dr. Fried's head, but now they weren't restricted any longer. Zac furiously charged the closest machine as he released **[Nature's Barrier]** along with **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** to turn the surroundings into his domain.

He knew his time was limited as the captain could appear at any moment.

He needed to break through the shield in front of him, but the machines kept blasting him with concussive projectiles that threw him off-balance. It wasn't enough to hurt him as the leaves still absorbed most of the damage, but it did slow him down considerably.

Three furious swings with **[Verun's Bite]** crushed the thick shield protecting the robot, and another one cleaved it in two. He tried launching a few fractal blades at the shield next, but they were actually shot down mid-air by the remaining sentries. Zac grunted in annoyance and glanced at the machines, but he didn't have time to figure out his next step before his danger sense went off again.

He quickly flashed away with **[Loamwalker]**, and it was just in time as a substantial explosion erupted where he had just stood, making him realize the machines were triggered to blow up the moment they were out of commission.

"It's useless," the voice of Dr. Fried drifted over, and Zac's eyes widened when he looked over.

A massive machine had appeared seemingly out of nowhere, looking like a mix of a walking crystal ball and a mecha. It had eight sturdy spider legs that held a platform

in the air. On top of it, a ten-meter crystal ball rested, and it resembled the containment shields a bit. Finally, there was a platform on top that the doctor himself stood on.

Over a hundred thin arms reached down from the upper dais, and appendages ended with small satellites pointed at the crystal ball from every direction. It looked to Zac like they were used to restrain the ball in the middle, and he could understand why. A chaotic swirl of febrile energies rushed around inside the crystal, and Zac started to wonder if the crazy researcher had turned the Shard of Creation into a weapon.

Zac immediately launched a series of fractal blades at the outer shield as he spread the storm of leaves to block any attempts at shooting them down. However, the fractal blades ineffectually hit the shield, only creating small ripples even though they were infused with the Fragment of the Axe.

“I told you,” Dr. Fried laughed. “As long as the sentries are standing you won’t be able to destroy this shield, and the captain will be here long before then.”

Zac growled in annoyance when he saw the researcher sitting snugly on top of the weird machine, and he launched another series of fractal blades at the shield. But it was completely useless like the last time.

He quickly realized that his current strategy wouldn’t work. The bots were too durable and they focused on slowing him down rather than taking him out. He quickly forced a storm of Cosmic Energy toward the fractal on the right side of his chest, and soon after the first axe of **[Deforestation]** appeared above him.

The bots were just too annoying, and he would rather fell them in one big swing. His arm swelled as he swung **[Verun’s Bite]** in a wide arc toward the group of sentries that protected the massive array of tubing. The machines had proven a tough target for **[Chop]**, but against the **[Axe of Felling]** they were little more than pieces of lumbers as they fell apart and exploded in an instant.

“You fool!” Dr. Fried cackled when he saw Zac launch his massive strike. “Did you really think that the shield was reliant on exposed power lines? Who would design such a shoddy defense?! You cultivators are really not much better than animals.”

Zac only snorted in response, but he was honestly a bit surprised that it didn’t seem to have any effect at all. He had still managed to destroy most of the robots though, and he was sure that the massive tubes at least provided some power to the shields. Perhaps it was only running on some auxiliary powers right now, and the doctor was only putting up a brave face.

Besides, it wasn’t like Zac was all out of options.

Veins popped out all over his arm as he forced even more energy into the skill fractal, and the flaming axe appeared next, causing the very air around it to twist and combust. Zac didn’t waste a second as he launched it straight at the shield, empowering the strike even further with the Fragment of the Axe.

The cutting flames of **[Infernal Axe]** slammed into the containment field with the force of a tidal wave, and flames were pushed in all directions, incinerating everything around them. Dozens of expensive-looking machines were reduced to scorched pieces of scrap, and even large sections of the floor were turned into molten pools.

But the shield had endured. Some cracks had appeared across its surface, but they were quickly mended. Zac tsk’ed in annoyance when he saw that the containment held. He hadn’t expected that the outer shield could withstand the second strike, even after losing its main power supply.

“You’re decent enough for a cultivator, but how can you match up to my lovingly crafted isolation sphere? It can even restrain the Shard, so what can a fiddling little h-

ah?” the doctor ranted, but was interrupted as a pulse suddenly spread from within the core containment.

Zac couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the molten plasma around him turn to mud, and trees and mushrooms appeared out of nowhere inside the huge room, causing the shield to flicker a few times before it died out. Zac and the researcher mutely stared at each other for a second, both obviously shocked by the turn of events.

Was the Shard helping him?

It seemed as though the Shard destroyed the backups while Zac took out the outer power source. The question was whether this was a random act of creation, or whether the Shard was sentient and had some plan of its own. But Zac couldn't focus on that right now as the air twisted and turned as Dr. Fried seemed ready to launch his final attack with the weird machine.

But Zac had one more card up his sleeve and he endured the pain as he pushed almost a third of his Cosmic Energy into the fractal of **[Deforestation]**, initiating the third and final swing. His bones creaked and groaned as he pushed his arm forward, but he wasn't the same person as when he attempted the swing in his battle with Salvation.

A terrifying axe appeared in the air, and even Zac felt some palpitations in his heart after sensing the aura. It was an ashy-grey single-bladed axe with a long edge that almost formed an inverted 'S'. The poll and shoulder of the axe seemed to form a robed being whose four arms ran along the cheek of the axe head.

The shaft was straight and unadorned, ending at a spiked knob, showing none of the craftsmanship of the intricate axe head. But the most striking aspect of the axe wasn't its incongruous design, but rather the desolate aura that spread out around it.

A tremendous resistance pushed against him as Zac almost finished the swing, but he roared and struggled to complete the motion with everything he had. He felt a sharp pain in his forearm as accumulated wounds from past levels reopened, but he didn't care. Zac could have activated **[Hatchetman's Fury]** to effortlessly finish the swing, but he didn't dare to be under the influence of that skill at the moment.

The scientist had noticeably quieted down as he no doubt understood the power of the attack Zac had brought forth, but he didn't flinch as he frantically tapped at a console in front of him. It looked like the rampant surges of power inside the crystal were being magnified, but they were still being contained.

“Die!” the researcher screeched as dozens of the machine's appendages rapidly reshuffled to no longer envelop the ball, but rather expose the side facing Zac.

The sphere immediately started to destabilize, and a second later the crystal cracked as a terrifying surge of destruction rippled toward him. Zac's mind screamed of danger, but he was unwilling to back down as canceling his strike now would not only cause a backlash but also put it on a long cooldown. It was also unclear whether **[Nature's Punishment]** would even work in a place like this, as there was no nature to draw from.

His destructive capabilities were in other words quite limited, and his other class wouldn't be any help in breaching the core containment field either. He could only meet fire with fire and bet the house on his ultimate strike. Zac roared in defiance as he finalized the swing even though his arm was strained beyond its limits.

A grey wave silently swept forward as the sinister **[Axe of Desolation]** matched the swing, and the whole ship shuddered as the two monstrous attacks collided.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### Chapter 458 - Creation

The whole room violently shook as the wave of ash collided with the vibrant beam. There were no explosions though as the collision of the attacks was very different from anything Zac had witnessed before, and it led Zac to believe that Dr. Fried really had managed to harness at least a small part of the Shard of Creation.

The energies that had been contained inside the crystal ball contained the ability of inception, and weird items kept popping up one after another, each stealing a bit of the momentum from his attack. A massive blue icicle appeared from nowhere and shot toward Zac, but it crumbled into drifting ash by the wave of desolation before it even had time to pick up any momentum.

There were rocks, waterfalls, and scorching flames that appeared to hinder the wave of desolation and strike at Zac, like all the elements of the world had combined to take him down. However, the third swing of **[Deforestation]** was the pinnacle of Zac's power, and it wasn't enough to just throw some rubble in front of it.

The grey cloud was noticeably diminished as it pushed through the construct's attack, but it still had almost half of its energy remaining when it finally exhausted the beam and swallowed the odd machine along with the doctor on top of it. There was still no explosion as the mecha only shuddered before falling apart. It was as though the thing was a burnt-out log that turned into a pile of ash when prodded.

The doctor's face was frozen in a visage of fear and incomprehension as it crumbled as well. Zac knew the man was finally dead body and soul as well as he felt the surge of energy entering his body. A quick look around unfortunately indicated that the doctor wasn't the level guardian, as no teleportation array had appeared upon his death.

The largest threat was dealt with, but Zac didn't rest as only half his objective was completed. He flashed forward, running past the pile of dust that was once the doctor and his battle platform. He wanted to stay in the wake of his own attack, though he kept a healthy distance as he didn't want to turn into another dust pile.

The wave had lost even more energy from killing Dr. Fried, but it was a large-scale attack capable of taking out tens of thousands of people, so it continued forward in the limited space of the inner containment field. It finally reached the core that housed the Shard itself, another spherical shield with a diameter of no more than 10 meters.

A tremendous shockwave suddenly threw Zac back across half the room, but his eyes lit up when he saw what was going on.

The last burst of power inside the **[Axe of Desolation]** had managed to crack open the final shield, and radiant tendrils reached out from the breach. They looked like condensed sunlight but almost moved around like the tentacles of an octopus as they gingerly felt around outside the containment shield.

It looked just like when the Splinter in his mind was searching for cracks or weaknesses inside the miasmatic cage, and Zac knew his opportunity had presented itself. He flashed forward with **[Loamwalker]** as far as he could until he left the spiritual forest of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, at which point he started to run normally. He needed to snatch the item before the shield healed.

"HALT!" a tremendous roar suddenly echoed from behind, and the power in the voice alone was enough for Zac to stumble as bloody gashes appeared all over his body.

Zac knew this was the end-run, and he scrambled to his feet and kept going, ignoring the mounting sense of doom from his danger sense.

However, it quickly became too much and he glanced back and spotted an infuriated metallic humanoid approaching. The cyborg's speed was way faster than his own, and it was upon Zac in an instant. Terrifying energies surged around him, and Zac desperately activated a Bodhi-infused **[Nature's Barrier]** to protect himself.

However, a flashing light almost blinded Zac, and he felt a stabbing pain in his mind as all the leaves were shredded to pieces in an instant. They didn't even impede the technocrat for a second as he reached for Zac's throat.

Zac swung his axe with all he got at the incoming hand, but **[Verun's Bite]** didn't even leave a mark as it was blocked by a thin energy layer covering the hand. Conversely, the hand released some sort of counter and Zac felt the Spirit Tool yowl in pain from the clash. Zac already understood who this was, and he wasn't surprised that his attack didn't work.

This was the captain, a true D-Grade Powerhouse. Even if he was the lowest rung among D-Grade warriors there was no contesting him while still in F-Grade.

But the clash had fulfilled its purpose as Zac was shot backward like a comet from the counterforce, straight into the core containment area. Zac prepared himself to swap classes if needed to block another strike, but he realized the man had stopped some distance away with a sinister smile. A small pang of pain suddenly flared up in the back of Zac's head as he hit something within the light, and Zac immediately felt an odd force invade his body.

He realized that he had accidentally hit the Shard, and he quickly tried to reach for his Tower Token to teleport out as planned. However, he only had time to see the technocrat captain shouting a bunch of orders before the world turned white.

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A crackling sound full of ebullience echoed out into the void, each snap exuding the primordial Dao. For untold ages the **[Spark of Creation]** left its mark on the universe, its conceptions growing ever larger and more intricate. But suddenly its revelry was encroached upon.

His breath was the Dao and his hand was the earth, and when he moved the Heavens shied away. He gripped the Spark and clenched with enough force to tear the fabric of reality to shreds. The shockwave shattered the Dimensional Core that the Spark had turned into its nourishment, the explosion destroying innumerable planets.

Unwillingness. Desperation. Desire. The spark shattered, its remnants fleeing to all corners of the myriad planes. Creation was never over.

A great sage sat upon his platform with a kindly smile, and with a wave of his arm he brought forth his miracles. Magical scenes covered the night sky, scenes of unfettered creativity and depth. The crowd was busy gaining inspiration from the apparitions above, and no one heard the despondent wails from the captives below as their very souls were being used as fertilizer for the sage's false gifts.

The warrior's arm quickly grew and formed a massive scythe as he swung it in a wide arc that decimated the closest attackers. His eyes were already hollow and his face a sallow mask, but there was no going back now. He released a bestial roar as he rushed into the thick of the Verith Tribe's Truthslayers, and a shockwave of metal and flesh exploded out from him like a detonation of a Taboo Treasure.

Wings containing boundless force stretched out for hundreds of meters in each direction, like two canopies shrouding the earth. Each flap of the gargantuan bird's wings brought forth storms that ravaged the plains below as it traversed its prison. It hated its inability soar higher, and it released a cry of desolation. A shudder pushed the

clouds away as the wings grew yet longer. Blood seeped out from its body and fell like rain, but it didn't care as it soared ever higher toward the stars above.

The young monk desperately prayed for tranquility as he climbed the lonely peak. He couldn't stay at the monastery any longer, he couldn't risk the lives of his brothers. But the whispers never ended even after reciting the mantras. It would be so easy to give in to desire, to grasp the power that resided within. One thought to turn dreams into reality, one wish to challenge fate itself.

Zac had once again found himself captive within a storm of visions showing an unceasing number of fates. Most were pretty horrible, and any notion that the Shard was the 'good' to the Splinter's 'bad' was finally gone. Those who had found themselves in possession of a Shard mostly seemed to be just as wretched, just with a different flavor. Coming in contact with concepts that were too far beyond comprehension was to play with fire, you were bound to get burned sooner or later.

The flashing visions suddenly stopped, and he found himself looking at a solitary figure from above. However, this time there wasn't a Draugr-Lady calmly sitting within a lake of miasma in silent contemplation. Instead, there was a cultivator perched on a terrifyingly tall peak under a shimmering night sky.

He wasn't Dragur, or any other undead race for that matter, but rather a humanoid alien with ashen-grey skin. The alien almost looked human with extremely fine features, making it hard to discern its gender. It did however have four eyes, one normal set and another one placed almost to the side of his head. The cultivator probably had 360-degree vision thanks to this feature.

The warrior radiated a dense and powerful aura full of verve, and even if Zac couldn't put his finger on it he somehow felt like the cultivator was the exact opposite of the Draugr lady. The whole peak was drowned in a vibrant shimmer as northern lights in all colors imaginable danced around him. It was a beautiful spectacle, but the cultivator didn't seem to care as his or her eyes were closed in meditation.

"Hm?" the cultivator mumbled, and judging by the cadence of the voice he was no doubt a man.

The alien looked up from the ground, and his two sets of eyes seemed to focus on the spot where Zac's spirit hovered. Zac's emotions surged in anticipation as he tried to speak, but he was simply a blob consciousness without any opportunity to communicate. But it really looked like the System had prepared another fortuitous encounter after all.

"Be'Zi mentioned meeting a child following her path just this way, and now you arrive at my doorstep just moments later?" the man said with a spurious smile. "I wonder what The Villainous Heavens has planned this time?"

The elation Zac felt was slowly doused as he listened to the seated cultivator. Even though the expressions on this man's face were more amicable than the cold visage of the Draugr, he still felt less welcoming.

"Creation and Oblivion. Broken peaks and an ocean of despair. The cycle continues," the cultivator muttered before he smiled again. "Will you break it? Or will you drown as well?"

Zac didn't understand what the hell the odd cultivator was speaking about, but he was more worried about whether he would provide assistance or not. He felt fine at the moment, but he knew that a storm was probably brewing inside his body back at the ship. A storm that would have no problem crushing him, body and soul, if not dealt with properly.

"The Villainous Heavens brought you to me, but why should I bow to the bindings of fate?" the alien continued, his four eyes gaining a ruthless gleam.

Zac's Danger Sense was quiet, but his instincts still screamed of danger as the lights surrounding the peak started to flash with increased intensity. Zac suddenly sensed his soul being crushed by immense pressure, like he was being thrown into a black hole. But a sudden shudder from beneath the mountain froze the northern lights, and the pressure disappeared in an instant.

"Mh?" the man said as he looked down at the ground again.

"Very well. Let the threads of fate run its course. I hope you will survive long enough to provide my wife and I with some entertainment. The eons are growing tedious, after all," he said.

The man pointed a finger at Zac, and his surroundings rapidly closed in and disappeared. Zac realized that the man had sent him away, and he couldn't help but feel some disappointment over the fact that he still refused to help out, even though he obviously had a connection with the Draugr lady.

Had the path the System laid out for him gone awry due to the cultivator's reluctance to assist, and if so, what did that mean for him and his odds of survival? Frantic thoughts swirled in Zac's mind as his vision turned black, but the voice of the cultivator drifted into his ears just before his vision disappeared completely.

"Creation is a miracle, but it is also a drug. It will satisfy your desires until you are nothing but a ball of cravings, a husk of a man. But through temperance and austerity, Creation will bow to your will."

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**Chapter 459 - Perception of Reality**

"Two days remaining," Ogras muttered as he looked out the window of the small farmstead. "I guess it's about time."

"What's that, darling?" the lithe woman purred in Ogras' ear.

"I need to go out for a bit," the demon said with a smile as he pinched the bare bottom of his little savior.

"You shouldn't walk around too much with those wounds of yours," she said with some admonishment in her eyes. "You were on death's bed just three weeks ago."

"Didn't I prove just how healthy I was yesterday?" Ogras said with a cheeky grin and received a roll of the eyes in return.

He had been pretty confident in defeating the 5<sup>th</sup> floor guardian after his experience with the Transcendent Master, but the fight had pushed him way harder than expected. The enraged beast had been a perfect counter to him as well, too stupid to be tricked.

Things didn't really turn for the better at the following three levels as he looked for an inheritance to end his run with. His wounds kept accumulating until he almost died at the hands of the assassin who guarded the gates to the 49<sup>th</sup> floor. If it wasn't for the defensive treasures he had commandeered from Galau he might have actually met his end then and there.

Thankfully he managed to escape from the assassin's pursuit, and he quickly disappeared into one of the neighboring kingdoms. However, the wounds were too severe, and he had fallen unconscious outside this Uynala's farmstead.

“Are you sure you don’t want to enter the path of cultivation?” Ogras asked as he looked at the girl lying in the bed.

“Only problems will come from that. Life is beautiful because it is short. Why would I want to prolong it just to fill it with bloodshed?” Uynala said with disapproval. “Look at that wound on your chest. Is it really worth it?”

Ogras only smiled in response as he finished dressing and walked out of the small house. He didn’t have a specific place in mind, but rather simply chose to walk a while to loosen up. One day on the inside meant roughly 15 minutes on the outside. He might find himself in deep shit real soon and needed to be ready.

The massive gash in his chest was still a bit troublesome, but he would be able to fight at full power without issue. Hopefully, it wouldn’t come to that though. Zac should have reached a floor high enough to scare off any attempt at their lives, and if not he would serve as an excellent lightning rod for their attacks until they tired themselves out.

The demon found himself on top of a small hill soon enough, and Ogras took a deep breath as he looked around at the quiet vale where he had stayed the past days. The world of cultivators and immortals was almost completely cut off from this little community. The strongest person he had encountered was an old hunter who was level 29.

People worked their fields and lived off the land, without strife or any real suffering. Their lives were short but fulfilling. Uynala would probably marry someone from the community, and their three weeks together would turn into a hazy memory of an adolescent escapade.

“Is it worth it...?” Ogras mumbled as he looked up at the sky. “Definitely.”

He donned a mask and robe and crushed his token the next moment, not sparing the house and its savior another look. A brief bout of darkness shrouded his surroundings until the world exploded into colors.

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The beautiful lake was hidden deep within the mountains, untouched for thousands of years. Not a ripple could be seen on its surface, making it seem like a perfect mirror that reflected the heavens above. If one looked from a certain angle it would be impossible to discern which sky was real and which one was fake.

A scream suddenly broke the tranquility of the secluded mountain as a harried cultivator desperately fled for his life. A group of warriors was high on his heels, and the man’s back was covered in wounds. He looked back and forth, but there was nowhere to hide. He knew he would have to make a final stand if he wanted to break free.

An hour later the same man slowly breached the crest of the mountain housing the tranquil pond, and his eyes lit up when he saw the inviting waters. He had barely survived the ordeal, and he was grievously wounded and without provisions. But at least he could drink his fill.

The man dipped his hands in the pond, causing a ripple spread across the tranquil surface. If the man hadn’t been completely focused on quenching his thirst he would have noticed a shocking change in his surroundings. Just as the pond rippled from his actions, so did the sky above.

Heavens and lake mirrored each other, and it was impossible to tell which was which.

But his mind was occupied with thoughts of escape, and he lamented the fact that he couldn’t simply sprout wings and fly away, leaving his problems behind. He was

so engrossed in his escapism he didn't even notice how the air behind him shuddered as two crystalline wings appeared on his back. He only kept drinking the icy cold water, feeling it was the most delectable thing ever.

He finally managed to quench his thirst, and the moment his hand left the pond the ripples disappeared, once again turning into a mirror. The man looked down at his reflection again, feeling that he wasn't as harried any longer.

There was something odd about him though, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Did he get the feeling because of the wound across his chest? No matter. The important thing was that he would be able to keep moving for a bit longer.

He jumped off from the ground, his wings vigorously pushing through the air to lift him into the sky. The warrior soon soared among the clouds and set off toward the sunset. Each beat of his wings filled his tired soul with a sense of freedom as trees and hilltops flashed by beneath. But his sense of euphoria slowly dimmed down and was replaced with a creeping unease.

Something was wrong.

He had sensed it before, and the feeling only became more and more palpable as time passed. It was like he was dream walking, where the world wasn't true and correct as he had always known it.

The wings!

Since when did he have wings?! What were these crystalline monstrosities attached to his back? Was this some curse the guards of his family had placed on him before being struck down? But he had never heard of anything like it.

Incongruous emotions clashed in his mind, memories of a life in the heavens, and memories of a life on the ground. But the memories of soaring among the clouds soon shattered, turning into crystalline shards that floated away.

He was elated at grasping the truth, but his eyes widened in horror when the wings on his back disintegrated, turning into shards just like the false memories. Without any means of flight he plummeted toward the forest below, and a large thud echoed out across the desolate mountain as he slammed into the ground.

The wounds of the warrior had worsened, but he was at least alive. The false memories were gone, and his pursuers were half a world away. A sense of freedom once again filled his soul, and it allowed him to rally the energy to keep going.

Dreams of his boundless future started to form as he walked across the unknown forest, but he suddenly felt the creeping unease return. He started running to escape the mounting dread, but it only worsened as time passed. What was happening to him? Who was messing with his mind, his perception of reality?

And what else about him was false? Something was no doubt the origin of the undeniable unease. He looked down at his hands and froze in place. Were these hands really his? Or were they figments of his imagination just like his wings?

The answer soon presented itself as the hands fractured and turned into crystal shards that started drifting toward the sky. But as more and more of his body fragmented and split off from his body, the heavier his apprehension became.

These memories that were left in his mind, were they real or more figments of his imagination? They turned more and more disjointed, and soon enough they were filled with nothing but short bursts of faces and places that he couldn't name or place.

Am I even real?

A swirl of crystalline fragments floated into the sky, and a ripple spread out as they breached the surface. The small crystals kept falling until they fell onto the bed of the tranquil pond, joining the millions of other ones just like them.

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Ogras found himself standing on top of the teleportation array, and he took a deep breath beneath the mask before sat down and went over his final gain of the Tower of Eternity.

“Reality is a perception,” Ogras muttered with a frown.

A surge of energy inundating his body as his understanding coalesced, and he felt a new path opening up before him. He had gained the Seed of Mirage from the inheritance trial, and he had quickly incorporated it into his fighting techniques as a means of distraction.

But was the way he looked at the concept too shallow? What if false could be true, and true be false? How could someone defend at something that was neither real nor fake, while simultaneously being both? His eyes stayed closed for another five minutes until Ogras finally took another deep breath and opened his Dao Screen.

**Seed of Mirage (High): Dexterity +15, Intelligence +35, Wisdom +10**

It looked like he had gained 5 Dexterity and Wisdom along with 20 points into Intelligence. It wasn't a huge amount, but it did push his somewhat lacking Intelligence a bit further. He had never planned on focusing on the attribute even though it was beneficial to some of his skills, but he would gladly take it when it came for free.

Only after having secured his gains did he bother to check in on his surroundings, and his expression immediately soured when he saw what was going on.

“Shit...” Ogras muttered as his eyes met the hundreds of glares from the mob waiting outside the protective shielding.

Had something happened to Zac's climb that emboldened these fools? Or did they have a false sense of security by their numbers? They would find that numbers were meaningless in a battle of powerhouses, and if they got swept up by the chaos it was their problem.

At least they couldn't target him until he stepped off the platform, but he knew that was only a temporary protection. The human cockroach would have to find a more permanent solution for their trio.

The array suddenly shuddered, and a pale Galau appeared the next moment. No apparition appeared upon his exit, but he still sat down with closed eyes as he took out a pill from his Cosmos Sack.

“You're late,” Ogras grinned beneath the mask, quickly pulling himself together. “Just missed my Apparition, and it was a pretty good one. By the way, do you have a tool to check what level that guy has reached? Hello?”

“Ah?” Galau suddenly said. “Mr. Azh'Rodum? It has been a while, I am glad you are fine. What did you say just now? You want to see the tower ladder?”

“What happened to you?” Ogras asked with a raised brow. “Trouble at the desert town?”

“Ah- well,” Galau said with a weak smile as his hand reached for his spatial pouch again. “Negotiations fell through at the last moment. I got a bit greedy I am afraid, wanting to make a big profit right before I left.”

This face turned even whiter the next moment, and he looked ready to puke. Ogras looked on with incomprehension before his eyes widened in understanding. He quickly reached for his own Cosmos Sack, and a second later his expression was an exact copy of the merchant's. So many barrels of fine liquor gone.

“It's that bad?” Ogras asked, trying to find some solace in the sorrows of others.

Almost a third of his barrels remained though, and most importantly he still had the treasure he got for defeating the fifth floor. That thing alone was worth more than

everything he had stashed away combined. Together with what that asshole provided in the inheritance he stood a chance to open up two of his hidden nodes in one go, provided that he would survive, of course.

“It’s worse than I expected,” Galau confessed with an almost crying expression, but he still took out an opaque crystal. “At least I could keep some of m- WHAT IN THE HEAVENS?!”

“What?” Ogras asked with a frown.

“He’s reached the 71st floor,” Galau sputtered, incredulity evident on his face. “Almost at the gates to the 9th floor.”

“Monster,” Ogras snorted with a shake of his head, even though he wasn’t as calm as he let on. “We’ll see if it’s enough to deter the group of starving Gwyllgi waiting outside the gates.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 460 - Indigestion**

Zac took a deep breath as he found himself back in his body, and he was almost surprised to see that he was still in one piece after the four-eyed cultivator refused to provide him with a cage for the Shard. He did sense a new power coursing through his body, but it didn’t feel too bad. His whole body was pins and needles, but there was nothing like the all-consuming rage and insanity that the Splinter sometimes brought forth.

Even the Splinter seemed to have been subdued by the alien presence in Zac’s body, and the railing against the Miasmatic Cage had completely stopped. This alone made Zac pretty hopeful for the future, as this was exactly the sort of effect he had hoped to gain by taking this huge risk. Satisfied that he wouldn’t up and explode the next minute he quickly took in his surroundings.

The radiant lights that previously lit up the core chamber were gone, and he found himself sitting on the metallic floor. He immediately reached for the token fastened to his belt, but he stopped himself when he realized that there was no threat.

The initial plan was to snatch the token and escape if he encountered the captain, but he realized that might not be needed now since the core containment shield had been erected again with him inside it. Three massive machines that had appeared while he took his spiritual journey powered the sphere from the outside, each of them shuddering with power.

Just outside the energy cage the metallic Transhuman stood guard, staring at Zac like a praying mantis. Beside him were a few technocrat scientists that were busying themselves with dozens of panels in front of them. It had been impossible to make out the orders the captain shouted earlier, but Zac quickly put two and two together as he looked at what was going on.

Jaol had mentioned a drastic increase of issues on the ship, and Dr. Fried believed that the anomalies appeared because the Shard wanted a host. Perhaps the technocrats hoped that him absorbing the Shard would result in fewer problems, which was something they desperately needed until they were out of harm’s way.

“I don’t know what your plan was, but I’ll be keeping an eye on you until we return to our domain. Deramex Dynamics will no doubt pay even more for the Shard

being delivered a compatible host,” the silver Transhuman said, immediately confirming Zac’s guess.

Zac ignored the man as he touched the shield, only to feel a painful zap that traveled along his arm. He wasn’t worried in the slightest about being imprisoned; it was actually the opposite. This was the perfect outcome for him since they couldn’t possibly know he would disappear the moment he cracked his Token.

Since his safety was guaranteed for now he wasn’t too anxious to return, and he would rather wait things out for a few days to see whether any unanticipated changes arose within his body. He also didn’t want to exit too early, as he had made an agreement with Ogras and Galau. Perhaps he would even be able to figure out a way to complete the mission on this level and then test his mettle against the floor guardian.

However, his eyes widened in shock when he looked down at the token. It showed that less than two days remained on his climb. How was that possible? He had over a week remaining on his climb when he arrived on the ship, allowing him to allocate over three days to finish this level before moving on to the floor guardian. There was even the chance of fighting for a treasure if one appeared on the 73rd level, in case he defeated the 8th floor guardian quickly.

He had pushed himself to the limits over the past weeks, but the system had somehow invalidated his efforts and stolen time on his climb. But a sudden realization made him want to curse out loud. He wasn’t inside the tower any longer. He hadn’t even considered it until now, but it appeared as though he had been forced to complete this level under normal temporal conditions. He had spent an hour and a half on this level, which pretty much was the equivalent of 6 days in of climbing time.

It also meant that his climb would end in less than thirty minutes unless he managed to get to the next level.

Even worse, were there perhaps other changes to the rules he had taken for granted? Would he even get sent out if he crushed his token at this point? Panic started to build in his body, and he was no longer as calm and collected as before. He desperately started to look around for an opportunity to escape, wishing for some solution to present itself.

A deep thud made his whole body shudder for an instant, before a shockwave of creation spread out, causing the environment to turn into a chaotic mess of random shapes and colors. The shockwave was contained within the shield though, and it seemed as though the power was slowly drained by the three large machines.

“It’s pointless,” the captain’s voice could be heard from outside, but Zac couldn’t bother with it as he had more pressing issues to deal with.

The Shard had awakened.

A shudder traveled across Zac’s whole body as it felt he was being ripped apart, and the next moment hundreds of bleeding cracks appeared across his body before quickly closing again. What had changed? The thing had been quietly moving about his body like a curious animal, but suddenly it was frenetically releasing power to the point that Zac had trouble withstanding it.

Desire. Was this what the cultivator in the vision had warned him about. Zac had suddenly wished for a way to return to the Tower, and the Shard of Creation started rampaging a moment later. Worse yet, the Splinter had woken up from the massive fluctuations in his body, and Zac felt his mind tremble as it pitted itself against one of the Miasmic Fractals.

It almost seemed as though the two remnants were creating some sort of loop where they kept agitating each other further and further. The visions he saw were

pretty grim, but it was nothing like this. The Shard was going haywire in his body, pouring out an ever-increasing amount of unfamiliar energies.

It was just like when he was drowning inside the pond of Cosmic Water, except that this time the energies came from one of the highest Daos in existence. There was no telling what would happen next, and he briefly considered whether he should crush his token in hopes that he would get sent out after all.

However, Zac eventually decided against it. His situation wouldn't be any better in the Base Town than here, and there was a complicated situation waiting outside. He would need his mental faculties to deal with whatever the forces in the Base Town had planned, and he would rather try to deal with this mess onboard a technocrat vessel than among the elites of his sector.

If he left the Tower of Eternity like this there was a decent chance that the tragedy of the Zethaya Pill House would repeat itself, this time perhaps causing trouble of irrevocable levels.

Zac knew needed to get rid of this excess energy before he exploded, and he desperately tried to force the energy out into his arm just like when he experimented with the bronze flashes. If something was going to explode it was better if it was an appendage. Ogras had lost an arm, but it hadn't really slowed the demon down at all.

However, the energies from the Shard of Creation weren't that easy to manipulate. Besides, his whole body, including his arms, was already crammed full of power. Zac briefly lamented that he couldn't expand his arm to contain the energies like with **[Unholy Strike]**, and his eyes widened in horror the next moment as his arm turned into a macabre slab sinew and muscle that kept growing until it slammed into the entrapment a few meters away.

The shield wobbled for a bit but it didn't break, but Zac didn't care about that as he frenziedly wished for his arm to get back to normal over and over in his mind, in hopes that the Shard would comply. And Zac was almost ready to cry when he saw his arm twist and turn until it returned back to normal.

In fact, it was actually better than normal. There had been a few wounds and a crack in one of his bones earlier from launching the third swing of **[Deforestation]**, but the arm was completely unblemished now, even missing a few recent scars that had yet to fade away. It was both a relief and cause for worry, as he wasn't sure whether this was really his old arm, or rather something that the Shard of Creation had reforged from nothing.

Worse yet, he felt that while the rapid transformations had expended some of the energies of creation building up inside him, it had also expended something from him. He wasn't sure what, but it was something else than Cosmic Energy or Mental Energy. However, Zac barely had time to feel a sense of relief before hell broke loose.

He sensed another buildup of energies in his chest, but it refused to budge in the slightest this time. Instead, it shot toward the Miasmatic Cage with furious momentum. The Splinter wasn't about to be outdone and the whole cage shuddered as it started to release unprecedented levels of power.

Zac desperately tried everything he could think of to stop the inevitable, but the two forces crashed into one of the seven remaining fractals at the same time. The pain in his mind threatened to turn him insane, but his mind felt like a small ship lost on a raging ocean. The Miasmatic cage barely held, but Zac sensed that the Fractal had started leaking from the crash.

The two remnants had failed in destroying each other, but their war was turning Zac's body into a ravaged battlefield as even higher amounts of energies rampaged

around, and he was barely cognizant of the fact that he was on the ground screaming his lungs out as the air around him crackled before it broke apart.

“What is he doing?!” the captain screamed from outside, but Zac barely heard it over the roar of the powers clashing in his body.

The whole core containment was already painted red as his body kept crumbling before being forcibly restored by the Shard. The pain was excruciating, but that was only a minor inconvenience compared to the cost. Zac had finally recognized the pain deep in his soul that came each time he expended the Shard’s powers. It was feeding on his life force.

His mind was a hazy mess, but he still understood that he needed to expel the excess energies even if it came at a cost of his longevity. He arduously got back on his knees and started punching the ground, each punch containing enough Strength to cause the whole room to shake.

The alloy was made to withstand terrifying power, but each punch expelled some of both the two peak Daos of Creation and Oblivion. Oblivion turned metal to nothingness as Creation turned his hand into massive sledgehammers. The entrapment had only been meant to keep the waves of creation inside, but that was only half the force inside Zac at the moment.

It just took a few seconds of rabid punching for a deep hope to form, and he suddenly found himself falling face-first over twenty meters into a subfloor that seemed to be some sort of service level.

The pain startled his muddled head awake for a second, and he quickly stopped swinging to instead look around. All kinds of pipes ran along the walls and into the floor and ceiling above, and there were no signs of any technocrats anywhere.

“Lower the shield!” a voice roared from above, and Zac desperately looked around for an escape route.

He started running toward what he believed was the rear end of the ship, and the aura around him kept increasing as Creation and Oblivion started to seep out of his body. Wherever he passed destruction followed, either in the form of utter annihilation or rampant mutation.

The waves that radiated from him had been contained while he still was within the shield, but now he was like a walking radiation sphere that ruined everything around him no matter if he wanted to or not. But that was fine with Zac as it both lessened the stress inside his body while it worked toward completing the mission.

Hopefully he’d break enough to make a Teleportation Array appear, which would send him back to the tower and its elongated spacetime. As long as he left soon he would still have a day left to deal with this mess.

A sense of Danger suddenly cut through the pain and confusion, but he felt himself getting punched before he had a chance to even erect any defenses. A biting cold spread through his body as a massive hole was blasted open in his chest, the force throwing him through multiple walls. It was the Captain who had caught up, and it looked like he was no longer interested in keeping him alive. Half Zac’s torso was gone, and it was barely held together by a few thin strings of flesh.

Zac felt death creeping forth, and not like when he changed his race to Draugr. This was a true death. He was full of reluctance as there were too many people counting on him back home. And the Vibrant energies surged in his body, and Zac was started awake by excruciating pain as his torso grew back in an instant.

Cold sweat ran down Zac’s forehead as he shakily got up on his feet and glanced down at his perfectly intact chest. Was this why the Technocrats had launched an orbital strike on the previous host? He briefly wondered what Ogras would say after

seeing such a disgusting regeneration speed, but he knew it came at a cost. He had lost even more of his longevity, and it was not a small amount as far as Zac could tell.

Worse yet, the captain was already charging up another strike.

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**Chapter 461 - Pink**

Zac barely had time to release another set of leaves and activate a defensive charge of his robes before the Captain was once again in front of him, his fist crackling with power. However, just as the captain appeared in front of Zac the two slivers decided to once again try to destroy the Miasmic Cage, and a massive wave of wild energies blasted out from Zac's body.

Everything within fifty meters was destroyed in an instant. Some parts had been annihilated or at least destroyed with complete prejudice, whereas some of the surroundings had been twisted and transformed beyond recognition. A dozen large crystals had also appeared out of nowhere, making the area look like a quartz mine.

The Captain wasn't unscathed either, and his chest lit up as a wave of dozens of shields spread out around him. However, these shields obviously hadn't been augmented by Dr. Fried as they proved utterly incapable of hindering the aura of Creation and Oblivion that radiated out from Zac.

The shields cracked like brittle glass and the Captain was suddenly inundated in the energies of the two remnants. His body twisted and mutated as other parts just withered away, but he immediately shot back with enough speed to break the sound barrier. The wave subsided and Zac once again found himself in control of his body, and he looked up with bleary eyes only to see the captain's body quickly reforming itself to peak condition.

It looked like killing a D-Grade warrior wouldn't be so easy.

The captain had learned his lesson though, and he no longer seemed interested in getting up-close to Zac. Perhaps he had wanted to minimize the damage to his ship that way, but the detonation seemed to have been too dangerous for comfort. Instead, he raised his arm toward Zac, and a dozen miniature drones were released from his arm and created a circle in the air.

Streams of power emerged from his arm and connected with the drones, and a simile of an array was formed. A ball that seemed to be a mix of electricity and plasma was quickly formed within the circle, and Zac's danger sense once again startled him awake from his muddled state.

Zac was still dealing with the aftermath of the shockwave himself, and fleeing from the captain was out of the question. He just hesitated for a fraction of a second before he sent the command to his specialty core, and he almost fell over again as a surge of Miasma joined the chaos within his body.

But the transformation finished in time, allowing Zac to barely erect [**Immutable Bulwark**] before a terrifying beam of energy slammed into him.

The captain was going all out to take him down, and his latest attack was causing even more damage to the ship than Zac's own efforts. Everything around him melted as he was pushed back over a hundred meters, but his defensive skill had protected him from getting incinerated at least. However, Zac saw that the shield was about to break

after just a second of defending, and he unhesitantly jumped out of the way at the last moment.

He had hoped that the beam would shoot past him and blast a hole in the hull, but it winked out immediately after Zac dodged it. His Danger Sense screamed again, and he re-summoned the large fractal bulwark to block his upper body as the Captain, or rather his detached arm, appeared in front of him.

**[Immutable Bulwark]** cracked in an instant under the pressure of the D-Grade warrior's punch and Zac was thrown through two walls before he slammed into what could either be a massive pipe or some sort of tunnel.

Scorching pain suddenly radiated from his leg, and Zac miserably got out of the indent that he had caused. An almost blinding light drowned the area the next moment as the dented metal was incinerated from the contents within. A beautiful yet terrifying stream of light coursed through the conduit, and Zac's eyes widened at the display.

The light didn't give off any heat or aura of power like a Cosmic Energy, but it still almost amputated his leg by just grazing it. His usually impervious body had proved wholly incapable of stopping it and the pain was excruciating. The good news was that the captain had stopped over a hundred meters away, and he didn't seem to be readying himself to activate another beam.

Was it just fear of another shockwave, or was it fear of damaging the power conduit behind him? It was probably one of the main lines of power that ran this whole ship as far as Zac could guess. What else would require this much power in a reclaimed old freight vessel?

His first instinct was to blow up the pipeline, but the problem was that he had sort of already done that by slamming into it like an infuriated Barghest. The thick metal tubing was dented and twisted, but the stream of lights seemed wholly undeterred. The parts of metal that blocked its original path had simply been incinerated, allowing the energy river to continue on its intended trajectory.

It made him believe that the piping itself might actually be there to protect others from getting themselves killed, or prevent things from getting into the energy feed. The stream itself was rather controlled through some other means, which made it much harder to blow up.

He had a sudden bout of inspiration as he quickly stabbed his shoulders with two knives as he stared into the eyes of the technocrat. The Fragments of the Bodhi and the Axe poured into the two fractals on his shoulders, and his whole body felt some relieve as a lot of the back-up energies inside his body poured into the fractal as well.

An extremely large blob had formed in his chest in an instant, and it started expanding at a shocking pace. Zac frantically pushed it out of his chest and into his arm as usual, but the ball of creation was as large as a beach ball by the time it reached his elbow. Zac grit his teeth and pushed half of his left arm straight into the stream of energy with one instant motion.

The pain of getting his arm singed off up to the elbow was almost enough to make him black out, but a spastic mess of flesh grew out and replaced the lost forearm in an instant as Zac repeatedly wished for a hand just like before when his arm was destroyed.

"What have you done!" the Captain screamed with fury before he launched toward Zac with murder in his eyes.

A billowing wave of killing intent caused his whole body to shudder, and he unhesitantly reached for the Token again. However, his eyes widened when he realized that his newly created hand was completely without strength and coordination. It flopped around like a wet noodle, and he couldn't even grip properly.

However, the whole thing became moot before the captain had a chance to arrive. A scorching pain enveloped him as a huge explosion of pink and blue flung straight through a meter-thick wall. Multiple bones creaked in pain, but he had thankfully been able to infuse his body with the Fragment of the Coffin along with expending a defensive talisman.

One explosion after another rocked the whole vessel, but he unsteadily got back to his feet in case the captain would show up again. But the only thing he saw was blue and pink flames spreading in every direction, and immense structural damage. Zac's eyes lit up at the scene, and he quickly looked around for a Teleportation Array.

Fleeing from the captain had already caused an excessive amount of damage to the ship, and he refused to believe that the chain of explosions that he could feel in his bones wasn't enough to get the job done. Just as expected, just twenty meters away a Teleportation Array had appeared, and Zac lunged at it as he knew he was running out of time.

However, just as he was about to step onto the platform the whole ship heaved as a massive crack opened up beneath his feet. Zac desperately tried to reach the array, but his surroundings turned to a blur as he was flung away from the spaceship decompressing.

A distance of hundreds of meters was opened up between Zac and the technocrat ship in an instant, and the momentum kept pushing him further and further away. He panicked for a second, but he soon enough realized that the Miasma in his body was keeping him safe, though the expenditure was pretty taxing.

Another shockwave from the distance caused Zac to spin out of control as he was pushed even further, and he started to flail his arm to regain control. And surprisingly enough it worked. He realized he could actually shoot out a burst of miasma to somewhat mimic the effect of a propulsion engine. It allowed him to right himself soon enough, and he finally got a good look at the surroundings.

Pieces of metal were spinning about all around him, and in the distance a series of explosions harried the gargantuan vessel he had just fallen out of. The dome of the bean in the middle of the ship had completely buckled, and the shockwave he had just felt was no doubt one of the enormous thrusters in the rear exploding.

A beautiful wave of the radiant destruction was currently spreading outward like a supernova explosion, but he seemed to be far from the blast zone. But guilt rather than happiness filled Zac's mind as he witnessed the scene. He hadn't really considered the implications of his actions when he infused the unknown pink spark into the river of energy.

He had subconsciously compared it to pouring sugar in a car tank to stall the engine, but this was much worse. Tens of thousands of people lived and worked on that ship, and he had turned it into scrap metal. Thankfully, the vessels had some fail-safes installed as blue shields spread across the breaches that leaked atmosphere, meaning that most of the technocrats were probably safe.

Zac breathed in relief as he thought of his next move. Usually the Teleportation Array followed you if you kept moving, pretty much urging you to move on to the next level. Would it be the same in outer space though?

There was nothing to lose from trying, and he quickly looked for any clues. Thankfully the familiar array was just a few dozen meters away from him, attached to a piece of wreckage from the Little Bean.

A sudden collision inside his body forced him to puke a mouthful of blood that instantly turned into an ice sculpture, which rudely informed him that two slivers in his body wouldn't even take a break after being thrown into space. He ignored the pain as

he propelled himself toward the array with the help of a burst of Miasma expelled from his hands.

The array lit up the moment he floated into it, and a brief bout of darkness provided some reprieve to the chaotic war that had resumed in his body. But the struggle for supremacy between the two artifacts immediately started up again the moment he appeared in the next world.

Zac tried to get a grasp of the situation at the 72<sup>nd</sup> level, but another clash made him double over and puke another stream of blood that this time turned into sanguine butterflies. The little bugs flittered about for a couple of seconds before they exploded, causing widespread destruction to the area around him.

He tried to rouse a response to the reignited war, but he knew he was in pretty bad shape. He had plenty of Miasma and ichor to spare, but his constitution and soul were drained after being inundated in Creation over and over again. The adrenaline coursing through his body during the escape had kept him going, but the brief sojourn into outer space had cooled him down.

A quest prompt appeared in front of Zac's eyes, but his fuzzy mind couldn't make out what the screen said as his body suddenly expanded ten meters before shrinking back again, the agony enough to make Zac scream out loud. Another burst of energies threatened to burn his pathways clear, and he desperately pounded down on the ground with enough force to cause a massive explosion that caused gravel and dirt to fly in all directions.

Zac zealously clung on to the parting words of the cultivator in the vision, using it as a foundation to steer back on course. The cultivator had told him to restrain himself and not wish for anything, and by now he understood all too well what he meant by restraining desires. The moment he had an errant thought it was immediately fulfilled, but the results were seldom what he hoped for.

It was like the Shard of Creation was an evil genie that sort of fulfilled his wishes, but in a way that seemed to backfire while also draining him of longevity. Should he try releasing a couple of flashes to tire out the Shard? The Splinter was also causing trouble, but it was still contained in its cage even if the fractal was leaking pretty badly by this point.

But releasing flashes was like putting band-aids on a sinking ship, and he needed a permanent solution. Should he try to expedite their attempts at breaking open the cage? It would happen sooner or later anyway as they kept slamming into the Miasmatic Fractal, and perhaps it would allow him to trap both remnants inside.

But something suddenly cut through both the pain and confusion as Zac's Danger Sense suddenly screamed that his life was in danger. It was not from something within, but rather from someone or something attacking him again.

The Splinter brought forth an all-consuming fury that threatened to burn Zac alive as hundreds of eyes spontaneously grew on his body to see what had accosted him. But the vision scared Zac straight, and the eyes immediately shrunk back into his body.

It was an actual Dragon from mythology, a primordial beast over a hundred meters long.

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## Chapter 462 - Dragon

Had dragons actually existed on Earth once upon a time? That was the only way Zac could explain it going by how stunningly similar it was to the depictions he had seen since he was a child. It looked like a traditional black dragon, though its scales were tinted slightly red at the edges. Two great horns adorned its head, and sharp spikes ran along its spine down to the edge of the thirty-meter long tail.

Only then did Zac realize that he had been dropped off right in front of an enormous cave mouth, which probably led into the dragon's den. What caused the surge of danger was a blade of power that was rushing toward him, seemingly caused by a swipe of the dragon's claws. Had he awakened the dragon and pissed it off by causing a ruckus at its door-step?

Zac had to push down a primordial fear as he prepared himself for battle. There was no way that this big thing wasn't the floor guardian. One good thing about the situation was that the dragon emitted an immense pressure that seemed to have subdued the remnants to some degree.

The swipe slammed into the bulwark the next moment, and Zac nodded in relief when he felt that the attack's power was immense but a lot more manageable than the Technocrat Captain's. He completed the transformation of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** before he stomped down on the ground as he activated all his passive skills. An explosion of miasma erupted as Zac appeared right beneath the dragon's chest, and the cage of **[Profane Seal]** rose from the ground the next instant.

Even the hundred skeletons of **[Undying Legion]** appeared and surrounded the enormous beast, and they immediately moved toward it without any fear of death. It was a pretty huge Miasma expenditure, but Zac figured that he would throw everything in his repertoire on the big bastard before swapping back to his human form as he still had one change remaining.

But Zac still felt a bit stumped as he looked up at the beast. How the hell would he take this thing down? He had grown to a hulking behemoth himself, but he wasn't even close to reaching the dragon's chest with his axe. The thick legs looked extremely fortified as well by thick scales, and it was not like they were very good targets anyway since the thing could fly.

However, the dragon gave Zac no time to form a proper battle plan as it stomped at him with one of its frontal claws. Zac quickly scrambled out of the way as he took out the five strongest Offensive Talismans he had been given by the Undead Kingdom. He threw them all toward the scales on its chest, and a huge explosion of ice and poison rocked the whole area the next moment.

Zac's pitch-black eyes widened in surprise when the vision cleared to display completely unblemished scales. The dragon was still infuriated by the attack, and its long neck curved as it tried to catch Zac in its massive maws. Ten spectral chains slammed into its head with enough momentum to veer it off-course, before they tried to find a way beneath the scales to burrow into its body.

The scene gave Zac an idea and a spectral chain suddenly flashed over to him and looped a few rounds around his body before it hoisted him up in the air. His arm swelled to almost ridiculous proportions as he forced as much miasma as possible into it with **[Unholy Strike]** while the chain lifted him toward the dragon's softer underbelly.

The creation energies worked in his favor this time, and it felt like there was no limit to how much Miasma he could infuse into his biceps. It just kept growing to accommodate. He still didn't dare to overdo it though in case he harmed his main arm. His left hand was still barely serviceable since it was reformed, though he felt that he

was gradually regaining control over it. But he couldn't afford that sort of thing happening to the arm he used to wield **[Verun's Bite]**.

Zac growled as he swung the massive black bardiche with everything he got, and the power was actually so great that the whole beast was pushed back a few meters. A small stream of blood leaked out from the wound, and Zac's eyes lit up as he saw his chance. The first swing had been infused with the Fragment of the Axe to cut through the thick scales, but his second swing was instead infused with the corrosion of the Fragment of the Coffin.

Zac wasn't done there as he breathed out a cloud of corruption into the open wound as he frenziedly swung over and over to cause as much rot and fester as he could. But he only managed to swing four times before the beast roared and moved with shocking speed. It almost looked like it teleported as the bleeding chest was replaced by a scaled tail barreling toward him.

The shield of **[Immutable Bulwark]** quickly moved to block, but he was still slammed into the ground like a comet while the spectral chain was fractured into pieces. The other fourteen tried to worm their way into the open wound in retaliation, which stopped any follow-up from the beast.

It didn't help Zac much though as the dragon's attack had been infused with some sort of Dao Fragment related to brute strength. The armor of his transformation broke apart all along his back when he slammed into the ground with enough force to cause a small earthquake. It felt like half the bones in his body had broken from the impact, but he suddenly felt a lot better as a cold and soothing stream of energy surged across his body.

Zac's first guess was that the Shard of Creation had yet again healed him at the cost of even more of his lifespan, but the feeling was completely different this time. There was not that aching hollow feeling that had accosted him the last times, and he crawled up from the ground with confusion just in time to see 12 of the closest skeletons crack and crumble into dust. What was this?

Only then did the real use of **[Undying Legion]** dawn on him. They were not only soldiers but also decoys that took damage for him. He had not used the skill a lot since trying it out against the Avoli Parasites, and when he did use the skill it was only on weaker enemies. The skill cost a lot and he didn't want to waste any Miasma in tough battles, which meant he had only seen the surface use of the skill.

Since he hadn't really been hurt until now he hadn't witnessed the secondary use of the skill; damage transference. He wasn't given 100 lives though, judging by the fact that over 10 skeletons were destroyed from one single strike. But it was still enough to let him keep fighting a lot longer. He also wasn't sure how strong the effect was.

For example, he doubted the skeletons could deal with a massive wound like the one where he got his whole torso blown to bits.

However, Zac's problems had just started as he found that the dragon was looking down at him with malice in its eyes. It almost seemed enraged at the fact that its mighty tail hadn't even managed to hurt him. Its wings started to furiously beat, causing torrential winds that made the miasma and corrosive mists to billow into the air.

The azure fractal in the sky was obviously strained as large cracks appeared on it before they mended themselves, but it stopped the dragon from going airborne. The beast did however manage to rise onto its back-legs, and Zac felt a foreboding sensation as a very familiar light lit up deep in the open maw.

An unceasing stream of scorching flames slammed into Zac the next moment, and he could only turtle up on the ground beneath his Fractal Bulwark. The flames

carried a terrifying heat, and it felt like he was being boiled alive inside his little bubble. Less than a second passed before he felt that all the skeletons outside had been turned to ash, and he even sensed that the whole miasmic cage struggled to withstand the sea of flames that covered the whole area by now.

The shield of **[Profane Seal]** finally broke a few seconds later, and Zac received a strong backlash that made him groan in pain. Even the thick bulwark started to show signs of tearing as small cracks let droplets of flames through.

He felt a scorching pain in his leg as one of them dripped right through a crack in the armor, but the burn was immediately healed by the Shard of Creation at the cost of even more life force. Zac knew he needed to finish the battles quickly. He couldn't let the Shard keep draining him to heal his wounds, or he'd return to Port Atwood as a senior citizen.

The flames finally abated, and Zac looked around only to see scorched earth in all directions. All the skeletal soldiers were gone, as was the cage trapping the beast. Even the vast swathes of Miasma and corrosive mists from **[Winds of Decay]** had been singed clean, leaving only superheated air.

Zac saw his opportunity as the dragon seemed pretty drained from having expelled a small ocean of flames, and he immediately swapped back to his human form. Lush growth rose from the ashen fields as the domain of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** emerged, and Zac immediately launched a series of Fractal blades at the open maw of the dragon.

However, the Fragment-infused blades only caused minor scars on its face before they broke apart, and Zac knew he would have to use something stronger than that. Cosmic Energy surged in his body as he activated **[Nature's Punishment]**, and the wooden fist emerged from the crack in space before it flew toward the exhausted dragon.

But another pulse from the Shard made Zac's hand twist and deform. Shockingly enough the same thing happened to the wooden hand, and it suddenly looked like a misshapen stump. The scene thankfully only lasted for a second before both of them turned back to normal after Zac shouted in his mind.

He had accidentally put too much focus on his hand from activating the skill, which the Shard had interpreted as desire.

A grand peak emerged from the enormous fractal in the sky the next second, and it shot straight down toward the head of the dragon. Zac wanted to end it once and for all with one massive strike, but he was dismayed to find that he had underestimated the sturdiness of a dragon's skull. Blood poured down from its head like rain, but it resisted the downward push with a furious roar.

It looked like it refused to give up in a battle of pure strength, and its whole body trembled as it tried to throw away the mountain pressing down on it. However, its head had been noticeably pushed down toward the ground, and its throat was only five meters in the air while its whole body was fixed in position.

Zac knew he wouldn't get a better opportunity than this.

This was his final shot, but he knew that any attack with **[Verun's Bite]** wouldn't cut it against the thick plating protecting the dragon's throat. There were only two things in his repertoire that had a shot at killing this thing in one go. The first option was the third swing of **[Deforestation]**, but it was impossible to launch the skill again after such a short duration.

Besides, he didn't have time to wind up 3 consecutive strikes before the dragon had managed to divert the mountain. He was already feeling that he was losing control of **[Nature's Punishment]**.

The second option was more fraught with danger, but he had already come to a point of no return. He felt that both the remnants were already building up for another strike at the fractal cage, and he knew that the rune was already teetering on the brink of collapse. His best shot at surviving whatever came next was to exhaust both the slivers first.

Two knives appeared in his hands and he stabbed them into his shoulders before he tried to launch what should be his ultimate move. He hadn't tried this before, but he saw no real alternative. A normal bronze flash was extremely strong, but the implosion area wasn't large enough to wound a beast of this size.

The pale pink flash he had managed to summon on the Technocrat Ship might work, but he still had no idea what it actually did. It might even heal the dragon rather than hurt it for all he knew.

Besides, either of those attacks would only exhaust one of the remnants, and he wanted to tire both of them out before the Miasmic Cage broke open. He needed to see if he could create a new flash by fusing Bodhi and Coffin in hopes it would create a mix of the two. That would involve both the slivers, and it should release the strongest force he could muster.

If that couldn't kill a dragon, then nothing would.

He was extremely drained already, but he still pushed more mental energy into the two fractals on his shoulders than he had ever done before. His vision was turning blurred, but he forcibly held on to his consciousness as he jumped toward the dragon's throat. The two Fragments entered the modified [**Cyclic Strike**] without issue, and streams of energies started to converge in the middle of his chest to merge as usual.

But the moment the two energies tried to merge in his chest the remnants turned insane.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 463 - Chaos**

The Shard of creation immediately stormed toward the Miasmic Fractal while pouring out unprecedented amounts of energies like it was suicidal, and the Splinter responded in kind. The rune cracked in an instant, causing a chaotic storm of energies that left a new set of cracks on his soul. However, a fractured soul wasn't actually his most pressing issue, as something terrifying was brewing in his chest.

The two streams of energy resisted being merged. Meanwhile, the dual skill fractals were like funnels that didn't stop infusing the two energies, causing more and more opposing energies to gather in his chest. Zac wasn't even providing any mental energy to the skill any longer, but the energy was rather ripped from the two remnants. He couldn't understand what was going on, nothing like this had happened before when forming a flash.

However, the two remnants seemed completely uncaring about the shocking amounts of energy they were losing. Dozens of tentacles shot out of the cage the instant the gap was created, all of them targeting the Shard hovering outside. It met the assault with radiant tendrils of its own. Dozens of clashes took place in an instant, but the battle was quickly slowing down as the two remnants started to look faded and listless.

It was too much.

Zac couldn't even begin to prepare a strike in this condition, and he was horrified to find himself locked in the air as massive surges of power radiated around him. In fact, it seemed as though the whole area had been forced to a halt, as neither the dragon nor the descending mountain moved in the slightest. However, the wind still blew, and Zac briefly noted a bird flying in the sky above, proving that time actually hadn't stopped.

Both Zac and his foe were just locked in place as a bomb was growing inside his chest.

Finally, the situation reached a tipping point just as the two remnants seemed to be on their last legs. They no longer fought, but their tentacles rather gripped each other for support as they teetered on the brink of collapse. Meanwhile, the pressure in his chest had built to such a degree that the two sides no longer were able to resist the merge, and the two streams finally fused into a new energy.

However, that was anything but good news as Zac was still frozen, and this new creation contained such terrifying force that Zac was almost scared out of his mind. Just its existence was breaking apart Zac's body, but he was utterly incapable of moving it even an inch.

Zac screamed with desperation in his mind, fervently wishing for the Spark of Creation to push the thing out of his body. His desire was thankfully granted, and a spear of white metal was forged by some of the left-over energies spread through his body. It emerged from his chest and shot toward the throat of the dragon with the terrifying creation residing within.

The universe suddenly stopped as time and space unraveled, and a hazy pattern emerged as the fused energy exploded.

Zac was still stuck in the air, and his eyes were glued to the thing he had brought forth into the universe. It emitted an unlimited sense of vastness that threatened to turn him insane. It felt like it was trying to force the whole universe into his mind, but his soul was already bursting at the seams from just being subjected to an insignificant corner of the whole.

He needed to look away, but he wasn't even able to blink. Zac was forced to witness the profundity of the universe and the end of his existence.

The dome of heaven suddenly cracked as boundless lightning spread across the horizon. They were the only thing that moved in this world of grey, and the lightning seemed to accumulate right above his position. Zac tried to look up to see what was going on, but his eyes were still fixed as they were before the world stopped. He could sense a terrifying pressure from above though, like he was being gazed upon by an indifferent god.

Power, supremacy, but also happiness?

There was no way for him to comprehend the series of events, but he was relieved to see that the odd pattern in front of him was starting to fade. His mind was right on the brink of a meltdown, and he fervently prayed he would be able to withstand the insane pressures until the grey rune was gone.

A pure pillar of lightning suddenly slammed into the pattern from above, but it was forcibly dispersed by a deep shudder emerging from within the rune. Another blast followed immediately after, and this process repeated eight times with increased intensity until a golden beam of lightning descended.

Its might was even a match to the mysterious rune, and it wasn't as easily dispersed as the earlier bolts.

Zac felt multiple shudders deep in his soul, but the final lightning bolt was like an unmovable fixture. Only after ten seconds did it dissipate, but it left behind a pillar

of golden fractals so densely inscribed that Zac's couldn't even begin to comprehend what they were meant to do. The pattern inside seemed intent to escape, and a world-ending amount of energy ravaged inside the cage.

The world shook and the universe seemed to be cracking as Zac's vision faded to black.

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A shudder ran through his body he was startled awake, and he scrambled to his feet as he looked for threats in all directions. It felt like his eyes were full of sand and his head turned to mush, but he was alive. The dragon lay unmoving next to him with a massive hole in its throat where the mysterious rune had appeared. The summoned mountain was lying beside it, making an odd addition to the environment.

There wasn't any sign of either the grey pattern or the terrifying lightning though. The massive dragon was completely unscathed apart from the hole in its throat, even though it should have been reduced to ash by the lightning strikes that struck the pattern right beneath it. It almost felt like what he witnessed while the world had stopped was a dream.

But he knew that what he had seen was all too real, and he had an inkling of what going on. The grey pattern he had summoned was something the System desired, and it had slowly created a situation for Zac to provide it on a silver platter. He had sensed the greed of the heavens, and the jubilation when the pattern was trapped.

He had been played.

Zac had a pretty good idea of what the thing he summoned was as well. It was Chaos, or more likely a small fragment of it. It was the origin of the Dao, and just looking at it had almost driven Zac insane. If the System hadn't swooped in to steal the thing he would have probably died then and there.

He didn't even have the energy to be mad about being used as an incubation chamber for the System. What could he do? Scream at the sky like a raving lunatic? A sigh emerged from Zac's lips as he looked down at the token by his side. It looked like he had been unconscious for over twelve hours, giving him some time to finish things up on this level and recuperate, but nothing more than that.

His climb would end at the entrance of the 73<sup>rd</sup> floor.

He took a deep breath as he looked up at the sky, and he felt a sense of peace, for the first time in months it felt like. But the tranquility made him freeze in realization as he finally noticed that the two remnants had been completely quiet since he woke up half a minute ago. He quickly turned his sight inward, and he almost reeled in shock at the drastic changes that had taken place.

The most important changes were obviously the ones that had happened to his Miasmic Cage. Only six Miasmic Runes remained as expected, but they had gotten company. Six golden fractals teeming with power had been added to the mix, forming an alternating circle in his mind. The construction seemed extremely robust, as though the two sets of runes formed something greater than the sum of its parts.

More importantly, the cage already housed the two remnants. Was this the System's method of reciprocity, some sort of reward for Zac providing it with the Chaos Pattern?

The two remnants were still entwined by their tendrils just like at the end of the fight, and they still seemed completely listless. They didn't move or struggle at all, and they felt faded, almost dying. They had been forcibly drained in order to form that special blob, and it seemed that it had almost taken all the power they had in the end.

Zac took a shuddering breath as he sat unmoving for a few seconds. He had made it after all. The two remnants had glommed on to each other and formed a mutual restriction, while his cage had upgraded to an unprecedented level. Of course, he knew that he couldn't completely count on the issue being solved.

The remnants couldn't even be destroyed by a warrior who was able to crush a black hole with his bare hands, so he doubted that getting slightly overtaxed would take them out. Besides, he wasn't confident in putting all his trust in the System's restrictive fractals. What if the System suddenly decided it wanted another Chaos Pattern and started prodding around in his head?

He still needed to quickly upgrade the strength of his soul to make sure he could handle any future problems. Besides, he still hadn't given up on his path after his recent troubles. On the contrary, he felt more confident about his choice than ever, which meant that strengthening his soul was still a top priority.

Fusing the Coffin and the Bodhi again was obviously out of the question, at least for the foreseeable future. But the bronze flash and its Bodhi-based equivalent were still very much on the table. He just needed to create a proper foundation first. He was currently like a kid with matches, playing with things he didn't understand.

He was shocked at the recklessness he had displayed during the latter parts of the climb as he looked back on the past weeks. He had not only risked his life untold times by creating the bronze flashes, but he had headed straight toward the Shard without any regard for his life.

Was it the Splinter that had egged him on toward his own path of destruction? Or was it the System that was somehow messing with his sense of reason in order to achieve its goals?

The current breather he had been given would hopefully give him the time he needed to work on his soul, and figure out a way to control the high-grade energies to such a grade that he could reliably use them.

There was no need for him to go to the lengths that he had to forcibly try to tame the flashes while still being a beginner cultivator. The glimpse of the Chaos Pattern had proved that he was in way over his head, and he needed to learn to walk before he could run.

However, it wasn't all good news as his soul had once again gone through a change after his encounter. Another set of white scars had been added to the black tendrils, making his whole soul look checkered. However, both the black and white scars seemed ephemeral and dim, like they were about to fade away. It looked like they had been completely drained just like the real slivers.

At least his soul seemed to have been healed by the Creation's infiltration, but Zac still swallowed one of the soul-healing treasures he had gotten from the mentalist just in case there were hidden wounds he couldn't spot.

It did clear his mind a bit, though it obviously wasn't able to expel the two high-tiered energies that had infiltrated his soul. There were no creation-based globules of energy in his soul though, but there was still a decent amount of left-over energies spread across his body. It was just a pittance compared to what he had spent in the final clash, but it would be able to help him out in a pinch.

As long as he didn't accidentally let his mind stray and waste it, of course.

His soul getting marked by the events didn't feel too surprising, as it had been the unwilling conduit as the two remnants were drained. However, another change was pretty startling. The two fractals on his shoulders had changed. The torrential amounts of energies that coursed through the crude shortcut he had made had actually remolded the skill fractals, making the pathing permanent.

But that was not all as fine markings lined the paths, creating patterns way beyond his comprehension. They were not fractals, and neither were they formed in the inscription language that was commonly used in the Multiverse. They felt more primal, like they were natural markings created by the Dao itself.

The fractal on his left shoulder had clearly been marked by the Shard of Creation, whereas the right one gave off the desolate aura of the Splinter of Oblivion. This could be both good news and bad news, but Zac wasn't ready to experiment whether it would cause any trouble when forming the bronze sparks.

Not that he was very sure that he'd actually be able to form one, judging by how pale and faded the scars on his soul were.

Apart from that his body was in decent condition, except for the horrifying cost of life force. He would have to ask an expert to make sure, but he believed that he had lost decades from the intense usage of the Shard. If he had kept going like that for a few days he would have died of old age, or at least reached an advanced enough age to make further cultivation impossible.

There was no way that using the Shard for recuperation was worth it, as it cost way more of his life compared to slowly recuperating with healing pills.

At least the Shard's forced healing regimen had helped him prepare for what waited outside the tower. The long bout of unconsciousness had also restored most of his missing Cosmic Energy, and he would be able to reach peak condition before the deadline was up. Only two hours remained on his climb, and his two companions had probably already emerged.

If he knew Ogras he would probably want to maximize his benefits by witnessing both his own and Zac's Apparitions. He didn't immediately enter the Teleportation array though, but rather turned to the unmoving body of the dragon.

His climb might have ended prematurely, but there were still treasures to be claimed.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 464 - An Old Friend**

"Worst dragon ever," Zac muttered with disgust as he emerged from the dragon's den.

He had expected to be met by a veritable sea of treasures upon entering the cave, but the only thing that had waited for him was an enormous mat and a small mountain of raw fire-attuned crystals. Certainly, the mat seemed to have been woven from extraordinary materials to create a soft and luxuriant feeling, but it was a far cry from the dragon's hoard he had been expecting.

At least there was the actual carcass of the dragon itself. Such a beast was no doubt a living treasure, and he needed to harvest it before moving on. He had already given up on any hope of finding treasure on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor, so he needed to make the most of this beast.

However, Zac didn't simply put the whole thing into a cosmos sack, but he rather chose to methodically harvest its body piece by piece. It would be a huge shame if the whole dragon turned to dust the moment he left the tower, and this way he would at least be able to guarantee that some parts would make it.

Zac tried to pry off as many scales as possible, along with its two massive horns. He also dug out what he believed to be a Beast Core from its head, though he was a bit surprised since those things usually only appeared after reaching D-Grade. The dragon was extremely powerful, but Zac truthfully suspected it was still in early E-Grade.

He had heard a bit about dragons from Galau. They were terrifying beasts and among the most naturally endowed creatures in the multiverse. They could grow impossibly large as well, making Zac believe he was only dealing with a youngling or a mixed-blood dragon.

Still, leaving anything behind would be a waste, so he even poured almost all his containers to fill them with dragon blood. Enough blood to fill an Olympic-size swimming pool entered his dozen or so canteens and the magical barrels of liquor he had bought.

He did feed a lot of it to **[Verun's Bite]** as well, but not enough to accidentally cause another upgrade. It took hours, sometimes days, for **[Verun's Bite]** to absorb treasures, and Zac was about to potentially face an army waiting outside the gates of the tower. The spirit tool was extremely interested in the beast core also, but it would have to wait.

It was a waste, but he could only pray that the Dragon Core would turn out to be real as he might need Verun's special skills for the upcoming battle. He had somewhat counted on the bronze flash to act as an ace, but there was no way that the remnants were in the position to provide help anytime soon.

He had tried summoning a bronze flash over twenty times while carving up the beast, but nothing happened. The two Fragments entered his reworked fractals just fine, but when they met in the chest they just turned into an impure mix of the two fragments that soon dissipated, just like the failed attempts from before. Something had clearly changed, as he had almost 50% success rate before.

The transformation of the fractals on his shoulders might be causing problems, but he was pretty sure that wasn't it.

An hour had passed since he had woken up by now, and he started to see some patterns of how things might go from here on out. It quickly became clear that the remnants were really capable of some sort of self-restoration. Small motes of energies appeared from within their bodies, even though no Cosmic or Mental energy had entered the cage.

However, it had been a slow grind for a pitiful amount of energy.

Things only went even worse for the remnants from there as the new cage created some sort of suction just moments after the motes of energy formed. The energy was instantly ripped out the Shard and Splinter, leaving only a fraction behind. The rest was purified and funneled out into Zac's body.

The purified energy from the Splinter made its way to his soul, as usual, subtly strengthening it. However, the energy from the Shard rather went into his body, where it seeped into his cells who greedily gobbled it up in an instant. Zac didn't feel any difference in his body, but he guessed that it would slowly improve his constitution.

The amount that he got was far lower compared to before though, and he was not even receiving a tenth of the purified energies he got from the Splinter before he entered the tower. That was fine with Zac though, as the gifts from the remnants always came with deadly downsides.

Focusing on just himself for the time being felt a lot more pertinent. It seemed like he had touched upon some of the massive secrets of the multiverse, and he was slowly forming a few theories based on what Jaol had told him about the System and

what the four-eyed alien said. But all those things were too grand, too complicated, and not something he wanted to get involved with.

He could mess with the broken peaks of the Boundless Path when he had reached A-Grade and was bored with life. Until then the Chaos Patterns and the skies full of lightning could stay as far away as possible as far as he was concerned. He wasn't even in a mood to start experimenting with the flashes again before he had got his Soul Strengthening Manual up and running.

Actually, it seemed that his mind was agreeing with his reluctance to get involved, as his memory Chaos Pattern he had just witnessed was growing foggier by the minute. He couldn't remember any details any longer, and he wouldn't be surprised if it would completely disappear from his memory in a day or two.

It was a pain to dismember the extremely sturdy dragon, and Zac was quickly running out of time. So he finally ran into the carcass and chopped its insides into massive slabs of meat and threw them into his Cosmos Sack. Finally he threw the mangled remains into the sack as well and called it a day.

There was one more thing Zac wanted to do before he left the floor though, and he took out an inscribed box containing an unknown fruit. It was one of the natural treasures he had found during the climb. He still had no idea what it did, but he figured that his body knew what it was doing as it urged him to eat it.

He was somewhat certain that the items he had pilfered during the Battle of Fates would stay, but the same couldn't be said about these things. He wanted to follow Galau's advice and rather eat them than have them turn back into the System's hands the moment he left.

It was only 30 minutes later that he snapped out of his state of vivid hallucinations and bouts of extreme gastrointestinal distress. His whole body was covered in a film of extremely foul-smelling oil, and he felt weak like he had been afflicted with food poisoning.

The natural treasure hadn't actually been toxic, but it rather looked like the treasure was the kind that helped expel impurities like pill toxicity. The problem was the way of expulsion. Some things needed to be processed into pills before eaten, and that scary fruit was probably one of them. He had less than 30 minutes remaining, but he still spent 10 of those vigorously scrubbing off the foul gunk. The smell was making him nauseated, which was saying something considering he could be covered in blood without noticing it nowadays.

Zac immediately discarded any thought of eating any more of the treasures as he stepped into the teleporter with a tired sigh.

**[Eighth Floor Complete. Upgrading Title.]**

**[Choose Reward: [Two Extremities Physique Array], [Divine Investiture Array], [Yin-Yang Arhat Soul Array]]**

Zac found himself in the familiar black dimension, and he almost felt some wistfulness that this was the last time he would come to this place. Of course, the wistfulness wasn't brought on by nostalgia, but rather that this was the last of the rewards. He first opened his title screen to sate his curiosity.

**[Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor: Reach the 73rd level of the Tower of Eternity. Reward: All stats +10, All Stats +10%, Effect of Attributes +10%]**

The upgraded title was just as he had expected after seeing the change on the seventh floor, and he couldn't help but feel a bit curious about what would change upon finishing the whole tower. Was there a secret title waiting at the top after all? However, his attention was soon diverted from the Tower title when he noticed that

there was a new addition to his ever-growing list of achievements. And it was an odd one.

**[Terminus - Gaze upon the Terminus.]**

There was only a short description and no reward, the first empty Title Zac had encountered thus far. Zac guessed the Terminus either referred to the lightning sea or the pattern that he could no longer remember, but he didn't understand why the System would add a title if it wouldn't dole out any Attributes.

Perhaps someone in the Base Town would know, but he felt that keeping this experience to himself was for the best. Stuff like the Dao of Chaos involved the System itself and the peak individuals of the multiverse, and just talking about it might bring a calamity upon his head.

He could only close the title screen with mixed emotions and instead turn his attention to the three arrays up for grabs. However, the rewards honestly had him a bit stumped. He understood the words as he read them one by one, but he had some trouble understanding what they meant.

Zac was surprised that the rewards didn't feel as tailored to his situation compared to the previous floor. Truthfully, they even seemed worse compared to the ones he had been awarded after succeeding in the Battle of Fates, as each of them had represented a clear and almost immediate boost to himself or his force.

Was there an element of luck where you could either get a good set of reward choices or a subpar one? Or were the arrays perhaps even better than the 7<sup>th</sup> floor awards, but Zac was too ignorant to tell? He looked back and forth between the three options, and he felt some helplessness at the fact that he didn't know what any of the three arrays did.

The first array, the **[Two Extremities Physique Array]**, might be some sort of training array to form a unique constitution. It might even be an extremely suited constitution based on the name. Two Extremities could refer to life and death, or perhaps even Creation and Oblivion. Remolding his body to be able to withstand the two remnants seemed pretty amazing. That might just be wishful thinking though.

That would mean that the award was an upgraded version of the body tempering manual, an array that would directly awaken a life and death constitution. However, there was another possibility, based on the wording of the first and third rewards. One was called a Physique Array, and the other a Soul Array.

That kind of wording was a bit reminiscent of War arrays, and it made him remember something; the Fire Golem down in the Underworld. Parts of its body had been engraved with crude fractals, and he had learned this was a common way for constructs to improve their power.

Was the same thing possible for humans? Was it perhaps an array that would be engraved to his body, somehow boosting it beyond its normal capabilities? He guessed something like that would work like a synthetic constitution or something, where it provided similar boosts.

Whichever way the array worked the end result was most likely the same. It would probably directly increase his combat power by improving his body, almost like having a private War array. It would give a direct and convenient boost to his Strength, and it was definitely a viable choice.

As for the **[Divine Investiture Array]**, he had no idea. Judging by the name it might be something that could improve a person or an item. Divine Investiture, maybe it meant that it could bestow Heaven's Blessing. Perhaps it was something like the array that he had passed when he climbed the 8<sup>th</sup> floor, but a greater version? Or was it related to fate?

Getting the System's blessing didn't sound too bad right about now, and it sort of felt like the System owed him one after the last two levels.

Then there was the final reward, one related to the soul. He would have preferred one that mentioned caging rambunctious slivers, but this one rather seemed geared toward taking advantage of the odd scars covering his soul. It seemed to be based on the concept of duality just like the Constitution Array, but he had no idea what a 'Soul Array' could do. Did it improve one's control over the Dao's, perhaps?

It did however include the word Arhat, which was a Buddhist term. He didn't know if what would cause any issues with his cultivation or his recently acquired manual, but he guessed that anything he got from the eighth floor would be compatible with him. An Arhat was a perfected being who had reached enlightenment, so perhaps the Soul Array would be able to push his soul to a perfect state?

Zac looked back and forth between the options, but he truthfully didn't need to look too long before he decided on the third option, the **[Yin-Yang Arhat Soul Array]**. It wasn't that he felt it was perfect for his situation, as he honestly had no idea what it did, but he'd obviously take anything that helped his soul at the current juncture.

The other two options were probably great as well, but they were luxuries compared to a necessity. His arm reached toward the hovering prompt in front of him, but he suddenly froze in shock as the silence of the special dimension was broken.

**[First choice will grant you power. Second choice brings rectification of regret. Third choice will lead you down an alternative Path]**

Zac didn't know how to react when he heard the emotionless voice in his head. A year had passed and he had almost forgotten those early days of the Integration, but it all rushed back to him at that moment.

The System was once again directly speaking with him.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 465 - Beware the Terminus**

Zac froze like a deer in the headlights as he looked in all directions. Back when the integration first took place he had been completely clueless, unaware of just how powerful a thing the System was. But now he was all too aware just how mighty it was, and the attention put him under immense psychological pressure.

However, he knew this was a rare opportunity and he needed some clarifications.

"Was it you who pushed me down this path, who put these two remnants in front of me?"

**[Yes. User qualified for unique empowerment scenario. Congratulations.]**

Zac felt some fury flare up at hearing the same annoying emotionless congratulations as he did when the two last spoke, but he quickly restrained himself this time and instead focused on what was important.

"Are we done then?" Zac asked, his heart pounding. "You won't mess with me any longer? I gave you that Pattern, and you provided me with protections against the fractals."

**[Reciprocity has been achieved and balance is maintained. Beware the Terminus.]**

“What does that even mean?” Zac asked with some bitterness in his voice, but he was only met with silence.

“What regrets are you talking about? And what alternate path? Please elaborate,” Zac tried instead, as he didn’t understand what the hell the system had been talking about earlier.

Unfortunately, it looked like the System wasn’t any more talkative this time around, and it had left after delivering a few cryptic lines. Zac once again looked upon the screen with the three rewards, his earlier resolve completely crushed. Could he trust the System? Or was it messing with him once again?

His thoughts about the first reward didn’t change, as the comment was in line with his own thoughts. But the other two threw him for a loop. What did an alternate path mean? Did it refer to his soul cultivation, or was it something much bigger? Would it tamper with his nascent Creation based on Life and Death? Would it actually force him to embark on Buddhist Cultivation, forgoing his current classes?

And what the hell did rectification of regret mean?

He had done things he wasn’t too proud of since the integration, but he would say there was only one real regret; not reaching his father before he was murdered. It couldn’t possibly be an array that could resurrect the dead, could it? Or was it rather related to his inability to cultivate? The more he thought about it the more likely it felt.

Wasn’t that exactly what Divine Investiture meant? The ability to cultivate was based on one’s affinity with the Daos, something that he was completely lacking. What if this array could rectify that deficiency in his body, allowing him to embark on the path of a true cultivator?

There were a lot of secrets related to his body, secrets that might make him want to stay a mortal. But he also knew that things would get extremely rough the further he walked down the path of cultivation. Things weren’t too bad right now in F-Grade, but the situation would get much worse for each grade as far as he knew. This might be his shot at getting the final, and greatest, boost to his power, becoming a proper cultivator.

Zac finally went with his gut and reached for the second option.

Zac chose the **[Divine Investiture Array]** based on his guess that the System wasn’t actively messing with him. Why would it even bother? It was in control of the rewards after all. He wasn’t interested in changing his path, which would potentially make the **[Yin-Yang Arhat Soul Array]** useless. And between rectifying regret and strength, he chose the former.

He had plenty of Strength from a bunch of other sources, and a constitution array wasn’t required for him to deal with the issues on Earth. He hadn’t even seen anyone in his sector utilizing this kind of thing, and it didn’t come up when Galau talked about constitutions. It was probably some sort of high-tiered boost not available in his sector, but people did just fine without them.

Rectifying regret was more in line with his purpose of cultivation. He didn’t really care about power for power’s sake, and not all his troubles could get solved by becoming stronger. Perhaps the **[Divine Investiture Array]** would make him a cultivator, or perhaps its function was something else entirely, but it didn’t matter.

He didn’t want to experience some tragedy in the future and realize it could have been prevented if he hadn’t been too greedy for more power.

Zac didn’t immediately pick the reward though, but he first started putting on one ring after another on his fingers, before moving on to bracers, earrings, and

necklaces. It was the jewelry he looted from the mentalist, each of them a pretty strong treasure that contained one charge either of offensive or defensive nature.

He had seen a couple of similar items by now, and he guessed that all of them were either high or more likely peak-tier quality. It was like he was decked in treasures that each could release an attack or shield at least at the level of the **[Void Bomb]** that was powerful enough to tear holes in space. The items were clearly made for a woman, but he wasn't in a position to be picky at the moment. The whole square could be full of people wanting to rip him to shreds for all he knew, and every small advantage would make a huge difference.

They were outside items so they were pretty limited inside the Tower, but they would be back to their full power out in the Base Town. He actually wanted to don a few dresses as well to improve his defenses even further, but he was afraid that he'd ruin any chances of finding a patron if he came out looking like a maniac.

He looked down at his body a second later, satisfied with the result. Ogras had once told him that wealth was one of the greatest weapons, and he was inclined to agree as he looked at the glistening treasures covering his hands and arms. It was like he suddenly had 10 lives, though each item spent was probably the equivalent of losing Hundreds of Millions of Nexus Coins, perhaps even Billions.

Zac also had enough Creation Energy in his body for one major restoration as well, but he didn't want to use it unless absolutely necessary. He finally prepared one of the spikes of Faceless #9 in the sleeves of his robes, but he was even leerier about that spike compared to the Creation Energy. It might be lethal for outsiders to use, and he would only stab himself with that thing if he really didn't see any alternatives.

Normally he would have entered the new floor as a Draugr to defend against surprise attacks, but he, unfortunately, couldn't do that as he was exiting the tower. Zac wasn't ready to expose his second identity, which meant would have to defend against any potential assault with treasures and his nature-based defensive skills.

Zac took a few deep breaths before he picked the **[Divine Investiture Array]**, and the next moment he was teleported to the 73<sup>rd</sup> floor. He crushed his token the moment he arrived, but his Danger Sense already screamed in alarm.

He immediately activated one of the defensive charges of a ring as he created a massive fractal edge that he swung in a grand 360-degree arc. A dozen massive rats were turned into mince-meat, and his whole body was drenched in blood and viscera in an instant. It wasn't exactly how he wanted to look upon exiting the tower, but perhaps it would give off an intimidating impression.

A glance at his surroundings showed that he had been thrown into the middle of an endless rat tide that relentlessly tried to swarm him from every direction with furious abandon, and he was forced to fight them off as their teeth seemed to be able to bite straight through the shield he had summoned. Even the leaves of **[Nature's Barrier]** were getting ripped apart and swallowed by the crazed beasts.

Thankfully he only needed to fight for ten seconds before he was teleported out of the Tower of Eternity, where the Dao Apparition awaited.

-----

The stone slate floated through the vast cosmos, just as it had since there was only darkness. Ancient lines marred its surface, every single groove and turn containing seemingly boundless profundity.

It spoke of the grand tenets of the universe, but very few had the ability to glean any of its secrets. So it continued its solitary journey through the vast cosmos. It silently passed the grand warriors who traversed the stars, and not even ancient existences born from stardust itself could sense its presence.

But all journeys must end.

A remote and solitary planet shone like a green gem, the stele imperceptibly adjusted its trajectory to head toward it. It breached the atmosphere not long after, and it finally settled down in a secluded valley.

The stele settled down gently on the ground, as though it wasn't encumbered by gravity in the slightest. However, a simple touch of the slate made the whole world tremble, causing earthquakes and extreme weather to ravage the whole planet for months before subsiding.

The primordial stone plaque sat in its valley undisturbed, but the planet slowly changed from the fundamental truths it espoused. War ravaged the continents and enough blood was spilled that crops refused to grow in the soil. Countries rose and fell like the turn of the seasons, grand warriors becoming kings before turning to dust.

One day a one-armed man found himself in the valley. His army had been utterly defeated in battle, and he needed a safe harbor to hide from his enemies. He hadn't lost through lacking skill or tactics, but through inferior numbers. It filled him with irreconciliation that a fool defeated him, but there was nothing to do about the situation. Reality wasn't fair.

There was something alluring about the valley though, and the general soon forgot his anger as he scoured its nooks and crannies until he found the ancient stele. He was unable to take his eyes away from the patterns covering the surface, and it felt like they were the most beautiful things in the universe.

He sat down in front of it as though he was possessed, his eyes never leaving the stone for a second. The seasons passed as the man pondered upon the stele, silent and unmoving. Months turned to years, and years turned into millennia. Forces emerged and fell soon after, great triumphs and defeats replaced each other one by one on the continent.

However, no one ever visited the secluded valley. No one even spoke about the mountains that shielded it from the surrounding countries. It was as though it was separated from the world, a dimension of its own. It was just a man and a stone, and eons of silence.

A storm suddenly erupted in the valley, and the millennia of tranquility ended. The cultivator shuddered, as though he was brought out from a dream.

"War," he muttered as he got on his feet and looked to the stars.

War was the motor of progress, and blood was needed to turn the wheels of fate. Bowed to his master before walking over to take away the monument, as he felt there was still much to learn. But no matter how he strained and pulled it wouldn't move the slightest. Cracks spread for tens of thousands of meters around him, but the monument refused to be moved.

The man sighed in disappointment, but there was no real anger in his eyes. There was just tranquility, and the burning fires of conflict. Increasingly powerful waves started to emanate from his body until he suddenly disappeared in a massive explosion. The next moment he stood in space, looking down at the planet below.

His homeworld had once been without end in his mind, a battlefield whose scale beggared comprehension. But now the scene was too small, just a small ripple in the universe not worth mentioning. He needed a grander arena to progress further. The warlord waved his hand, and a moon was ripped from its trajectory, and crushed into an unadorned lance of stone and steel.

Its materials were nothing special, but space still broke from the slightest movement of its tip.

He looked down at the planet, or rather the now-ruined valley where he had spent most of his life. If it wasn't meant for him any longer, then it might as well continue its journey toward the next fated one. Being stuck on this small corner was an insult to the grandeur it represented.

He swung the lance with one swift motion, and space trembled as a wave of unfettered destruction carved off a section of the planet, sending the continent spinning toward the endless black. The universe needed war, and war needed more than one general.

A stone slate floated through the vast cosmos, and it would continue doing so until there was only darkness. Ancient lines marred its surface, almost every single groove and turn containing seemingly boundless profundity.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 466 - War**

"He made it to the 72<sup>nd</sup> floor after all!" Balios said to his uncle. "He might even make it the whole way."

"He's almost out of time. There was less than a day remaining when he finally managed to pass the 71<sup>st</sup> level. Even if he defeats the guardian now he will be exhausted and most likely wounded," Ubrok answered, but there were clear signs of hesitation on his face.

"Still," Balios whispered. "Perhaps we should stay out of this? Even lord Beradan only made it to the 65<sup>th</sup> floor. No matter if he passes or not he's still someone we shouldn't get involved with. We're just sticking our necks out while the real lords will reap the eventual rewards. The promised payment for assistance is not worth our lives."

"You are right. Let's back away," Ubrok finally relented. "We cannot get involved with the second coming of the Eveningtide Asura, our force will not be able to withstand the fallout no matter which side stands victorious. Let's back away and enjoy the apparition in peace. I might even be able to improve my Dao Seed after all these years."

Balios hurriedly nodded in agreement and their group of 8 started making their way back across the square. They weren't alone in choosing retreat over the quest reward and the private bounties provided by a few scions. The heated competition for the front-row seats of the square had quickly died down as Zac Piker had knocked down one level after another, eclipsing all the sector's geniuses for the past hundreds of thousands of years.

Things had calmed down as Mr. Piker, or rather Lord Piker, found himself stuck on the 71<sup>st</sup> level for almost a week, but the moment he'd reached the final level of the 8<sup>th</sup> floor people started to worry. Some had already backed away, and there were not many willing to take the place of the deserters.

A million years had passed, but the lessons that the Eveningtide Asura had engraved into the souls of the people of the Zecia Sector were still vividly remembered. Opening yourself and your family up to that level of vengeance was not worth the potential prize or remuneration. However, the group only managed to retreat a hundred meters before a commotion broke out across the square.

"73!" a cultivator screamed with shock, immediately causing some panic to finally appear even in the eyes of the staunchest of warriors.

A few still remained, clearly intent on betting it all, but most people started running for their lives. However, the fleeing cultivators stopped just a few seconds later because the tower started releasing an immense pressure as waves of power radiated across the whole town, far beyond what anyone had ever seen before.

Greed fought with fear, but the allure was too great. Witnessing a 9th-floor apparition from a front-row seat was too enticing to give up, and the whole square sat down on the ground as if they were of one mind. Balios froze in hesitation, unsure whether he should flee further or join the others. The hesitation only lasted for a fraction of a second as he hurriedly took out his prepared mat as he gazed up at the sky.

The pressure emitted from the tower kept accumulating, and fewer and fewer managed to hold their backs straight. A few even started bleeding from their ears from the immense aura of the Tower of Eternity. It was as though the Heavens themselves had descended upon the Base Town, standing in judgment.

But the pressure was suddenly gone, and Balios's eyes widened in shock as the tower flickered before it suddenly disappeared as well. Taking its place was a stone plaque whose size was a match to the Tower of Eternity. Balios's eyes were drawn toward the mysterious scars covering its surface, and his mind turned blank the next moment.

It was only sometime later he woke up from his trance, but he was shocked to realize he couldn't remember a thing, not even how much time had passed. But something had changed inside his body, and it felt like his blood had been replaced by fire. The drums of war echoed in his mind and his arms bulged as he subconsciously dragged out [Skylark], his azure blue Azrathir Spirit Tool.

The sword hummed in response, seemingly influenced by the odd state of its master.

The teleportation array lit up, and the whole square collectively held their breath as the man they had been waiting for the past day reappeared. However, this was not a hero's exit, but rather that of a beggar. The man's aura seemed strong and stable, but he was completely covered in still-wet blood. He was also decked out in odd jewelry that made him look like a robber who had absconded with a maiden's jewelry box.

His rough state wasn't surprising, as he had passed to the 73<sup>rd</sup> floor at the last possible moment. He was probably putting up a brave front, and he quickly sat down and closed his eyes, enjoying the protection of the array. Zac Piker had overtaxed himself, forgetting that there was another trial waiting for him outside.

Balios's eyes were slowly turning bloodshot, and a wordless agreement passed between him and his uncle. The group no longer had any interest in retreating, but instead slowly made their way back toward their position.

"The quest! It changed!" another man suddenly shouted.

The flames of war were already drowning out most of Balios's thoughts, but curiosity overcame bloodthirst and he slowly looked away from the blood-drenched man to instead check out the changes of the quest.

**Fatebreaker (Unique, Limited): Kill Zac Piker within the time limit. Reward: Ten free levels in the Tower of Eternity. [00:01:00]**

Balios's eyes threatened to pop out of their sockets as he read the reward. What was going on? If the previous reward had been unprecedented, then the current one was beyond comprehension. Had Lord Piker spent his whole climb cursing the Heavens, and this was his retribution?

The whole square was like a kettle that threatened to boil over at any second, and Balios's eyes were locked at the humanoid treasure trove. A few minutes passed and Balios almost lashed out at his neighbors in a bloodthirsty rage, his muscles shuddering as he tried to keep his impulses in check.

But finally, the man stood up and turned toward the square.

"I—" Lord Piker said, but he stopped when the protective array suddenly winked out like it just ran out of power.

Everyone gaped in incomprehension for a second, but chaos took hold of the square the next moment.

-----  
Zac appeared on the teleportation array, and he relaxed when he saw that the defensive array was still up and running. He needed to quickly consolidate his gains, so he sat down on the ground after nodding at Ogras and Galau who were mutely staring at him with eyes as wide as saucers.

He was relieved to see that all the defensive treasures he had equipped before exiting were still there, as was the valuable Spatial Ring that had belonged to the mentalist. He was pretty certain at this point that all the loot he had snatched from other climbers was still in his possession, though the same probably didn't hold true for the other valuables he picked up during the climb.

The other two didn't say a word as Zac closed his eyes, and he could understand their stunned expressions.

Not even he had really expected to pass the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, let alone the 8<sup>th</sup>. But all that could wait until later as he needed to focus on the vision he had just witnessed. It felt as though he had sat right next to that man for tens of thousands of years, appreciating the stone stele and its mysteries. Just looking at it had filled him with a desire for conquest, a bit like when he used [**Hatchetman's Rage**].

The runes spoke of the survival of the fittest, about the need for conflict. Through battle the weaker sides would get cleansed, or 'weakness leaving the hive' as the Zhix would call it. The strong would get stronger, and the universe would benefit as a whole. It was evolution, continuous betterment by discarding what didn't perform.

Zac wasn't sure what concept the rune represented, but he felt that it was either a Dao of Conflict or a Dao of War. The man in the vision had leaned toward the latter, but he had also been colored by his past experiences as a general. The man only grasped a snippet of the truths the stele contained, but that part alone had turned him into a terrifying powerhouse that made him break through multiple grades without any other assistance.

The main takeaway for Zac was the connection between battle and creation; war always had a purpose. It might be held to protect your beliefs or to punish evil. War might erupt over resources, or to take out a hated enemy. It might just simply be the pursuit of strength. Purpose and conviction were what separated a warrior and a beast or a madman.

This meant that the concept engraved upon the stele wasn't based on Oblivion, as it was not mindless destruction. It was creation through destruction, where you built your future through conflict. It felt like one of the most fundamental fusions of the two peak concept after looking at the ancient runes, but the Dao Fragment it resonated with most was his Fragment of the Axe. Perhaps all weapon-related Daos were children of the Dao of War.

A swing empowered by your conviction would move faster and hit harder than an empty attack. As long as he fought for what he believed in he would be able to push himself much further than if he fought with hesitation or reluctance in his heart. He

had combined many aspects of heaviness and sharpness into the Fragment of the Axe, such as sharpness through speed and heaviness from momentum.

But he now added the reason for swinging his axe into his Dao.

Energy surged around him as he felt his insight coalesce, and his body was flush with power in an instant. He opened his eyes and immediately opened his Dao screen to see the result, and he was extremely satisfied with the results.

**Fragment of the Axe (Middle): All attributes +20, Strength +225, Dexterity +120, Endurance +15, Wisdom +50. Effectiveness of Strength +10%.**

It was a massive boost, though Zac looked at the additional all attributes with mixed emotions. He had hoped to maintain his massive lead in Luck against general cultivators, but it looked like deep insights into the Dao would be able to bridge some of the gap. Of course, he would still maintain a commanding lead thanks to his large number of titles that improved upon his base Luck.

Perhaps he shouldn't be too surprised about the increased Luck stemming from a deeper understanding of the Dao. Gaining Dao Seeds and Dao Fragments was just forming a stronger connection with the heavens, which in turn should improve one's fate.

The evolution of his Fragment of the Axe wasn't the only thing that he had gained from the vision. The stone stele had almost been all-encompassing, and he felt like he had created a foundation for improving both his other Fragments as well. Both the Fragment of the Coffin and the Fragment of the Bodhi were at the lowest possible level until now, but Zac now had something to build upon when he came back.

Taking the first step forward toward an upgrade had always been the hardest for him, but upgrading the two Fragments was only a matter of time now. It wasn't to the point that he felt one week of meditation would do the trick, but he still believed that he would be able to take the next step within a few months even if he didn't enter any life and death battles.

Unfortunately, he couldn't revel in his latest gains at the moment, as there were some pressing issues to deal with.

"Are you okay?" Ogras asked with a hoarse voice as Zac stood up, and Zac noted a slightly manic look in the eyes behind the mask he wore to cover his features.

"Not my blood," Zac shrugged. "I'm in perfect condition, I killed the guardian over twelve hours ago. What's going on?"

"People started to leave, but then the apparition appeared and the quest changed. We're in deep shit," Ogras growled.

"It changed?" Zac exclaimed with shock. "I'll deal with this. Stay behind me if I can't convince them to back away. I'll activate a defensive treasure I found."

He turned toward the square, and he immediately understood what Ogras meant. The field in front of the tower only half-filled with cultivators from all sorts of races, but people were rushing toward the center square from every direction.

"I-" Zac said with a carrying voice, but he was cut short as the shield in front of him suddenly disappeared.

His mind blanked out as he found himself exposed to a whole army waiting to kill him. He had hoped to work out a diplomatic resolution, but he realized that was a fool's dream as a collective roar spread across the square. His eyes widened in alarm, and his danger sense was already going off the charts.

The Spectral Forest of [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] appeared in an instant, and [**Nature's Barrier**] followed right after. He infused the Fragment of the Bodhi into the leaves without hesitation and spread it to cover his two companions as well. The two

of them backed away as far as they possibly could, each of them erecting a few layers of defenses of their own.

He didn't understand what was going on. It felt like he and the System had struck an accord earlier, and it had even gone so far as to help him out by directly speaking to him. But then it followed it up with dialing up the bounty on his head to the point that it made these people froth at the mouth.

Was the System unhappy with his choice?

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**Chapter 467 - Man Versus World**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Over a hundred attacks teeming with power soared toward him, and the whole sky was shrouded by the multifarious display. Zac's fractal leaves condensed to cover a smaller area to create more layers of defense, but the defenses were quickly ripped to shreds by the onslaught.

Zac was far stronger than anyone here, but the attackers weren't weaklings by any means. This was a low-grade sector, but everyone present was still the strongest of a generation, all intent on taking him out. There was only so much **[Nature's Barrier]** could block before the leaves were exhausted, and he knew that he couldn't just sit around like a target dummy.

**[Verun's Bite]** keened with delight as Zac's arm was almost turning into a blur. One fractal blade after another radiating terrifying energy ripped into the storm of attacks, crushing most of them without even needing to clash. The extreme power that radiated out from the middle-stage Dao Fragment was enough to utterly dominate the weaker strikes, and they were ripped into swirls of Cosmic Energy.

However, if each of his fractal blades was like a powerful elephant, then the weaker attacks were like a sea of rabid hyenas that slowly managed to whittle them down. There were just too many attackers, and he felt his waves of fractal edges slowly getting pushed back as more and more cultivators joined the fight.

It was a bit disappointing to not being able to utterly crush his enemies with sheer might, but it was still a massive show of force that he could almost create a stalemate when exchanging blows with hundreds of the top geniuses of the sector. He also knew that it was a testament to just how powerful a Mid-Grade Dao Fragment was.

His weapon was just average if you discounted the uncommonly high spirituality of the Tool Spirit, and **[Chop]** was as basic a skill as they came. However, each blade still managed to crush a dozen beautiful and intricate skills that sailed toward him before they ran out of steam. Of course, if he didn't do something soon he might get himself or his two companions hurt.

However, Zac was prepared for exactly this kind of worst-case scenario, and Cosmic Energy streamed toward his neck.

Mysterious fluctuations spread out from his position the next second as a massive eye emerged out of the void. It was one of the treasures he had taken from the mentalist's Spatial Ring, a necklace with an eye that actually seemed alive. The conjured eye didn't move, but it rather just stared at the sea of cultivators and the incoming attacks. A mystic ray of blue light spread out the next moment, and the attacks cracked in an instant, leaving not a single one intact.

Dozens of warriors fell back with blood pouring from their eyes, their souls definitely hurt by the clash. It caused a lull in the battle, and Zac figured this was his last chance to stop the madness before it got out of hand.

"Stop now and I won't cause any trouble for you or your clans," Zac roared at the top of his lungs. "But I will kill everyone who stays behind, no matter heritage or affiliation! This is your only warning!"

His voice was filled with power, and the air shuddered around him as his blood-drenched aura was unleashed to its fullest. He hoped to wake these people up from their greed-fueled battle fervor. However, the effect of his words and his aura was far worse than he anticipated, and not a single one seemed willing to back down.

It was like they had eaten stimulants or some sort of berserking pill.

A few had been killed or incapacitated by the massive eye, but new warriors filled the ranks, and Zac could see that the streets were filling up with people who wanted to join the chaos. Just defending wouldn't cut it, and he needed to go with Ogras' idea. Kill a few chickens to scare the monkeys as the demon called it.

Another defensive treasure cracked on his hand, causing a shimmering fractal made from churning waters to appear in the air. Torrential typhoons shot toward the cultivators and swallowed up even more attacks, but a few still slipped through and slammed into his newly formed leaves. The storms weren't as effective as the mysterious eye in pushing back the attackers, but it gave Zac enough time to charge up **[Deforestation]**.

Zac was going all-out from the start. If the first swing wouldn't convince them to back off, then there was a tsunami of flames waiting. If people still hadn't managed to curb their greed he would release the **[Axe of Desolation]** and end the battle altogether. The massive woodcutter's axe materialized above him, and Zac immediately initiated the **[Axe of Felling]**.

You could say that he had started this battle with this very attack just before he was forced to flee into the tower, and he would end it the same way.

"Stop its activation!" a shout echoed out across the square, and Zac was suddenly covered in uncomfortable energy that made the Cosmic Energy in his body feel slow and listless.

He quickly activated the first defensive charge of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, but his eyes widened when the attack passed right through the emerald shield and drilled into his chest.

"It's a curse, a rare type of mental attack!" Galau screamed from behind. "You can break it by force or treasures, look inward!"

Zac's eyes lit up and he looked inside, and he immediately spotted crude runes covering the Skill Fractal for **[Deforestation]**. He rotated a storm of Cosmic Energy to slam into it, and three forceful pushes cracked it wide open. It caused light internal bleeding as well, but it wasn't a big deal for someone like Zac.

However, that was just the first of dozens attempts to tie down the massive axe in the sky. It was covered in ten layers of restrictive arrays as well, and no matter how hard Zac struggled he wasn't able to move his arm forward. It was a type of counter to his attacks he had never seen before, and he couldn't figure out any quick fix to launch the skill.

His axe was already tied up in the swing, making it impossible to send out any fractal attacks to destroy the restrictions. **[Nature's Punishment]** was liable to destroy the axe as well, not that Zac was able to unleash both the attacks at the same time. Ogras seemed to have understood the issue as a beam of darkness slammed into the restrictions from behind, but only the outermost of the many layers of restrictions were broken.

"Don't worry," Zac said as he looked back. "I'll deal with this."

He felt thankful that the demon was willing to stick his neck out in a messy situation like this, but Ogras was honestly more of a liability than an asset at this moment unless he had completely transformed during the time since they parted ways in the tower. He could only activate yet another of the one-time treasures, and he felt a large chunk of Cosmic Energy leave his body as a thousand golden swords shot toward the restrictions around the **[Axe of Felling]**.

The restrictions were ripped to pieces before the swords continued toward the mob and caused widespread carnage as the summoned weapons slipped straight past hastily erected shields and into their bodies. However, the **[Axe of Felling]** was already dissipating, and Zac had lost his connection to the fractal axe. Nothing happened as Zac swung **[Verun's Bite]** over and over until the massive woodcutter's axe dissipated.

Zac growled with annoyance and tried to resummon the axe, but he was shocked to find that the skill wouldn't activate. It seemed that **[Deforestation]** had been put on its cooldown since the first swing had technically been initiated. Zac didn't even know that an outcome like this was possible, and he scrambled for new ideas to deal with the mob and their next salvo of attacks.

Zac activated another one of the treasures, an offensively geared ring that released an invisible force that made the whole square twist and bend. Dozens fell to their knees screaming, their eyes and ears bleeding as they clutched their heads. It looked like the mentalist had been in possession of multiple mental attack treasures in addition to her terrifying skills.

The attack gave Zac a short breather and he turned toward his two companions who were still hiding in the back.

"How do I defend against more curses?" Zac asked.

Galau only hesitated for a short moment before he took out a small doll and threw it over to Zac.

"Pour some energy into this. It will take your place. But curses are very hard to plant when the target is anticipating it," the merchant hurriedly said as his eyes darted back and in search of any lurking threat. "You can also guard your fractals with your Daos if they try it again."

Zac nodded in thanks before he turned back toward the enemies. Losing **[Deforestation]** to such a trick was a huge blow, but he wasn't out of options just yet. Cosmic Energy surged into his hand instead, and the sky above him cracked.

He also activated **[Hatchetman's Rage]** for good measure, as he was confident that the Splinter was in no condition to cause any trouble at the moment. The leaves surrounding him suddenly lost the beautiful fractals covering their surface as the wooden hand emerged from its separate dimension. Zac needed to make this one count,

so he chose to infuse the attack with the Fragment of the Bodhi rather than his defensive canopy.

However, the wooden hand barely had time to move more than ten meters before it was almost blasted to pieces by three beams of light that converged right at its position. Zac endured the pain in his own hand and looked around, realizing that three attackers were holding identical mirrors covered in fractals. It was no doubt an array, and if there was one there were bound to be more arrays waiting to be activated.

A shockwave spread out from his original position as he flashed forward, two massive avatars appearing in an instant as a bracer on each of his arms cracked. One formed a vast cloud of darkness that covered the sky. Everything that entered it disappeared, including the beams of light. The other was a kneeling warrior without features, and he enclosed Ogras and Galau in a protective embrace.

The second treasure was activated to prevent the attackers from taking his two companions hostage in case he needed to enter a melee with the mob, whereas the second one would let him complete his skill. The vast clouds allowed the hand to move forward shrouded in darkness, and it quickly managed to erect its emerald array above the chaotic army.

However, its activation was by no means uncontested as over twenty avatars and powerful attacks rose to meet it.

The combined power the dozen elite warriors was barely able to hold back the descent of the punishment, and Zac found it difficult to make any headway. Zac was considering whether he should try to cause some chaos by jumping into the fray or perhaps weaken their coordination with another treasure.

Finally, he also decided to make a move himself. It would put Ogras and Galau at some risk, but he felt he needed his hands to get a bit bloodied if he wanted to end this thing. Perhaps the mob thought he kept using treasures because he wasn't actually that strong, which emboldened them to keep going. It would put him in harm's way of his own punishment, but he was durable enough to withstand some friendly fire.

He was just about to flash forward with **[Loamwalker]** when a group of cultivators suddenly appeared out of nowhere at the front of the army. Most of them radiated a powerful aura that could almost match the weaker warriors in the Battle of Fates, and Zac knew that the true elites of the sector had made their move.

Zac wasn't worried in the slightest, rather the opposite. He believed if he managed to take out these people then any cohesion in the army would crumble, and he would only need to defend against some weaklings for another minute to make it out alive. Zac directly charged at the quintet, but he didn't have time to move before each of them produced a different treasure in their hands.

"Four Gates!" one of the men shouted, and one massive doorway appeared in each direction around Zac.

The doors cracked open, and four densely inscribed hands emerged, each one forming a different seal. Zac noticed there was a group of warriors behind the man who had created a War Array to support the summoning, but he didn't have a chance to even attack before he was beset by a series of hallucinations.

Not only that, it felt like the world was twisted and inverted. He saw that his hand moved when he tried to walk, and the world was suddenly upside-down. It was like all his wires had been crossed, and just making the smallest movement needed great focus. Eating one of the mental pills and cracking another defensive treasure did alleviate the symptoms somewhat, but it was still a struggle to understand what was going on around him.

Zac knew he would have been able to improve the situation by infusing **[Mental Fortress]** with the Fragment of the Bohdi Rather than Fragment of the Coffin, but he knew that the still-struggling **[Nature's Punishment]** would be destroyed if it lost its Dao empowerment. He really needed to take out these five new arrivals, he arduously split his attention from the wooden hand to shoot out a series of fractal blades toward the group.

“Six Directions!” a second cultivator shouted immediately as Zac launched his attacks, and six elongated Fractals formed a circle in the sky.

Zac growled in annoyance when he saw that he had been trapped by a shield that blocked his strikes with only the smallest of cracks forming, and he realized that it might be even sturdier than the cage he created with **[Profane Seal]**.

But these people would soon understand he wasn't someone they could trap so easily.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 468 - Restrained**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac realized that breaking through the thick shield would be difficult from the outside, but the wooden hand was already presiding above the army outside of the shield. He needed to create an opportunity to let the punishment descend, which would hopefully ruin the array as well. He had a few options, but he ultimately chose to utilize one of the rings on his finger, which was another offensive treasure from the mentalist.

He hoped that the mental attack would be able to breach the Six Direction's shield, as it seemed physical in nature. It was unlikely they had prepared mental defenses after his display upon entering the tower, after all. The ring on his finger cracked and Zac breathed out in relief when he saw the almost imperceptible wave slip through minute cracks between the six fractals and descend on the army.

Another burst of Cosmic Energy entered Zac's body as several cultivators instantly got their souls crushed, and many of the skills blocking **[Nature's Punishment]** failed as warriors were forced to withstand a massive trauma to their souls. It seemed as though the group of five in the front were protected by some unknown means though, and they didn't even flinch as the wave passed them by.

The offensive treasure had fulfilled its purpose as the avatars that blocked **[Nature's Punishment]** lost their vigor in an instant, and a massive branch finally managed to emerge from the emerald fractal in the sky. Chaotic storms of Cosmic Energy caused massive waves in the sky as warriors threw out defensive treasures and all sorts of talismans as a last-ditch effort, but everything was pushed aside or crushed as the massive branch descended.

Only at the last moment was the wooden punishment stopped by a prismatic shield that reminded Zac of a soap bubble. Zac kept infusing the skill with more and

more power though, and he felt like he was just missing a little bit to break the last line of defenses. One cultivator after another fell beneath the shield as they were overtaxed by the pressure, but the replacements were seemingly endless.

Zac suddenly had an idea and he took out an impressive-looking talisman from his Spatial Ring and threw it toward the army with a roar. The eyes of quite a few warriors widened in alarm, and they quickly refocused their efforts to defend their minds from yet another concussive wave. The army had already been beset by two peak-grade soul-harming arrays, and many were probably hanging on by a thread.

However, no mental attack emerged as the talisman cracked in front of the prismatic shield. Instead, a weak shield sprung up and covered a patch of dirt.

The prismatic shield burst apart the next moment, and the wooden finger headed right toward the army with world-ending force. The branch slammed into the large square cobblestones of the square like the finger of an angry god and the whole area shook and heaved as Zac was inundated in a massive amount of Cosmic Energy. At least 50 people had died from the initial attack, and even more sported gristly wound from the shockwave.

However, the attack wasn't over just yet.

Hundreds of sharp branches grew out of the tree and stabbed everything in its surroundings, causing another wave of carnage. It was just like when the spectral chains of **[Profane Seal]** targeted the living inside its cage, and desolate cries echoed across the core area of Base Town as one cultivator after another was impaled.

Only then did the emerald array in the air dissipate while Zac lost his mental connection to the tree. It remained on the square though, its branches filled with the unmoving bodies of dozens of fallen warriors. It had turned into a twisted monument drenched in the blood of the elites of the sector, and hopefully it would serve as a reminder to choose life over wealth for anyone who had any ideas on Zac.

Unfortunately, it seemed as though the group maintaining the two powerful arrays around him had come prepared, and another shield protected them from the fall-out from **[Nature's Punishment]** as they prepared their next moves. It was becoming increasingly apparent that this group of five was the largest threat unless there were even stronger people lying in wait in one of the palaces that lined the square.

"Heaven's Punishment!" "Hell Suppression!" two more cultivators shouted in unison as Zac scrambled for a way to break the stalemate, leaving only the young man in the middle of the group of five unoccupied.

A vast array in an unblemished white appeared in the sky, and it felt like his body was being slowly being ground to dust just by being covered in its lights. Zac wanted to get out the way, but a pitch-black array suddenly covered the ground he stood on, and he helplessly fell down onto the cobblestones from an immense pressure.

Zac's whole body was immobilized by an almost unbearable weight, and the whole square around him cracked even though it was made from some mysterious material that didn't even scar until he brought out **[Nature's Punishment]**. The four arrays were no doubt at the absolute peak of what could be brought to the Base down, and they had even formed a system to create an even stronger effect.

Just moving his arms was a struggle, and Zac started to worry for the first time as he saw the leader of the group prepare what would no doubt be the finale. He considered activating another defensive treasure pre-emptively, but he quickly decided against it. He was running low on Cosmic Energy by this point, and each activation took a good chunk of his reserves. He'd only activate another talisman if he saw a lethal attack coming.

He was also out of offensive treasures, leaving him unable to deal with any of the four arrays restricting him. He was almost out of options, and he knew he would have to pay a price to deal with this situation. However, he was unwilling to keep his head bowed down to some warriors relying on superior numbers.

He remembered the feelings of irreconciliation of the general in his vision; the frustration of being bested not by skills or hard work, but by being overwhelmed by sheer numbers. He would have done well to remember that general's painful lesson, but he had walked into this fight with a feeling of superiority, that numbers were irrelevant to his superior might.

But he had been met with ingenious tactics and boundless ferocity, proving that not even someone who had stood shoulder to shoulder with the elites of the multiverse was safe. Death could come at any time, from the most unlikely of perpetrators.

Veins wiggled beneath his skin across his body as he forced himself back on his knees. The pressure was terrifying, but he was slowly adapting to it with the help of his insights into the Dao of Heaviness. Thin layers of skin were peeling off from his face and arms before rising toward the array above like he was spontaneously falling apart, but he ignored the pain as his wild eyes were trained at the group of warriors.

The whole shield shuddered as Zac flashed forward and cut into it with [**Verun's Bite**], the weapon radiating sanguine light that painted the group red. The woman controlling the array paled from the backlash, forced to take a step back. It did hold against his assault though, but Zac was just getting started.

Power and rage coursed through his veins as he slammed one time after another, each strike containing enough force to split mountains. His whole body creaked and groaned from the pressure and wounds were opening up from just moving about, but he kept swinging his axe with relentless ferocity.

The woman controlling the Six Directions array was empowered by a retinue running a War Array, but the supportive cultivators fell down with bleeding orifices as they were being overtaxed. Cracks started spreading across the shimmering wall, and just a bit would be enough to break through and reach these people.

As long as he got into melee range things would be over, as no one here was his match in such close proximity.

Zac's eyes were filled with blood from the immense pressure from the combination of the suppressive array and [**Hatchetman's Rage**], but the leader of the five looked into his with equanimity as he took out a large box and pointed it toward Zac. Zac's danger sense screamed for him to move, but he first sent a mental command into his axe.

A swirl of mysterious energies slipped through the cracks Zac had caused in the shield, and the primordial beast appeared in all its glory a second later. Zac wasn't the only one who had undergone a drastic change during the climb, Verun had gotten received its own share of opportunities.

The beast was actually a bit smaller compared to before, but it was more condensed, more corporeal, compared to before. It was still five meters long and reached almost three meters into the air, making it a massive beast compared to anything that had lived on Earth at least. Its huge maw with its grisly fangs looked the same as before, but the number of eyes had actually increased on its head.

It now had two sets of eyes, all four of them seemingly moving independent of each other as they looked for targets. Swirls of blood also slowly rotated around its paws, and Zac sensed a hint of the dragon's primordial aura from the Tool Spirit. It released an earthshattering roar after having finally appeared after so long, and it immediately pounced on the cultivators on the square.

Zac had initially wanted to force his way out of the shield, but he knew enough to listen to his danger sense. So he jumped back to avoid whatever the leader had planned. He didn't know what was inside that box, but it felt extremely dangerous, even to him.

Being forced to back off at this critical juncture was a disappointment, but the shield was seriously weakened and its controller seemed to be running out of steam. Verun was also causing mass panic among the cultivators outside, and together with the mass casualties from **[Nature's Punishment]** he pretty much only had the five elites and their retinues to worry about. And he still had something that could easily turn the tides.

Zac was still a bit hesitant though as he took out the rusty sword from his Spatial Ring.

However, he had witnessed the power of the sinister weapon himself during the Battle of Fates. That swordsman had been able to utterly destroy **[Nature's Punishment]** with the help of this cursed weapon, and if Zac hadn't deactivated his skill in time he might even have lost his hand. It was his best option to end things in one go, especially now that the rabble had been mostly routed with the help of the massive tree's descent.

Besides, he didn't want to waste any more of the mentalist's jewelry. He would have wasted too many treasures before even returning to earth if he continued like this, and those things might be crucial in the upcoming fights against the Dominators. Zac gripped the dried-out leather of the hilt, and his wounds opened all over his arm as he forcibly started dragging it out of its scabbard.

Blood fell on the ground like rain, and Zac roared into the sky as a storm of voices entered his mind. Odd veins started traveling up his arm from his sword as well, like the weapon was trying to fuse with his body. Even the exhausted remnants shuddered from the intrusion into his mind, but they weren't in any condition to affect the course of events.

Zac suppressed the voices with everything he got as he strained to finish the attack quicker.

It almost felt like he was trying to complete the third swing of **[Deforestation]** by unsheathing the blade, and a huge chunk of his remaining Cosmic Energy was swallowed by the sword in an instant. But Zac didn't care as he felt that a horrible power was brewing within the sword, and his arm bulged as he finally managed to drag out the reluctant weapon before the veins could spread above his elbow.

A piercing wail echoed across the square and Zac's vision doubled from the mental shock, but he still swung the weapon in a wide arc toward the cultivators running the arrays. He wasn't sure whether there was a trick to using the weapon, so he tried to mimic the form of the swordsman as best as he could remember.

The familiar white half-moon thankfully appeared, but it was covered in the same red pulsating veins as those snaking up along his arm. The strike had felt like a pure sword-strike when the lanky swordsman used the weapon back on the 7th floor, but now it really felt like something an unorthodox cultivator would use. It hadn't weakened the power of the strike though, but rather the opposite.

Zac moved his mental energy and started infusing the blade with the Fragment of the Axe for good measure. Zac got a rabid pushback from the weapon, but Zac growled and crammed it in, no matter what the crazy voices were screaming. The blade shuddered and a few cracks appeared, but it quickly mended and continued to expand as it picked up more and more speed as it rushed toward the shield, now empowered with Zac's most destructive Dao.

It was like the edge was tapping an unceasing fount of power, and was soon so large that the whole army would be hit if it managed to break out from its cage. Most of the surviving warriors had already started running for their lives after realizing their attacks passed straight through Verun's body, and seeing the corrupted half-moon broke the will of the few remaining cultivators hoping to fish in muddy waters.

Only the five cultivators stood their ground, and they seemed to have some confidence in the layers of restrictions they had superimposed on the square.

"Breath of Cosmos!" the leader shouted, and he finally opened the box that he had held in his arms until now.

A cloud of stardust emerged from the chest, and it drifted straight through the shield and toward the incoming attack. The whole blade was soon covered in a glistening cloud, and it looked like a beautiful nebula. The aura of madness that the half-moon emitted was completely swallowed by the dust, and Zac sensed that the cloud was slowly grinding it down.

However, Zac's attack pushed forward with undeniable intractability, and it was like the mysterious cloud that had caused such a strong reaction in Zac's mind only managed to nip at its heels. The leader looked extremely surprised at the turn of events before some worry started to show on his face.

"Release your greatest attacks!" the leader shouted, as Cosmic Energy started to surge around his body.

"This is not what we agreed upon!" another of the five retorted. "You guaranteed that the [Five Dimensional Seal] would restrain him! Does this look restrained to you?!"

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 469 - Clashing Fates**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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The man who had spoken up wasn't the only one who looked at the leader with fear-induced anger, but another two of them seemed to be ready to leave then and there.

"I'll increase the compensation. Besides, he is still restrained even if he's not incapacitated. We just need to break this attack and we'll have won," the man said.

The man looked unreconciled but he still complied, and he took out a green finger from his Spatial Tool and swallowed it. The next moment he swelled over five times in size while an enormous cauldron appeared behind him, and he launched a punch that shuddered with power toward Zac. The attack caused a cascading series of putrid explosions to rock the area, and a few unlucky cultivators who had been maimed from the fight earlier were consumed as well, turning into brittle skeletons in an instant.

The four elites followed suit, and all of them either transformed from an ultimate skill or caused an avatar to appear behind their backs. One of them seemed

to be a lightning cultivator, and another summoned a beast that looked even more dangerous than Verun. The Tool Spirit roared in defiance, but it still stayed away from the five due to Zac's command and kept routing the stragglers.

Zac was a bit out of it from the increasingly intrusive screams emerging from the tattered sword, but he could still hear their discussion. He was initially confused just who these five people were, as they were of mixed races and dressed completely differently. It didn't seem like they belonged to the same force, and this notion was only reinforced when they released their ultimate skills.

From the conversation, it looked like a group of elites had decided to band together in order to incapacitate him. Zac guessed they had kept their aces in hopes that they would be able to snatch the final prize the moment he was lying within the arrays unable to even lift a finger.

The two sides clashed, and it felt like the world had frozen before cataclysmic waves of attuned energies spread in all directions, drowning the whole square in color. There was a very clear divide in the sky, with Zac's side being white with red streaks, and the other half being a mix of colors representing the five elites.

It looked like there was a stalemate taking place, but Zac knew things weren't that simple. His attack was one single wave of unadulterated power, whereas the other side was a mostly disjointed mix. It was only a matter of time before his attack would break through at which point things would go south very quickly for his enemies.

The leader of the group seemed to have understood what was going to happen as well, and he immediately took action. However, he neither tried another counter nor tried to run away, but he rather slapped a talisman onto the back of the woman next to him, the cultivator responsible for the 'Six Directions Array'.

She disappeared in a puff, leaving the others flabbergasted.

Their side had already been on the losing end of the confrontation, and they had suddenly lost a fifth of their power along with the powerful shield protecting them. The four remaining attacks crumbled in an instant, and the half-moon seized the opportunity pushed forward with furious momentum.

One of the masters tried to run, but it seemed as though he was bogged down in a quagmire. He released a soundless scream as the half-moon bisected him, but Zac's brows furrowed when he saw that the blade actually seemed to swallow the man. The red veins crept out from the edge and latched onto the cultivator, and his body was drained in an instant.

Most of the retinues that infused the five through War Arrays met the same fate, and only the leader managed to hold on by expending a series of defensive treasures. Zac finally couldn't take the strain from holding the sword any longer, and he immediately put away the thing, causing the half-moon to disappear after releasing a wail of discontent.

Zac flashed forward the next moment and he activated the first fractal of **[Verun's Bite]** again, intending to end things then and there. The mob of cultivators was mostly dealt with, but as long as the man who had organized the assault was alive he wouldn't feel safe. He was in front of the leader in an instant, and his axe shone with a sanguine glow as it fell toward his head.

However, before Zac's attack had a chance to connect a necklace lit around the man up, and Zac felt an all-consuming pain as the defensive charge of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** crumbled in an instant. His chest had been turned into a bloody mess yet again, and it was almost as bad as yesterday when he got punched by the Technocrat Captain.

Thankfully Zac still possessed the final energies that the Shard of Creation had released during its rampage, and he quickly urged it to reform his torso before he

passed out. It almost looked like time went in reverse as his body reformed in an instant, but the fact that his robes were broken and tattered was proof that he had been at death's door just a second ago.

The richly dressed youth gaped in shock and dismay as Zac's axe bit into his body. The richly decked man tried to push the axehead out of his body, but Zac utterly overpowered him as he released a storm of rampant energies that turned the man's insides into a mess.

He somehow managed to stay alive, and their eyes met as the man clung to life.

"I'm sorry. You needed to die for my dream to come true. My ending is well deserved," the cultivator weakly smiled before his volume rose to be heard across the square. "I risked everything for power, but I failed. My ending has no relation with my clan."

Zac didn't say anything, and the man died a just a few seconds later. A lot of murmurs erupted from the cultivators who had spectated the battle from a safe distance, and a lot of people seemed to be recording the events into information crystals.

Being recorded was pretty much expected, so he didn't care, but he rather readied his still bloody axe for any follow-up attacks. As expected, his mind suddenly felt a pang of danger, and he quickly turned around as **[Everlasting]** appeared on his arm.

However, the assassin who had wanted to take advantage of the moment Zac let his guard down found himself impaled on a black spear as Ogras appeared out of his shadows. A burst of shadows ripped the man to pieces, and the demon walked up next to Zac as his face dripped with blood.

"It's over!" the demon shouted. "The quest is over, and Lord Piker has withstood the Trial of the Ruthless Heavens. We understand the allure of the reward and the effect of the Apparition, so we'll let all enmities stay in behind and dissipate in Base Town as we leave. But any further attempts on our lives here or out in the open world will be met with a vengeance of extreme proportions. If not today then later."

A snort escaped from Zac's nose even if he understood the severity of the situation. It was just like Ogras, appearing the last moment looking like a heroic defender of justice with his spear pointed at the skies. Zac knew full well that the demon was nowhere near as confident as he wanted to appear, but it was for the best that Ogras dealt with the fallout.

Zac had immediately understood what Ogras was doing. He was trying to make minimize potential threats that could crop up in the future. They already had the Zethaya, Tsarun Clan, and The Great Redeemer to worry about, and causing a grudge with dozens of more families would neither do him nor Earth any good.

He could only hope that the forces of the sector would take the death of their scions with stride. A few people dying should barely be noticeable for these huge forces as thousands died every day in their struggle to become stronger. Such was the life of a cultivator.

If that wasn't enough the various forces still might on his good due to worry about what he might become in the future. He had reached the 9<sup>th</sup> floor, something that only had happened once in recent memory, which should be a huge indicator of great potential for the people in this sector.

Thankfully it looked like no one wanted to fight any longer. Perhaps it was because the quest had ended, or perhaps it was because he was still essentially unscathed while the bodies of his enemies littered the whole square. The corpse-tree

rising almost fifty meters into the air was also a poignant warning to anyone arriving late.

It was a relief, as he was currently pretty exhausted. Along with the backlash from activating [**Hatchetman's Rage**] he wouldn't even be able to muster half his power right now. But there was one thing that cut through the fatigue; greed. Just as there were bodies strewn everywhere across the field, so were there Spirit Tools and Cosmos Sacks.

His eyes turned to the man lying in front of him, the presumptive leader of the other side. He walked over toward the corpse and bent down to take the Spatial Ring on his finger. However, he stopped when he saw a man from the sidelines take a few steps toward him.

"Ah, Lord Piker, I mean no disrespect. But you might not want to take that man's possessions," a man hesitantly spoke up from the distance. "That is Yeorav Dravorak, of the Dravorak Dynasty. You might want to let them take his body and belongings back."

Zac looked down at the body in front of him without a change in expression, but some waves still rose in his heart. Was this the brother of Reoluv, the man whose Tower Apparition had given him the Fragment of the Coffin, and the greatest Genius in the sector for thousands of years? And more importantly, the Dravorak Dynasty was a peak force in the sector. How would they respond to one of their princes dying?

Was this why the man had spoken up right before his death?

But at the same time, wasn't it too late by now for a show of respect? If the Dravorak wanted revenge, would him giving back the man's body make any difference? If this had been inside The tower or in the wild, then Zac would definitely have looted the body before destroying it, but this had taken place in front of hundreds of people.

He wasn't sure what the custom was regarding this, and he glanced at the demon for assistance.

"The young Prince was an honorable man, facing his fate with equanimity," Ogras said. "His companions can claim him and his belongings. However, that only goes for the young prince. The rest bet their lives for power and wealth, and their possessions are Lord Piker's rightful claim for standing victorious. Everyone is free to claim the bodies of the deceased though, to give them their final rites."

Zac glanced at the expressions of those standing in the distance, and from the looks of it the demon's way of dealing with things wasn't anything uncommon. However, his eyes widened when he saw the woman who he had just fought return. Her eyes were bloodshot as she looked down at Yeroluv Dravorak, before her eyes moved to meet Zac's.

Zac felt the demon next to him tense up, gearing up for a battle, but Zac stopped him with a shake of his head.

"I am sorry. I-" she said before she looked down again with a shake of her head. "I am sorry."

She bent down and gingerly picked up the body of Yeorav before she slowly walked away from the square with the man in her arms. Zac's eyes followed the woman's lonely back as she carried the body to the edge of the square before she squatted down. It didn't look like she was planning on avenging him or anything, but rather that she seemed at a loss of what to do next.

Zac only shook his head with some heaviness.

It sounded like that man had desperately needed to get the reward for taking him out, to the point that he had been willing to die for it. That didn't really make him

evil though, but rather someone out of options. Zac knew the feeling all too well, having been forced to make decisions that went against his conscience to protect those around him.

Ogras would probably have killed the lover as well if they hadn't been inside the Base Town where his actions might have triggered another quest, but Zac had no such intentions. It might be akin to releasing a wolf back into the forest, but what trouble could she possibly cause compared to Yeorav's family?

Zac didn't even have the energy to start speculating the aftermath of killing a scion of the Dravorak Dynasty, and instead focused on the task at hand.

"I am Zac Piker, and I am not connected to any force," Zac said with a hoarse but carrying voice.

He had long considered what he should say if he ever got to this point, and he was glad to see the eyes light up among many of the scions.

"There is a man calling himself The Great Redeemer is heading for my planet, intent on sacrificing everyone on it for an evil ritual. I believe he is currently a Peak D-Grade Warrior, and he has some knowledge of the Dao of Karma, but that's all I know," Zac continued.

This was the plan. He'd simply lay the cards on the table. He had no bargaining skills, and his time was limited, so he wanted to create a sense of urgency. There should be a lot of C-Grade forces interested in making a connection with him, and everyone would want to be the first to tie him to their chariot.

The scions looked a bit confused about the sudden change in topic, but a few eyes lit up in comprehension as they realized what was going on.

"I come from a weak recently integrated planet, and no one will be able to stop him. Taking care of a D-Grade Hegemon would be a small task for many of your ancestors, but it would be a favor I would forever remember. I am wi-" Zac said, but he was interrupted by a man who had just walked out of one of the palaces.

"Wait! I know that man!" the youth said with surprise. "He's the excommunicated son of the Heliophos Clan! They have been looking for him for tens of thousands of years!"

Zac's eyes lit up when he heard the news. Things would only become easier if the man was actually a fugitive. Perhaps he could even count on this Heliophos Clan clan to deal with the problem for him.

But the drastic change in expression among the people quickly doused Zac's excitement.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 44 chapters ahead) please check out my**

**Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have a**

**Please remember to vote on [at least once a week!](#) It helps me a lot!**

**Chapter 470 - Friends and Foes**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**Nevada so slow with counting the votes, amirite? Now that we've bonded over current events, why not head over to [my](#) instead of fretting over the election? Access up to 44 chapters for one glorious binge!**

People who had already spoken up of their support suddenly looked troubled, and a few others were even walking away without hesitation. Just what was going on? He quickly looked over at Ogras, but he shook his head in confusion as well.

Zac could only guess they were another peak force, and he looked over at Galau for confirmation.

“Ah... This...” Galau stammered, clearly unwilling to broach the subject in front of such a large audience. “I think you should speak with Heliophos Clan before doing anything else.”

Zac slowly nodded as he looked at the troubled faces of the people around him.

“Is there anyone here who belongs to the Heliophos Clan?” Zac asked.

“The Heliophos Clan isn’t a combat-oriented family, so they don’t climb the Tower of Eternity,” the youth from earlier said after the silence had stretched on for a while. “They are a solitary clan focusing on divination and fate augmentation.”

Zac inwardly groaned in annoyance when he put two and two together. These people didn’t want to risk causing a rift with a clan full of Karmic Cultivators. They might find that their clan was on the brink of ruination a few hundred years later without knowing what had happened. No one wanted to be the one to take out The Great Redeemer if it meant making such a troublesome enemy.

He was about to ask the merchant to clarify just how powerful the Heliophos Clan was, but he suddenly noticed that the crowd was giving way for someone to reach the front. Was there actually someone who could speak for this odd clan here?

“Now that was something else,” a slightly amused voice said, and young cultivators hurriedly scurried out of the way to give room to a young woman.

Zac looked over and almost took a step back in shock, as the woman looked almost identical to someone he had seen before. The newcomer was almost a picture-perfect copy of the mysterious Draugr-lady who had given him the miasmatic fractals in his mind, and whose presumed husband he had just met in another vision.

Behind her two Revenants walked in pace, one of which radiated an aura that was at least comparable to the man he had just taken out. If such an elite was just an attendant, then the Draugr might be frightfully powerful, even if Zac couldn’t gauge anything from her appearance alone. Add to that the vast resources of the Undead Empire, and this small group might be an even bigger threat compared to those he had just fought.

However, they didn’t emit any killing intent, but rather the opposite. It was like the Draugr was looking at him like he was some long-lost brother or something. Was this a huge coincidence? Or was this the System messing with his fate somehow? He warily stared at her, trying to figure out what her aim was.

“You don’t need to worry about me. I’m not even from this star sector, I wouldn’t care even if you killed everyone in this place,” she smiled. “In fact, I’m a friend and I come bearing gifts.”

Almost forty bloody heads appeared in front of her the next second.

“I... encouraged a few forces to stay away from this matter as I wanted to meet with you,” she said as she looked down at the heads like they were a pile of garbage. “I also dealt with the Tsarun clan for you, so that we would be able to talk uninterrupted.”

“What do you want?” Zac asked suspiciously before he looked down at the heads with a grimace.

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that things had deteriorated into an irreconcilable feud with the Tsarun Clan after this.

It made no sense that this Draugr wanted to make friends with him. The Undead Empire wasn't strictly xenophobic, but they seldom mingled with the living. Or did she simply need a strong F-Grade ally for some task? Or more likely, was she able to sense his connection to Be'Zi somehow?

"I think it's a discussion best held in private," the Draugr said, not offering any clues.

"A- My friend," a familiar voice said as Boje Zethaya scurried forward. "I feel terribly apologetic about the mess caused by my inattentiveness the other day. Why don't you use my family's abode to conduct any meetings you might have?"

"Well, shall we?" the Draugr said as she sauntered toward the Pill House with the powerful-looking revenant silently walking behind her.

Zac only hesitated for a second before he decided to check things out. This girl wasn't even from this Sector, which meant she had a pretty strong backing. Traveling between sectors was something that only the extremely powerful or the exorbitantly wealthy could do.

It was a possibility that she came from some big shot family of the Undead Empire, and she might even be able to solve the problem on Earth with a few words. One newly integrated planet couldn't be very important in the wider scope of things. It was absolutely worth exploring further.

He first turned to Ogras and Galau who had walked over as well, but still stood some distance apart from the gathered mob.

"Will you two be fine?" Zac asked.

"I- I need to talk with my cousins," Galau said with a slightly hollow voice.

"Tell me if you need help with anything," Zac nodded.

"I'll come with you after dealing with the battlefield. You talk with the Draugr, I'll stay outside and see if I can find out some more about that clan. I don't believe there isn't a single force that's brave enough to stick their neck out and help deal with that old goat coming for us," the demon said.

Zac nodded as he looked around at the square full of corpses. His eyes moved to a corpse lying just a few meters away, a stocky humanoid holding a beautiful blue sword which hummed with spirituality. Ogras looked over as well, and a shadow tendril brought over the sword.

"Water attuned," the demon muttered. "Might be suited for old man Trang."

Zac nodded before his eyes turned toward the merchant who was scurrying toward one of the roads leading toward the outer sector of Base Town. However, he didn't get far before one scion after another approached him. Finally, two stunning beauties dispersed the crowds before they led Galau to a palace facing the square.

"They seem to know him. The Peak girl?" Ogras muttered as he shot a glance at the merchant just as they walked into the grand building.

"Perhaps," Zac nodded. "We haven't done anything evil in his presence though, and the Peak family might prove our best shot at dealing with this mess. Let them sound Galau out while I talk with the Draugr."

Zac left the demon to deal with the clean-up, and he only personally took the Spatial tools of the three elites who had assisted Yeorav before he walked toward the Pill House. He couldn't stop his curiosity though, and he took a look at his status screen he walked.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

75

Class

[F-Rare] Hatchetman

Race

[E] Human

Alignment

[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power

Limited Titles

Frontrunner, Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th

Dao

Fragment of the Axe - Middle, Fragment of the Coffin - Early, Fragment of the Bodhi - Early

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

1253 [Increase: 81%. Efficiency: 199%]

Dexterity

590 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 170%]

Endurance

1453 [Increase: 99%. Efficiency: 189%]

Vitality

784 [Increase: 84%. Efficiency: 189%]

Intelligence

293 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 170%]

Wisdom

494 [Increase: 60%. Efficiency: 170%]

Luck

285 [Increase: 86%. Efficiency: 179%]

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

[F] 6 862 770 130

Zac wryly smiled as he looked at his status screen. He had been worried about being able to reach 1000 Strength at all, but he had suddenly shot way past his goal. However, he quickly realized that all of it didn't come from his upgraded Dao Fragment, but there were actually two new titles as well.

**[Peak Power: Reach 5000 Attribute Points while still in F-Grade Reward: Effect of Attributes +5%]**

As expected, there was another Title for reaching a monstrous number like 5000 attribute points while still at F-Grade. However, he wasn't as sure about just how rare it was any longer after witnessing the Battle of Fates and his Mid-Grade Dao Fragment.

One Dao Fragment awarded 550 attribute points, which together with the effect of titles closed in on a thousand points. If someone had a couple of them, or perhaps even a Late-Stage Dao Seed, then reaching 5000 attribute points wouldn't be all too difficult. However, that wasn't all he gained, as he had actually gained another title, though this one was limited.

**[Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th [Limited]: Attain the 14th best all-time result in the Zecia Sector. Reward: Strength, Endurance, Vitality, Luck +6%. Effect of Strength, Endurance, Vitality +6% ]**

He was honestly a bit surprised about being only the fourteenth position. It was still an extremely good result, but he had only heard of the Eveningtide Asura. But then again, the sector was probably extremely old, and outliers were bound to appear now and then over millions of years.

However, he noticed that his recently gained title related to the Terminus was missing in his status screen, though he could still find it if he opened the actual title screen. It was a bit odd, but he honestly felt it was for the best. What if some old monster had the ability to spy on his status screen? Having seen the Terminus might only cause a bunch of problems for him.

Normally he would have looked through his status screen a bit longer, but he had things to do and time was limited. He soon walked through the passageway into the Pill House, and there was no array impeding him this time. Zac almost felt as though he had dreamed that the place had been turned into a pile of rubble just one day ago, as the place looked almost like a carbon-copy of its predecessor.

Boje was already waiting in the lobby, and Zac was personally led by the man to the second floor.

"Let us know if there's anything else you need," he said as he stopped outside a room.

"Do you have any more of those cherries?" Zac asked before walking inside.

"A- No? I thought you..." Boje stammered a bit, looking a bit confused.

"I had to use it on myself in the tower, so I need another soul-healing treasure for the intended recipient," Zac explained.

"Oh, I see," Boje said with a troubled face. "I am afraid I don't have anything on me. If you give me a week I'll be able to send for something from my family, and I'll be happy to directly gift it to you."

"I'm leaving today," Zac said with a shake of his head. "See if you can find out if anyone has something that would work."

"We'd be happy to," Boje said before he handed Zac two tokens after some thought. "This teleportation token leads to one of our main stores, and the insignia gives you the status of an esteemed guest. You will be able to order a medicine tailored for your friend there, and our resident alchemist will immediately concoct it. Such a pill would not have any secondary effects like the Cherry might have produced, but its healing efficacy will be at least of the same level, probably higher."

Zac's eyes lit up and he immediately accepted the two tokens. He wouldn't personally go there until he could be certain about his safety, but he might be able to send someone else there if he couldn't find any solution for Alea in the short run.

“Thank you. You can speak with Ogras if there is anything else,” Zac nodded.

He couldn't help but feel some sort of vindication as he stepped inside the room. Last time he had come here as a nobody, a supplicant begging for resources. Now he was a bigshot who got things done with a wave of his hand, and he'd be lying if he said that it didn't feel pretty nice.

“I didn't have a chance to introduce myself earlier,” the Draugr smiled as Zac closed the door behind him. “I am Catheya Sharva'Zi. I am from what you would call the Empire Heartlands.”

“Why have you come to this remote corner of the universe then?” Zac asked with some confusion. “Shouldn't be anything of interest here.”

“My master is looking for a certain opportunity to break through,” Catheya said. “He received some clues that made us pass by this frontier region. But he suddenly had a bout of inspiration and had to enter seclusion for a few years. I got bored and chose to visit the Tower.”

Zac only wryly smiled as he sat down. Having a big tree like a great master to depend on seemed to allow for a pretty leisurely lifestyle.

“Did you know? It has been over a million years since someone breached the 8<sup>th</sup> floor in this sector,” the Draugr said as she glanced at the Revenant standing by the side.

He nodded and produced an exquisite teapot out of nowhere and expertly poured Zac a cup before he lit a stick of mild incense.

“The Eveningtide Asura,” Zac nodded, ignoring the drink for now.

“Yes,” Catheya said. “You two are more similar than you might think. He was a Progenitor as well.”

Zac frowned as she looked at the Draugr. Had she found out about Earth, and was planning to use it against him?

“I mean nothing by my words,” Catheya smiled as she handed over a crystal. “Take a look by yourself.”

Zac gave Catheya another glance as he quickly scanned the contents.

“Ez'Mahal,” Zac snorted, some fury erupting in his chest again.

Those scumbags weren't content with treating the Earthlings like cattle, but they even dared to place a bounty on his head? He wondered what their reaction would be after hearing about his deeds inside the Tower of Eternity.

“It seems you have looked into me while I climbed. Why? I have no connection to your Undead Empire,” Zac said as he stashed away the information crystal.

“I wouldn't be so sure about that,” Catheya said with a smile. “I was somewhat convinced when I saw you when you entered the tower, but now I am certain. You and I are connected, I know it. You even smell like one of us.”

Zac didn't say anything, but he was pretty surprised about her last comment. Did he actually smell like a Draugr?

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have a**

**Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!**

**Chapter 471 - Quid Pro Quo**

### A note from TheFirstDefier

Tired of getting cliffhanged by both me and the vote counters? I can't help with the latter, but I do have a solution for the former! Why not head over to [my](#)? Learn how to survive in the apocalypse by reading up to 44 DotF-chapters in one glorious chunk!

Iz Tayn slowly walked through the vast gardens in her home, not sparing the divine flowers a second glance until she reached a burning mountain.

"Hello, uncle. Is grandpa awake?" she asked, and the ground started to shake the next moment.

Enormous pieces of rocks rearranged themselves, and the mountain turned into a golem hundreds of meters tall. Its whole body was covered in extremely dense scriptures to the point that not a single inch of its body wasn't covered with fractals. Iz always liked looking at the mysterious patterns while meditating, but she had other things to do today.

"Master has been expecting your return, he is awake," the enormous golem rumbled as it stretched out a finger that was over a dozen meters wide.

Iz disappeared in a puff of flames the next moment, and the fiery flowers and red sky were replaced with the boundless cosmos. In front of her a scorching sun hovered in the void, with an impossibly large man sitting on top of it. The man looked to be an amalgam of man and flames, and the heat he emanated far eclipsed the sun beneath him.

It was Mohzius Tayn, her grandfather.

Iz was just a speck of dust compared to the terrifying size of her ancestor. However, the scales of the cosmos somehow changed, and the gargantuan man was suddenly the same size as Iz herself, and the sun even smaller than her own [World's End].

"How did it go?" the middle-aged man asked with a warm smile.

"51 Days," Iz said as the bored expression she usually wore outside became increasingly animated. "You lied! It wasn't exciting at all. The last guy was pretty tough, but it was just one long slog."

"Ha!" Mohzius laughed, and the star beneath him flickered as it shared the man's mood. "Old Man River's descendant in your cohort took over 65 days to break the ceiling. I can't wait to see his face when he hears about this."

"My age group? Theleferos is almost twenty thousand years old," Iz snorted with, but she was still secretly happy about her grandpa's expression.

Seeing his smile more valuable than the titles and new treasures she received, since her grandpa had been pretty down since her grandma had to leave.

"Still the young generation," Mohzius smiled. "By the way, haven't you only been gone for a few days? Why didn't you stay and play with your friends? I am sure we have a nice house by the tower."

"What friends? Just a bunch of people who only thinks about benefits and getting stronger all day," Iz muttered before her eyes lit with excitement. "I met someone interesting inside the Tower though! But I need your help, grandpa."

"Hm? Met someone? A boy?" the old man said, a frown quickly appearing on his face.

"Yes, but I just found him interesting," Iz hurriedly explained.

"Bringing someone out from that spatial fold is quite troublesome," the man muttered. "Your uncle can't do it without getting hurt, and I can't leave this place for the next few centuries."

“No, he’s not someone from that place,” Iz said with a shake of her head as she described her encounter on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor.

“Dual classes and dual races? And you say he’s a human rather than a wanderer?” her grandpa said, looking a bit interested. “Sounds like a mutated constitution or a twinned soul. Perhaps even the fusion of two individuals with interwoven fates.”

“But he somehow managed to remove the marking just after I returned. Can you help me?” Iz entreated.

“That is much easier,” the man nodded, and a small mote of flame split off from the sun and entered Iz’s forehead.

A small rune emerged a few seconds later, and the man grabbed it in his hand.

“He seems to have completely blown up his torso to rid himself of the mark,” Mohzius said with a smile. “A gutsy fellow. But he didn’t notice the branding on his spirit body. I strengthened it a bit, he won’t be able to remove it easily now. But why do you want to see him?”

“No particular reason,” Iz shrugged. “I was bored and he was interesting, so I thought I would go visit and take a look. Besides, he called me a lunatic, he owes me an explanation.”

“Remember to not go around causing trouble in the lower realms,” the man sternly said. “Most people are just trying to live their lives.”

“I know, grandpa,” Iz muttered.

“... Fine,” the old man eventually relented. “You can go when you have undergone your next bloodline evolution and formed your first Dao Branch.”

“But that can take decades!” Iz exclaimed.

“Just the blink of an eye,” Mohzius smiled. “Better work hard.”

“Fine. I’ll go and break through now. Goodbye, grandpa,” Iz Tayn said before she looked up at the stars. “Goodbye, grandma.”

The next moment she disappeared from the remote star system, leaving the giant sitting on his sun. However, a massive claw ripped through the fabric of space, and a scar even larger than the celestial body appeared the next moment.

An eye of impossible proportions gazed down through the tear, and just its gaze put tremendous pressure on the whole star system. However, the giant wasn’t worried in the least, but rather looked up with a smile matching the one that was usually reserved for his sole granddaughter.

“It seems you’re well on the way of getting better. Just a few dozen millennia and you might be able to descend,” he said with barely restrained elation.

“I didn’t hear everything just now. Has little Iz met a boy? And you actually wanted to send her into his arms?” a booming voice echoed across the cosmos.

“Iz is more talented than both of us combined, but she lacks the drive and curiosity to walk toward the Terminus. I am hoping that she will find something worth fighting for, like how I fought for you all those years ago,” Mohzius said, his smile widening.

A snort could be heard from within the void, and the whole star system shook in response.

“If my granddaughter runs away with some man before I can even meet her, I’ll fight it out with you, old man,” the voice said as white flames danced in the eye. “How dare he call my beautiful granddaughter a lunatic. He better not come to this sector of space.”

“Yes dear,” the old man smiled as he closed his eyes, some wistfulness flashing in their depths. “You should go back now. I can only hold back the Heavens for so long.”

“How do you know my ancestor? Is she your master?” Catheya asked point-blank, her pitch-black orbs boring into Zac’s eyes.

Zac was about to respond, but he suddenly felt a small pang of pain in his chest. He was already feeling pretty wretched after the fight, and he couldn’t help but wonder if the cursed sword had left some lingering threats.

However, he felt fine except the exhaustion and a quick inspection couldn’t pinpoint any issues, so he returned his attention back to the Draugr sitting in front of him.

“It’s not what you think,” Zac finally said after the pause.

“Then what?” She said, leaning forward in eagerness.

“There is an Incursion of the Undead Empire on my home planet,” Zac slowly said, ignoring the question. “Can you deal with it?”

Catheya froze for a second before she wryly sighed.

“No. I am willing to pay a lot for information pertaining to my ancestor, but I cannot help you in that regard,” she said with a shake of her head.

“Why not?” Zac said with a frown. “One small planet shouldn’t matter to you guys.”

“It doesn’t really, but there are a few iron-clad commandments in the Empire. The first one is cohesion. Undead Kingdoms cannot go to war against each other. Skirmishes for unclaimed resources and are okay, but full-scale wars are banned. The second commandment is the Commandment of Conquest,” she said.

“Conquest?” Zac repeated.

“All the Kingdoms of the Empire have a quota to expand, and no one is allowed to hinder a crusade. I could take over the Incursion if I could somehow make my way to your planet, but I would still be bound by law to conquer the planet,” she said.

“Why?” Zac said with incredulity.

“Do you know the history of our people?” Catheya asked.

“I just know the Undead Empire is older than the System,” Zac shrugged.

“Well, the undead races are older, but the Undead Empire is not,” she said. “Do you know about the Darkness?”

“What? The Darkness?” Zac said, the rapid change of topics throwing him off-balance.

“When the System was born, the universe was drained of its energy to feed its usurpation of the heavens. The path of cultivation was cut off,” she said.

Zac nodded in understanding. Alyn had told him about this while she explaining the origin of the System.

“For most races it was a great inconvenience, but for the Undead Races it was a calamity. Our existence is dependent on death-attuned energies, and when the universe was being drained so was our lifeline,” Catheya said.

Zac’s eyes immediately widened in understanding. This was something he hadn’t considered. If all Cosmic Energy was suddenly gone, then Zac would live as he did before the Integration. But his Draugr-side would be screwed.

Even just sitting around would slowly expend miasma, though nowhere near the amounts that were expended during battle. But he would no doubt die within the year if he didn’t have any Miasma Crystals to top himself off.

But Zac remembered that the Darkness as Catheya called it had lasted over a million years. How did the undead races survive for so long? He could only imagine that more powerful warriors required a lot of Miasma to just survive.

“The Founders and the Undead Princes searched the whole universe for pockets of energies that could sustain us, but over 95% of our population succumbed before we found the Heartlands. Since then there’s been a standing order to realign the universe, because if the whole Multiverse is death-attuned we’ll never be without a lifeline again. So we will never stop expanding.”

“That’s... Crazy,” Zac sighed.

“Well,” Catheya said with a smile. “Only the fanatics take the mission seriously nowadays. But conflict is still the cornerstone of progress, and The Ruthless Heavens is very much in favor of the way we’re doing things as it causes conflict everywhere. That by itself provides us with some special benefits. Besides, we cannot disobey the commandments since they are coded into our bloodlines by the Primo.”

“The Primo?” Zac asked.

“I cannot discuss the Primo,” Catheya said with a shake of her head.

Zac sighed with a nod. He could only guess that the Primo was either the founder of the Undead Empire or the current Emperor. It didn’t really matter though. What mattered was the fact that there was no way for the Draugr in front of him to settle the Incursion.

However, the Undead Incursions was just the first of the many threats that Earth was facing, and he was pretty confident in dealing with it on his own after all his recent gains.

“What about the thing I mentioned out in the square? You said you’re not from this sector, so you wouldn’t care about offending these guys, right?” Zac probed.

“I’m not sure how I would be able to help with this matter? He sounds like someone on his last legs. I doubt he would care for a second that your planet was under the protection of some powerhouse unless the powerhouse was actually standing guard over the planet,” Catheya slowly said. “I also don’t carry anything that can kill someone that strong with any guarantee, since items of that grade can’t be taken to this place.”

“Can’t your clan do something?” Zac asks with some helplessness.

“My master probably wouldn’t mind killing that guy if I asked him. He has no love for the unorthodox cultivators. But we have no means to find him. He could be anywhere in this sector, and him being versed in the Dao of Karma which makes him twice as slippery. Do you have a token to summon my master if needed?”

“A-“ Zac stammered, realizing that there were glaring issues in his plan of getting a patron.

“I am willing to join a force as long as they can provide protection of Earth,” Zac said.

“Well, that might work, though not with me. Undead Kingdoms and forces cannot form alliances with the living, with you being targets of conquest and all. We could strike an unofficial partnership though,” the Draugr smiled. “But there are a lot of problems with this plan.”

“Problems how?” Zac asked.

“Is my ancestor alive?” Catheya smiled, but the effect was extremely creepy if you combined it with her dead eyes.

Zac sighed and mulled it over for a second.

“She was alive three months ago to the best of my knowledge. Or well, alive by undead standards I guess?” Zac said. “What problems?”

“She’s really alive?!” Catheya exclaimed, even standing up in excitement.

Zac was pretty sure by this point that the Draugr-lady in his vision was an ancestor to the one in front of him, one that seemed to have gone missing. Had she perhaps left her clan behind due to issues stemming from the Splinter of Oblivion? She was clearly extremely powerful, and if she went mad it wouldn’t be just a small Pill House going up in smokes.

She might blow up a whole planet.

It was a great bargaining tool for Zac though. She clearly was anxious to learn about her ancestor, and she seemed to come from an extremely powerful faction of one of the oldest forces in the Multiverse. She was probably the most knowledgeable person he had met, perhaps with the exception of some of the scions he had met during the fight on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor.

It was time to get his money’s worth.

“The problems?” Zac reminded.

“Well, you can technically join a faction, either as an ally or a subordinate. But that doesn’t mean that you can get the help you need,” Catheya said after having composed herself. “First of all, travel will not be possible as your world probably hasn’t met the requirements to connect with the multiverse. You can’t even teleport to local factions, how are you going to teleport to other factions of the sector?”

“So there’s no hope?” Zac said with some bleakness.

“Well, most people here have tokens to give out. You could technically form an agreement now, and then use the token to fetch a powerhouse to assist you. The one going would need to be a Planetary Leader though, since others wouldn’t be able to bring anyone back while the planet is closed-off,” Catheya said.

“How do you know this?” Zac asked. “Seems like a pretty specific rule.”

“I’ve led an incursion myself,” Catheya explained as it was a matter of course. “That’s how I met Varo over there. I guess you could say he was that planet’s version of you. Anyway, the rules are pretty much the same for an invader, so I read up on how things worked. It’s a bit more convenient for the invader though, as the world immediately gets integrated after the conquest is done with. But you will still be cut-off for a hundred years even if you win.”

Zac couldn’t help his eyes turning toward the silent Revenant, and he couldn’t help but feel a shudder. Would this have been the fate of himself and Kenzie if he hadn’t managed to accumulate enough power? The Revenant seemed to feel the gaze, and he opened his eyes and looked over at Zac.

“That was him, I am me. We’re nothing but strangers fated to never meet,” Varo said before he once again closed his eyes.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 472 - Arcane**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**I guess I can’t rely on election memes any longer. Come visit [my](#), read up to 44 chapters ahead while supporting my writing.**

“Oh?” Io said, looking up from his position in the middle of the Data Array.

The thousands of screens around him faded away as he stood up and walked out, taking in the fresh breath of air for the first time in almost a year. He didn't like to be away from his array for too long, so he immediately made a beeline toward the restricted area in the middle of the sect.

Io was just a peak D-Grade warrior, but he was still let into the hidden realm without any hassle after flashing a token. A guard even arranged for transportation to where he needed to go, and he stood in front of the Lake of Solace after just a couple of hours.

Being friends with a Grand Deacon had its benefits.

"Oh? I thought I would have to drag you outside for you to leave your little cave," a laughing voice echoed out across the lake.

"I experience far more in the Data Array than I could ever do with my own two eyes," Io said with a smile as he drifted over to the small island in the middle. "How are things on your end?"

Io and A'Feris came from the same world, so Io had helped him gain his footing in the sect, which had formed a friendship that had lasted for eons. A'Feris had passed him by in terms of cultivation long ago, and was now one of the elites of the force.

"Same as usual," A'Feris said with a smile as he poured a cup of tea for his old friend. "Something is lacking. I need some impetus to take the next step, but it eludes me."

"You still look quite calm," Io commented.

"Well, my road has taken me further than I ever expected. Even if it stopped here it wouldn't be the worst of fates," A'Feris laughed.

"How about taking a disciple?" Io smiled. "Some have found the experience rewarding, and have even managed to break through their barriers that way."

"Why would I want to get bogged down with one of those snotty brats who keep relying on their elders to solve all their little problems?" A'Feris snorted with derision before he looked at Io with suspicion. "Wait, why are you saying this right now? What have you found out through your Array? Or do you have some descendants you've hidden from me?"

"I just received a report of an outlier in the Zecia sector," Io said as he took a sip of the tea.

"Zecia? I haven't heard of it," A'Feris said. "What sort of outlier?"

"It is one of the frontier sectors that could tentatively be said to be within our domain, though ownership of those sectors is quite contested as you know," Io explained. "Someone just reached the 9<sup>th</sup> floor of the Tower of Eternity, though just the entrance."

"Tower of Eternity?" A'Feris muttered. "Haven't heard of that place in a long time. So who was it?"

"His name is Zac Piker, but that's all I know," Io said. "It is likely a pseudonym though."

"That's it?" A'Feris laughed. "Is this the limits of the so-called Living Library?"

"I am guessing he is a wandering cultivator or a Planet Progenitor. The established forces in that kind of place don't have the means to nurture that level of elite, so those who appear are the results of a series of lucky encounters. Of the 14 people who have passed the 8<sup>th</sup> floor in the Zecia sector, 11 of them have been unattached," Io said.

"A gem in the rough," A'Feris muttered. "What path is he following?"

“I just found out about his existence, no real information has leaked out yet,” lo said. “One of our agents will know more in a few hours. I thought I’d let you know before others learn of it. I will only be able to block the information from leaking for a day or two though.”

“Discipleship...” A’Feris muttered as his fingers ran along the grisly weapon that never left his side. “We will see. It’s not just a matter of convenience, but also of fate. He might be someone worth nurturing, but he needs to walk a similar path as mine. Otherwise both our times would be wasted.”

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It was a pretty odd situation.

The man had essentially been killed by Catheya and turned into a revenant, but he still seemed happy enough to follow her. But Zac knew that “realignment” wasn’t anything evil in the eyes of the undead after his stay at the Undead Kingdom during his climb. It was the same as waking up someone who had been sleepwalking.

“What if I sign a contract with the scions here?” Zac asked as he turned back to Catheya, getting back to the topic at hand. “Something along the line that they cannot attack me and promise to provide assistance, in return for me joining their force.”

“The people here are just juniors, they can’t speak for their elders,” Catheya said with a shake of her head. “Besides, there are ways for the elders to forcibly break the contracts as the difference between them and you is so vast. Then they can simply make up some reason for why they apprehend you before they steal all your treasures and dig out your secrets. They might even hand you over to that Heliophos Clan to curry favor.”

“So what should I do?” Zac asked. “I can’t be the first guy who has needed to hire someone much stronger than me.”

“Of course not. But you have stood out too much. You definitely have a bunch of secrets on you, to the point that even I am extremely curious. Maintaining reputation in the face of such a huge potential gain is nothing,” Catheya smiled.

Zac slowly nodded, and he remembered Yrial’s situation. He had almost lost his life multiple times to so-called righteous factions who wanted his treasures without paying for them. There was no right and wrong in the Multiverse, there was only power and benefits. Crushing a token to arrive at a foreign force full of D- and C-Grade Hegemons would be like serving himself up on a platter if there were no safeguards in place.

The fact that The Great Redeemer was from a powerful clan of Karmic Cultivators only made the situation messier.

The only force he felt he could somewhat trust was the Peak family, but he wasn’t completely ready to put his life in their hands. But it was a last-ditch solution if everything else failed. He could head over to their place if he got a token from Pretty. Even if he ended up captured he would probably have a better ending than whatever The Great Redeemer had planned.

“Do you have any solution? Just preventing him from finding my planet is enough for now,” Zac said as he explained the situation with the Dominators and the beacon he had destroyed with the help of the old abbot.

“Cutting off any Karmic Ties before he reaches your plane is your best bet, as it doesn’t matter how close or far he is from your planet then. He will not be able to find you through the spatial folds of the sector without any guidance, at least not while The Ruthless Heavens is shrouding your world. And I do have something for that actually,” Catheya slowly said as she turned to the Revenant behind her. “Go fetch the 8<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> treasures.”

“The local Kingdoms will need remuneration,” Varo slowly said.

“That’s fine,” she said with a disinterested wave.

The man nodded and blended into the shadows with a bow.

“What are the treasures?” Zac asked with interest.

He probably had a lot of good things in his bag, but he had no idea what most of them were. Besides, even if they were valuable there was no guarantee that they’d be able to help him with his current predicaments.

“The 8<sup>th</sup> treasure is called [**Lantern of Fate**]. Anyone it illuminates will have their karmic ties exposed, and you will even be able to destroy the ties with enough effort. The wearer will also be immune from forming karmic ties when it’s activated,” Catheya said.

Zac’s eyes lit up, as it sounded like a treasure that produced the karmic ties that the Abbot had allowed him to see for a short while.

This was exactly what he needed to make sure there were no lingering ties between Earth and The Great Redeemer after he had dealt with the Dominators. It could solve any potential issue stemming from his repeated contact with the Redeemer, and make sure that nothing was wrong with those who had almost been possessed during the activation of the Dao Funnel.

“And the 23<sup>rd</sup>?” Zac asked with mounting excitement.

“A peak E-Grade treasure of erasure. Use it on the corpses of the underlings of the Redeemer, and any hidden karmic links will be severed. We use those kinds of treasures before we create new subjects with... troublesome histories. No one wants an insanely strong powerhouse to come for you to reclaim the body of a descendant,” Catheya said with a wry smile.

“Both these two items are yours in return for the information I’m looking for. You will have to sign a contract saying that the treasures cannot be used against the forces of the Undead Empire though,” she added.

“Deal,” Zac nodded without hesitation.

It was a bit disappointing that she wasn’t able to directly help with neither The Great Redeemer nor the Undead Incursion. However, he wasn’t really worried about the invaders any longer. He had gained far more than expected during his visit to the Tower of Eternity, and he had great confidence in dealing with the Lich King.

He had hoped to get some help with the incursion to be able to delay his evolution. He had made a lot of improvements in the tower, but he had been too rushed to make gains. If he could have a couple of months to figure out what was going on with his Dao fusions and what to do about the two items in his head he would probably be able to get even better classes.

“So...?” Catheya asked with a raised brow.

“Let me see the treasures first,” Zac said with a smile, taking a cue from the paranoid demon.

“Fine,” she snorted.

“By the way, do you know the requirements from the system for it to consider one’s path a ‘Creation’?” Zac asked instead as they waited for the Revenant to return.

“Big appetite, already grasping for an Arcane class?” Catheya smiled.

“Something like that,” Zac said, not denying it.

He had passed the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of the Tower of Eternity. It shouldn’t come as a shock that someone like him wanted to get the best possible rarity for their class.

“You should think long and hard before taking that step,” Catheya said.

“Why wouldn’t I want to get an Arcane class?” Zac asked with some skepticism.

Was this another lecture like that of Alyn? To pursue greatness through mediocrity.

“Have you changed your view of cultivation since your world got integrated?” Catheya asked.

“Of course,” Zac nodded.

“Will you change it again?”

“Probably,” Zac responded after a short deliberation.

“Well, there you go,” Catheya smiled.

“What?” Zac said, not following the logic.

“The Arcane class gives you a bit more attributes and a few other benefits, but you shouldn’t think of it as something as simple as the next step after Epic rarity. Getting an Arcane class is confirming your path of cultivation, and doing so is irrevocable,” she said.

“Irrevocable? What does that mean?” Zac asked with confusion.

“It means that you cannot change directions any longer. The path you chose will be the path you will have for the rest of your life. If your Creation is substandard, then your path of cultivation will be cut short,” Catheya explained. “Arcane classes are probably extremely rare in this sector, but they are more common where I am from. However, most people hold off on choosing them until later in their life.”

“What’s the difference between choosing now and later?” Zac asked, though he had an inkling.

“We’re just children,” Catheya said. “Our understanding of the Dao and the universe is shallow at best. Choosing an Arcane Class immediately is like choosing your future profession as a child. You don’t know what you are doing. So people wait until their understanding becomes deeper and the Creation becomes more refined.

“You lose some attributes, but trying to maximize attributes is a fool’s venture in any case,” the Draugr continued. “What is important is your path and your Dao. They will take you past the bottlenecks, a few extra points in Strength will not.”

The room turned silent as Zac looked down at his hands with a frown. He would have to confirm that she was telling the truth about Arcane classes, but what should he do if it was the truth? He felt that his creation was extremely high tier since it followed the path of Life and Death, which might even be turned into that of Creation and Oblivion with the help of the Splinter of Oblivion and the Shard of Creation.

But was that enough? There were still huge obstacles to overcome. He still couldn’t use the energies as he pleased, and he was essentially fumbling in the dark about most aspects. Besides, he wasn’t even sure if his ideas would even work any longer after the changes just before he left the tower. The pathways to **[Cyclic Strike]** had been rebranded, and he hadn’t been able to confirm whether they even worked like before.

What would happen if he chose an Arcane class based on such rickety foundations? His whole future might be ruined since he grasped for too much, just like Alyn had warned him of.

The silence stretched on for another four minutes until the revenant returned with two boxes.

“This is the lantern,” Catheya smiled. “Be careful not to use it constantly. It consumes life-force to run.”

“Lifeforce? How much?” Zac said with a frown.

“One minute’s use will result in a year lost when used,” the revenant spoke up after the Draugr shot him a glance. “Ten years if you have reached the D-Grade. It is not strong enough to protect the fate of those stronger than that.”

Zac nodded in thanks. It was a bit creepy to pay with your life to use an item, especially after already having already lost so much of it to the Shard. But just using it for short durations wouldn’t be too bad, especially as he was about to evolve and get a new chunk of lifespan any day now.

“So, about the information?” The Draugr said.

“I don’t know if the one I’m thinking of is related to you, but you look just like a younger version of the one I saw,” Zac said as he stowed away the two treasures. “I think her name is Be’Zi.”

“So you really have met her?!” the Draugr almost screamed as she leaned across the table. “Is she in this sector?”

“I don’t know,” Zac said. “We met in a vision since we walk similar paths. She bestowed me with something to protect me. Perhaps that’s what you can sense from me.”

“Why would she help you though?” Catheya said with confusion.

“She believed it was fate we met,” Zac shrugged. “According to her husband she seemed to place pretty great emphasis on such things.”

“Her WHAT?!” Catheya shouted as she slammed the table. “WHO?!”

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**Chapter 473 - Twilight Harbor**

Catheya looked extremely shocked at the prospect of her ancestor having married, or perhaps having remarried as she already had descendants since before.

“I didn’t get his name,” Zac coughed before he described his appearance.

“Our ancestor has run off with an Aetherlord? What?” Catheya mumbled as she sat down with a thump. “Well, better that than some human I guess. No offense.”

Zac only snorted in response, not taking the thing to heart. It was not like he was lining up to date someone who wasn’t even alive.

“Why hasn’t she returned though?” Catheya asked. “Where is she now? How was her mental state?”

“I have no idea where she is,” Zac said. “I saw her sitting in a dark cave with a sea of liquefied Miasma slowly rotating around her. It felt like a drop of that pond would be able to instantly kill me. She seemed normal, a bit cold I guess?”

“So why hasn’t she been back for so long?” she muttered with some despondency.

“She didn’t say, I saw them for less than a minute,” Zac said, but he spoke up again after some hesitation. “But the path we walk has side-effects. You saw what happened to this place the other day. She might be afraid of hurting her family if she lost control.”

“Madness...” Catheya muttered. “I feel like you are still keeping some secrets from me though.”

“Some things aren’t of any value to you, but they pertain to my cultivation path. I know that the two of them cultivate opposite Daos though, and I think they are forming some system between them. That might be why your ancestor can stay alive,” Zac

added after some thought, feeling he hadn't provided much information in return for the treasures.

"The also husband spoke of broken peaks and seemed to carry resentment toward the System."

"Broken peaks..." Catheya muttered. "The Boundless Path? This might be important, I need to speak with my master."

"Stuff like that is beyond me. I'm just a newly integrated Progenitor, I don't have any experience with stuff like old ancestors," Zac shrugged. "Can I ask something else?"

"What?" Catheya said, though her interest in keeping up the conversation seemed to have waned somewhat now that she had the information she wanted.

"What ways are there to gain more limited title slots?"

Catheya was someone from a higher sector than the one he lived in, which meant that things that her knowledge might be unrivaled compared to all the other scions in the Base town. She also didn't care about offending any local force like the Heliophos Clan, so he needed to milk her for as much knowledge as he could before he returned to Earth.

"Limited Titles... Just what did you encounter in the Tower of Eternity?" Catheya said, her crestfallen demeanor replaced by one filled with curiosity. "Did you encounter a trial?"

"A what?"

"A special event inside the tower. You encountered one, didn't you?" Catheya asked.

Zac hesitated for a few seconds before he slowly nodded.

"The fate you carry must be pretty immense," Catheya muttered. "Then again, that was already all too apparent from the events outside."

"Fate?"

"The amount of attention the Heavens put on you. It is both a blessing and a curse," Catheya smiled.

Zac weakly smiled in return, knowing the sentiment all too well.

"So, Limited Titles?" Zac said.

"It's extremely rare. My master is deemed to have great genius partly because he has 4 Limited Slots. There are people with more, but I don't know how they have gotten the other one. There are only a few generally known means to gain such a boost, and the Tower and its equivalent trials are the only I have heard of before D-Grade," Catheya said.

"Why is there a limit at all?" Zac muttered. "Why doesn't the System not just have normal titles? Isn't its goal to make people powerful?"

"Tell me what trial you encountered," Catheya smiled.

"It was called a Battle of Fates, it replaced the 63<sup>rd</sup> floor," Zac said after deciding if the trade of information was worth it.

"That's a rough one, but its mortality is pretty low," Catheya nodded. "It's a decent one to get, as long as you're adept at combat."

"So, titles?" Zac said.

"Did you know that cultivators today are stronger than they were pre-system?" Catheya said.

"Isn't that the point of the System?" Zac responded, not understanding where Catheya was going. "Making warriors stronger."

“Yes, but I am talking stage by stage,” Catheya explained. “The average cultivators of today are only slightly better than the average ancient cultivators, but the elites are almost twice as powerful going by the records. Can you guess why?”

“The titles?” Zac immediately understood.

“Exactly. Skills, Cultivation manuals, Bloodlines, and Daos. All this existed before the System. But titles did not,” the Draugr said. “It’s still not completely understood exactly what the Ruthless Heavens does when giving out titles, but the consensus is that it can be seen as an extremely exact, but minute, Bloodline Evolution. A Title improves our base constitution by a small degree.

“However, nothing comes without a price. It no doubt costs the System energy to improve the fundamental aspects of a warrior, and the Heavens is running at maximum capacity as far as we can tell, constantly integrating new realms. It can’t expend unlimited resources on every person, especially as its core directive is to manufacture warriors as efficiently as possible,” Catheya said.

“The general belief is that it’s pretty cheap for the System to award titles to warriors who are still in the earliest stages of cultivation. Giving 5% to Intelligence is barely anything. But providing 5% Intelligence for an A-Grade Prince? That would require terrifying amounts of energy,” the Draugr continued.

“But even if you get the title early, you’ll still get the same boost when reaching A-Grade later,” Zac countered.

“The Heavens won’t provide that energy. You will need to collect that yourself through killing or cultivating,” the Draugr smiled.

“So if you have a bunch of titles your cultivation will be slower?” Zac asked with surprise.

“Yes. The amount of energy a warrior requires to level up differs from person to person. A higher potential will require more energy,” Catheya explained as matter of course. “It’s not noticeable in the F-grade as the System subsidizes everyone, but elites generally gain levels slower. That’s why most factions force their general warriors to use lower Rarity Classes. They’ll shoot up to their bottlenecks far quicker, and a few might even break through with the extra time on their hands.”

“So the system provides the Titles as rewards, but you have to provide the energy required to maintain them yourself,” Zac concluded.

“Exactly,” Catheya nodded.

“And the limited titles?” Zac asked.

“The Ruthless Heavens still needed an extra incentive for people to enter dangerous places. Often people return empty-handed from such ventures, but if they at least could get a Title out of it more are likely to risk their lives. This dramatically increases the death rate among cultivators, but those who survive are stronger and more experienced,” Catheya smiled. “Besides, if you have a limited number of titles you will gradually upgrade them, and it will create a smaller strain on the Ruthless Heavens.”

“Of course, that’s just the general theory. Another is that Titles are actually unrealized potential. There is only so much potential that the System can dig out from a person, so it can’t provide unlimited titles and need to set a limit,” Catheya added.

The two kept talking for almost an hour, where the two kept going tit-for-tat for information. She obviously didn’t know as much about the Dao or cultivation as Yrial, but she had the viewpoint of someone who was born in a top tier faction. That came with all kinds of snippets of information that accumulated into a huge advantage.

Catheya was more interested in his experiences, and kept asking about whether he had encountered any cursed Mystic Realms or performed rituals on battlefields. Zac realized she tried to understand why he “smelled” like a Draugr, but he kept that secret to himself as he extracted one piece of information after another.

For example, he learned that it was possible to control one’s Dao to the point that you could actually form arrays with the mental energy before infusing it into skills. It would increase the boost even further, and sometimes even change the way a skill worked. He had never heard of anything of the sort before, which meant that it probably wasn’t a widely known technique here. Of course, that wasn’t something that was fated with Zac in any case.

However, the real shock was learning just what a **[Divine Investiture Array]** was, and he almost exploded in anger when doing so.

It was actually an array to create or alter Spirit Tools. It could either take raw materials or an already existing spirit tool, and it would create something new with it. It was extremely sought after as you could create a Spirit Tool with extreme growth potential that was uniquely suited to one’s own battle style and Daos.

It was a very convenient item, and Catheya even went so far as to offer 250 billion Nexus Coins for it, but it didn’t detract from the fact that the System had screwed him over yet again. How was an array like this supposed to ‘rectify regret’? Had it straight out lied to him, or did it refer to the fact that **[Verun’s Bite]** was starting to lag behind, which could be considered regretful?

“You don’t understand how great such an array is. It can potentially create an item that will follow you for the rest of your life. An item you buy from a Blacksmith will always be influenced by the creator’s Dao and path and limited by his lack of skill, creating frictions that become more obvious the further you progress,” the Draugr explained with exasperation.

“The **[Divine Investiture]** array, on the other hand, can create an unblemished item that is a direct bridge between you and the Heavens,” Catheya continued as she looked at Zac like he was an idiot. “Having a perfectly suited weapon is even more important than having a perfect cultivation manual, it’s a top tier reward of the Tower. I would have tried tricking it out of your hands if you didn’t have a karmic connection to my ancestor.”

Zac slowly nodded in understanding, though there was still a sense of frustration about the situation. It sounded like something he could use though, and he contemplated upgrading Verun after returning to Earth. He had gathered quite a few materials during his climb, and he would be able to get some more in the Base Town.

He had the Pathfinder Eye and pieces of a true Dragon, along with metals, bones, and other odd materials that attracted the Tool Spirit’s desire. It should allow him to elevate **[Verun’s Bite]** to a terrifying level, which might be considered rectifying regret in some roundabout way.

Another valuable piece of intel appeared a few minutes later, when the Draugr asked where he had got his hands on a Sword Slave.

“A what?” Zac asked after hearing the unfamiliar term. “Do you mean one of the avatars I conjured? They were defensive treasures.”

“No, I mean the old sword you used at the end,” the Draugr snorted. “I am guessing you looted those defensive treasures from some poor girl during the Trial, judging by their design.”

“Oh, that one. I picked it up during the Battle of Fates as well,” Zac explained, not commenting on the fact that he was still wearing a bunch of jewelry.

He probably looked a bit weird, but he would be in a weakened state for a while longer, and there was no way he'd take off his defensive treasures in front of the Draugr.

"You should be careful about that item, and have whatever the human equivalent to a Cleansing Lich is take a look at you," Catheya said.

"Just what is it?" Zac asked with some worry, making a mental note to have Sui check up on his condition. "It feels a bit like a Spirit Tool, but it's still different."

"I guess you could call it a cursed object. A piece of a cultivator's soul has fused with that weapon, either through accident or through a ritual. The skill you used is most likely one the warrior knew before dying," Catheya explained. "Judging by its appearance its state is unstable, and it even tried to fuse with your arm."

"The man I took it from didn't seem to get any backlash from using it," Zac said, hoping the Draugr would have a solution.

The power of the attack he had unleashed was somewhere between the Second and Third swings of **[Deforestation]**, and if he could use the weapon freely it would be a great ace to take out if needed. But his arm did feel a bit uncomfortable now that Catheya mentioned. He had just thought it was the general state of weakness from **[Hatchetman's Rage]**, but perhaps there was something more.

"Then he must have had some means to counteract the side-effects of the weapon," Catheya guessed.

"So what's the point of having one of these Cursed Swords instead of a normal Spirit Tool?" Zac asked.

"There really isn't one, Spirit Tools are generally more convenient as the Tool Spirits are more compatible to reside in a weapon. It's either a sinister cultivator who makes them with mass sacrifices to suit their warped paths or as a punishment. Imagine, capturing the soul of your enemy and forcing it into an old rotten sword? It's pretty impactful," Catheya smiled. "Of course, I'd personally make them into my followers instead."

Zac shook his head with disgust before his thoughts went back to the youth back on the platform. Had he actually done something so cruel as to trap the souls of his enemies as punishment? It didn't fit with the image he righteous swordsman image he projected. But Zac was soon dragged out of his thoughts though as someone knocked at the door.

Varo slowly walked over and opened it up to show Galau standing outside.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Galau said as he repeatedly bowed toward Zac and Catheya. "Ms. Peak and her friend have waited to speak with you for some time now... I wonder if you might be available today?"

"Interesting fellow," Catheya muttered as she stood up. "We're done here in any case. Here, take this. I believe it might become useful to you someday. You need to upgrade your Nexus Hub quite a bit before using it though. You can contact me through the Fallen Ferrymen there."

It was another Teleportation Token, though it looked more refined compared to those had seen until now.

"Does this lead to the Undead Empire?" Zac asked as he looked at the Draugr askance.

"No," she snorted. "If you showed up at a teleportation array in the heartlands you would get snatched up and realigned in seconds. This token leads to Twilight Harbor, an interesting place in a frontier sector neighboring this one. That sector is even younger than Zecia, and things are very chaotic and exciting. You could call

Twilight Harbor a 'Gray Zone', one of the few places where the living and dead intermingle."

"Didn't you say that wasn't allowed by the Empire?" Zac asked with a raised brow.

"It's not. But I never said that all undead are part of the Empire, did I?" the Draugr said with a smile as she left the room.

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**Chapter 474 - Challenged**

Zac looked over at Galau, who shook his head in confusion.

"I thought they were all part of the same Empire as well, even if it was a pretty weak connection for local Kingdoms," the merchant said. "Perhaps that's only true for the Zecia sector?"

"Where is Pretty Peak now?" Zac asked, dropping the subject.

Zac was a bit surprised that the token didn't lead to Catheya's home planet, as he would have expected her to want to stay in touch. But she probably believed that he would never go to the Empire Heartlands, and felt it a waste of a token.

She couldn't know that it was a place that Zac was actually interested in visiting sooner or later, in order to find opportunities for his Draugr class. That would have to wait until he got a surefire way to hide his unique condition though. Greatest was only a D-Grade warrior after all, and Zac doubted that the bracer he made would be able to fool anyone in such a place.

Twilight Harbor sounded like an interesting place as well though, and it might serve as a safer substitute to the Empire Heartlands. Leaving one's planet while still at the F-grade was nigh-suicidal though, as any random peak E-Grade warrior might be able to kill him. He needed to reach at least a level of Strength where he could escape from a D-Grade warrior if needed.

"Lady Peak and Lady Lioress are currently resting in a neighboring room," Galau said.

"Lioress? Who's that?" Zac asked.

"I'm not sure. Her first name is Leyara. My guess is that she is a disciple of some of the hidden peak experts of the sector judging by the way others treat her," Galau said with a low voice. "They might both be able to get in contact with the Heliophos clan for you, which isn't easy from what I've heard."

"Let them wait a few seconds more," Zac said as he indicated Galau to come inside instead. "Did you hear any mentions of The Great Redeemer outside? Are the claims credible? I'm thinking that cultivator who spoke up might have been messing with me as revenge or something."

"Have you seen the man you mentioned?" Galau asked, receiving a nod in response.

"Is this him?" Galau asked, and a face along with some text appeared on a screen the next moment.

"That's him," Zac confirmed with a sigh.

It was obviously the man he had seen twice, though his age was somewhat younger compared to the real-time avatar he had conjured when breaking the beacon.

It looked like he wasn't lucky this time around, and the Redeemer really was part of the karmic cultivator clan.

"Well, his real name is Voridis A'Heliophos. He is not technically part of the Heliophos clan, hence the prefix. He is presumably an illegitimate son of one of the grand elders of the family. It's said that the elder came back to the clan with a 5-year-old child after having traveled for a few centuries, and he said the boy was his son," Galau started explaining as he took out a crystal.

"It's hard to get details since it seems like a touchy subject with the clan, but apparently the boy seemed to have some unique gifts, and he was heavily nurtured even if he wasn't part of the real bloodline. But something happened and Voridis couldn't form his cultivator core, so he fell out of favor within the clan, much to his and his father's dismay.

"He got desperate, both due to his own remaining lifespan growing shorter by the day, and to prove himself to his clan again. He left the clan and came back as a D-Grade powerhouse 200 years later. However, the elders noticed something was wrong with his karma even though it was covered deep. It was eventually exposed that Voridis had used a taboo ritual that was powered by the death of millions of people," Voridis said.

"So why is he still out causing trouble if he was exposed?" Zac asked with a frown.

"His father pled for leniency, and the patriarch relented and only exiled him after crippling his cultivation and putting a karmic curse on him. They planned to let him live out his life as a mortal on a desolate planet to understand the plight of those he had killed.

A thousand years later another sacrifice was exposed, and it became soon became apparent that it was Voridis who had regained his ability to cultivate and had just reformed his Cultivation Core. That was tens of thousands of years ago, and he still hasn't been caught by his family. There are at least 4 taboo genocides linked to him. The System has handed out multiple quests for his death as well, but he is still alive," Galau narrated, clearly reading off some information packet.

"Taboo?" Zac asked. "Like unorthodox?"

"Exactly. What he's doing is going against the will of the Heavens. That man wasn't talented enough to form a core by himself, but he didn't want to risk his life in Mystic Realms in hopes of finding opportunities that could allow him to break through. Instead, he chose to sacrifice mortals to change his fate. That is one of the most taboo actions to the heavens," Galau explained.

Zac slowly nodded as he went over the information that Galau had provided. The origin of The Great Redeemer didn't change anything. The good news was that the Heliophos Clan seemed intent on dealing with their embarrassment, but the bad news was that the father seemed ready to cover for him even after all his transgressions.

It also meant that killing Voridis might cause all kinds of issues for Earth, as someone like a Grand Elder of a C-Grade Karmic Clan probably could mess with a single D-Grade planet without much effort. Perhaps focusing on making Earth harder to find rather than dealing with the man himself was really the better course of action.

There should be no cause of conflict between Earth and the Heliophos Clan if Earth simply hid away until the Great Redeemer had died or moved on.

Zac also noted that the Merchant's wealth of knowledge seemed a lot broader right now compared to his comments after the fight.

"You've been busy since we exited," Zac commented.

“Ah, well,” Galau coughed. “Gathering the information was mostly done by the two misses, I am just the messenger. Incidentally, why don’t we head over and say hello?”

Zac shot an even glance at the merchant, waiting for an explanation.

“Well, you know what happened with the Tsarun Clan, and then the fight as we exited. I was afraid that it might implicate my family after all, but thankfully I managed to form a connection with the Peak Family. That way I won’t return to my Family like a criminal,” the merchant confessed. “I’m sorry.”

“Isn’t knowing me enough of a boon now that the bounty is lifted?” Zac asked with confusion.

He wasn’t trying to be arrogant, but he was the first person to conquer the 8th floor in an extremely long time in the sector, which no doubt hinted at him being a future powerhouse. Shouldn’t such an accomplishment be worth something?

“Honestly, it’s still not decided whether knowing you is a boon or a curse,” Galau said with a wry smile. “It’s unclear what the attitude of the Heliophos Clan and the Dravorak Dynasty will be. That will affect whether you will be seen as a murderous fugitive or a pride of the sector until you are strong enough to speak for yourself.”

“I guess I overestimated myself,” Zac wryly smiled. “Before we head over, can you look into a few things for me?”

“Look into?” Galau said, his interest immediately piqued. “Treasures?”

“Exactly,” Zac nodded.

He had spent over an hour with Catheya, but he hadn’t been completely focused on their conversation. His hand had imperceptibly moved toward the Cosmos Sacks now and then, and he glanced at its contents.

There were a lot of things missing, but there was even more remaining. For example, almost the whole dragon was left intact, apart from some scales and the messy remains he threw inside at the end. Both the massive horns and the Dragon Core were still there, which was a huge relief as they were probably worth the most of the beast.

“Do you know what this is?” Zac asked. “Be careful, it comes from an elite assassin.”

Galau gingerly took the spike and turned it over as his eyes flickered with light.

“There is a liquid inside,” the merchant slowly said. “That is the real treasure. The young master from Zethaya might be more knowledgeable about it.”

“I’m not comfortable with exposing what I found just yet,” Zac smiled. “Please keep these things to yourself as well.”

“Of course,” Galau hurriedly nodded.

Zac took out one item after another from his Spatial Tools, and the eyes of Galau grew even wider.

“I’ve never heard of items with such craftsmanship appearing in the Tower of Eternity,” the merchant mumbled. “Is it a special perk of the higher floors?”

Zac wouldn’t expose the fact that he had taken them off the body of an elite from another part of the universe. He was afraid that would hurt resale value in case he decided to swap them for cold hard cash instead.

It turned out that over twenty of the odd trinkets in the Mentalist’s Spatial Ring were Array Breakers that could take out specific types of formations. It wasn’t anything related to evolving or fighting, but rather items that were probably used to expedite the climb for the young mentalist. Galau couldn’t pinpoint exactly what sort of arrays they worked against though, as that would require some experimentation.

He was a bit surprised that there were no treasures geared toward evolving among the things he had picked up from the three elites. They should all have been right at the precipice before evolving, so why weren't they preparing? Or was there perhaps no point for people like them to carry around such items, as they could simply visit their clan's storage rooms?

Galau also had no idea what the odd heads that Zac found in Faceless #9's Cosmos Sack were. He could confirm that they were some sort of unorthodox arrays that had trapped the souls of the previous owners, but he said that experimentation was the only way to know for sure what the arrays did.

It was either that or to hand them over to an array master who could slowly decipher the inscriptions on the talisman, but Zac didn't know anyone like that at the moment.

Zac could only nod with some defeat and hope that the Sky Gnome back on earth knew more even though the Thayer Consortia wasn't nearly as powerful as Galau's clan. They were however once a C-Grade merchant clan, and a lot of knowledge should remain even if they had fallen to their current pitiful state over the past centuries.

The two soon enough left the room. The Zethaya scion was actually waiting outside, and Zac already knew the results of the Alchemist's inquiries judging by his expression.

"I am afraid that there are no treasures to heal old wounds in the Base Town. Plenty of people have brought pills that can heal a recently wounded soul, such as our Zethaya's [**Serene Soul Pill**]. But you would normally only bring items like the [**Prajñā Cherry**] if you plan on selling or trading it," Boje explained with a pained expression.

"That's fine, I guessed as much," Zac sighed. "You don't happen to know a way to block out Karmic links for a whole planet?"

"Is this about the Heliophos Traitor?" Boje thoughtfully said. "It's an unusual problem. Perhaps there are arrays that can provide such an effect, but I would have to confer with a proper Array Master."

Zac nodded in thanks as the alchemist walked off again, and his eyes turned to a woman who stood in a doorway not far away. It was one of the two ladies who had snatched up Galau earlier, and judging by the trademark purple hair it was no doubt Pretty Peak.

"He's happy you're not holding a grudge," Pretty smiled. "Outliers like you are a nightmare for large clans. Come inside, and we can discuss your predicament."

Zac nodded and followed her inside where the second girl waited. She immediately stood up when he appeared, but Zac noticed that her smile looked a bit forced. Her eyes repeatedly went toward the various jewelry that decked his hands, while occasionally darting over to Galau to the side.

Had the merchant said something weird?

However, she soon snapped out of it and introduced herself as Leyara Lioress, calling herself the personal disciple of 'The Void Priestess'. That didn't mean anything to Zac, but judging by Galau's reaction it seemed as though she was a big shot in the sector, or at least in the Allbright Empire. Zac marked down the information for later before he introduced himself.

"I'm Zac, nice to meet you," Zac simply said.

"I am Pretty Peak, but you can call me Divine Fist," Pretty added from the side, drawing a blank stare from Zac.

"Don't mind her," Leyara giggled from the side as she walked closer to Zac, causing a puff of perfume to waft over. "Pretty was finally allowed to change name a

year ago after forming a Mid-Grade Fragment while still in F-Grade. But she can't decide on a new name."

"Yes, I've met your cousin," Zac coughed, surprised at how much stronger she seemed to be compared to her cousin. "How is Average?"

"He's current-" Pretty began, but Zac's attention was suddenly diverted by a System Prompt that appeared in front of him.

### **[Lordship of Port Atwood Challenged]**

"Lordship challenged?!" Zac swore out loud as he saw the prompt as he glared at the two girls, his dense killing intent started leaking a bit. "Who?"

"It's not us. Such a prompt means your Capital is being attacked," Pretty said, her equanimity slightly cracking in front of Zac's aura.

Zac immediately stood up in alarm upon hearing the news and started to walk out the door without another word.

"Wait," Pretty said from behind, and Zac looked back to see both the girls throw a Cosmos Sack over.

"We'll contact the Heliophos Clan for you," Pretty said. "We should have heard back within a month. You can read in the crystal how to contact me without exposing yourself."

"A small greeting gift from me," Leyara added as well.

"Thank you both," Zac nodded and left in a hurry to find Ogras.

"What did you give him?" Pretty asked her friend after Zac had left the room, noticing that her friend had acted a bit unnatural since Zac Piker had arrived.

"You heard the merchant's descriptions," Leyara said with a slight blush. "And you saw what he wore. Many geniuses have unique interests and tastes, and you have to adapt to circumstances."

"You didn't..." Pretty exclaimed, her eyes widening in disbelief.

### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 475 - Trapped**

Zac rushed out of the meeting room and found the demon sitting in the lobby downstairs, surrounded by a handful of scions. Ogras looked up and immediately spotted something was wrong with his expression and flashed over.

"The town is being attacked," Zac simply said with a low voice. "I got a prompt by the System."

"What?!" the demon said with surprise. "Who would be able to attack the island?"

"I'll go deal with it immediately," Zac said. "It doesn't look like we'll be able to get any force to help us out against that guy anyway."

"No," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "I asked around. It seems a few C-Grade forces in the sector have gone from rulers of their areas to beggars after having crossed that Clan. One weird calamity after another befell their factions until nothing was left. They are definitely not some benign monks, and no one wants to be the next one to fall."

“You can stay behind a bit longer while I deal with this,” Zac said after thinking it over. “I got something that will be able to see karma threads at least. See if you can find anything else that can help us hide our planet better, like arrays or obscuring treasures.”

“I’ll make some inquiries. Many still want to make a connection to us even if they will stay out of the way of the Heliophos Clan,” the demon said. “I’m sure I can squeeze all kinds of good things out of the people here. There might be something useful in the sacks I looted as well, I haven’t had a chance to go through them yet.”

“Might as well make the most of the situation,” Zac sighed. “I’ve already asked Boje Zethaya, but see if you can find any soul healing treasures. My soul cracked and I was forced to use the treasure during the climb and I don’t have anything to heal Alea now. And get some materials for upgrading weapons as well.”

The demon looked shocked, before he wryly looked at the people around.

“I’ll ask, but if the Zethaya Descendant can’t find anything I doubt I will fare any better,” Ogras said. “But the girl is strong and we still have time. We need to focus on that old bastard coming for us. I’ll see what solutions there are.”

“Good. I got a token from Boje anyway, so we can always send someone over for a healing pill,” Zac agreed as he took out the Tower Token. “When will you come back?”

“I’ll sort things out quickly before returning as well,” Ogras said after some thought. “Give me an hour or so.”

Zac only nodded and cracked his token, and ten seconds later he was back on earth.

It almost felt surreal to be back in his secluded courtyard after moving through dozens of worlds that might have either been real or imaginary. The experiences over the past 100 days had been life-changing. Some parts had far exceeded his expectations, but for other things he had come up short.

The increase to his power compared to when he left Earth just 10 days ago was almost incalculable, yet he had still failed in either getting a real solution in the fight against The Great Redeemer or a cure for Alea. It wasn’t all hopeless though, as Ogras might be able to come back with something that would help them shroud Earth from any karmic trails.

But there was no time to rest. He was still not completely recuperated from the showdown outside the Tower of Eternity, but he had thankfully relied heavily on his accumulated treasures to tide that tribulation. It left him with a decent amount of Cosmic Energy to spare, though the side-effects of **[Hatchetman’s Rage]** were still there to a certain degree.

There were no obvious sounds of battle that he could hear, so he immediately rushed toward his Nexus Node. His first instinct was that someone might be trying to tamper with his private Node while he was away, like a spy trying to snatch his lordship from under his nose. But the house with the node was empty, and it didn’t look like anyone had messed with it either.

Zac quickly walked out of the building and was about to head toward the town, when a shocking explosion erupted to the south. Trees were almost flattened to the ground and Zac felt the shockwave deep into his bones even though the explosion came from hundreds of meters away. There was only one thing in that direction; the shipyard.

“The creators?” Zac muttered with confusion before he flashed away.

A massive plume of flames rose to the sky the moment he passed the final layer of trees, and Zac was forced to cover his face from the intense light. The explosion

earlier must have taken place somewhere out on the water, but Zac could feel the heat all the way from where he stood.

Zac was about to rush toward the Creator Offices, but he noticed that a familiar figure had appeared in front of him without him noticing. It was Rahm, the Creator Liaison.

“Lord Atwood, it has been a while. I hope you are well?” the stoic Creator said, seemingly unperturbed by the fact that the whole area had been turned into a blazing inferno.

“I’m fine,” Zac said. “More importantly, what is going on? Are there attackers on the island? Or is this an experiment?”

“It is not an experiment, unfortunately,” Rahm said. “It would appear that you are being invaded. Multiple large ships have breached your shores, and there have been sounds of conflict for a while now. The explosion just now was one of the ships trying to breach our arrays.”

“Do you need assistance?” Zac asked.

“No,” a booming voice echoed as the familiar spider-golem emerged from the offices. “It’s so rare I get to see some action, and I hold no love for neither the fanatics nor the unliving. There is no way these children will be able to breach our fortifications, so you can rest easy. Nothing will be able to anchor this side of your living quarters.”

It was Karunthel, the Creator foreman who had shown up. He looked pretty much the same as before, with the noticeable addition of a cannon radiating a terrifying amount of energy that had been mounted onto his torso. The spider golem was turning more and more into a killer robot every day.

“What?” Zac blurted with confusion. “Are they *both* attacking us? They are supposed to be mortal enemies.”

“I guess you youngsters gave them a scare. Should’ve finished them off sooner though, now they’re crawling all over the island,” Karunthel shrugged as he inspected Zac.

“Brat, your aura is getting nice and condensed. But if you would accept a piece of advice, don’t get hung up on perfection. Cultivation might not be a sprint, but it is not a marathon either. You need to maintain momentum and keep pushing forward. The second you stop it will be much harder to start running again,” he said.

“Thank you,” Zac said, though he couldn’t really focus on the advice after hearing the whole island was under attack. “I will soon evolve. So you are fine here?”

“They have already realized we’re a Mercantile Structure and will soon move on,” Karunthel laughed. “And I am not allowed to blast those rats who are staying outside the shields. Not within the job description. But I’ve expanded the shield to the maximum area that I am allowed, which will keep part of your coastline safe at least.”

“Thank you, I’ll visit you once this is dealt with,” Zac nodded and immediately started running toward Port Atwood.

Zac rapidly moved through his private forest like a specter, each step with **[Loamwalker]** moving him fifty meters forward. Urgency and some confusion made his mind muddled as he tried to figure out just what was going on. Had the two bitter enemies really put their differences aside just for him? He had never heard of anything like it.

And more importantly, how the hell had they found these secluded islands so easily? It had taken months of exploration to find the mainland, so finding his small island would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

He could only pray he wasn't too late yet again. With both him and Ogras gone and Alea in a coma, there was pretty much no one who would be able to rebuff an assault. He could only thank the System that it was kind enough to provide a warning that his people were under attack.

Another massive shockwave erupted in the distance, containing enough power to almost throw him off his feet. A plume of golden flames rose into the sky, and Zac remembered Ogras' descriptions of the zealot's powers all too well. Fury started to smolder in his mind, fiery anger at the people who dared launch such a massive strike at a town full of civilians and non-combat personnel.

The world shrunk around him as he pushed **[Loamwalker]** to its limits. The towering flames came from the northeast, some ways inland from the coast. It was the part of Port Atwood that contained the Academy and the structures related to his army. It seemed the attackers knew what parts they needed to take out first.

Was there really a spy on the island?

Port Atwood had thankfully overhauled its defenses since the last waves of attack though, and his people should at least be able to hold out for while even against the Undead Empire. Back then he barely had the resources to run a simple town protection array, but Port Atwood had been a Global City for quite some time now.

He had given his subordinates almost free reign with the town's funds in order to develop Port Atwood, and he saw waves of flames slamming into a sturdy crystalline barrier as he approached the battlefield. Four massive fractals shone in the sky, and one of them suddenly lit up.

A tremendous surge of chaotic energies cut straight through the seas of flames with such force that space was ripped open, and a thundering explosion could be heard as the attack hit something on the other side of the ten-meter tall wall.

It was clear that the town had added some great new defenses, but both the Undead Empire and the Church of the Everlasting Dao were terrifying forces with extremely deep heritages. A golden ball slammed into the crystalline shield protecting the wall the next moment, causing massive cracks all over as streams of fire shot toward the people standing guard on the wall walk.

Zac's eyes widened with anger as he saw the gouts of flames pour down toward his army who were desperately trying to maintain the barrier. The ground cracked beneath his feet as he leaped forward, and a storm of leaves spread out to create a vast canopy to block out the rain of fire.

"Lord Atwood!" a Valkyrie suddenly screamed, and hundreds of hopeful eyes were turned in his direction.

Zac only nodded in response as he flew toward the golden ball in the sky with furious momentum, and his body was hardened by the Fragment of the Coffin as his fist slammed into the molten core. A shockwave spread out in all directions from his punch, and a few warriors were even thrown off from the wall as the golden ball was twisted and deformed before it was flung away.

Another shudder spread through the earth as the ball landed some distance outside the wall. Zac himself landed on the wall walk, and he tried to understand what was going on outside. However, the only thing that met his gaze was a sea of flames that spread in every direction outside the city wall.

The lunatics had set half the island on fire it seemed.

"What's going on?" Zac asked as a familiar demon rushed to his side.

It was Harvath, one of the Demon captains who had accompanied him in the Underworld and the earlier Incursions.

“We discovered six massive ships heading this way about a day ago, carrying both the undead and zealots of the Church of Everlasting Dao,” Harvath explained between pants. “We tried to stop their advance with repeated raids using our smaller vessels, but we only managed to sink two of them before our ships were too burned to continue attacking.”

“The Undead Empire has really teamed up with the Church?” Zac asked incredulously, still having trouble believing it was true.

“It appears that way,” Harvath said. “Three of the remaining ships sailed for our island, with the final one veering off for some reason. We fear that other settlements might have been hit.”

“You don’t know?” Zac asked with a frown.

“They are somehow blocking our teleporters. It is like this island has become isolated from the rest of the world. We have lost connection to all other locations on our Teleportation List. We could still teleport within the island until recently, but we lost that ability a few minutes ago. We have sent out scouting vessels but haven’t gotten word back,” he said.

“How’s that possible?” Zac muttered with a frown.

“General Ilvere believes the ship might have dropped some manner of spatial disruption arrays into the ocean as they sailed toward us,” Harvath said. “But we don’t know.”

Zac frowned when he heard about the block. It seemed to be the same technology as that which almost got Alea and his whole army killed. He hadn’t expected being troubled by such technology right as he returned, and he didn’t have any real way to solve them. The simplest method would be to destroy the jammers, but he didn’t even know what they looked like.

Were the Invaders trying to imprison him on this remote island?

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**Chapter 476 - Sowing Discord**

“How do things look with the Undead Incursion?” Zac asked after making sure that another molten ball wasn’t coming their way. “Have you found out how long until it activates?”

“... The array has already been activated,” the demon said after a brief hesitation. “Half the sky of the main continent is reportedly covered with a green array.”

“WHAT?!” Zac almost roared, his eyes widening with shock. “Since when?”

“Four days ago,” the demon sighed. “But it is not converting the world as of yet, it is currently drawing energy from the planet. Your sister and the human champions have worked hard to slow it down for your return, but I am not sure how much time there is left. Lady Atwood will likely know more.”

“Ok, where is my sister right now?” Zac asked, his mind reeling after getting bombarded by a series of unwelcome news the past hour.

His miscalculation of the time he had remaining had caused massive repercussions for Earth, and he couldn’t help but feel ashamed when he thought back

to his meeting with Thea just before leaving for the tower. He could only pray that he had returned in time to set things right.

“She is fighting at Azh’Rodum,” Harvath said. “She is holding the invaders back with your swarm of flying machines.”

“My machines?” Zac repeated with confusion before he remembered the drones.

She had actually gained control of the drone swarms, which Zac guessed wasn’t surprising considering Jeeves. Some fear flickered in his heart, but he knew he couldn’t blame her for taking them out. If now was not the time to use it, then when? But another point of confusion suddenly entered his mind.

“Wait, Azh’Rodum? What are they doing so far inland?” Zac asked with a frown.

“We don’t know. They first tried bombarding us from a distance where we couldn’t retaliate, but our shields were too strong for those attacks. So two ships stayed outside this town while they prepared for a siege, while the largest ship sailed north,” the demon captain explained. “We believe they might be targeting the Vein through the mine.”

“Who went with her?” Zac asked.

“Most of the Valkyries, along with Ilvere and a squad of E-Grade demons. Azh’Rodum is not as strongly defended, and it is the gateway to the Nexus Vein, so most of our elites went there. Our task here is simply to hold out until you and the young lord returned, or until the threat inland was averted. The young master... Is he here?” Harvath asked as he looked around.

“Ogras is still in the Tower of Eternity, he is fine. I got a prompt that Port Atwood was under attack so I immediately returned. Ogras will return a bit later after he has dealt with some matters over there,” Zac explained as his mind went over the details.

Some things didn’t make sense. His force had been in combat for over a day. Why hadn’t the system warned him? He also suddenly remembered the spike in levels for Thea and Billy roughly twelve hours ago in real-time.

“Are Billy and Thea on the island?” Zac asked.

“Yes, it was only thanks to them we managed to sink one of the ships before we were pushed back,” Harvath nodded, some respect shining in his eyes. “They are currently on bed-rest. Janos had to hypnotize the big one to prevent him from running out and bashing the invaders with that nasty club of his. They will be fine in a week or two.”

Zac sighed in relief when hearing those two were fine. It looked like they actually had risked their lives to protect his people. But it made him all-the-more confused why the alert had only warned him just now.

“Did something change a few minutes ago?” Zac suddenly asked.

“A few minutes ago?” the demon repeated. “Nothing special has happened except our communications being blocked. They did also start shooting those massive balls at our shield recently. We can’t see them any longer because of the flames, but the zealots set up large siege tools some distance from here.”

Zac slowly nodded in understanding. It seemed that the System only gave out a warning at the last moment, which was a valuable piece of information. He couldn’t rely on the System as a warning call to protect his home. This time he was lucky enough to be able to get back to town almost instantly, but that wouldn’t always be the case.

He really needed to erect a more permanent protection that would withstand any threat on Earth.

“I can’t see anything in front of me, what are they doing on the other side of the flames?” Zac finally asked.

“Our vision has been blocked for a while now as well. It’s almost exclusively the Cultists who have set up camp outside. We received a report that the situation is almost the opposite at Azh’Rodum before we lost contact. There’s almost only undead warriors up there.”

“I’ll deal with the attackers here before heading to Azh’Rodum,” Zac said. “Try to find out if they’ve erected some sort of array anywhere. We need to break the arrays blocking our communications.”

With that, he simply jumped out from the wall and landed in a sea of flames that rose over a dozen meters into the air. He had just jumped twenty meters or so, but his vision was completely blocked in both directions, and he was forced to activate the Fragment of the coffin to not get burnt. A thought suddenly struck him and his Specialty Core activated.

The undead and the cultists might be working together on the surface, but things weren’t very harmonious from the sound of it. Perhaps he could cause some confusion within their ranks with his alternate form while also letting his Hatchetman class rest for a bit. Both the main skills of Hatchetman were on cool-down, after all, along with **[Hatchetman’s Rage]**.

Granted, he was still pretty confident at defeating this army even with Hatchetman in a weakened state. His power had almost doubled in the ten short days since he left Earth, while the Invaders still should have some small restrictions to their power. Not only that, but he had also gone through all sorts of life-and-death encounters, sharpening his skills to the utmost.

His body grew as the pitch-black armor covered his body, and Zac caused the flames surrounding him to die out with one massive swing of his bardiche. It put him face-to-face with the Zealot army, and he was delighted to see their anger and confusion as a sea of miasma spread out around him as he started running toward their front-lines.

“You! What ploy is this!” a massive roar echoed out from the army, and a huge lizardman decked in a thick armor shining in gold and red pushed past the inquisitors at the front.

Zac didn’t answer, but he rather took out one of the enormous Unholy Beacons from his Cosmos Sack and slammed it into the ground like he was planting a flag. It immediately started spewing out miasma, though most of it was burned away by the surrounding flames. But this was more about sending a message than getting more death-attuned energy, and the effect was immediate.

“Heretic! Your sins will be judged today!” the infuriated Bishop roared, and Zac couldn’t help but snicker beneath his helmet as the undead liaisons were mobbed by infuriated cultists.

There was no time to waste though as his sister was fighting for her life as far as he knew. The only reason he didn’t immediately rush to Azh’Rodum was that he believed her to be somewhat safe with the help of the drone swarm he had left on Port Atwood. She also had access to the Town Shop, meaning she could keep buying one defensive layer after another as was needed.

He still didn’t want to waste time with the crazy zealots though, and he stomped down onto the ground to teleport into the middle of the army. However, he was surprised to find himself rebuffed, and he stumbled a bit as he appeared right outside a golden shield that had appeared in front of the army.

“We have fought your kind for millions of years. Did you truly think we didn’t come prepared?!” the bishop roared with mad laughter.

Zac knew he was putting himself in a disadvantage by fighting as an undead against the cultists, as they had whole armies dedicated to fighting the Undead Empire. However, he saw it as an opportunity to fight in an adverse situation, and he still felt he had the strength to prevail. There was no way he wouldn't be able to deal with these guys head-on unless the leaders of the two Incursions had shown up on his doorstep.

But that would be fine with Zac as well, as killing those two would essentially end the incursions and threat to Earth.

His arm swelled as he forced his arm full of Miasma for **[Unholy Strike]**, and the whole area shook as the shield was beset by a series of furious swings empowered by his improved Middle Stage Dao Fragment. Almost a dozen of the robed priests standing behind the shield hunkered over after the first swing, with a few even starting bleeding down their ears.

A storm of golden flames beset him as Zac tried to force his way through the shield, but he kept them at bay with **[Immutable Bulwark]**. However, he noticed with some surprise that the flames were like sticky napalm, and they stayed on the fractal bulwark and slowly whittled it down. It was like the flames and the Miasma canceled each other out, and Zac felt a far higher-than-normal consumption just to maintain the fractal shield.

His reserves of death-attuned energies were thankfully immense due to his almost inhuman attribute pool, and he kept providing the bulwark with more and more energy until he managed to create a crack in the wall. He forced himself through in an instant, he was upon the cultists like a fox in a henhouse.

Two burly clergymen tried to take him down by swinging scepters that contained the same fiery energy as the ranged attacks. Zac blocked one of them with his axe, and the other one got slammed with **[Everlasting]** with enough force to be thrown dozens of meters away. Zac heard a crunching sound after the man was hit with the shield-bash, and he felt a surge of energy not long after he fell onto the ground.

"Regroup!" the leader from before shouted, but Zac didn't want to give them any time to retreat to a safe distance.

He stomped his foot into the ground once more, and the cage of **[Profane Seal]** rose from the ground and captured almost the whole army along with the siege tools that had been shooting out the molten cores at the City Shield. However, he was unable to spread his corrosive breath along with miasma from **[Fields of Despair]** to cover the cage, as waves of flames kept dispersing the mists.

Zac finally gave up on his usual tactic, and instead started fighting by hand as he commanded the fifteen spectral chains to target the weaker warriors. Ghosts kept appearing in the cage as well as hundreds of the cultists tried to destroy the gates and the towers of **[Profane Seal]**, only to hurt themselves.

A hundred skeletal warriors also emerged from the ground, and they formed ten squads that moved across the cage to take out stragglers and interrupt the zealot's attempts to form a proper defense against the chains. Unfortunately, it seemed as though the cultists were quite adept at fighting skeletons, and Zac felt himself losing subordinates at a rapid pace.

However, it wasn't like the life and death of the skeletons mattered, as long as they fulfilled their purpose. The whole cage was an utter mess soon enough with battles taking place everywhere. Errant flames and miasmatic gusts made visibility almost impossible, and Zac was only able to make sense of the situation with the help of **[Cosmic Gaze]**.

A tremendous wave of golden flames threatened to swallow Zac whole as the siege weapons launched a barrage meant for shield-breaking right at him, scoring a few over fifteen zealots by mistake. He swiftly cut the projectiles apart with a Dao-infused swing, and he started taking out the operators the next moment.

One siege tool after another entered his Spatial ring as the controllers were cut into two, and the situation was turning gradually into his favor as each chain soon held multiple desiccated corpses while they whizzed around. The head priest had been suspiciously silent until now though, but Zac finally spotted him through the flames.

Two wings sprouted out from his back, and he rose over a dozen meters into the air even after the suppressive effect of the azure fractal sealing the cage. A glowing orb of flames over fifteen meters across emerged behind his back, making him look like an apostle of the sun. However, it still looked a bit hollow in Zac's eyes as he had witnessed the true flames conjured by Iz Tayn.

"Weight of the Heavens!" the priest roared and a massive array appeared in the sky above the cage the next moment.

Zac's eyes widened at the sight, but it still wasn't enough to make him despair or even worry. He had faced a lot stronger arrays just a few hours ago, and Zac still had almost half his treasures remaining if need be. Besides, the restrictive array from **[Profane Seal]** didn't only put pressure on the people inside, it also acted as a protection from outside interference.

But Zac realized that the cultists were going all-out as he spotted nine priests who had kept out of harm's way until now, each of them holding a metal sun toward the sky that seemed to burn the controllers alive. He immediately directed a chain toward each of the priests, but they were immediately rebuffed by a fiery wall of flames whose heat was enough to turn the spectral fetters into motes of miasma when they got too close.

A few seconds later the nine priests were gone, replaced with nine hovering suns positioned in a circle at the edge of the cage.

The nine glowing suns were clearly related to the array that had lit up in the sky above, but the main controller was no doubt the Bishop who was still hovering up in the air. Zac growled in frustration over the lack of ranged options in his Undying Bulwark class, and he opted to try out his recently invented tactic again.

A spectral chain made a few loops around his chest before it hoisted him up, but he only managed to rise five meters before the Bishop launched a stream of fire that destroyed the midsection of the chain. Zac helplessly fell down again, wondering if he actually had to waste one of his single-use treasures on a simple general.

"A lowly cretin wants to rise toward the sky?" The Bishop roared. "The Boundless Heaven's won't abide!"

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**Chapter 477 - Meteors**

The Bishop's golden array lit up the next moment, and a fiery meteor several times larger than the one that had slammed into the City Shield begun its descent, its fall accompanied by a rain of fire so hot that the air itself was incinerated.

Zac realized these maniacs weren't called zealots by chance, and over a hundred of their own would die if that thing slammed into the ground in the confined space of **[Profane Seal]**.

"We wanted to use this strike on the native Lord, but taking out an elite from the five cursed races is a worthy trade," the Bishop laughed from the sky.

The meteor rammed into the miasmic fractal acting as a dome for the miasmic cage the next second, and Zac knew in an instant that it would only hold for so long before cracking. Zac started running toward the edge of the cage along with the surviving cultists, but he was forced to carve a path of blood as the lunatics seemed ready to sacrifice their lives just to keep him within the blast zone.

However, the normal cultists had no means to even impede Zac's escape, and he reached the edge of his cage just as the azure fractal broke apart, transmitting a blowback to Zac that made him stumble for a second.

The meteor regained its momentum in an instant, but it actually managed to change its trajectory as it went straight for Zac. He growled in annoyance as he activated **[Immutable Bulwark]** and infused it with the Fragment of the Coffin. The fractal wall grew to its maximum size, reaching almost twenty meters across, but it could still barely cover a third of the meteor as the two collided.

Zac felt like he was being subject to the gravity of a sun as he was locked in a battle of man versus nature. His whole body trembled from the strain as the pressure was transmitted from the skill into his body. A few zealots tried to take the opportunity to strike while Zac was occupied, but they found themselves turned into desiccated husks from a few spectral chains that hovered around Zac like sentinels.

The meteor thankfully lost its momentum fast enough, and Zac pushed the fiery ball toward the largest clump of soldiers with a grunt, and it landed among them with a massive outburst of flames that rushed in every direction. The soldiers had desperately tried to erect some golden shields to stop the meteor as well, but they were nowhere near as powerful as Zac and his fractal bulwark.

The shields had broken in an instant and the cultists were either turned to paste or burned alive.

Screams could be heard from every direction, and not even Zac was completely unscathed even if he had managed to change the trajectory of the array. He had lost a large chunk of Miasma to maintain the massive shield as it was pressed against the flaming meteor, and he was still beset by the waves of flames that instantly covered the entire cage after the impact.

He also felt that the whole cage was being pushed toward its breaking point. The dome in the sky breaking had already damaged **[Profane Seal]**, and cracks now covered both the towers and gates of the skill. The only thing maintaining the skill right now was probably the infusion of energy from the fifteen spectral chains.

However, Zac didn't enjoy that kind of energy boost as **[Fields of Despair]** was completely countered by the all-consuming flames. The miasmic haze hadn't been present at all during the battle, and he hadn't gotten even a smidgeon of Miasma from the large number of killed zealots. It was the first time he had met a perfect counter to so many of his skills in his Undying Bulwark form, and he felt it wasn't by chance that the Church of Everlasting Dao and the Undying Empire were such bitter enemies.

Zac quickly readjusted his shield so that it shrunk just to the point that it covered his body. It was just in time as well as waves of fire and molten stones shot toward him. The heat was blistering, but it was somewhat manageable by circulating the Fragment of the Bodhi through his body. His first instinct was to dispel the cage and regroup,

perhaps even change back to his human form to gain some ranged capabilities to take out the bishop and the stragglers.

However, Zac eventually decided against that course of action. Instead of fleeing from the scorching heat of the meteor, he rather ran toward it. The ground shuddered beneath his feet as he ran as quickly as his bulky transformation allowed, and he ignored the burning heat that was transmitted straight through his armor as he started scrambling up the burning meteor.

The Bishop was still floating in the air, the flames seemingly having no effect on him, and he started to rise even higher when he noticed Zac's approach.

There should no doubt be a limit of how long an E-Grade warrior could stay in the sky, but Zac wasn't willing to let the Bishop run amok until he ran out of steam. He wanted to end things quickly since his sister was waiting for him, but he was out of offensive treasures that could kill the flying man in one go.

Hoisting himself into the air with the spectral chains had already failed spectacularly as well, so he could only move as quickly as he could until he reached the top of the meteor to use it as a springboard before it was too late. The bishop launched a storm of flames in his direction, but he simply punched through them as he jumped toward the lizardman in the sky.

The meteor cracked beneath Zac's feet as he put everything into the hulking leap, and his arm was already swelling in size in preparation for the final strike. The Bishop snorted and flexed his wings, but ten spectral chains whipped at him from behind to push him down. It was the final hurrah of the spectral chains before [**Profane Seal**] was destroyed by the flames.

Eight of the chains were incinerated as they tried to destroy the radiant sun that shielded the Bishop, but the sacrifice released a dense storm of Miasmatic gases that allowed the final two chains to pass straight through the globe of fire unscathed. The Bishop was forced to stop ascending to avoid the attack, which kept him in Zac's trajectory.

The wings of the cultist suddenly his own body in an embrace and Zac realized the man was using some sort of movement skill. However, that was just what Zac hoped for and he immediately swung his axe as he saw a burst of flames appear in front of him. The massive bardiche fell, cutting straight through a golden fractal and luxuriant armor.

The large meteor lost most of its heat in an instant, and three thuds echoed out across the battlefield as Zac and the two bisected pieces of the Bishop landed on the scorched ground. A large surge of energy entered his body, but he also felt a backlash as the miasmatic cage finally broke apart.

Zac would have thought that seeing their leader getting cut in two would douse the fighting spirit of the surviving zealots, but he had severely underestimated just how crazy these people were. Most of them started emitting extremely condensed fires from their mouths and eyes, and they heedlessly ran toward him as their bodies started swelling.

Some fell onto the ground before they even got close to Zac, their bodies turning into bloated balloons before exploding into cascading flames. It reminded Zac of the man that had exploded when he saved Kenzie from the New World Government at the border town. The whole area shuddered as dozens of eruptions went off one after another as the soldiers tried to bring Zac with them down to hell.

The pitch-black armor from [**Vanguard of Undeath**] was already in a haggard state after climbing atop the meteor, and the blasts were quickly ripping apart the

remaining layers. Zac blocked out the attacks he could with [Immutable Bulwark], whereas the few remaining skeletons absorbed some of the attacks for him.

Thankfully enough the battlefield turned quiet soon enough, with just him and a few dying cultists remaining.

His hair was singed clean off and burns covered a large part of his body, but one of the two invading armies were dealt with at least. The cultists hadn't even managed to harm him apart from some surface burns, but they had been a surprisingly hard nut to crack. It looked like most, if not all, of the Incursion restrictions were gone by this point.

Normally he would have wanted to sit down and go over the battle at this juncture, as it felt like he had gained a lot from the fight. But there was no time, and Zac turned back to his human form before he walked back through the burning wreckage toward Port Atwood's Wall.

He jumped up with a grunt, appearing next to the demon captain and a few Valkyries that had waited for his return.

"I've dealt with the leader and the army, but be careful," Zac said as he cracked his neck. "There might be more hiding."

Harvath slowly nodded as he looked out across the destruction outside the wall, mute disbelief apparent in his eyes.

"Have you found anything about the array jamming?" Zac asked as he took out one of his healing pills to deal with the burns.

"I'm sorry, we didn't dare to leave the wall while you fought in case we would become a liability. We'll start cleaning up the battlefield and looking for the array immediately," Harvath said as he started awake.

"That's fine," Zac nodded as he took out his new flying treasure, the large inscribed leaf. "I'm heading inland. Be careful, most of the cultists chose to blow themselves up, but perhaps there are reinforcements on the ship."

"We'll be careful," Harvath nodded. "Don't worry and let us deal with the aftermath."

Zac jumped on the treasure the next moment, and it soundlessly rose to the sky before it shot away with enough speed to rip the clouds in two.

It felt a bit bad to leave Port Atwood while there still were enemies remaining. He had dealt with the army, but who knew what other things the cultists had planned. It was all-too-apparent just how far they were willing to go to take out their enemies, and he wouldn't be surprised if they had more nasty surprises in store for his island.

However, there was only one of him, and he needed to prioritize where to strike for maximum effect.

The speed of Zac's new flying treasure was just shocking, and he wasn't sure whether he would have been able to hang on if it wasn't for the protective array that blocked out any wind. He didn't have any means to make an exact measurement, but he felt that the leaf would be able to keep up with a modern fighter jet.

At least it felt like he moved a lot faster compared to when he had flown in a commercial airplane before the integration.

It wasn't all thanks to the high-quality craftsmanship of the vessel though. He had actually noticed that he could infuse the leaf with the Fragment of the Bodhi, which boosted the treasure's speed by around 30%. He even believed he could push the thing even further if he had some Nature-Attuned crystals to feed into the sockets rather than normal E-Grade Nexus Crystals.

It would normally have taken Zac hours to reach Azh'Rodum by foot, even if he used [Loamwalker] to speed up, but he was closing in on the center of the island after just 15 minutes of travel. He was anxious to reach the demon stronghold, as he didn't want to repeat the tragedy of arriving just a few seconds too late again.

Finally, he saw the battlefield ahead, or rather the massive clouds of miasma that covered a huge section of the northern parts of the island. The undead forces had no doubt set up a large array of Unholy Beacons to form such a vast cloud, but he frowned in confusion when he saw that there wasn't much of a battle raging.

There was a hovering line of sentries protecting the whole flank of Azh'Rodum, and there were over a hundred craters on the ground outside, along with a few scorched bodies. It looked there had been a few minor skirmishes that had been ended with laser-beams by his sister, but the complete lack of damage to the town fortifications indicated that the undead army wasn't even straining itself to take over the town.

However, the defenders were desperately launching attacks at an azure shield from the walls of Azh'Rodum, with dozens of projectiles hitting the barrier every second. It almost felt like the roles of invader and defender had been swapped. Zac guessed that something was brewing within the cloud of miasma that needed to be dealt with, and quickly judging by the fervor of the attacks.

He didn't even touch down inside the town to get a grasp on the situation, but he rather chose to fly straight toward the miasmatic shield. Just when he was a hundred meters from the shield he pushed off while simultaneously stowing away the treasure. Tremendous amounts of Cosmic Energy swirled around him as he shot toward the shield while [Verun's Bite] drenched the area in a bloody hue.

This time he would be the meteor.

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**Chapter 478 - Fighting Fate**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

Early chapter today as I'll be playing the PoE Gauntlet. Anyone else planning on getting their butts kicked?

The air screamed around Zac as he shot toward the azure shield with the speed of an airplane, and even he got a bit worried he was playing a bit fast and loose with his life. However, he threw any hesitation into the back of his mind as he conjured a fractal blade that was as large as himself. He was perfectly capable of making it even larger, but he needed to contain the impact to a smaller area.

The blade first changed color to a gleaming silver as he imbued it with the Fragment of the Axe, but the sanguine glow quickly spread from [Verun's Bite] as well to cover the whole fractal edge. This was the most power he could release without utilizing [Hatchetman's Rage] or the slumbering remnants, and he could only pray that it was enough to punch a hole in the massive array.

The world froze as Zac's attack cut into the shield with all the power he could muster, but an enormous shockwave that dispersed the clouds of miasma soon followed. Hairline cracks spread for hundreds of meters in each direction, and Zac managed to squeeze through the hole in the barrier before it healed.

However, the point of impact was over 100 meters into the air and he had no means to control his descent. The collision had also caused him to completely lose balance, and any hopes of a hero's entrance were dashed as he slammed into the ground face-first. Another shockwave, this one a lot smaller, spread out from the point of impact, instantly killing the closest zombies. He scrambled back to his feet while wiping away some of the blood running down his nose, and he took stock of the situation.

The insides of the array were shrouded by dense swirls of miasmic haze, and his skin crawled from the contact with the condensed death-attuned energies. The extremely limited sight made it impossible to see any clear threat to Port Atwood, and instantly getting mobbed by enraged elite zombies didn't make things easier to discern.

Fractal blades shot out in each direction as swathes of destruction were carved into the undead hordes. However, these were the best of the zombies as the fractal blades were whittled down before they reached too far. Each strike still killed over fifty zombies, but the blade broke apart from a storm of counterstrikes after that.

Zac activated **[Cosmic Gaze]** in hopes of making anything out, but everything became a haze varying degrees of grey. However, he did spot spots with more condensed energies, and he immediately shot toward the closest target.

A few seconds later he found himself in front of an Unholy Beacon, and Zac wasn't surprised by the sight at all. What did make him frown in consternation, however, was the array surrounding it. There hadn't been anything like that around the beacons he had seen until now, and he guessed it was some sort of secondary array that was powered by the beacon.

The beacon was guarded by a hulking Corpse Golem that immediately swung at Zac the moment he appeared. However, Zac's physique was beyond monstrous by now, with an effective strength reaching 2500. Zac countered the punch with his own, his fist not even a tenth the size of the massive undead construct.

A thundering explosion echoed out as the arm of the golem blew apart from the force, and it was cut in two the next second as Zac slashed it with a lazy swing as he stepped toward the beacon. He couldn't make out its purpose, so Zac simply cut a few lines to ruin the inscriptions before he ripped the beacon out of the ground and stashed it in his Spatial Ring.

Zac was a moving calamity as he moved from beacon to beacon at his utmost speed, and he had stolen ten beacons in less than three minutes. Some of them had launched massive outbursts of death-attuned energies at him though, but Zac had managed to dodge the waves of death with the help of **[Loamwalker]**.

One of them had actually detonated just as he was about to stow it away, but the vibrant energies of the Fragment of the Bodhi were able to neutralize the attack. He still hadn't spotted any leaders though, so he could only keep going in hopes that they would be forced to show their hand sooner or later.

A large shudder echoed out when he ripped another beacon out of the ground, and he saw that the shield finally flickered before it dissipated.

It had been pretty smashed by his tremendous momentum when he launched himself at it, but it had soon healed itself after he pushed his way through. But now it looked like Zac had caused too much destruction within the shield, to the point that it could no longer maintain its functionality. The highly condensed Miasma started within the barrier to spread out as well, but Zac knew that it would sooner or later be cleansed by the pure energies of the world.

However, his confusion only grew while looking around as visibility steadily grew better. He couldn't see any high-grade siege tools or anything else that would separate

the thousands of zombies from normal elites. But he finally spotted a group of hooded beings in the back of the army, guarded by five hulking E-Grade Corpse Golems.

Zac immediately rushed toward them, carving a line of true death through the zombie horde. The hooded warriors didn't react to his approach, but the golems readied themselves for battle and started rushing toward him. However, these golems were only marginally stronger than those who had guarded the Unholy Beacons, and Zac needed less than a minute to turn them into small hills of rock-hard flesh.

The hooded warriors had started fleeing but he effortlessly captured one of them while blocking the escape of the others. It tried to struggle out of his grasp, but Zac was surprised to find that it was pitifully weak.

"What are you planning?" Zac growled with anger as he ripped the hood from the lich's head.

However, what met Zac's gaze wasn't the Lich King or one of his generals, but just some random revenants that couldn't have been higher than Level 60. Zac immediately crushed its neck in frustration before he captured the others, getting the same results.

Just what was going on?

It quickly became apparent that this was all a big diversion, and that the undead wasn't actually interested in conquering Azh'Rodum. But what was the point of sacrificing their own without any gain? Was it to trick the Church of the Everlasting Dao? Or was the real mission taking place somewhere else?

Zac's first thought was the mines, just like how Harvath had guessed. Were they trying to mess with his Nexus Vein somehow? If the real leaders had entered the confusing mess of subterranean tunnels beneath the island it would be extremely annoying to root them out, as his own force still hadn't completely mapped the nigh endless number of narrow passageways that ran beneath the surface.

However, he suddenly saw someone running toward him, decimating all the zombies that tried to impede her path with a barrage of attacks based on the four elements. Zac immediately flashed over to Kenzie, who immediately threw herself in his arms. He really wanted to catch up and hear what had happened since he left, but he saw how frazzled she had looked as she ran toward him.

Something was wrong.

"Are you okay?" Zac asked. "What's going on?"

"I am fine, but someone is tampering with the arrays in the valley since some time ago!" Kenzie said with worry as she released him. "I stationed a few sentries on the mountain just in case, but I can't get a hold of them now with the jammers. I'm afraid they're up to something over there. I've been trying to head to the mountain, but the undead swarms anyone who leaves the town. We've tried breaking out but their shields were too strong."

"I'll deal with it," Zac said as the leaf appeared again beneath his feet. "There are no elites here, it seems. I think this whole army is a diversion. I'll be back in a bit."

The next second he was hundreds of meters away, speeding toward the secluded valley.

Panic coursed through Zac's body as he infused the flying treasure with the Fragment of the Bodhi. He had handed over control of the network of arrays he had erected around the island to his sister upon leaving, so he hadn't noticed anything wrong at all since arriving. His thoughts were a mess as he tried to figure out the purpose of whoever had breached the arrays.

Were they looking for Alea, or did they have some other agenda?

Was it because of the mutated Tree of Ascension? That thing would no doubt be of huge value for anyone dabbling with poison, perhaps even after having reached E-Grade. However, there should be no way that the Undead Empire knew about it as access to the valley was completely restricted after Zac took control of the island.

Besides, things wouldn't end well even if the invaders weren't there specifically for Alea. Would they simply let her rest in peace after seeing her next to the Tree of Ascension? Of course not.

Zac and his sister had placed strong protective arrays around the whole valley to keep people away, but the invaders were either extremely strong or adept at breaking arrays. The inner shield protecting Alea's Stasis Array wasn't much stronger than the outer one, and Zac was doubtful that it would prove a challenge to whoever had encroached upon the valley.

Less than five minutes had passed since he left the outskirts of Azh'Rodum, but he felt like it had been hours when he finally breached the crest leading into the valley. He immediately noticed that there was something wrong with the outer array covering the whole valley like a dome. It was still intact, but it felt completely drained of energy like it was just there for show.

The leaf shot straight through it, and he was at the core of the valley in seconds. However, his fears were immediately realized as he spotted four hooded individuals sitting in a circle around Alea's stasis array, right next to the **[Tree of Ascension]**. An intricate array covered the ground around the stasis array, and Zac sensed extremely pure fluctuations of Death-Attuned energies from the crystals powering it.

Zac jumped down from the flying treasure and rushed forward like an enraged beast, his axe already shining with a sanguine glow. The air popped around him as his aura billowed out without restraints, and even the slumbering Splinter stirred in his mind from Zac's towering fury.

"So you are he-" the closest man said with a hoarse voice, but he couldn't even finish his sentence before he was obliterated by a world-ending punch, turning into scraps of flesh that rained down upon the area.

The three others quickly rose from their seated positions around the array and unleashed what looked like a swarm of jumbo mosquitoes at him, but Zac ignored them as he unleashed a Dao field based on his strongest Dao Fragment. Many of the bugs died from the sharpness of the domain, but even more managed to resist as they assaulted every piece of exposed skin on his body.

The spectral forest of **[Hatchetman's Sprit]** rose from the ground, and an emerald shield protected Zac from the gnats as he cut through the swarm. The hooded warriors released another barrage of what seemed to be poisonous insects and airborne toxins, but everything was destroyed by Zac's furious assault.

The second robed warrior was quickly cut into a dozen pieces from a furious barrage of swings, and the third was literally ripped apart the moment Zac caught him with his free hand. Only one final warrior remained in just a couple of seconds, and Zac had him caught in an iron grip as he took ragged breaths due to barely restrained rage.

He had gotten even angrier as he had seen the Stasis Array at close distance, as it had obviously been tampered with. The golden glass was replaced by a murky black sheen, and he couldn't even see Alea's body inside due to an extremely dense violet cloud within the glass. He couldn't even tell whether she was alive or dead while standing just a few meters away.

"Tell me, what have you done?!" he roared as he ripped off the hood of the man, exposing a man that looked like a corpse that had been left out in a desert for weeks.

“Fractured soul, not living, not dead,” the man wheezed with a laugh. “I was anointing her to become an elite of our Empire, but now it’s all for naught. You might as well put the girl out of her misery.”

“Tell me how to fix this!” Zac screamed into the man’s face, his anger towering to an unprecedented degree.

“Death is the destination for all. You can’t fight fate,” the desiccated husk of a man laughed, and Zac’s danger sense soon erupted, forcing him to throw the man away.

The hooded Lich exploded into an enormous cloud of gasses that were no doubt extremely toxic, but a few wide swings with [Verun’s Bite] pushed the cloud north and toward the edge of the island.

Zac only took a cursory glance at the surroundings before running over toward the glass array that had kept Alea’s soul from crumbling any further. However, he stumbled after just a few steps, and his mind started to become cloudy. He quickly ate one of his best antidotes as he circulated the Fragment of the Coffin in an effort to refine the invisible toxins that must have made their way into his body.

Helplessness threatened to immobilize him as he looked down at the array. He somewhat regretted not bringing his sister in his hurry to get here in time, but he instinctively knew there was nothing she could do in front of something like this. He ripped out the four crystals powering the array, and they were no-doubt D-Grade Miasma Crystals from the fluctuations.

Extremely condensed streams of death-attuned energies tried to infect his body without him even trying to absorb anything, but his Specialty Core just trembled a bit as it absorbed the infiltration. Zac put the crystals into his pouch as he swung his axe a few times to ruin the intricate layout of inscriptions covering the ground, and the array immediately lost any remaining strength.

The array was stopped, but his heart still hammered as he gripped the cover glass coffin to push it away. But before he even had a chance to move the lid an invisible shockwave erupted from within, and his surroundings changed the next instant.

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#### **Chapter 479 - Fragments**

”GET OUT!” Yasera screeched, her eyes muddled and unfocused from the Hera Leaves. “You keep taking up time and money, what are you good for?”

Tears pooled in Alea’s eyes, but she knew her mom was not herself at the moment.

“I’ll be useful, I promise,” Alea said as she shuffled out of their corner of the communal space, her eyes downcast to avoid the mean stares of the others.

She quickly found herself on the streets, the two burly guards at the door only sparing her a glance as she vacantly stopped after a few meters. What should she do? Mama was not well, and they had no money.

Alea already scrounged food outside most days, but the shopkeepers had started to become wise to her tricks. There was only one solution left. She needed to start working as well.

The madame had said that she should wait a while longer, but mom needed money now. So Alea tried to still her beating heart as she looked back and forth along the street to find a willing customer.

She finally spotted a young man who seemed to have recently passed the Age of Adulthood. He wore mostly ragged clothes just like most people in the slums, but there was something about him. There was an energy around him that made him feel the same way as the scary man who always followed the Madame around.

The energy of a cultivator. Besides, he looked very handsome even if he had a lazy expression, and the dirt on his body seemed to be recently applied compared to the ingrained filth some walked around with. He would no doubt have some coin to spare, and compared with most of the men who entered the Tea House this one seemed a lot better.

She slowly walked up toward him before he had the chance to walk away, and quickly gathered her courage as he looked up at the man who was over two heads taller than her.

“Yo-young master, ho-how about having a cup of tea with me?” Alea stuttered as she desperately tried to mimic the ladies of the White Lotus Tea House.

The young man with the lackadaisical expression looked down at her with surprise, and she tried to give off the innocent charm that Madam Sai said would be her best weapon for the next few years. However, Alea became uneasy when she realized that he didn’t have that gleam in his eyes that was so easy to discern. The expression that meant that the man was no longer thinking with his brain.

Was he too young to be interested in these kinds of things? Alea still wasn’t sure how everything worked, but she was confident she had seen even younger men entering the private compartment in the Tea House.

“Why did you call me young master? Do you recognize me?” he said curiously as he walked closer.

“Ah, no?” Alea said, some fear taking hold of her heart.

Had she made a mistake and said something she shouldn’t? Madam Sai always said that words were the most dangerous things, and one wrong word could cause a lifetime of suffering.

“Then how did you know that I am rich? I am not wearing anything expensive, and both my face and my clothes are dirty,” he said as he took another step closer.

“That,” Alea said, looking back and forth, trying to figure out a way to get out of the situation.

She pleadingly looked at the two guards behind, but they pointedly ignored her. Had they already realized that the young man was too dangerous to mess with?

“I’ll give you an E-Grade Nexus Crystal if you tell me,” the young man said.

Alea’s eyes widened in shock when she heard what he said. An E-Grade Nexus Crystal was a huge fortune. One aunty in the Tea House had been tipped one once, and she had been able to eat her fill for over a year on that, even after having given the Tea House their share.

Could she make that much money by just answering a few questions? Her instincts said no. Things that seemed too good to be true always came with hidden dangers. More than one girl in the Tea House had disappeared after being offered a handsome reward to visit a patron in their homes.

Some believed they had found a better life, but Madam Sai said they were usually sold into slavery, or even turned into some sort of materials for evil cultivators.

“My patience is only so long,” the young man said as he took out a shimmering crystal from nowhere and waved it in front of her.

Alea’s heart started to beat rapidly, and she was unable to take her eyes off the mesmerizing crystal in his hand. She had never seen anything so beautiful, and it radiated amazing amounts of energy.

“Your clothes look worn but they are new, the wear doesn’t seem natural. It is like you have rubbed the clothes against a stone to make it look worse than it is. It’s the same with the face, it’s dirty but your skin is healthy and clear,” she said, the words tumbling out of her mouth as quickly as she could form them.

“I guess I overestimated my disguise,” the youth wryly smiled as he threw her the crystal.

Alea’s eyes lit up as she clutched the crystal, quickly placing it inside a hidden pocket within her dress. The youth looked at her with amusement for a second before he seemingly had thought of something.

“Here, hold this for a second,” he said, handing her another crystal, though this one was a smoothly polished sphere that didn’t emit the same beautiful colors.

Alea didn’t dare to say no to the young master, so she gingerly gripped the ball, and she noticed that the young man’s eyes lit up when it started to gleam with a mysterious purple shimmer.

“Are you sure about this?” Ogras asked with a serious expression.

“What’s there to think about?” Namys growled from the side as she glared at Alea. “The Lord has spent so much time on effort on this. Why are you hesitating?”

“Namys,” Ogras sighed before he turned back to Alea.

Alea looked down at the large vat with trepidation, knowing that she might never be able to leave once she entered the bubbling pool.

The young lord didn’t know this, but she had found out that there had been three before her. Three young women who had died while attempting this. Her knowledge about constitutions was shallow, but she had learned from the old master that instructed the nine of them that the risk of dying was extremely high unless there was a great fit between you and the manual.

And that risk only increased when you were dealing with deadly poison.

But this was the path she had chosen. If she died she would at least die at the peak of beauty. Her thoughts went to her recent return to the White Lotus Tea House, the first visit in 6 years. Her mother, the beautiful goddess wrapped in the finest garments, was gone, replaced by a wretched hag.

Her face had been pocked by scabs, and her skin sallow from overindulging on alcohol and Hera Leaves. The lithe and graceful curves were gone, replaced by sagging skin and festering sores.

Yasera hadn’t cared where she had been. She hadn’t even bothered looking for her after she left with Lord Azh’Rezak. Her mother had only demanded money or liquor after having seen the quality of the dress and jewelry she wore. Alea had turned away without another word, ignoring her mother’s cries as her childhood crumbled around her.

“I’m ready,” she said as she let her dress fall to the ground, showcasing her pristine body.

“Good,” Ogras said, trying his best to appear unperturbed by the scene as he handed her a shimmering beast crystal. “The main component of the medicinal bath comes from a swamp creature named [Er’Harkath Marshwalker]. They are known for

their ability to store all kinds of poisons in their body without harming themselves. Try your best to fuse with this thing as quickly as possible.”

Alea nodded and after one deep breath swallowed the crystal whole as she stepped into the pool. This would either be the first step on the path of cultivation, or the last day of her life.

“Is that him?” Ilvere whispered with incredulity as he gazed at the human in the distance. “I can’t believe that guy toppled the Azh’Rezak Clan singlehandedly. While wearing lady’s garments.”

“Progenitor. Odd advantages,” Janos muttered.

“Why is he even alive?” Namys growled. “He’s a threat to our Lord, especially now that he’s doubly weakened. Alea, shouldn’t you do something?”

Alea’s mouth curved upward as she looked at the man, trying to imagine the scene that Lord Ogras had described. One human dressed in Vesarith’s dress and drenched in blood, running around causing havoc. It somehow felt like the world had just turned a bit more interesting.

“Lord Azh’Rezak hasn’t told us to do anything, so why should I?” Alea smiled as she stood up and adjusted her dress.

“What are you doing?” Namys wheezed as she saw Alea skip toward the human.

“Are you heading to the mines again?” Alea said with a smile as she walked next to Zac.

“Yeah,” he said, looking a bit perturbed.

“Why don’t I join you?” Alea said, snaking her arm around his.

“I have a lot to do,” Zac sighed, helplessness evident in his eyes.

It was a refreshing difference compared to those meathead warriors at the compound she had trained with, a bunch of men with overblown egos and rampant aggression. This guy was the strongest warrior on the island, but he didn’t even know what to do with himself when she teased him. It was both intriguing and a bit frustrating.

“I know, learn about The Ruthless Heavens?” she said, pushing her breasts toward his arm, the response leaving nothing wanting. “I know. I know all that basic stuff as well, I can teach you just as well as Alyn can. And wouldn’t it be nicer with just the two of us?”

Her heart hammered in her chest as she hurried away from the Gazebo, and she immediately jumped onto the teleporter taking her to Azh’Rodum.

Just what had she done?

This had been the perfect opportunity, but she had ruined it all by poisoning him because of that stupid impulse. She regretted stepping into that bath for the first time since gaining this odd constitution. For the first time, the gains didn’t seem to match up to the costs. Of course, a larger part of her knew that absorbing the essence of the swamp monster was the only reason she had been able to save Lord Atwood at all during the final Beast Wave.

Without it, she would just have been another bystander.

She walked up to the secluded rooftop garden in her mansion and lay down on the recliner, her eyes absentmindedly looking up at the stars. The blue sky that once

had felt so cold and glaring felt soothing for the first time since arriving to this odd world.

He was drifting away. The sturdy back kept growing, now towering like a mountain in front of her. It was this cursed situation that pushed him toward the Heavens themselves. It should be a joy seeing the man she loved growing stronger, but she couldn't help but feel pangs of loneliness as the two drifted further and further apart. She simply couldn't keep up. No one on Earth could.

Zac was leaving again soon, this time for the Underworld, and a changed man would no doubt return. She had somewhat managed to improve their situation after her mistakes, and there was no longer that thinly veiled disappointment in his eyes when he looked at her.

But that didn't change the reality they found themselves in. He was Lord Atwood, the de-facto leader of a world, and perhaps even a future elite that would make his name known in the whole Sector.

She was just Alea, a prostitute's daughter who hadn't even earned the right to take a last name. She had thought that becoming a cultivator would change her fate, but she was still that same dirty child from the slums looking up at the gods soaring through the skies toward their faraway palaces.

How long would it be until they looked at each other like strangers?

Zac was inundated in one vision after another, snippets of Alea's life flashing past him. He had a vague understanding of what was going on, and the knowledge was terrifying. Alea's soul was rapidly falling apart, and fragments of her soul released the visions for him.

He didn't know how this was possible as it had never happened with all the people he had killed until now. But one thing was certain; Alea was not long for this world if this kept on. Suddenly another shudder emerged from the coffin, but this time Alea's voice rather than another vision entered his mind.

*"I'm not ready. I want to follow you."*

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

**Chapter 480 - Desperate Times**

Zac's mind was thrown into disarray after witnessing one snippet after another of Alea's life pass by his eyes, but he still desperately tried to figure out a way to salvage the situation. Once he was back in his own body again he immediately lifted the casket, only to be met by a horrifying sight.

Alea's body had been turned completely black, and dense waves of corruption and death radiated from her body. Gases leaked out of her pores as well, and Zac was forced to quickly close the lid again as the noxious fumes almost made him keel over after a single breath.

That scene alone made him furious enough to almost spontaneously combust, but he restrained his anger as he searched for a solution. However, there were simply no treasures in his possession that would allow him to save her life.

Her soul was falling apart, and her body was no longer fit for a living being as far as he could tell. But her last words echoed through his mind, and he refused to give up as long as there was a chance that he could save her.

His first idea was to turn her into a Revenant somehow, as that would at least allow her to keep 'living' in a sense. However, not only would that erase Alea and create a new personality, but it might turn her into a subordinate of the Lich King. It was those robed lichs who had initiated the process, which might have left some sort of mark.

Also, he had no idea how to actually turn someone into a Revenant.

"Follow me..." Zac muttered as he stared down at the crystalline casket, and in his desperation he suddenly thought of something.

He didn't have any idea whether what he did was insane or not, but he was unable to think of anything else as he took out an object and placed it on top of the lid.

It was the **[Divine Investiture Array]**.

This the only solution available to him. Her soul was already a problem that was out of his league after having lost the **[Prajñā Cherry]**, and with the Lich messing up her body she was way beyond his means of salvation. He wasn't even sure whether a D-Grade healer would be able to bring her back from the brink of death, let alone his paltry E-Grade pills.

But what if she became a Tool Spirit, a being that was essentially immortal? He had recently learned about two pieces of key information. First, living beings could be turned into Spirit Tools, or rather 'Sword Slaves' through sacrificial rituals. Second, the **[Divine Investiture Array]** could pretty much turn anything into a Spirit Tool.

If he turned Alea into a Tool Spirit she would be able to live on, just like Brazla. It was obviously a messed-up solution, but one that would fulfill her wish and keep her 'alive'. The universe was full of magical things that he couldn't even imagine, and perhaps he would be able to turn her back into a living being again in the future.

He immediately infused a stream of Cosmic Energy into the **[Divine Investiture Array]** before he could change his mind. A massive pillar of gold shot down from the heavens and slammed into the valley with enough force to completely obliterate all clouds for kilometers in each direction.

A groundswell of energy rose from the depths of the mountain to meet the golden pillar, and Zac found himself submerged in a surge of power so dense that it was almost a liquid. He did not doubt that he would be able to gain multiple levels in minutes from staying in a magical place like this upon reaching E-Grade, but that wasn't why he had summoned these energies.

He suddenly felt a spiritual nudge from beneath the lid, and Zac refocused on the coffin Alea lay inside. His eyes lit up in excitement upon sensing it. Zac couldn't be sure, but he felt it was as an agreement of his plan. Perhaps she could understand what was going to happen after being in the middle of it.

However, nothing happened with the casket, and the energies simply seemed to swirl around it as Zac felt the spiritual signal from within weaken. Zac's mind spun for solutions, trying to figure out what the problem was. Was the array wasn't enough?

Zac emptied his Spatial Ring of anything that might help with her situation, and a stream of golden energy immediately emerged from the **[Divine Investiture Array]** and snatched a third of his Soul Crystals before starting going over the other things he had taken out. Zac didn't mind at the least, as he suddenly felt Alea's presence once more from within the coffin, making it seem as though the Soul Crystals had condensed her soul again.

The next thing to be selected by the golden tendrils was the fossilized bug that radiated an unceasing aura of corrosion. Zac had picked it up on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the tower, but he believed that it was a lucky find as neither Ogras nor Galau had been able to even get close due to the aura it emitted. He thought it might fit with Alea and her constitution, so he took it out as well.

However, it wasn't enough as he felt Alea's spirit slowly weaken again.

Panic welled up once more, and he grit his teeth and took out an intricately inscribed jade box and opened its lid. The tendrils of light immediately pounced on the contents, and Zac wasn't surprised as it was the **[Pathfinder Oracle Eye]**. The Auctioneer had said that it was perfect to improve a Spirit Tool's spirituality, and it might just be what was needed.

The cost was pretty shocking, but he had already gone so far as to expend his **[Divine Investiture Array]**. It was too late to hold back.

But Zac's eyes suddenly widened in alarm as another tendril reached out behind Zac and picked up **[Everlasting]** that he had poured out of his spatial ring along with the rest of his treasures. Zac was about to take the shield back, but he stopped himself after some hesitation and let the golden light use the E-Grade defensive treasure as another ingredient.

It wasn't even a Spirit Tool, and he could always get another shield elsewhere.

The tendril also reached behind him and ripped off a few of the largest branches of the **[Tree of Ascension]** while a storm of gases was dragged out from the underground where the Amanita Mushroom resided. Only then did the array seem satiated, and the tendrils receded back into the crystal as a Golden Cocoon formed around the Stasis Array.

'*Thank you...*' a silent whisper suddenly echoed out in his mind, but its volume grew lower and lower toward the end, as though Alea was moving away from him.

"Are you okay?" Zac asked, but a sinking feeling spread through his chest as there was no answer. "Alea?"

The silence stretched on, and Zac started to panic as he couldn't get an answer from Alea no matter what he did. He wanted to go closer, but he was instantly rebuffed by the powerful force from the **[Divine Investiture]** array.

Zac could only anxiously wait for the light to dissipate. Time passed as more and more energy was infused into the cocoon, but Zac didn't move a muscle. He knew there were no doubt a dozen things that needed to be done on the island, but he refused to leave until he had seen this thing through. Only two hours later did the lights finally dissipate as the cocoon cracked, revealing the item within.

The large crystal encasing Alea was recuperating inside was gone, as was his shield and all the materials he had poured into the array. In their place was only one thing, a massive black coffin.

The coffin was just over two meters long, and seemed to be crafted from a mix of the wood from the **[Tree of Ascension]** and some black crystal or smooth stone. The two materials formed intricate patterns all across the surface, though they didn't seem to be fractals as far as he could tell. They were more akin to the markings of the Stone Stele he had seen in the vision, though they obviously didn't contain that kind of power.

The coffin's shape was traditional with the top being slightly wider before narrowing again toward the bottom. It looked nothing like the translucent glass studded with Divine Crystals of before, but rather a rugged and completely opaque box that carried a heavy and almost solemn aura.

There were two sets of fractals covering the lid as well. First was a circle placed at the wider section toward the top, and the other set was two lines of inscriptions that ran parallel along the length of the lid. The fractals almost reminded Zac of a funeral wreath with two ribbons hanging down.

Finally, there were thick pitch-black chains that were wound around the whole coffin a few times, and Zac was surprised when he realized they actually emerged from holes on the side of the coffin. A quick estimate told Zac there were over five meters of links wound around the ominous item, and there were perhaps even more chains waiting inside the coffin itself.

All in all, it felt like an extremely somber item, and Zac was pretty shocked at how it had turned out. He wasn't sure what he had expected the **[Divine Investiture Array]** to do, but at least it wasn't something as drastic as this. It had completely repurposed the items he had thrown inside in just two hours, a feat that would no doubt be utterly impossible even for great artisans like the original Brazla.

But the amazing craftsmanship wasn't really what Zac was interested in right now. He hurried over to the coffin and tried to open the lid, but no matter how hard he strained he was utterly incapable of moving it even an inch.

He growled in frustration as veins bulged across his arms, but he could eventually only give up. He tried peering into the six holes the chains emerged from on the sides, but there was nothing but darkness inside of the coffin. Zac tried shining a light inside with an illumination crystal, but it was as though the light was immediately swallowed the moment it entered.

Zac sat back with a blank look, his determination slowly being swapped out by confusion and depression. Just what had he done? Making Spirit Tools from living cultivators wasn't just considered an unorthodox method, but a downright evil one. He felt like a mad scientist playing god, and he had no idea what would come of this.

"What have you done?" a furious voice said from the side, and Zac looked over to see Ogras walk over with bloodshot eyes, his eyes darting between the coffin and Zac.

"She said she wasn't ready to leave, that she wanted to follow me," Zac mumbled with a hollow voice. "Her soul was falling apart because of those damn lichens. She wasn't ready to let go, and this was the only solution I could think of."

The demon stared at Zac for a few seconds, while Zac simply looked at the coffin with a lost expression.

"So what is this?" Ogras finally said as he looked at the coffin. "Exactly what did you do? I can't sense her presence any longer."

"I got something called a **[Divine Investiture Array]** from the eighth floor, it could turn anything into a Spirit Tool. I also added the **[Pathfinder Oracle Eye]**, and it seems the process swallowed my shield along with a bunch of the treasures I have gathered so far," Zac explained.

"This... This is not right," Ogras said with disgust on his face. "It goes against the natural order. How will her soul find rest or enter the cycle of the Heavens this way? You have cursed her."

Zac said could say nothing in response, bleakness washing over him as he felt some disgust with himself. The silence stretched on with one man brooding and the other man stewing.

"You threw a shield worth over a billion into this, and it was one of the cheaper materials?" Ogras finally said with a grimace. "The things you expended here would be able to pay for the foundation of a great faction."

“I figured that if I could turn her into a Spirit Tool like Brazla, she would be able to stay alive. We could find a way to turn her back into flesh and bone in the future,” Zac sighed as he looked up from the coffin. “Do you know if it’s possible?”

“No idea,” Ogras said. “Anyway, we can’t stay here.”

“What’s going on?” Zac asked.

“We’re getting invaded, remember?” Ogras snorted. “There are still enemies to deal with even after your rampage, we need to clear them out so we don’t leave any hidden threats. Besides, we are running out of time to deal with the unliving. Your sister might have bought us some time, but we’re still cutting it close.”

Zac nodded before he walked over to the coffin. He silently looked at the beautifully crafted surface and the chains that kept the thing sealed before he slowly reached down to put it in his Spatial Ring.

But the coffin suddenly shuddered and started shrinking as the chains moved about. In just a second the coffin had shrunk to just half a decimeter’s length, and one of its chains had formed a loop through the top holes of the coffin.

Zac immediately understood what was going on, and he didn’t hesitate to put the chain above his head to wear it as a necklace. The moment the coffin touched a chest a weak tendril emerged from the treasure, but there was no voice accompanying it this time. It still gave some comfort for Zac, and he desperately clung to the idea that Alea was still inside there, but that she was simply too drained to communicate at the moment.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 481 - The Next Step**

Confusion and guilt plagued Zac’s conscience about what he had just done to Alea. But the deed was done, and he couldn’t stay in this secluded valley and second-guess himself forever.

The two jumped onto Zac’s flying treasure, immediately setting off toward Azh’Rodum. As they flew he got an update of the situation from the demon. Ogras had returned 30 minutes ago, at which point order was mostly restored to the island. The Valkyries had discovered the jamming array that blocked out any communication and teleportation on the island and immediately deactivated it.

They were still locked out from the rest of the world, but Kenzie and the other experts were working on multiple solutions while multiple squads had set sail to look for hints of similar arrays. Even the Creators were furiously producing new vessels to replace the destroyed ones, and they had already delivered three Carracks in record speed.

They reached Azh’Rodum soon enough, and Zac was relieved to see that the miasmic clouds were mostly dispelled by this point. He saw hundreds of warriors walking through the forests in groups, likely looking for stragglers who had wandered off from the rest of the zombies. An inquiry told him that his sister and the demon generals had already returned to Port Atwood, and they took the teleporter back as well.

The scene in Port Atwood was pretty similar to the one in Azh’Rodum. The raging flames had been doused by now, but much of the southern edge of the island had been completely ruined by the wildfires. Thankfully they sat right on top of a Nexus Vain, and the dense energies would restore the greenery in a year or two.

The two walked over to the battlefield, where the bodies of the fallen cultists were still being examined for lingering threats. The few who survived Zac's onslaught had either tried to go out in a blaze of glory or were summarily executed by one of the demon armies. Zac didn't care about that, as there was no middle ground with these two forces.

He saw his sister stand at the edge of the battlefield as a dozen drones roved back and forth across the area. It was the same ones who had stood sentry around the Technocrat incursion, and Zac guessed she was looking for any survivors who tried to play dead. The demon generals were nowhere to be seen though, perhaps occupied elsewhere.

Of course, her search was a bit redundant considering that demon warriors and a few nauseated humans were cutting the head off every corpse just in case. It was both to kill the stragglers and to avoid any corpses from rising again.

Their approach was quickly noticed, and Kenzie ran over with worry written on her face.

"What happened? Is Alea okay?" she asked the moment they appeared.

"... It's complicated," Zac sighed. "We'll talk about it later. How are things here? How are the losses?"

"Around 200 people died from the invasion, almost of them during the battles at sea before they reached our island," Kenzie said. "We mostly stayed within the arrays after they arrived though, so very few people were hurt."

Zac closed his eyes as he took a deep breath. Another 200 people dead, and that was probably just a drop in the bucket compared to the losses on the main continent. But he couldn't do anything about it, and he slowly opened his eyes and indicated for his sister to continue.

"The threat was essentially over after you arrived. We're mostly cleaning up and rebuilding by this point. We've also figured out a means of communication, old-school radio signals. A few engineers and the Ishiate tinkerers have managed to strengthen the signals of old machines to the point we can communicate pretty great distances, but it's only in morse code."

"That's good," Zac nodded. "Do the ships you've sent out have these things?"

"They do, and we've actually found the missing Cultist Ship already thanks to Mr. Trang's Companion. It is sailing away from us, toward Mystic Island I think," Kenzie sighed. "We have sent over half of our remaining ships to harass it though, but it will take a few days to catch up. Ilvere is leading those ships."

"I'll deal with it," Zac said with a frown, preparing to take out his Flying Treasure again.

"Just let it be," Ogras said from the side. "Our time is limited, and we can deal with the stragglers another day. It should take them a few days to reach that Island, perhaps over a week if they're constantly under harassment. We already have elites stationed there, and they can just jump into the Mystic Realm and close the spatial tunnel, allowing us to reclaim the island at a later date."

Letting the invaders have free reign in his Archipelago went against every fiber in his body, but he knew that he didn't have much of a choice as there were bigger fish to fry.

"How long do we have until the realignment array activates?" Zac asked

"We broke a couple of key pillars before we had to stop," Kenzie answered. "I can't be sure, but we think it will take around 6 or 7 days to complete unless something

changed the last day. But the sooner it's stopped the better. It's draining our planet, who knows what long-term effect that might have."

"What about the arrays blocking our Teleportation Array?" Zac asked. "I heard you were working on some sort of solution?"

"We haven't located any more arrays apart from the one on this island," Kenzie said with some helplessness. "So we are still locked out from the main continent. Worst case you can try flying over to Cogstown and use their Teleporter, it's possible it hasn't been impacted by the spatial disruption."

"That will cost us a few days though," Ogras interjected. "And we don't know the situation on the Mainland."

"Calrin and I have looked into these types of arrays since what happened to Alea and the army," Kenzie said. "I figured they might block out all teleporters around the Dead Zone after they activated the realignment array. They found a simpler solution though by just blocking this island though. But I do have something that might work."

"You do?" Zac asked with surprise.

"Blocking arrays is a standard tactic during conflicts in the multiverse," Ogras added from the side. "It's almost impossible to catch your targets if they just keep teleporting away. Just look at the insectoids and their war. They have tried to catch the followers of the old Redeemer for months, but they just keep teleporting away from any compromised hive."

"So there are solutions?" Zac asked.

"It boils down to whether your or your opponent's methods are better, and that's why I'm not sure," Kenzie explained. "We managed to get our hands on a [**Spatial Reinforcement Array**], and it should technically be able to stabilize the subspace or whatever long enough for you to teleport to the main continent."

"That's great!" Zac exclaimed, a weight lifted from his shoulders.

"Well, it's just that we're dealing with two ancient factions, their jamming arrays are probably pretty strong. I'm not sure what would happen if our array breaks apart before your jump is completed. You might be thrown out in the middle of the ocean, or you might be torn to pieces by spatial rifts."

"...Oh," Zac muttered. "So it's either waste a day or two getting to Cogstown in hopes that their teleporter still works, or risk getting ripped apart?"

"Pretty much," Kenzie said with a weak smile.

"Just teleport," Ogras shrugged from the side. "With your luck, you'll be just thrown out right in front of the Lich King even if the array breaks."

Zac only snorted in response before he turned back to his sister.

"Can I do anything to help with the spatial array thing?" Zac asked. "I've gathered all kinds of items during my climb."

"I don't think so," Kenzie said. "Some treasures might be able to make the array stronger, but I don't know how to do that."

"That's fine. Where are Thea and Billy?" Zac asked. "I heard they helped out while I was gone. Oh, and where are the Tal-Eladar? I haven't seen a single one since returning."

"Billy and Thea are recuperating in a mansion next to the hospital," Kenzie said before her face scrunched up. "As for the Tal-Eladar..."

"They didn't come," the demon snorted. "I told you that you can't rely on those wily beast tamers."

“Is that true?” Zac asked with a frown as he looked over at his sister, and her face told him everything he needed to know.

“We sent a distress call, but they delayed and delayed until our Teleportation Array was blocked out,” Kenzie said with some anger.

Zac knew that the Tal-Eladar just stayed behind as business partners, but he was still pretty angry that they simply chose to cower to the side when their ally was being attacked like this. This was the second time Verana had refused to get involved with the conflicts on Earth, and it had become abundantly clear that they couldn’t be relied upon for anything important.

“Well, I’m sure they’ll regret their choice sooner or later,” Zac finally said after a short silence, which elicited a knowing snort from Ogras.

“So what happened in the Tower of Eternity?” Kenzie asked with some worry. “Ogras said that you caused a mess, but things turned out mostly fine?”

Zac glared at the demon who just grinned back at him.

“Well, I got a pretty good result and made some allies, but I might have also made some enemies as well. I had to suddenly leave due to getting a prompt about Port Atwood being invaded, so I don’t know about the fallout,” Zac said as he took out the **[Heaven’s Secrets Array]**. “More importantly, can you install this thing on my Nexus Node later when you have the time? It can help with my evolution.”

“Oh?” Kenzie said with interest as she looked down at the array. “It shouldn’t take too long, I’ll go deal with it right now. I’m done here anyway.”

Zac nodded before he left his sister to visit his two friends, and two Valkyries immediately accompanied him and helped him catch up to speed as they walked. They reached the mansion soon enough, where the guards wordlessly let him in with a bow. He indicated for the Valkyries to stay outside as he entered, and he quickly spotted where the two were recuperating with the help of **[Cosmic Gaze]**.

A few quick steps brought him to a large bedroom on the second floor, and he entered after softly knocking at the door.

“You’re back,” Thea said with a weak voice from her bed facing a window looking out at a beautiful garden. “Your intelligence was incorrect. They made their move early.”

“I heard,” Zac sighed as he sat down next to her bedside.

He was inwardly relieved though that Thea seemed fine, with all her limbs intact. He did spot a wound on her stomach that was lit up with miasmatic energies though. But it didn’t look as bad as the one he got himself from Mhal, and it should heal up as long as she slowly ground down the lingering Dao with her own.

“I’m sorry,” Zac said. “And thank you for helping my people while I was away. Who knows how many would have died if you weren’t there.”

“So? Have you dealt with everything?” Thea said as she turned to look at Zac, her piercing blue eyes staring evenly into his.

Zac was silent for a few seconds thinking it over. There was honestly more he could do to improve his current power while still in F-Grade, a lot of untapped potential as Catheya would call it. But more importantly than that, there was a burning desire that was eating him alive.

There had been a desire smoldering in his chest since the events in the valley, the desire to unleash an unprecedented level of vengeance upon the so-called Lich King for what he or his subjects did to his island and Alea. Zac’s face was without expression, but a fire burned in his eyes as he looked down at Thea.

“I am evolving right now and heading toward the core of the Dead Zone the moment it’s completed,” Zac said, and he felt a momentum building in his body the moment he made his choice. “The Undead Incursion will be gone within a few days.”

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**Chapter 482 - Love’s Bond**

Zac didn’t immediately leave the mansion though, but rather gave some of his best healing pills to Thea. He was about to leave her room to visit Billy as well, and Thea surprisingly jumped down from her bed to join him. The giant was even worse off than Thea from what she said.

He had taken the brunt of the attacks after changing into massive form to sink the ship, and this time Zac hadn’t been there to block out the attacks with **[Nature’s Barrier]** like during the hunt. Billy had been badly burned by the flames of the cultists it seemed.

It was easy to figure out with room the giant resided in as the whole room shook from the massive snores from within, but they stopped when Zac walked into the room.

“You’re back!” Billy rumbled as he woke up. “Help Billy a bit! A stupid horny guy keeps tricking Billy, making him forget how to leave this place! All horny people seems tricky, could use a good thwonkin’.”

“Don’t let your fans hear that,” Thea snorted from the side as she walked inside as well, prompting Zac to look over with confusion.

“He has over thirty suitors among the Demons on this island,” Thea said with some bemusement. “It’s a bit surreal.”

“Of course it is super real. Billy is the most dashing prince, Mama always said so,” Billy nodded with a complacent expression. “But Billy doesn’t like horny girls.”

“Uh, you should just call them Demons,” Zac coughed, the anger in his gut somewhat dispersed by the giant’s antics.

He couldn’t stay for too long though, and he had to leave after making sure Thea and Billy had everything they needed.

“I’m sorry about how things turned out. I underestimated the Undead Empire and put too much trust in the words of Void’s Disciple. I was sure I had a few more weeks,” Zac apologized again just as he was about to exit.

“It’s our fault as well,” Thea sighed as she sat down next to Billy. “We didn’t adapt quickly enough to this new reality, forcing the whole burden onto your shoulders. We played politics and fought for benefits when we should have been fighting for our lives and our futures.”

Zac sighed as well, not knowing how to respond, and he left the mansion in silence.

“You really are evolving?” a voice said from the side, and Zac looked over to see Ogras standing there.

“I am,” Zac nodded before he wryly smiled. “Did you know that Billy is pretty popular among the female demons?”

“Well, it makes sense. He’s even bulkier than the Abyssal Demons, and rumors are circulating on the island that he has some powerful bloodline that increased his strength even further,” the demon shrugged. “Between his constitution and his

potential, he's one of the best bachelors on this world, perhaps even better than you since you're a mortal."

Zac only shook his head in bemusement before he got back to the matter at hand.

"I need to take down the Undead Incursion quickly. Do you think I can do it without evolving?" Zac asked as the two walked toward his private section.

"It's hard to say," the demon said after a while. "Normally I would have said yes, but we're running out of time. The Lich King seems adept at arrays judging by what we have seen so far, and he has no doubt turned the core zone into a fortress over the past year. He doesn't even need to maintain the shield for that long, just a few days will do and he will have won."

"You really think his arrays are that strong?" Zac asked skeptically. "I even managed to break the arrays in the Base Town."

"That's different, those were mobile arrays powered by F-Grade warriors," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "The undead array will have hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Unholy Beacons powering it. He might even sacrifice tens of millions of Zombies to give the defenses a boost until the realignment is complete."

"Still," Zac muttered, but he knew the demon had a point.

"Sieges can take years, decades even, to slowly grind down the defensive arrays, and that's with proper equipment we don't have. You need to be a lot stronger to crack them in an instant," the demon said. "The normal method would have been for us to bring millions of fodder to blast attacks on the shield to weaken it before we made our move. But there's no time for that either."

Zac slowly nodded. He had somewhat hoped for the demon to convince him otherwise, but it truly looked like he needed to get a few power-ups to increase his certainty of success. He wasn't willing to bet Earth's future that he was able to break through the defensive perimeters and destroy the realignment array within one week without evolving.

"Where's my sister?" Zac asked. "Has she installed the array?"

"She's still trying to figure out the thing," Ogras said. "But you need to slow down."

"What? You know we're running out of time," Zac said.

"Just a few hours have passed since you exited the tower. You have fought half the Sector's geniuses and then fended off the invasions. You even turned Alea into a heaven-cursed necklace. You're not stable at the moment, you can't evolve in your current state," the demon said. "Honestly, if you were the scion of some clan you would probably have been forced into silent meditation for at least year to regain a sense of tranquility and balance."

"So you just want me to sit around?" Zac said with disbelief. "The planet is dying as we speak."

"We are all dying," the demon snorted. "Don't ruin everything now by rushing into things. Sit down and heal up and calm your mind at least. A few hours spent now will save you a lot of time in the long run."

Zac was somewhat unwilling, but he knew that the demon was right. He wasn't in his right mind at the moment, and he needed to cool off. But he still felt like a child who got sent to take his nap as he walked back to his courtyard and sat down.

His thoughts were a whirl as he tried to calm down, and his mind kept jumping between the various things that needed his attention, each more urgent than the last. But slowly circulating the Fragment of the Bodhi helped him relax his tense muscles,

and his thoughts slowly followed. Visiting the Tower of Eternity was supposed to give him a breather to decompress, but things had gone increasingly out of hand with the Splinter and then the time crunch to complete the climb.

He felt more wound up than ever, especially after what he went through with Alea.

His eyes slowly opened and he looked down at the black 5-centimeter casket hanging on its chain around his neck. He still didn't know whether he had done the right thing or not. What if he had completely damned Alea by turning her into something like the Sword Slave he had snatched from the swordmaster? The voices that had invaded his mind while using the thing had sounded beyond wretched.

The one solace in his mind was that the System had said that the **[Divine Investiture Array]** was a rectification of regret.

If Alea had died in front of his eyes like that, then he would have regretted it forever. To be just too late to save her not just once, but twice would have been too much to take. The System was essentially omniscient and perhaps it had already known that things would end up like this. It did make him a bit pissed off that the System didn't provide a better solution to save her, but he guessed the System was more interested in making him stronger than it was in saving the poison mistress.

However, his actions had no doubt caused some complications to his plans. A lot of his materials had gone into the **[Divine Investiture Array]** in his frenzied attempts to save the demoness. It also meant that he no longer had any way to upgrade his axe, except letting it slowly eat various treasures. Of course, most items meant for Verun had gone to Alea, but he at least had the Dragon Core still.

The real question was what sort of item that he had created. He had initially just been focused on saving Alea's soul, but the array was meant to create a perfect Spirit Tool. This became doubly important as **[Everlasting]** had been thrown into the mix, leaving him without anything to activate half of his skills.

It might even affect his coming Class choices for all he knew, so he needed to understand what he was dealing with.

He tried sending his mind into the coffin to see if he could glean anything, but it was impossible. Zac suddenly had an idea and released a drop of blood onto the necklace, which was immediately swallowed.

A stream of information immediately entered his mind as he felt the same sort of connection as he did to his robes and **[Verun's Bite]**. He couldn't help but feel a sense of sourness when he realized that either Alea or the System had named the chain-covered coffin **[Love's Bond]**.

There was still no active response from the demoness even after having bound the treasure with his blood. The coffin was still in a "passive" state like his robes, where he could use it but he couldn't sense any Spirit Tool's sapience. This was the norm for an E-Grade Spirit Tool though, with the tool awakening Spirituality usually happened at higher grades, if ever.

However, the stream of information had broadened his insight of what a spirit tool could do, and a mental command made two chains rush out from the holes on the side of the coffin and latch onto his left arm as the coffin rapidly grew in size.

It took just a fraction of a second before the coffin had become almost as tall as Zac himself while keeping the width of a normal coffin. But it was a lot thinner compared to what should be expected, with a depth of just 15 centimeters. It had actually turned into a shield.

However, that was just one of its functions, and another mental command prompted the chains to snake around his torso as the coffin moved toward his back. It

grew a lot shorter as well, making it almost resemble a coffin for a child or perhaps a gnome.

Four more chains reached out from their respective holes, each of them dancing in the air as though Zac was a snake charmer. He was already used to this kind of fighting from the chains in **[Profane Seal]**, and commanding them was almost as natural as moving his own limbs. The chains shot out in an instant, and four trees in his courtyard had holes punched through with such force that they barely shuddered before the chains had passed through.

The chains didn't have the life-sucking abilities of the spectral chains, but there seemed to be some inherently corrosive effect attached to them, perhaps an addition provided from the mysterious fossilized bug he had thrown into the mix. It wasn't immediately noticeable, but the holes in the trees started to wither after a few seconds as well like they were being assaulted by some sort of invasive rot.

Furthermore, the chains were actual corporeal links made by top-tier materials like Neprosium, compared to the far more fragile fractal chains that his skill conjured. There was no way that a casual swing of an E-Grade warrior would be able to break them apart as they could do with the spectral copies.

That meant that the chains were essentially a combination or fusion of hardness and rot, which made them a perfect fit for using together with the Fragment of the Coffin.

However, Zac didn't take the time to experiment with all the possibilities of the chains at the moment, so he retracted them back into the coffin. He was extremely relieved that there was a second form of Alea's new form since he was somewhat leery about using the coffin in its shield-state. What if he encountered some powerhouse that managed to break it? What effect would it have on his chances of restoring her to her demon form?

The chains themselves looked like his Neprosium shield but slightly darker, so they wouldn't break so easily. Besides, Neprosium had excellent healing capabilities even if that happened. The chains would probably just reform if the links broke as long as he retrieved the material.

It still felt weird to consider using Alea as a Spirit Tool, but he also knew that was what she wished for. At least he prayed that was what that wordless spiritual connection meant. She wanted to accompany him in his journey, and leaving her in a corner of his Spatial Ring felt even worse than using the treasure.

He would need some time to think of the pitch-black coffin as **[Love's Bond]** rather than Alea, but he would make the best of the situation. Besides, that might be his best shot at actually getting the poison mistress back.

Zac had asked about Spirit Tool upgrades while talking to Catheya since they had broached the subject when discussing the **[Divine Investiture Array]**. Much of what she said hadn't been anything new, but one thing had stuck out. Using the same weapon a lot and for a long time gradually formed a bond that was helpful in all kinds of ways.

It would allow a warrior to squeeze out more potential during a battle, and it would even help with upgrading the Spirit Tool. That was why most elites wanted a powerful weapon that could follow them during their whole Cultivation Path, rather than repeatedly swapping out their weapon for a stronger one. Nurturing this bond was the same as nurturing the Spirit Tool, so using the coffin in battle might actually be the best method to heal her soul, odd as it might sound.

A chain snaked around his throat as the coffin shrunk again, and it soon enough had returned to its passive state. Zac finally tried imbuing the Spirit Tool with his three fragments, but he found that the coffin, unsurprisingly, resisted the Fragment of the

Axe. Imbuing it with the Fragment of the Bodhi worked, but he couldn't sense any direct effect when doing so.

But when he tried imbuing the skill with the final Fragment he was shocked. The surprise didn't come from the fact that the defensive fragment entered the Spirit Tool effortlessly. After all, if the Dao of the Coffin didn't fit this Spirit Tool, then nothing would. The surprise came from something else.

The Fragment of the Coffin had evolved.

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**Chapter 483 - Against the Natural Order**

Zac quickly opened up his Dao Screen, and as expected, there was a change.

**Fragment of the Coffin (Middle): All attributes +20, Endurance +190, Vitality +120, Intelligence +35, Wisdom +65. Effectiveness of Endurance +10%**

Zac still didn't know when the upgrade took place, but he guessed that it mainly came from creating a Coffin-type Spirit Tool. He had sat as though he was in trance witnessing the whole process, and something about the experience had helped him break through.

Of course, more things had contributed to the upgrade. He had taken the first step toward upgrading the Fragment from witnessing the Dao Apparition of the War Stele, and he had fought both in the life-and-death battle against half the Base Town, followed by the battle against the cultists.

These battles had set the foundations for the evolution, and the magical activation of the **[Divine Investiture Array]** was probably the final spark that upgraded the Fragment. However, these things were just the latest additions. Alea had been the spark of inspiration to the formation of the Fragment of the Coffin since the very beginning.

The vision of her lying in the stasis array had felt like a perfect mirror of the blood-drenched lotus he witnessed during his Dao Vision. The two visions had merged into the Fragment of the Coffin, and the recent events were a continuation of that reality. Zac couldn't exactly pinpoint what concept was added to the Dao Fragment though, but he slowly started to form an idea.

He had long since started to walk the path of life and death, but only the Seed of Trees had properly incorporated this concept so far. The Seed of Rot was clearly death-attuned, but that seed was mostly propped up by fortuitous encounters. The concept he had incorporated into the Fragment of the Coffin was one he already had brushed upon before; life through death.

There were some differences though. The insight related to trees was more akin to how a seed would grow from the ashes of a burned-down forest, gaining life through death. However, the insights he gained now was rather based on embracing death for a shot at life.

He knew that he essentially had killed Alea when he turned her into a Spirit Tool. Even if her consciousness awoke again she wouldn't be living. But Alea dying was the only way for her to live. The insight contained the willingness to go against the natural order, whereas the earlier insight was based on making the most of the natural order.

They were the same, but also the opposite.

Zac felt it was an extremely important step in the creation he was building for himself, a realignment of his Dao so that it would better fit as one half of the whole. Getting a second Middle-Grade Fragment would no doubt improve his choices upon evolving as well, but for now he focused on the gained attributes.

The improved attributes weren't too surprising, apart from the boost to Endurance being slightly smaller than expected. That was the best-case scenario though. He had reached a terrifying 1692 Endurance in his Human form after the latest upgrade, and while he still was some ways from the attribute cap of 2500, he still needed to be careful. A few more titles and another Dao upgrade and he might hit the ceiling.

He had only lost 3 points in Strength from reaching the limit of the F-Grade, but a loss at this stage could be huge in case there were complications for him to upgrade his Race to D-Grade.

There wasn't cause to worry just yet though, and Zac refocused on **[Love's Bond]**. He already knew that there were also actually two skills in the Spirit Tool already to match the two fractals on the handle of **[Verun's Bite]**, but he wouldn't use them now as they had pretty big cool-downs.

A long cool-down was fine with Zac though since that meant that the skills were a lot stronger than normal. It was just like how his ultimate skills, except **[Vanguard of Undeath]**, couldn't be used over and over.

All in all, he felt that his new Spirit Tool was even better than expected. The more he thought about it the more he felt it would be extremely easy to incorporate **[Love's Bond]** into his fighting style without it affecting the fighting style he had come up with for himself.

It almost symbolized his whole creation in a sense. It was an extremely good fit with most of his skills in his Undying Bulwark class, while also adding something new to the table. It perfectly mirrored his Fragment of the Coffin as well, and he would perhaps be able to move them both toward the Dao of Death over time.

But the Spirit Tool also represented life and rebirth through Alea's soul and the purpose of its creation. If things progressed as he hoped he would be able to turn Death into Life, and give Alea back her life again.

He could even think of some interesting possibilities with the sparks he could create with the help of the remnants. Getting them under control was a long-term plan, but perhaps he would be able to use the chains as a delivery method in the future.

In the final attack against the dragon he had used Creation Energy to form a spear to house the spark, but perhaps he could simply put the sparks into the coffin and shoot them out with a chain. He could only imagine the destructive potential of a Neprosium chain infused with the purest destruction.

He wouldn't need to force it or change himself to adapt to the shield, and the System upheld its end of the bargain and created a Spirit Tool suited just for him. The process had even given him a second Mid-Tier Fragment, which might allow him to get a fitting Arcane class. After having upgraded a second he couldn't help but fantasize about what options he might see when touching the Nexus Node this time.

Zac didn't immediately head over to the Nexus Node though, but he rather spent another hour to completely rid himself of the weakened state from using **[Hatchetman's Rage]**. He had gotten mostly better during his talk with Catheya, but he wanted to be completely rid of any lingering threats to his evolution before taking that step.

He already had the ticking-time bombs in his head to worry about.

Truthfully, the Undead Incursion wasn't the only reason why he wanted to evolve as quickly as possible; there were two more reasons. The first was the two remnants in his mind. He knew there was a tribulation waiting for him when evolving. It was the final test before reaching E-Grade, and he would normally be completely confident in passing.

However, the two remnants in his mind had already proven extremely adept at causing chaos at the most inopportune times, and Zac was afraid that they would flare up during the tribulation. It was better to smoothly into E-Grade now while they remnants were still drained and in an inactive state.

The second was that he was getting dangerously close to the limit of how many attributes he could have. With the Fragment of the Coffin having evolved just now, his wiggle room was getting limited. There was also probably a title waiting for reaching E-Grade first on the planet, and then there was potentially something for surviving the integration, closing the most Incursions, and becoming the world leader, and so on.

There were potentially a lot of titles waiting the moment he managed to close the final Incursions, and he wanted to have the ability to enjoy the bonuses. His plan was to immediately eat the **[Fruit of Rebirth]** and the two race-boosting pills he got in the base town while flying toward the core of the Dead Zone.

It might not be enough to completely pass into D-Grade Race, but it would at least set up the foundations and both increase his longevity and unlock some of the Attribute Cap of having a D-Grade race.

Zac finally felt he had both figured out what he needed to do and calmed his mind, and the next thing was simply for him to evolve so that he could set out toward the Undead Incursion. He walked over to the Nexus House and found that Kenzie was still installing the **[Heaven's Secrets Array]** he bought during an auction in Base Town.

"How are things?" Zac asked when he arrived, nodding at Ogras who stood to the side as well.

"I'll have this array installed in half an hour," Kenzie answered as she blew a wisp of hair away from her face. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'll be able to get a breather when the undead are dealt with," Zac sighed.

"Have you decided what to do to get to the mainland?" Ogras asked.

"If we haven't managed to stop the disruption by the point I'm ready to leave, then I'll risk it and use Kenzie's stabilization array. The area that was jammed by the undead the last time was enormous, and I'm afraid that going to Cogstown will just be a waste of time," Zac said.

"Fair enough," Ogras shrugged.

"I'll get Calrin's uncle to help me set it up," Kenzie said. "He's pretty skilled with arrays, but he can only help with things that we buy through Thayer Consortia. Something to do with limitations of the Mercantile License."

"That little blue bastard should be thankful that we don't throw him into a spatial tear to search for a safe passage for us," Ogras muttered from the side.

Zac snorted and was inclined to agree. The Sky Gnome's small act of giving him a protective ring had caused a ripple effect of almost incomprehensible proportions. It had led to the Zethaya Pill house blowing up, and him gaining infamy through slaughtering over a hundred scions of the Zecia sector.

Who knew what trouble waited for him when venturing into the vaster stage of the sector?

However, the demon's words also made him think of something else, and he turned to Ogras.

"Can you have the Sky Gnome and his appraisers come over?" Zac asked. "We need to make a preliminary tally of the gains, I want to see if there's anything useful we can bring to the Dead Zone."

"Sure," Ogras said with some excitement as he flickered away.

Zac turned to his sister and handed her his Cosmos Sack. His most important Treasures had already been moved over to his new Spatial Ring after it was confirmed that it didn't disappear. Most of the stuff he didn't have any direct use for was thrown into the Cosmos Sack to be either appraised or added to the Merit Store.

"I'll go talk with Brazla for a bit," Zac said.

"Is this about Alea?" Kenzie asked as her eyes darted to the necklace around Zac's neck. "Ogras told me what happened."

"I was too late again," Zac sighed. "This was the only thing I could think of."

Kenzie silently looked at her brother, but her eyes spoke volumes.

"I... I just couldn't sit and watch her die," Zac coughed, dodging the meaning of the stare.

He truthfully wasn't sure how he felt about the demoness even now. He had thought about her a lot during the climb, and seeing those snippets of Alea's memories had rekindled the memories of those months they had spent almost attached at the hip after he closed the Demon Incursion. They had gone through ups and downs together, and he knew her even more intimately than Ogras in a sense.

If this had been before the Integration he would no doubt have believed it was love. But the past year had numbed him, made him almost unable to think about anything except getting stronger. First, it was to find his family, then it was to save Earth. He had never stopped to consider things such as love, especially not after Hannah's betrayal.

But all of that was moot now that she was a coffin.

"So you think you can bring her back in the future?" Kenzie asked instead after seeing her brother's brooding silence.

"That's what I hope. I'll go talk with Brazla, he might know more," Zac said with a pained face. "Provided he's in a talkative mood today."

"Say hello from me, it's been a while since I had time to visit him. This thing will be up and running when you're back," Kenzie said as she turned back to keep working on the **[Heaven's Secrets Array]**.

Zac smiled as he flashed away with **[Loamwalker]**, and he found himself in front of The Towers of Myriad Dao in a few seconds. His Dao Repository had always looked gaudy, but now that he had witnessed the awe-inspiring Tower of Eternity and its mysterious apparitions, it looked even worse.

The lights were blinding but hollow, completely lacking the mysteries of the universe. Zac kept his opinions to himself though as he walked inside the repository with a staid expression.

"So you survived, after all," the ever-annoying voice drifted over as Brazla descended from a golden light appearing out of nowhere.

The Tool Spirit was decked in golden armor with multiple golden and gem-studded swords attached to his back. Zac wasn't sure, but he guessed that he was copying the creator of the Blademaster Inheritance this time, perhaps inspired by the war outside.

"I thought more capable owners had descended on the island for a moment, but I guess the Great Brazla have to make do with you for a while longer," Brazla added as he threw Zac a scathing glance as he conjured his throne.

"I'll try to live up to your expectations," Zac sighed. "My sister sends her regards."

"I—" Brazla said, but he suddenly froze as he stared at the necklace around Zac's neck. "What's that?"

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**Chapter 484 - Invitations**

"This craftsmanship," Brazla muttered with glowing eyes as he teleported closer. "It almost matches that of the Great Brazla himself. But why does it have a False Spirit within?"

"That's what I came to talk to you about. One of my people was dying and her soul was crumbling. The only thing I could think of was to use a **[Divine Investiture Array]** to lock her soul in a Spirit Tool in hopes of saving her life."

"Using the holy array for such a purpose," Brazla muttered. "Sacrilege. My creator would have turned you into blood mist if he heard about you wasted such a chance on something so frivolous."

"I was out of options and got desperate," Zac admitted. "I came to ask you, do you know if I can bring her back?"

"Bring her back?" Brazla asked as he looked at Zac like he was an idiot. "Why would you want to do that? As long as the girl's spirit heals she can become a True Spirit. You will have to break some rules to upgrade her, but you already seem all too willing to dabble in the taboo."

"What do you mean?" Zac asked.

"This thing will not be able to improve the normal way. You need to find... creative solutions to upgrade it. Solutions that the heavens won't be too happy about," the Tool Spirit said, clearly taking pleasure in Zac's misfortune.

"Why would I need to upgrade the Spirit Tool though?" Zac asked. "I just want to return her to life."

"Upgrading a weapon will upgrade the spirituality residing within. Just look at the dumb mutt inside your Axe. You will need to upgrade this thing if you want to heal the girl," Brazla said.

Zac frowned when he heard the news. This was clearly bad. He had never had any desire to go against the System by becoming an unorthodox cultivator, but it was exactly what he needed to do to upgrade **[Love's Bond]** from the sound of it. Even weirder, it almost felt like the System was pushing him in that direction as it was the System that gave him the array.

Just what was it planning?

Was this another type of trial it wanted to have him survive? If he stepped on the unorthodox path he would be turned into a pariah like the Technocrats, and people might get quests to kill him just by coming close to him. Or was the system planning something else entirely? Something related to the Terminus?

But first of all, Zac needed to know if there even was a point to go down that road.

“If I make her a new body, can I put her soul into it and give her back her life?” Zac asked.

“No idea,” Brazla shrugged with disinterest. “Seems pretty stupid.”

“Haven’t you ever hoped to become living? To become able to cultivate just like your creator?” Zac probed, hoping to elicit some response.

“Why would the Great Brazla ever want to become a fleshbag cursed by mortality? I am perfection, unsullied by time, and I will walk these halls long after both you and your planet has turned to dust. I might not be able to cultivate, but I am eternal,” the Tool Spirit harangued, and shining lights started appearing all around him like he was a God’s avatar or something.

“But do you know if it’s possible? Someone as knowledgeable as you must surely have figured some things out,” Zac entreated.

“My creator once mentioned that Spirit Tools can reach a sublime state where they are virtually indistinguishable from cultivators, but he had never seen it himself. Of course, The Great Brazla wouldn’t degrade himself to the point of being mistaken for a lowly Human. But all things are possible,” the Tool Spirit admitted. “Turning a False Spirit back into someone living is probably possible.”

“So it’s possible, after all,” Zac sighed in relief.

“It might be possible, but what you want to do is going against the natural order,” Brazla snorted. “It’s akin to bringing back those from the dead. It might be achievable for the great characters of the multiverse, but what does that have to do with a piece of trash like you?”

“I’ll work hard and get there sooner or later,” Zac said. “As long as it’s possible it’ll be fine.”

A derisive snort was all the Tool Spirit deigned to respond with before he dissipated again.

Zac felt as though a huge weight was lifted from his shoulders as he walked back toward the Nexus House. Brazla was obviously a bit fuzzy on the details, but it really seemed that returning Alea into a demon was within the realm of possibilities. That was all Zac could ask for right now. He knew the process would likely be a long and arduous one, but at least he knew he hadn’t completely messed things up.

The knowledge gave him a sense of purpose beyond saving Earth as well, but for now, he needed to refocus on the task at hand. He needed to get his items appraised and deal with the realignment.

The thought of his items suddenly reminded him of the two Cosmos Sacks he had stowed away just before leaving Base Town. They were from Leyara and Pretty, and curiosity made him take a look before returning to his sister.

The Cosmos Sack he got from Pretty Peak just contained three crystals and a teleportation token, but he was surprised to see that one of them was a Skill Crystal. He didn’t immediately touch it, but rather turned his attention toward the middle crystal that seemed to be a communication crystal. He immediately infused some Cosmic Energy into it and he immediately heard the voice of Pretty Peak in his mind.

*I engraved this thing because some things should not be spoken aloud. You should not rely on the Heliophos Clan dealing with the threat to your planet. There are some unsavory rumors about that clan among the top forces of the Zecia sector.*

*Divination comes with a cost, one that few are willing to pay unless absolutely necessary. One cannot divulge Heaven's Secrets wantonly. But being able to glimpse the future is also an extremely addicting power from what I have heard.*

Zac suddenly remembered Lord 84th who stopped Abbot Everlasting Peace from saying too much. The reincarnated Buddhist had said essentially the same thing. Did divination perhaps mess with the plans the System had set in motion across the multiverse and was therefore punished? Or was it simply that such a heaven-defying ability couldn't be powered by something so basic as Cosmic Energy?

Zac shook his head as he kept listening.

*Many believe that the Heliophos Clan is searching for means to avoid the side-effects of Divination and Karmic Manipulation. They are already suspected to have been gravitating toward unorthodox means for tens of thousands of years.*

*It's possible that Voridis is performing his mad experiments with the clan's tacit blessing, and that they even have covertly protected him from capture by manipulating events behind the curtain. I don't understand how Voridis have survived pursuit for so long otherwise.*

*I bet they can't wait to find out what scheme that lunatic has concocted in case they can use it for themselves.*

Zac sighed when he heard the explanation. Yet another method to deal with the threat of the Redeemer seemed to have been ruined then and there. It looked like hiding was his only option, but as long as he cut any Karmic Links in time they were likely safe.

After meeting Catheya he finally had a better grasp of just how a Star Sector was constituted. She had likened a Star Sector with a book, where each page was a Dimensional layer. A Star Sector was, in other words, not a coherent galaxy teeming with life, but rather parts of multiple planes stacked so close to each other that dimensional travel was possible.

Not even singular forces were constrained to a single dimension. The Allbright Empire was comprised of planets and continents across thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of realities. Some planets in the Empire might actually exist in the same reality, but so far away from each other that it was infinitely faster to use interdimensional travel rather than normal travel to go between the two planets.

It was akin to wormhole technology that Zac had seen in Science Fiction movies, where space was somehow bent and twisted, and traveling out of the main dimension was like taking a short-cut compared to moving in a straight line.

The whole thing was extremely confusing, but the biggest takeaway was the difficulty of finding one's way without a marker. The Redeemer was probably traveling toward Earth or another seeded planet at this very moment, but he needed to move through multiple dimensions to get here. As long as any Karmic Link was cut off before Voridis was within a few dimensional layers of Earth, then finding this place was almost impossible.

Especially while the System's shroud was still in effect.

This was also why flying treasures that could travel between worlds was expensive to the point that even D-Grade warriors were often confined to their own world, or at least their solar system. The vessels didn't only need to have the capability to fly through the vacuum of space, but they also needed the capabilities to push through dimensional layers.

It was a bit uncomfortable to think about, but Zac's only recourse was to hide Earth so that Voridis fed on some other poor planets instead of Earth. He could only pray that the people of Berum would manage to take out all the remaining members of

the Medhin Royals on their side, as no one deserved getting culled by a lunatic like the Redeemer.

That would be the best-case scenario, where all the seed planets managed to hide from Voridis. He already looked as though he wasn't long for the world, and 100 years was a long time. Perhaps the issue would be dealt with by the time that Earth was properly integrated into the Zecia sector.

*I will contact the Heliophos Clan for you, the message continued. But you truly shouldn't expect much. You can still get in touch with me by visiting Jaera at the Blossom Rose Sword School that's close to Trasteria, the city where the Teleportation Token leads. She is an elder there, and a disciple of my father.*

*Trasteria is located on the main continent of the Allbright Empire, a vast place full of opportunities. You can simply use the token to move to a place with more opportunities if you want. But you should know that your situation is precarious. Standing out too much without a backing can cause an endless amount of trouble to arrive at your doorstep.*

*The universe is full of lunatics ready to risk everything to progress one step further on the road of cultivation, and some might believe you might be the key for them to take that step.*

*I hope you will be able to survive the following centuries, the Zecia sector needs a beacon.*

The second information crystal was a comprehensive introduction packet of the Allbright Empire, its forces, and even some Mystic Realms that provided good limited titles. There were also a couple of identities that Zac could freely assume with the help of the attached skill, which was of the Shapeshifting variety. It was like he was about to enter the witness protection program or something.

The skill was called **[Shared Identity]**, and it worked a bit differently compared to **[Thousand Faces]**. The skill he got from Pretty seemed to be able to create a greater transformation, where even one's aura could be changed by a certain degree, but it came with only three "pre-loaded" identities.

He could essentially take one of these three shared identities, but he wouldn't be able to change his face as he wished like he could with **[Thousand Faces]**. Zac held off on learning the skill for now, but it wasn't impossible he'd use it in the future. It would be pretty convenient to step into the shoes of someone with a proper background, but he didn't know if there were hidden strings attached to taking the name of one of these three men.

Zac turned his attentions to the second Cosmos Sack next, but his expression froze when he noticed its contents. There were only two things inside, a short note and a frilly piece of fabric.

*A small greeting gift to remember me by. I am not allowed to hand out Teleportation Tokens to the Void Gate, but I would be happy to entertain you if you have the opportunity to stop by. We can talk about fashion and our futures under the light of the Void Star.*

*-Leyara*

Zac blankly looked at the note, his mind unable to compute what was going on. The strained smile of Leyara suddenly flashed by in his mind, before he remembered the apologetic face of Galau. Just what had the merchant divulged during their meeting? Would he be known as some sort of deviant in the whole Sector because of that one level in the tower?

A sigh escaped from his mouth as he stowed away the Cosmos Sack, unsure what to do with the "treasure". He could only reluctantly put it into his Spatial ring, as it

would be weird throwing it out in the middle of his forest. However, things didn't get much better when he returned to the Nexus House where Kenzie stood next to a rack of exquisite dresses, while three Sky Gnomes eagerly went through the mound of treasures.

"Why are there so many dresses in your sack?" Kenzie asked with a weird smile when she noticed his return.

"I was about to ask," the demon laughed from the side. "I thought I absconded with the most 'treasures' back then, but I see that I still have much to learn."

"Are you planning on wooing someone? Is it Thea?" Kenzie asked before she shot him a hesitant look. "Or don't tell me...?"

"Don't be silly," Zac sighed. "The seventh floor had me fighting actual scions from other parts of the multiverse. I looted my new ring and those dresses from a girl who targeted me."

"Do you think any trouble from that will lead back to Earth?" Ogras asked with a frown.

"I doubt it?" Zac said hesitantly. "It kind of looked like my human side was killed by the girl who I looted, and she was killed by someone else in turn. I fought the rest of the battle in my Draugr-form. I don't think the System would allow problems to follow you back home, right? Perhaps it's possible to do something to 'cleanse' the items if needed?"

However, he honestly wasn't as sure as he let on.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on [at least once a week!](#) It helps me a lot!

**Chapter 485 - Choices**

He had already noticed it back during his meeting with Catheya, but there was something wrong with his chest. Iz Tayn had left a burn on his body that he hadn't been able to get rid of with healing pills. However, getting his torso blown apart and reformed by Creation Energy had dealt with that problem.

Or so he thought.

He still couldn't see any mark on his body, but he had felt a slight pain in his chest multiple times now, but the feeling was gone before he had a chance to react, making him almost doubt it was ever there. He couldn't see anything amiss, but the fire mage seemed to come from a real powerful force.

She might have all kinds of means of tracking he had no idea about.

"The Thayer Consortia happens to be skilled in those kinds of endeavors, we'll happily help in this regard... For a small remuneration," Calrin said as he gave a prim bow. "Young Lord, it is good to see you again."

Zac didn't immediately greet the wily merchant, but he rather gazed at the Sky Gnome for a few seconds as his thumb rubbed the defensive treasure that he received from Calrin before he left for the tower.

"Did you know that the ring you gave me would cause trouble with the Tsarun clan?" Zac asked while he tried to gauge the slippery merchant's face for any lies.

"No way!" Calrin said, looking genuinely shocked. "It is just a defensive treasure that has been kept in my family. I just wanted to make sure that you, my great

benefactor, wouldn't meet any untoward end during your first sojourn into the Cultivator World!"

"Well, your small gift led to the destruction of the Zethaya Pill House, and the death of almost a hundred elites of the sector. Including a Dravorak Princeling," the demon snorted from the side. "Oh, and a main branch Tsarun Scion along with all their members at the Base Town. Thayer Consortia might become famous across the whole sector over the following years as the rumors spread."

"It- Ah? Dravorak as in the Dravorak Dynasty?" the Sky Gnome said, his face aghast. "Did they see the signet as well? I mean, it wasn't my intention to cause any trouble. I don't understand what's going on?"

"Just what happened during your climb?!" Kenzie exclaimed with shock from the side after glaring at the Sky Gnome, who quickly busied himself with the pile of treasures by the side.

"It's complicated," Zac sighed. "I got spotted by one of Calrin's old enemies, but problem was that I didn't handle it well. Things got a bit out of control from there and a bunch of people tried to kill me. But it was mostly sorted out."

"Sorted out?" Ogras snorted from the side, but he didn't add any more oil to the fire after a glare from Zac.

"Well, we also learned a few things about the origins of the Redeemer. For now, make sure that no one on Port Atwood mentions where they come from if they decide to head to the Tower of Eternity. My identity might be a bit delicate," Zac said after some thought as he turned to Kenzie.

"If I may, young master," Calrin said from the side, "What level did you reach?"

"73rd level. The entrance of the 9th floor," Zac said, not bothering to hide the truth.

"9th Floor!" Calrin screamed while the appraisers looked up from the pile of treasures for the first time, shock clearly written all over their faces.

"Monster! True monster!" the Sky Gnome muttered, before his face lit up again. "But that's for the best. With you as a guardian, The Thayer Consortia will reach unprecedented heights. I, Calrin Thayer, will not only have led my family out of a calamity, but toward the heaven's themselves!"

"What are you getting so big-headed for, you little bastard," Ogras snorted from the side. "You better think of new ways to provide benefits to your shareholders instead. A big tree might give you shade, but it also requires a lot of nutrients."

Zac slightly smiled at the antics, but he didn't correct the demon. He still couldn't tell if the Sky Gnome had exposed his connection to the Thayer Consortia on purpose or not, but it had caused heaps of trouble regardless. The little merchant would have to work extra hard to make up for the chaos he had caused.

But he knew that he would have to rely on the Sky Gnome to a certain degree after meeting Catheya. He had no idea that elites required more energy to level up compared to weaker cultivators, which honestly made him worry about his own situation a bit.

Not only were his attributes almost ten times higher compared to a normal cultivator, but he also had high efficiency on the attributes. Add to that that he had a second class to level, and the even more troubling issue of him being a mortal. All that combined made for an extremely torturous leveling experience that would require terrifying amounts of bloodshed and treasures to reach the peak of E-Grade.

As for the grades above that, he didn't even dare think about it.

“How long until you’ve gone through everything?” Zac asked instead as he turned to Clarin.

“We’ll have a preliminary answer for you in two hours,” Calrin hurriedly said. “You can focus on your cultivation with ease.”

Zac nodded before he turned to Ogras.

“So, do you have any advice? The information crystals I have only mentioned the three tribulations,” Zac asked. “Heart, Body, and Soul. It said that using treasures to pass is impossible and that you had to rely on your own prowess. Then it just went on to say that one should have an elder near-by in case of a mishap.”

The information crystal was something he had bought in Base Town during the first week he stayed there. He had bought a bunch of general information crystals that contained all sorts of things that were good to know. Most of it was things that any teenager belonging to a cultivation force would know, which was why they cost almost nothing.

However, that also meant that they didn’t delve too deep into any topics, only giving an overview.

Buying the crystals had been the first step toward self-reliance for the humans of Port Atwood. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Ogras or Alyn’s teachings, but their world view and knowledge were influenced by growing up in Clan Azh’Rezak.

What worked there wasn’t necessarily optimal for Port Atwood, so it didn’t hurt getting another source of knowledge. It wasn’t anywhere near as comprehensive as Thea’s library, but it was a start.

“It differs,” Ogras said as he looked at the Nexus Node while Kenzie was putting the finishing touches to the support array. “It tests you in one of three ways, depending on where The Ruthless Heaven’s feels you are lacking. The tribulation will strike at your weakness, and either you pass or you fail.”

“What happens if you fail?” Zac asked.

“Anything from mild wounds to death depending on how badly you performed and whether someone could disperse the tribulation for you,” the demon shrugged. “But truthfully, I’ve only met one who failed his trial so badly he was forced to give up on cultivation. Obburak, a guard in my home. He undertook the trial drunk out of his mind, it ended with him going insane.”

“Insane? Just what did he encounter?” Zac asked with a frown.

“The Body Tribulation is essentially The Ruthless Heavens beating you up, and you just have to bear it. It is to test that you have created a foundation sturdy enough to keep building upon. You will probably not get that one considering your monstrous constitution,” the demon said with an envious glance. “It is the most common trail for Dexterity and Intelligence-based classes.”

“And then?” Zac urged.

“Next there is the Spirit Tribulation,” the demon continued. “Your soul is attacked in a way that neither Skills nor items can protect you from. You need to use your soul and Dao to defend yourself. The Soul is the connection to the Heavens, and it needs to be strong enough to withstand the weight of the Dao,” Alyn said.

Zac grimaced as he heard the description. His soul was already in a pretty fragile state after having been forcibly torn apart and mended twice the past month. It was a patchwork upon a patchwork, where the slightest thing might set off a chain-reaction beyond his control. However, his soul had become pretty sturdy from the series of harrowing experiences, so he still felt some confidence in case he got that one, at least while the Remnants stayed inactive.

“Finally there is the Heart Tribulation. You will be thrown into illusions and temptations, and you will need to break free. The Heavens test your conviction and mental fortitude. A sturdy body and soul is needed to walk the path of cultivation, but a resolute heart might be even more important,” the demon continued. “This is the trial that turned Obburak into a simpleton, by the way.”

Zac slowly nodded as he listened to the options. The third one didn't feel too difficult either. His mental state should be a lot sturdier compared to most peak F-Grade warriors after his countless life-and-death battles. Many cultivators who had reached this point had never even left their own clan's estates, and this kind of trial might be pretty difficult for that kind of greenhouse warriors.

Still, it was a relief that the risk of death or crippling was pretty low. He could still fail, but he would at least be able to heal up and fight the Undead Empire in his current condition.

“Is it the same for all the rarities, or are there more things to be wary of when talking Epic Classes or higher?” Zac asked.

“Perhaps Epic and higher have different trials apart from the normal three, I wouldn't know,” the demon slowly said. “But they will no doubt be more dangerous. Each increase in rarity means a sharp increase in difficulty that accompanies the tribulation.”

Zac looked at the Crystal with mixed emotions. He wasn't sure if he was ready. He wanted to consolidate his gains and stabilize his foundations before attempting this. But time waited for no man, and he couldn't hold off any longer.

Hearing about the losses out on the ocean, and seeing the scorched landscape outside his home had been a stark reminder that every day he spent on accumulating his strength was another day of disastrous losses across the world.

Perhaps he would be able to enter the heart of the Dead Zone and take out the Lich King without evolving. But perhaps he wouldn't. With the situation looking like it did there would be no second chances or do-overs. If his assault failed or even got slightly delayed the whole world would fall.

He could not have that on his consciousness.

“It's done,” Kenzie said as she looked up with a tired grin.

“Thank you. Try to rest up,” Zac smiled, a pang of guilt blossoming up in his heart again.

He had heard from Ogras just how hard she had fought to keep things together while he was gone, and her unstable aura clearly indicated that her soul was overtaxed. He had already learned from Jaol that using high tech was draining on the soul, and Jeeves was no doubt as high tech as they came.

“Here, take these with you as well,” Zac said as he took out a stack of Soul Crystals. “They'll help restore your mental energy.”

“Where did you get that?” Ogras said with wide eyes, his hand already reaching out to snatch one from Kenzie.

“Here, take this,” Zac snorted and took out a few more after he slapped away the demon's hand. “I got these Soul Crystals from the Mentalist Cultivator on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor as well.”

“It's called a Soul Crystal?” Ogras asked curiously as he tried absorbing it.

“No idea, that's just what I called it,” Zac shrugged. “They didn't have these things on your home planet?”

“I don't think I've ever heard of crystals like this in our sector at all,” Ogras muttered with a frown. “Perhaps our sector simply doesn't produce them. Trade

between sectors is pretty difficult from what I've heard, and only the top people do it. Nobodies like us will have to make do with local products."

"So I won't be able to restock on these things?" Zac muttered with disappointment.

He had thought that might be a real possibility after not having seen a single Soul Crystal during his time in the Base Town, but he had held on to some small hope that was because he'd only been there for less than two weeks. But judging by the demon's reaction he wasn't so lucky.

He suddenly regretted using Soul Crystals like candy during his climb, but he also knew that they had played a large part in him managing to break through the 8<sup>th</sup> floor. But he would have to be more careful about any expenditure going forward, which was fine now that the two primordial Remnants were restraining each other.

With the array installed Zac couldn't wait any longer, and he walked over to the large crystal with brisk steps, anticipation making his heart pound. The moment Zac touched the Nexus Node to initiate the upgrade a screen appeared in front of him, but it was vastly different compared to the sparse rows of information he had seen the last time. He almost completely forgot his surroundings as he eagerly read the boxes.

### **Free Attributes Gained Per Level: 10**

#### **Base Attributes Gained Per Node 76-100:**

Common, Uncommon: Base Attributes: +6

Rare, Epic: Base Attributes: +7

Arcane: Base Attributes: +8

#### **Base Attributes Gained Per Node 101-125:**

Common, Uncommon: Base Attributes: +14

Rare, Epic: Base Attributes: +16

Arcane: Base Attributes: +18

#### **Base Attributes Gained Per Node 126-150:**

Common, Uncommon: Base Attributes: +22

Rare, Epic: Base Attributes: +25

Arcane: Base Attributes: +28

#### **[Option 1.]**

**Name**

**Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)**

**First Skill Gained**

**Gatekeeper of Sukhavati [E-Epic]**

Vitality + 10, Endurance +8, Wisdom +5

Chains of Samsara

*Paradise is waiting, but only the worthy may step past your gates. Divergence from Hatchetman.*

**Name**

**Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)**

**First Skill Gained**

**Undying Warlord [E-Epic]**

Strength +12, Endurance +10

Profane Annihilation

*Unstoppable. Undeniable. Unmatched. Divergence from Undying Bulwark.*

**[Option 2.]**

**Name**

**Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)**

**First Skill Gained**

**Vessel of Destruction [E-Arcane]**

Strength +38, Agility +5 Endurance -10

Avatar of Wrath

*Only through destruction can creation take place. Become the harbinger of a new era. Upgrade of Hatchetman.*

**Name**

**Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)**

**First Skill Gained**

**Nature's Lament [E-Epic]**

Endurance +10, Wisdom +11

Touch of Anguish

*Paradise is a lie, a putrid tomb of unimaginable horrors. Divergence from Undying Bulwark.*

**[Option 3.]**

**Name**

**Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)**

**First Skill Gained**

**Edge of Arcadia [E-Epic]**

Strength +14, Vitality +8

Rapturous Divide

*Even paradise needs a butcher, an unrelenting storm of violence. Upgrade of Hatchetman.*

**Name**

**Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)**

**First Skill Gained**

**Fetters of Desolation [E-Epic]**

Strength +11, Endurance +8, Wisdom +5

Blighted Cut

*Bind them to your calamity. Sever their path. Emerge alone. Divergence from Undying Bulwark.*

**[Option 4.]**

**Name**

**Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)**

**First Skill Gained**

**Gaia's Apostle [E-Epic]**

Strength +5, Vitality +12, Wisdom + 5

Gaia's Eruption

*The champion of verdure, unmatched and unkillable. Upgrade of Hatchetman.*

**Name**

**Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)**

**First Skill Gained**

**Wall of Bones [E-Epic]**

Endurance +18, Vitality +5

Profane Phalanx

*The living can only run in fear as the tide of bones moves forward. Upgrade of Undying Bulwark.*

**[Option 5.]**

**Name**

**Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)**

**First Skill Gained**

**Warmaster of Hecate [E-Epic]**

Strength +15, Vitality +7

Nature's Fall

*Empowered by the Sacred Yew, the Warmaster becomes Death incarnate. Divergence of Hatchetman.*

**Name**

**Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)**

**First Skill Gained**

**Risen Asura [E-Epic]**

Strength +12, Endurance +11

Winds of War

*Not even death can chain down your furor. Divergence of Undying Bulwark.*

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**Chapter 486 - Decision**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

The choices again in case you want a reminder:

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**Base Attributes Gained Per Node 76-100:**

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Rare, Epic: Base Attributes: +7  
Arcane: Base Attributes: +8

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**Base Attributes Gained Per Node 126-150:**

Common, Uncommon: Base Attributes: +22  
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Gaia's Eruption

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Profane Phalanx

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**Name**

**Attribute Per Level (x1/x2/x3)**

### **First Skill Gained**

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Winds of War

*Not even death can chain down your furor. Divergence of Undying Bulwark.*

Zac looked at the options with mixed emotions. He had succeeded in the sense that there actually was an Arcane class available, a class called Vessel of Destruction. However, it didn't have another Arcane to accompany it. It was rather matched with an Epic Class called Nature's Lament.

He had been hesitant about what he should do after hearing Catheya's description, and this only muddied the waters further. With Arcane classes locking in your future path there was a real risk that picking just one Arcane class while leaving the other at Epic might have some unanticipated ramifications.

If there had been a set of two Arcane classes he might just have ignored Catheya's warning and followed Yrial's advice to shoot for the stars, but now he wasn't so sure.

His instincts told him that he needed to create a functioning system between his two classes where both sides moved toward a common goal. He had felt there were some compatibility issues with his second class for some time now, and there was a real risk that his Draugr side might turn into a bottleneck if he wasn't careful.

Zac slowly read the description of Vessel of Destruction. It felt most likely that it was based around the Splinter. It seemed to utilize the rage that the splinter radiated, and the class would perhaps even help him in harnessing the bronze sparks. It also provided a skill called Avatar of Wrath, which sounded like some sort of boosting skill in the vein of [**Hatchetman's Rage**], or perhaps something more akin to [**Vanguard of Undeath**].

However, nothing indicated that it also incorporated the Shard or the balance between the two forces, and neither was there any such indication on the accompanying class. It wasn't surprising though, as there simply hadn't been enough time for him to get acquainted with the pink flashes and the Shard of Creation.

He only had access to it during the frantic escape from the Technocrat vessel and the subsequent battle against the dragon. That was nothing compared to the months of carrying the Splinter and the weeks of constant experimentation into the bronze flashes.

The Dao requirements had been fulfilled after reaching Middle mastery with the Dao of the Coffin, and there was no doubt in his mind that he had gone far beyond what was required to generate enough merit for a second Arcane option. He had conquered the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of the Tower of Eternity. He had taken down a literal dragon before forcing the elites of the whole sector to give in.

He had taken out a whole Technocrat vessel, and he had closed almost all the Incursions of a newly Integrated world. He had even witnessed the 'Terminus', the origin and the end of the Dao itself. If he didn't have enough achievements by now, then who did?

That meant there was a problem with his 'creation'.

There was a fuzzy image of his future cultivation in his mind, one based on a few defining features of his power. It was a path of duality, exemplified through his two classes, his opposing Daos, and the two remnants in his mind. But there was still nothing that really tied these three pairs together. He also had no actual idea what the bronze and pink flashes he created were, or even how he was supposed to properly use them.

He knew that there was no way for him to gain a quick fix to upgrade Nature's Lament to an Arcane option, so he could only drop the issue for now. Cultivation was measured in centuries, even millennia, and he had ample time to figure out the missing pieces of his cultivation path.

There were all sorts of logical reasons why he shouldn't take the Vessel of Destruction, but the word 'Arcane' was like a target that kept drawing back Zac's eyes. The class was clearly powerful, and it would both provide more attributes from the Base Attributes, while almost ten extra attribute points per level.

It was an extremely lopsided class, but his unique situation with bonus attributes would cancel out the huge downside of negative Endurance. He was frozen in indecision for a few seconds, but eventually, his fears of the potential risks overcame the lure of the potential rewards.

He was giving up on an Arcane class for E-Grade.

Zac slowly read through each of the four other options instead, not too surprised with the rarity of them. He had already expected to be presented mostly Epic Classes, perhaps with a few Rare ones peppered in. The only question was how many options he would be provided.

There was no denying that his visit to the Tower of Eternity had been worth it in terms of options to choose from. Not only did his options max out at five, but every single Class apart from Vessel of Destruction was Epic. Most of them were new as well, with only Undying Warlord remaining as an option from his previous inquiry.

The **[Heaven's Secrets Array]** was also showing its worth, and the information he was given was just on a completely different level compared to last time. It didn't just provide him with information about what attributes the classes provided, but even revealed the names of the skills he would gain.

Zac already knew about the base attributes after having spoken with Ylvas and Catheya, but it was still eye-opening to see the numbers in person. It was not without reason that Ogras had said that Low-Tiered Titles were useless for anything except leveraging them into medium and high-tiered counterparts.

Even a common class warrior would gain the equivalent of a top tier Low-tiered title every level while still early E-Grade, excluding Luck of course. Furthermore, that boost would increase further at reaching Middle E-Grade, and then once more upon reaching High E-Grade. If things followed the same pattern as F-Grade, then there might also be a bonus waiting at the peak of E-Grade.

And that wasn't all. The actual class gave another round of attributes on top of the base, and a quick glance proved that an epic class seemed to give another 20 to 25 attribute points, in addition to the ten free attribute points. That meant that a Low E-Grade Warrior with an Epic class would gain almost 80 Attribute points per level, which was in line with what Ylvas had said.

The real question on Zac's mind was how this base worked for him. Judging by the description it seemed like a done deal that he would get the class-specific attributes from both classes, along with two sets of free attributes as he did level his classes separately. But would he also get two base packs per level?

It would make a huge difference, as more than half of the attributes came from the Base Attributes awarded upon breaking open a node. If he didn't get the base attributes twice he'd "only" get 50% more attributes compared to a normal cultivator, drastically reducing his advantage.

Another piece of information that the array added was whether the evolution was an upgrade or a divergence. Zac guessed that meant that the new class would either build upon the earlier class or move it away from its predecessor in some other direction.

For example, Edge of Arcadia and Gaia's Apostle were both clearly related to the Hatchetman Class, but judging by their attributes and skills they went in different directions. Edge of Arcadia seemed to focus more on axe-work whereas Gaia's Apostle leaned toward nature skills like **[Nature's Punishment]** and **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**.

A divergence would instead stake out a new path, perhaps only partially relying on the earlier class. It wasn't surprising that he saw mostly divergent options for his Draugr-class after splitting up its Dao Seeds with hardness going into the Coffin and Sanctuary going into the Bodhi. It might result in some of his old skills becoming obsolete, but Zac already knew that going in.

Zac knew he needed to make a decision, and he first excluded the fourth option. The Draugr-class seemed to be purely defensive, which was the very thing he wanted to move away from. Gaia's Apostle didn't really resonate with him either, even though **[Nature's Punishment]** had been one of his main skills for dealing with tough opponents.

The other three options both had strong points and demerits, but Zac eventually discarded the first option as well, leaving him with options three and five. Undying Warlord seemed like a good fit for him, as it probably was just like his current class with a higher focus on offense. However, the problem was with the class 'Gatekeeper of Sukhavati'.

The class didn't provide a single point in Strength, which indicated a significant step away from his current fighting style. Even worse, it seemed to be lopsided in the sense that it was based on both the Bodhi and the Coffin. He didn't want those two Fragments going into the same class, as he wanted for each class to represent one of the concepts of life and death, or Creation and Oblivion.

The third and fifth options both seemed to fulfill all his goals for his new class. The Draugr Classes seemed to be geared much more offensively compared to Undying Bulwark. Risen Asura gave the feeling of pure violence and oppression, like he would become an unstoppable killing machine that refused to die until all his enemies had fallen before him.

The Fetters of Desolation was a bit less clear, but he still felt it was a very good match. The name of the class didn't really sound like something he'd want to use, but there were some good indications that it was still suited for him. The first indicator was the skill, Blighted Cut. It sounded like a weapon-based attack, and perhaps something that took advantage of the Corrosive elements of the Dao of the Coffin.

The flavor text also made him think of a restriction-based warrior who entrapped and weakened his enemies before he delivered the killing blow. That seemed like a good option to him, as that was the main way that he used his Undying Bulwark Class.

He trapped his enemies in the Miasmatic Cage, then whittled them down with [Winds of Decay], [Deathwish], and the Spectral Chains.

If the enemy tried a desperate strike he took them out with [Vanguard of Undeath] and [Unholy Strike].

Of course, these were still just hypotheses, but there was undeniably something about that class that pulled at him. He wasn't sure whether there was the advertised Karmic Guidance that was supposed to be included in the [Heaven's Secret Array], or if it was because of his recently acquired Spirit Tool.

As for the two classes for his human side, both of them had strong points.

Arcadia contained the meaning of becoming one with nature, which was exactly the direction he wanted to take the class based on his life-aspected vision for his path. But it still had Strength as its main attribute, which clearly indicated a warrior-archetype together with the flavor text and skill option.

However, Warmaster of Hecate had provided an interesting twist to his envisioned path. Hecate was a goddess of witchcraft, death, and poison. It was a fusion of Death and Life, while still being a warrior-type class with a connection to nature. This fit well together with the 'Risen' part of the other class, which seemed based on his recent insight of Life from Death.

So one of the options blended life and death, incorporating a nascent duality of his two main concepts into both the classes. The other option was more neatly separated with his Human side representing life and nature, and his Draugr side representing death and desolation.

The question was whether he wanted to fuse these two concepts already and build upon it, or if it was better to progress in the two paths separately until he understood more about what the paths entailed.

Eventually, his eyes turned to the third option, the combination of Edge of Arcadia and Fetters of Desolation.

He decided to go with this option for two reasons. First was the fact that Warmaster of Hecate was a Divergence of Hatchetman, a class he felt perfectly suited for him. He would rather upgrade his human side and get a Divergent class for his Draugr side.

The second reason was that he felt it was too early to start mucking about and fusing the two concepts of life and death into one single class. He wasn't even sure if that was the form his 'creation' would take in the future, and he didn't want to walk down that path before he had come to a conclusion there.

However, he didn't immediately activate his option, but rather turned toward his sister and Ogras who curiously looked at him.

"It's working," Zac nodded.

"Well no shit," the demon muttered. "You've been standing still with a disgusting grin on your face for five minutes. Are you ready to evolve?"

"I'm going now," Zac nodded.

"None of us can help you if you mess up, so you might as well do it in your courtyard where you won't be disturbed," the demon said. "You will have a minute or so before the tribulation descends."

Zac nodded in agreement, as it sounded as the best option.

"This might take a while, but make sure I'm okay if I haven't emerged in a day," Zac said as he took out the dozen Array Breakers from his Spatial Ring. "And focus on identifying treasures that will help in the battle against the Undead Empire. I'm pretty

sure that these are all Array Breakers, see which ones might be of use against anything the Lich King uses.”

“We’ll certainly extract their secrets by the time you’re done,” Calrin hurriedly nodded, obviously eager to rack up some contribution.

“Good,” Zac nodded before he turned back to the Nexus Node and picked the third option before having a chance to change his mind again.

**[Tribulation will descend in 1 Minute]**

“Good luck,” Kenzie said from the side, but some excitement was evident in her eyes. “You’re making history here.”

“I’ll be back soon,” Zac smiled before he flashed away, quickly returning to his courtyard.

The moment he entered he activated his layered arrays before he sat down on his prayer mat. He doubted it would be of any help, but it did help him calm his mind a bit better as he waited for the minute to pass.

Finally it arrived, and he felt himself being surrounded by a mysterious energy. He couldn’t figure out what it was made of, but it felt a bit reminiscent of the sky of lightning he had witnessed when the Chaos Pattern had appeared. Of course, it was an extremely watered-down version.

He was just about to close his eyes and brace for the tribulation when two prompts appeared in front of him.

**[Heart Tribulation Descends. Struggle for Survival]**

**[Spirit Tribulation Descends. Struggle for Survival]**

“...Shit,” Zac muttered before his world was consumed by pain and fire.

### **Chapter 487 - Heart**

Zac growled from the pain as it felt like his soul had been doused in kerosene and lit on fire. The torment made it almost impossible for him to form a coherent thought, let alone erect some sort of defense.

Not that there was any. He knew that skills and items were useless in a case like this, and he could only bear with it. The pain was agonizing, but it wouldn’t actually hurt his soul unless he gave in. He repeated the word ‘endure’ over and over in his mind, turning it into a mantra of perseverance.

The pain was well beyond what he had expected for a tribulation though, it was almost up there with other terrifying ordeals such as his dip in the Cosmic Water pond. Did everyone have to endure suffering of this magnitude, or was he given special attention because he chose an Epic class?

However, he didn’t have time to form any hypothesis before his surroundings blurred, and he suddenly found himself in his bed. Zac looked around in confusion, his past experiences turning muddled and indistinct as a slender arm reached around him. He smiled and turned over, coming face to face with his new girlfriend.

“What is it?” Hannah asked she scratched his beard with a wink. “Can’t sleep?”

“Something like that,” Zac smiled as he dragged her closer to him.

“Hmm,” Hanna hummed as she leaned in for a kiss as her hand reached downward.

Zac’s body was quick to respond, but he froze just as he was about to reciprocate her actions. How did he get here? Why did things seem so off?

“What’s wrong?” Hannah panted in his ear, her hand stopping just as it was about to reach inside his underwear.

Lust fought with unease, but Zac finally shook his head and climbed out of his bed, his head darting back and forth with a wildness in his eyes.

Something wasn't right.

A heavy sense of wrongness encompassed him even though everything in his studio apartment looked like it should. But a shocking pain in his mind almost made him keel over, and he held his head in his hands as the world turned blurry.

"Zac? What's going on? Should I call an ambulance?" Hanna asked with fright as she ran over, but Zac's eyes widened when a knife suddenly appeared in her hand and sank deep into his chest.

"You're not real," Zac growled, finally remembering what was going on. "This is not real."

"Yes, isn't that what you like to tell yourself after you discarded me like trash?" Hannah sneered as the world collapsed.

Anxiety burned in Zac's chest as he urged the flying disk to move faster, but it felt like he was flying through solid matter as he saw his beleaguered army in the distance. Alea stood in the front, desperately fighting to create an opportunity for the army to survive. But it was for naught as she was cut down where she stood by a group of spectral assassins.

Zac finally managed to push through the solidified air as he landed next to her, and he quickly put a healing pill in her mouth. But it barely had an effect as the wounds kept bleeding, staining the ground in a crimson hue.

"Why didn't you save me?" Alea cried as she looked up at Zac with desolation in her eyes. "I loved you. I bled for you. But you only saw me as a tool to further your goals."

"I—" Zac stammered, but he had no chance to form a response before one sobbing voice after another spoke up around him.

"Why did you give up on us?" a Valkyrie cried. "You were supposed to lead us out of misery, not into it."

"Why?" a dozen dying soldiers cried in anguish, their wails growing in agony and sorrow by the second.

"Why?!"

"WHY?!"

The chorus grew louder and louder, and Zac felt like his mind was splitting apart. A wave of pain came from nowhere at that very moment, making him fall over in agony. He arduously got to his feet again, and he tried to explain himself to the angry mob of corpses. He didn't mean for anyone to die. He was trying to do the right thing, but he was just one man, unable to save everyone.

But the words didn't come. It felt like when he was in a dream where he wanted to throw a punch, but he was wholly impotent to actually urge his hand to move. He wasn't even sure whether his explanation could be considered a legitimate excuse, but it was moot as he couldn't even vocalize a single word. Zac only helplessly fell backward, the screams growing ever louder in his mind.

Alea crawled closer as he mutely sat on the ground, leaving a trail of blood and intestines behind her. It was with great exertion she managed to drag herself up along his torso, completely drenching Zac in blood while doing so. She whimpered in pain as she enclosed him in a final embrace, her head resting on his shoulder.

"Was this all a game to you?" the sorrowful voice of the poison mistress whispered in his ear. "You played around in the Underworld, looking for opportunities

to level up. You left us to fight one of the strongest forces in the Multiverse. You sent us to our deaths. You're the leader, you should join us."

"Join us!" the chorus echoed as a storm of poison seeped out of every pore of Alea's body.

Zac felt muddled from the blazing pain in his head, but his Danger Sense screamed for him to wake up.

*No!*

Zac ardently recoiled in his mind, and the world around him cracked like a broken mirror.

Shame and self-blame threatened to drown Zac as he stood in front of Thea's sickbed. Her piercing blue eyes had lost their luster as she hollowly stared at him, and her ragged breaths told him she already hovered at death's door.

"I thought we had formed an understanding during our time in the Hunt. But the moment we left you forgot about me, discarded me for the next shiny thing. Was that all I was to you? A means to an end during the hunt?" she asked with a voice so weak that it was barely audible.

"Billy was true in his sincerity toward you. But were you sincere toward him? Or were you just patronizing him while abusing his naiveté and strength? You didn't even bother going in person to help with his Incursion, you rather sent a subordinate to steal the main achievement from him," Thea continued, despondency creeping into her voice.

"That's not--"

"Yet we came here, leaving our own people to fend for themselves. Just so that you wouldn't have yet another excuse to avoid doing the right thing. We bled for you. Why won't you do the same?" she said just as her eyes grew blank, her final breath leaving her lungs.

Panic made Zac's heart beat like a drum, but he suddenly calmed down as he looked at the unmoving body of Thea Marshall.

"You're alive, and I will save you all," Zac growled as the world crumbled.

He had dreaded this moment, but Zac was finally here, his fingers fidgeted with nervousness as he walked across the field toward the man sitting on a rock. His steps were unsteady from the mounting pain in his head, but this thing couldn't be held off any longer.

The man looked upon hearing Zac's approach, his disfigured face scrunching up in anger upon seeing who it was. David slowly stood up with the assistance of a cane, and he spat at the ground the moment Zac arrived.

"I was captured, tortured, left for dead. All because I used to know you," David said before Zac had a chance to greet him, his face contorting in anger and pain. "I wake up screaming every night, drenched in sweat, because of what that lunatic put me through. But you didn't even come to visit me. You threw me out of your mind as you stowed me away on this desolate island, where I wouldn't be able to remind you of what you've become."

"Hannah," Zac said, but he was interrupted by David, whose fury was quickly mounting.

"Hannah was traumatized, manipulated, and abused. First by The Lord of Eyes, then by the infiltrators, and finally by your little demon lover. You couldn't even wait for a second to cast her away the moment she finally regained a sense of stability. All because she didn't fit with your 'new self', the great lone-wolf warrior who consorted with Demons," David spat.

“But perhaps it’s for the best, no?” the mutilated man said as he swung his cane at Zac. “Better to be a cast-away than turned into a cursed piece of jewelry.”

Zac tried to catch the cane, but another wave of pain made him space out, and he found himself on the ground as David desperately tried to pummel him.

“It’s all your fault!” he screamed, but he was forced to stop as he spat out a mouthful of blood from the exertion.

“I’m sorry,” Zac said through grit teeth as he woke up from his stupor, once again realizing he was inside an illusion. “The way I treated you isn’t right. I will visit the real you when this is all over.”

The world dissipated in a haze, and he was surprised to find himself in a very familiar place, this time completely aware he was still undergoing the Heart Tribulation. It was his childhood room where he had lived until he moved out at 21. However, it looked vastly different from how it did before the Integration. It was rather decorated exactly the same as when he was a child.

That wasn’t all, as he could actually see himself lying asleep in his bed. Why was the System showing him this? It was no doubt another trick of the Heart Tribulation, but why was it so different compared to the other ones that preyed on his emotions? Why had he come here like some sort of Ghost of Christmas Future?

A wave of agony suddenly burst through the illusion, and Zac found himself soundlessly screaming into the room. The waves of pain were getting worse, and Zac was getting worried that the other Tribulation was running amok with him stuck in these visions.

Becoming aware that this was all an illusion obviously wasn’t the key to getting out, so he started to look around for any clues on how to break the illusion. But there was no clearly identifiable clue to help him escape, and he could only turn to the sleeping form in the bed.

It was a surreal feeling to see himself as a ten-year-old. Things he had completely forgotten were reproduced with perfect crispness as well. There were his posters and the orange lava lamp that always were turned on when he went to bed but inexplicably turned off when he awoke. Of course, it was his parents who turned it off as they checked in on him, but today it was still turned on in the middle of the night.

However, that small detail wasn’t the only thing that was a bit off.

There was a note of discordance in the memory, the sounds of agitated voices seeping through the door. The two voices grew gradually louder, but Zac still couldn’t make out any distinct words. The fact that it felt like his head was splitting apart didn’t make things easier either. He tried to move closer to the source of the commotion, but he found himself stuck next to the bed, or perhaps rather stuck to his younger self.

However, the argument taking place outside his room was soon enough to wake up the ten-year-old version of himself, and Zac couldn’t help but feel some trepidation as he saw himself getting out of bed. He looked just as confused as Zac felt, but he still silently moved over toward his door. Zac thankfully moved in accord, and they got closer to the source of the sounds.

“... Doctor,” Zac heard as they inched closer, and he could finally confirm that it was his father’s voice, though the voice sounded frantic in a way that he had never heard before.

Young Zac seemed to come to the same realization as he slowly turned the doorknob and created a small crack in his door without making a sound. It was just enough for some light from the corridor to bleed inside, along with the voices. The voices of his parents.

“Doctor? What would some mortal doctor be able to help me with?” Leandra snorted, her voice dripping with disdain. “Besides. I am telling you I am not sick.”

“Darling, calm down. You just had a baby, don’t get agitated,” Robert seemed to try to placate her.

“I’m not agitated, I’m just telling you what needs to happen,” his mom answered with a cold tone that Zac had never heard before. “I guess I can consider myself lucky that the pain of childbirth startled me awake.”

Zac frowned as he listened in on the conversation from his vantage as a silent specter behind his own body. Was this actually a memory of his, or yet another lie shown by the System? Because he couldn’t remember this ever happening in his real life, though his childhood had always been a bit hazy.

But judging from the discussion and how old he looked, this might just be the night when his mother disappeared, never to be heard from again.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 488 - The Final Era**

“Did you really plan on leaving while just leaving a note? What about Zac? What about our daughter?” Robert wheezed, his franticness turning to anger mid-sentence.

“Don’t mention that little monster. And I am doing this for our daughter. She is destined for greatness,” Leandra retorted. “Against all odds, she is an actual match. She will finish what her ancestors started tens of millions of years ago.”

Another wave of pain intruded in his mind, but Zac growled as he forcibly pushed it away with far greater fervor than he had done before. He refused to be disturbed by the other tribulation at this point. He wasn’t sure if this was all real or not, but he needed to hear what his parents were saying.

What the hell did she mean by calling him a monster? And what was with the ambiguous wording of his dad? His mind was running a mile a minute, but he had no chance to digest the words of his mother before she spoke up again.

“You know what? Why am I even-“ his mother’s continued, before a muffled scream followed by a thud came from the room on the other side of the corridor, his parent’s room.

And the room where his sister slept.

“I’m sorry, Robert,” Leandra sighed, her voice barely audible through the door. “In another lifetime, perhaps.”

Terror was clearly written on the face of his younger self, but Zac still saw himself slowly open the door and sneak outside. There was a shining light coming from the next-door room, and he steeled himself before he glanced inside.

Only to lock eyes with Leandra who stood next to the crib, an unconscious Robert by her feet.

“You heard us?” she said as she looked at the younger Zac with an unperturbed face.

His younger self didn’t say a word, but he only looked down at the unmoving form of his father, before his eyes turned back to his newly-born sister who still radiated a red light from her forehead.

“Some things have been set in motion that cannot be stopped. You were the first, and she is the second. Perhaps this is for the best, I was never happy with the original plan in any case,” she said with a calm voice as she looked down at him. “And the heavens proved me right.”

Zac observed his mother as a specter behind his younger self, and it felt like a wave of memories were awakened by the familiar face. However, there was a difference between the gentle woman that hazily appeared in the back of his mind, and the woman in front of him. The gentleness was utterly gone, replaced by far uglier emotions hiding within her eyes as she looked down at his younger self.

Disgust and rage.

He, or rather his ten-year-old self, was clearly in shock by the turn of events, but he still spoke up.

“Is Kenzie sick?” he said hesitantly as he fearfully took a step toward the crib.

“You want to protect her?” Leandra laughed. “Well, perhaps you can be good for something. I can’t stay here. My awakening has already alerted the Cursed Heavens and some other old bastards. Someone will need to stand guard as we rebuild from the ground up.”

It looked like his younger self received a shock the next second, and he fell over right next to Kenzie’s cradle. The present Zac was still there though, and he looked down at himself before his eyes once again turned back to Leandra.

It at least looked like she wasn’t aware of his existence, in contrast to Be’Zi and her husband who could sense his presence in his visions. She gave the two unmoving forms on the floor a long look before she once again focused on Kenzie, but Zac couldn’t understand what she was doing.

She stood unmoving with her hand on his sister’s infant head for a good ten minutes, but there were no changes and no energy fluctuations as far as Zac could tell.

“It can still be salvaged,” she breathed in relief as she took a step back.

The next moment she bent down and put her index finger against his forehead, and a shudder ran through his ten-year-old body. Finally, she walked over to a cabinet in the room, and a familiar item appeared in her hand; the pendant. She placed it next to a paper before she took one last look at the room where she had lived the past ten years.

“Keep her safe. I’ll be back to claim her after I’ve dealt with this mess,” she mumbled down at Robert, or perhaps himself. “She is carrying the fate of the Final Era.”

A rift opened up in space the next moment, and she walked right through it without a second glance.

Confusion muddled his thoughts as he tried to make sense of the vision. Was this really what happened twenty years ago when his mother disappeared? Had she wiped his memory of the actual events, planting the story of her mysterious disappearance?

And what was with her reaction to him? Zac didn’t remember her fondly due to her abandonment as a child, but he had to admit that she had been nothing but a good mother before she disappeared. But the eyes of Leandra had been those of a fanatic on a mission, almost reminding Zac of Salvation.

There was one possibility that immediately came to mind though; Robert wasn’t his biological father.

It might even be possible that Leandra wasn’t his mother, but his instincts told him they were mother and son. They had a lot of similar features, especially their eyes

who looked identical. But perhaps her hatred was a projection of any animosity she carried for his biological father?

That was the only reason he could think of that would explain the hatred from his own flesh and blood.

Leandra's grand proclamations of carrying out the will of the ancestors and the 'Fate of the Final Era' also felt extremely ominous, and not something he wanted Kenzie to get embroiled in. But was it really up to him, or was their mother really coming back to take Kenzie away?

A mother reuniting with her children might seem like something good, but there was something deeply wrong with the way Leandra had looked at Kenzie as well, though there wasn't the unmasked hatred she held for Zac. Was Leandra just using her as nourishment for Jeeves, where the mysterious AI was using Kenzie and her soul as an incubation chamber until the point that Leandra came to steal it?

That would explain why the AI had taken so long to awaken. It only happened months after the integration was over according to his Sister. Had it fed on her soul until that point, slowing her progression and weakening her potential?

Then again, all this was just conjecture, his frayed mind running amok from not knowing whether this was real or fake. Was this just the System messing with his head, preying on his fears, causing a bout of paranoia that would trap him in this illusion forever? Or was it trying to create a rift between himself and his mother, making sure that he never joined Leandra's camp?

Did the System have other plans for him?

Zac's mind was a mess, and he felt a weird sense of disconnect with reality like he had been living a lie his whole life. The whole room around him started to twist and contort like it tried to superimpose on his own sense of reality.

His emotions started to spiral out of control, but Zac quickly stabilized his thoughts. He knew that these feelings were mostly fake. This was the Heart Tribulation. The System had shown him an illusion that had caused a crack in his mental fortitude, and it had tried to push him toward insanity from there.

But his mind wasn't so easily shaken, not after all the things he had gone through the past year. He had looked at the Terminus and survived, how could this compare? Perhaps the things he had seen were real, perhaps they weren't. It wasn't much that he could do about it in either case if he didn't get stronger.

The fact that their mother might have ulterior motives about Kenzie had been something that Zac had considered a real possibility since the moment he figured out their origin. Witnessing this scene did nothing to change that. He would still keep his guard up for anything that might come his way.

It was the same with his own heritage. Perhaps Robert wasn't his biological father, but so what? He had been as real a father as any could have been. The fact that there might be some other guy out there didn't matter in the slightest to Zac, he could just be considered a sperm donor at best if it even was true. There was no point in looking into the matter any further.

It was far more important to keep improving and get stronger.

Only then would he be able to achieve his goals, only then would he be able to feel a sense of safety and freedom. He needed to become stronger to protect his sister and everyone else that had come to mean something to him over the past year. To protect Earth itself against those who wished it harm.

The room drenched in the red glow cracked, and he immediately found himself back in his body, the real one. He didn't know exactly what had changed, but he

somehow felt stable, like he could face anything with a calm heart. Was this a hidden benefit of succeeding against the Heart Tribulation?

He breathed out in relief, but he quickly remembered that he wasn't out of the woods just yet. He just overcame the Heart Tribulation, but there was still the Soul Tribulation to deal with. Just before he was dragged into the illusion he had felt like his soul was lit on fire, and it had made itself remembered multiple times during the hallucinations as well.

Another wave of terrifying agony assaulted him the moment he remembered his predicament, setting his whole world on fire. He screamed in pain, but he quickly activated the Fragment of the Axe and spread it across his whole soul. The Soul was the connection to the Dao, and his fragments would be able to dampen the effect of the Tribulation from what he knew.

And thankfully, the searing pain quieted down by a noticeable degree the moment his soul was covered in a dense layer of his Dao. It was just like when he used the Seed of Trees to ward off the corruption in the wound that Mhal left in his side. However, the mysterious energy that had descended upon him was still there in full force, meaning he wasn't safe just because his tactic had worked out.

Zac quickly looked inwards and breathed out in relief when he saw that his soul was fine apart from some small wounds that could be fixed with a normal Soul Healing Pill. It was a lot better than he had feared after having felt those bouts of agony during the Heart Tribulation, and nothing compared to the time after the Shard had ripped it apart and ensconced itself in the tears.

But one part was a bit worrying. The scars were still there, and not only did they seem more integrated with his soul, but they had now regained some of their luster. Had they somehow managed to feed on whatever energy the System used to put his soul under pressure?

The pain quickly got worse though, making Zac unable to gather any further clues from the scars. The Dao energy of the Axe was somehow losing its efficacy, but Zac had an idea and swapped to the Fragment of the Coffin. The pain became manageable once more, and Zac soon set into a cyclic pattern where he moved from one Dao Fragment to another to handle the Soul Tribulation.

Zac lost track of time as he just focused on enduring, but it gradually grew harder as the effect grew steadily worse, even if he kept swapping between Daos. However, a sudden shudder from within his soul suddenly blasted his defenses straight open, giving the tribulation energy free access to his soul.

However, Zac felt no pain at all as two whirlpools appeared, one black and one white, and they dragged the Tribulation Energy into the abyss with extreme fervor. Zac was shocked to see that the energy didn't go into the scars though, but the other side of the whirlpools were clearly inside the cage that housed the two Remnants.

Both of them seemed enlivened, and they started fighting with each other once more. However, they quickly calmed down and focused on absorbing the unwilling Tribulation Energies. Zac tried to figure out a way to break the connection, but he couldn't destroy the two whirlpools no matter what he did.

However, it thankfully looked like he had the System on his side this time. It Seemed that it considered him having passed the second Tribulation as well as the Soul Tribulation was actually becoming food, and the energies around Zac dissipated the next second. Better yet, the Fractals of the cage woke up once more and stole most of the energy from the Remnants.

They looked clearly upset about the situation as they slammed their tendrils against the walls, but the cage didn't even shudder as it continued its siphoning. A few

minutes later a surge of extremely pure energies seeped into his soul and body, and he felt extremely invigorated. The wounds on his soul closed by themselves, and he felt a huge surge of power coursing through his body.

He had made it, he was finally an E-Grade Mortal.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have a

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**Chapter 489 - A Frayed Web of Uncertainty**

What had changed?

Who had made such a mess of his Karma, turning it into a frayed web of uncertainty? Finding the source of the Karmic Turbulence had proven futile though, with connections having formed from every single direction. There was a larger overlying cause, but any attempt of his to scry the source was met with failure.

Voridis hesitated for a while longer until he finally made a decision. There was a populated world just one jump away, and Voridis realigned his vessel after casting an obscuring haze to confuse any potential pursuers. He needed to know what was going on. Had the orthodox faction among the elders finally made their move?

That was the only explanation Voridis could think of as he descended upon the planet. The humanoids of the town he chose fell to the ground as their futures were drained clean, but these morsels wouldn't even pay for the delay to his plan. Only the Mayor was left alive, turned into a marker to enable his return.

Anger bubbled in Voridis' chest as he located the Nexus Hub and teleported away after donning his disguise. He was finally reaching fruition of his goal, thousands of years of planning on the cusp of producing results. His wretched circumstances over the past eons would all change as long as he succeeded, but something was threatening to ruin it all.

A brief bout of darkness swallowed him before he appeared in a simple tower.

"Identification," the golem rumbled with a threatening tone, but it immediately backed away when Voridis flashed his token as a member of the Hephasar.

His identity was stolen, of course, the token was taken from the body of one of their Chieftains. But they wouldn't know for a few centuries as the corpse of the man was currently soaring through the outskirts of the sector attached to a meteor.

His family was still believing him to be traveling the Zecia sector in search of opportunities to form his inner sanctum, when it was just his body kept 'alive' by special means. Voridis snickered at the thought as flew straight toward the floating palace in the distance, the local chapter of The Hidden Whispers.

Just emitting a hint of his aura, modified to be unrecognizable of course, was enough for him to immediately receive VIP treatment. He was led into an opulent room where an elderly man waited. Voridis inwardly snorted in annoyance when he realized the old man was not only Peak D-Grade as well, but also wearing multiple layers of protection.

So much for free information.

"What do you wish to know?" the man said with a smile as they sat down.

"Voridis A'Heliophos," Voridis said with a growl.

"Oh, you too? Well, it is no wonder," the old man smiled, his eyes never leaving Voridis in search of any clues.

“Hmph,” Voridis grunted noncommittally, though he was extremely anxious to know what the man meant.

It really looked like there was something wrong, to the point that it was already spread to the better information houses within a day.

He wanted to trap the old bastard’s soul and drain it of its secrets, but he knew he couldn’t cause any waves in this place. There was a C-Grade Monarch presiding over this town, after all. Voridis normally wouldn’t have come to a place like this at all, but he was afraid some backwater Information House wouldn’t have the information he needed.

“What does Sir need to know? I am afraid we have no clues about his current whereabouts. But we have gathered his known movements over the past few Millennia,” the old man said. “We are also buying any pertinent information.”

“I heard there are opportunities related to his capture from certain channels, but I just emerged from cultivation,” Voridis said. “I need to know what rewards there are.”

“I understand. Sir can buy the relevant information for 1 Billion Nexus Coins. The price is steep due to how fresh it is, these things will not become public knowledge for some time,” the old man smiled.

“Hmph, old thief,” Voridis snorted, but he still transferred the money without hesitation.

A few minutes later he was returning toward the Nexus Hub with haste, not wanting to spend one second longer in this place than necessary. He paid the exorbitant fee and teleported away, once again returning to the remote town at the edge of the Zecia sector.

Voridis culled the Mayor as well before he flew off in his vessel, not leaving a soul behind who could bear witness to his appearance. He quickly performed his obscuration rite before he jumped back to the original plane, only then feeling safe from pursuit once more. He didn’t immediately set the course toward the closest beacon though, but he started reading the contents of the missive he just bought.

He needed to know who would have to pay the ultimate price for messing with his plans.

However, Voridis’ anger was exchanged for exhilaration the more he read. Ninth Floor? Known across the Sector? Powerhouses of the upper realms asking about him? How was it possible that he had lucked into such a huge windfall?!

A soul embraced by the fate of a world, a world steeped in the Energy of Inception. Two Fulcrums, and one world would be born from the death of another. But what if the Fulcrum of Fate was powerful enough that it could impact the whole Sector? His plan no longer seemed like a long-shot, but almost a foregone conclusion.

It felt like his worn body was injected with stimulants as his mind ran thousands of simulations to make sure that his original design for his Fulcrum Array would still work. He might need to make some alterations to capitalize on the external Karmic Links, but it was definitely possible.

As for any repercussions, he didn’t care. That brat would disappear long before the Shroud of the Ruthless Heavens dissipated, turning him into an interesting but forgettable side-note of the Zecia Sector’s history. No-one would mourn or avenge the death of an unattached F-Grade brat.

The question now was how to locate which of the seed worlds held the key to his ascension.

“What is your impression of the situation?” Theos asked.

“It’s tricky. Voridis is extremely crafty, but Zac Piker is no doubt in possession of multiple Teleportation Tokens. If Voridis makes a mistake a lingering threat might be created, one that would lead to the demise of our clan,” Reolus sighed as his milky-white eyes gazed toward the stars. “I can’t see it...”

“I know,” Theos Heliophos sighed. “Voridis will never back away from such a convergence of Karma, even if I send out Geros in person. I should have followed the whispers of fate and killed that boy. I became too greedy.”

“We all did,” Reolus muttered from the side. “So what do you want to do?”

“Spread the news. I will perform a Fate Augmentation to the person who brings Voridis to us, dead or alive,” Theos said after a while. “Make a show of looking for him as well, but no need to draw upon the Eyes of Heaven. We’ll show our stance, and let the chips fall where they may. We are not yet facing a choice between calamity and fortune.”

“Voridis will either find him, or he won’t,” Reolus nodded. “It has nothing to do with us. But what about those people from the higher planes?”

“They won’t cause any storms in this remote place over a single child, at least not until someone claims him. There’s no lack of talents in the higher planes, and even if they miss out on this seedling, another one will come along in a millennium or two from another sector,” Theos said.

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“They failed,” the sturdy man growled as the golden flames in the brazier died out, ending the telepathic communication.

“Perhaps this was the Boundless Heavens punishing us for consorting with the cursed races,” Vicar Uld sighed as his hand created the sigil for a blessing. “Bishop Kyhv-Elerad and our brothers have joined the embrace of the Heavens, it is a small consolation at least.”

Uld had honestly been skeptical about the excursion from the beginning, which is why he sent Kyhv-Elerad and kept his trusted subordinate Trovad next to him. Both of them were zealots and fools, but Kyhv-Elerad had already cozied up to Arkensau. And he couldn’t have that.

He really missed Bishop Orsiccas, the only other leader of the mission team that knew of the true purpose of these Invasions. Sending his confidante over to secure the body of the Monarch-Select had been a massive miscalculation, one that had left him alone dealing with these maniacs for months.

“Did we manage to retrieve any of the bodies?” Uld still had to ask. “I would like to send them back to be interred among the other martyrs.”

“None made it back after stepping foot on the island,” Trovad sighed. “Only the vessel aiming for the spatial tunnel survived.”

“Shame,” Uld muttered, feeling the pinch of missing an opportunity to make some money.

“Some good news has emerged from the Incubator Realm though,” Trovad added. “We have managed to seize and purify one of the towns on the second layer. Our scribes are already working at gaining control of the systems. Inquisitor Arkensau has entered the depths.”

Uld nodded with equanimity, but a pang of annoyance flared up in his chest upon hearing that name. This was supposed to be his opportunity, his chance to garner massive amounts of credit with the Zecia Chapter. But who would have expected the

Grand Cardinal to send his own disciple to this remote planet to take charge of the invasion?

He had thought that this would be his chance to get transferred out of the Zecia sector to one of the real Cathedrals of the Everlasting Dao. To be anointed in the holy flames and born anew as a true elite of unlimited potential. But that bastard was stealing it under his nose, and he was unable to do anything about it.

“Have we located the inception point of the Dimensional Seed yet?” Uld asked. “We’re only a few months away from its completion.”

He still couldn’t believe that a treasure like a Dimensional Seed could be found in a remote sector like the Zecia. He had never even heard of such a thing before the Grand Cardinal himself explained what it was and the importance of acquiring it. There shouldn’t be enough energy in this area of space. Just which of the heretic factions was it that had created this mystic realm?

That seed held the promise of endless possibilities. It could be the core to create a Hidden Realm of almost unimaginable size. Imagine, controlling a Hidden Realm that would slowly grow to the size of an Empire. But in contrast to a normal Empire that was beset by threats in all directions, you would be a true hegemon as long as you controlled who could enter through the spatial tunnel.

A hidden Realm of that quality was unheard of in a small place like Zecia.

But that wasn’t the reason the Grand Cardinal wanted it. There was one more usage for the Seed from what Urd understood. It could be used as a foundation upon creating the Inner Sanctum of a C-Grade Monarch. It would help create a world so powerful that it might even have enough potential to take that mythical next step.

The vaunted B-Grade.

The Grand Cardinal couldn’t use it for himself since he had already formed his inner world, but Uld was willing to bet that he planned on trading it for some opportunity to break through his current bottleneck, or to be transferred to the Embrace of the Boundless Heavens. Even Uld himself was tempted to take the treasure and run, but he knew that was impossible with the Martyr Array engraved into his soul.

There was no escape, only obedience.

“We haven’t found it yet, the spatial anomalies are too numerous, rendering our arrays useless. We have been forced to search manually, but those natives know the depths far better than us, leading to setbacks,” Trovad said.

“Well, Inquisitor Arkensau is the best suited for handling the Natives,” Uld said.

“What about the last vessel and the Monarch-Select?”

“Have them investigate whether they can destroy the entrance,” Uld said. “We will not be able to hold that place it seems, but we might at least be able to stop the Monarch-Select from entering.”

“What about the Super-Brother Man?” Trovad asked with a smoldering anger. “With all due respect, are we leaving him after what he’s done?”

“The Monarch-Select has no choice but to assault the cursed races if he wants to protect this planet,” Uld said with a small smile. “We will find our opportunity there, we will be able to end both the Natives and the Unliving in one fell swoop if the Heavens provide. Inform Inquisitor Arkensau about the return of the Monarch-Select. He will no doubt be interested in joining the Holy War.”

Trovad’s eyes lit up with fervor upon hearing the term Holy War, and quickly left the chapel after saluting. Uld looked at the receding back of the Bishop with some disdain, before he started to plan his next move.

If he played his cards right he might be able to realize all his goals in one fell swoop. If all three of those powerful bastards died he would be half-done. Only those monstrous Insectoids and the slippery bastards inside the Mystic Realm would stand between him and the Dimensional Seed.

Those were odds he was willing to take.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 490 - The Second Step**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

So, a quick status update for December.

DotF will take its first real vacation for ten days this winter, with **no scheduled chapters between 21-31 of December**. This will affect both (all tiers) and RoyalRoad.

The schedule will return back to normal in January, with standard Mon-Saturday releases and two bonus chapters for \$10 Tier. Release schedule 1-19 Dec will also be the same as usual.

Zac took a deep breath as he looked around, a sense of calmness filling him.

He had done it, he'd passed the first true bottleneck of cultivation, the watershed that separated those who had a shot at immortality and those who were destined to stay mortal. He had been a bit worried about complications arising due to his weird body without any affinities, but it looked like he had been worrying about nothing.

Then again, he certainly understood why most warriors waited to consolidate their gains before evolving, some taking years to ready themselves for the Tribulation. He hadn't been prepared for just how perilous it would be. However, things had gone above expectations all things considered. Getting dual Tribulations was pretty rough, but he almost felt he was lucky it happened.

The Heart Tribulation was much harder than the Spirit Tribulation in his case. Enduring pain was his forte by now, but he had been drawn into those visions that preyed on his insecurities way too easily. If it wasn't for the constant waves of pain he might have forgotten himself for real, which would have made it so much harder to extricate himself.

He might even have failed that Tribulation altogether.

It was dealt with now though, and he wouldn't have to worry about the next Tribulation for quite some time. The remnants had fallen asleep again it seemed, but they didn't look quite as wretched as before. However, it was a good sign that they immediately started fighting each other rather than the cage the moment they got energized, and perhaps he wouldn't have to keep living in dread of their awakening.

But he made a mental note to mention the arrays for the Soul Strengthening Manual to his sister. Perhaps she could work on it while he dealt with the undead threat.

He cracked his neck and looked down at his watch, extremely surprised to see that almost 14 hours had passed since he sat down. It felt like the Tribulations hadn't taken more than half an hour. Something had messed with his sense of time it seemed, most likely the five visions.

But it still was better than his allotment of one day, and it gave him some room to figure out his situation. He immediately opened his status screen to see what was going on.

Name

Zachary Atwood

Level

75

Class

[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia

Race

[E] Human

Alignment

[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord

Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Monarch-Select

Limited Titles

Frontrunner, Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th

Dao

Fragment of the Axe - Middle, Fragment of the Coffin - Middle, Fragment of the Bodhi - Early

Core

[E] Duplicity

Strength

1704 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 199%]

Dexterity

708 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 170%]

Endurance

1871 [Increase: 99%. Efficiency: 199%]

Vitality

1136 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 189%]

Intelligence

434 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 170%]

Wisdom

721 [Increase: 70%. Efficiency: 170%]

Luck

321 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 179%]

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

[F] 6 862 691 291

There wasn't a lot of things that had changed to the status screen from his evolution, apart from his attributes having increased a by quite a bit. However, Zac was a bit surprised he was still level 75. He had assumed that he would move to level 76 upon evolving, but it looked like he was wrong in that regard. It seemed that Evolving was just shedding the limiters on your body, but you would still have to do the work yourself.

He opened his Class Screen next, and he saw one of the major sources for his massive boost in Strength.

**Class: [E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia.**

**Strength +100, +10%. Vitality +50, +5%.**

**Level: Strength +14/28/42, Vitality +8/16/24, +10 Free.**

**Skills: Rapturous Divide (LOCKED)**

The class itself gave him an impressive 100 flat Strength, which turned into almost 200 thanks to his titles. He guessed that his Draugr form provided a similar boost, but he held off on swapping over for the moment as there were more things he wanted to check out first. Another reason for his increased attributes rather was his new title.

He couldn't help but be a bit curious about his first E-Grade title, and he focused on the line that said 'Monarch-Select'. Titles would get harder and harder to get now that he had Evolved, so anything he got was likely based on a real tough accomplishment.

**[Monarch Select: First to Reach E-Grade in World Reward: Base attributes +50, Luck +5, All stats +5%]**

The term 'Base Attributes' was the same as the one he had seen on the prompt where he chose which class to upgrade. It looked like any low-tiered title he got now wouldn't give +All Stats any longer, as the boost to Luck would be too massive. That was a relief for Zac though as it meant it would be easier for him to maintain his advantage.

The flat attribute bonus was enormous though, 50 points in each attribute was a massive boost even for him, especially with his extreme multipliers. A single title gave him 305 raw attribute points, which was almost as much as he got from gaining 50 levels while in F-Grade. Add to that yet another multiplier, and he had gained big from not letting anyone else snag this unique title.

He had thought that the massive amounts of Attributes gained from his Dao Fragments would be the only thing that mattered for a while, but he now knew that wasn't the case. Both his levels and Limited Titles would provide massive boosts that would be equally impressive.

It really made sense now that he could take care of dozens of Early E-Grade warriors without breaking a sweat, but started struggling against Middle E-Grade warriors. Peak E-Grade was still impossible for him to deal with, even the weakest ones.

Just breaking open all nodes alone would rack up to something like 1300 points in each attribute by the time one would have reached level 150. Furthermore, someone

who had reached Peak E-Grade couldn't be complete trash as such people would have been weeded out long before then. They would have a bunch of titles and Daos to supplement those attributes even further.

There was still a long way for him to go.

The name of the title made him think of something else as well, and he opened the Quest Screen next. As expected, there were new quests that had appeared in the previously empty menu.

**Second Step of Hegemony (Unique, Limited): Enter the Trial within one Year. Reward: Unique E-Grade Structure (Quality based on performance), Qualification to stake claim on World. (0/1)**

Zac's eyes lit up with glee as he saw the new quest. He had been pretty sure that he would get something like this upon Evolving, and he had been proven right. The quest where he had killed the Star Ox had only been called the first step, which heavily indicated it to be a chain quest.

That quest had given him the ticket to the Tower of Eternity which had turned out hugely beneficial to him, so he had high hopes for the follow-up quest as well.

And the rewards really didn't disappoint.

Every unique structure that Zac had seen had come with enormous benefits to a nascent force. Brazla was pretty annoying, but the value of the inheritances and the Skill Repositories was enormous. The Creator Shipyard was perhaps even greater, with the ability to upgrade its grade perhaps even all the way to B-Grade. Even Thea's Library was a valuable asset.

Qualification to stake claim was likely related to upgrading one's town to a World Capital, and himself from a Lord to whatever the equivalent was of someone ruling over a whole planet. However, the upgraded title wasn't directly given as a reward, making Zac believe there was some hidden catch to the qualification.

Perhaps it would activate some sort of quest that pitted him against the world, and he wasn't sure if he was ready to do that while the Dominators were still around. But as long as he dealt with them one way or another he felt confident that no one on earth would have anything to say about him becoming the de-facto leader of the planet.

The contents of the quest itself were equally vague as the last one though. It looked like he would be teleported to another world once more. However, after having completed over 70 levels in the Tower of Eternity it didn't feel like a challenge to do one more.

The only issue was that of what level the System expected him to be before undertaking the trial. For the last quest he had been given a month before he needed to activate the quest, but this time there was a full year. It was great for Zac who had his hands full at the moment, but it also made him wonder what level of strength was expected to complete the quest.

However, the Hegemony Quest would have to wait until he'd dealt with the more pressing issues, and he rather turned his attention to another quest that had appeared.

**Rapturous Divide (Class): Split Life and Death. Reward: Rapturous Divide Skill (0/1).**

The second quest was far more inscrutable than any other Skill quest he had gotten before now. Split Life and Death? What did that even mean? It made him long for the easier tasks back in F-Grade, which essentially told him to go chop a tree or kill some monsters. It really felt like he finally had left the beginner village of a game and the difficulty suddenly spiked.

Life and death were related to his path though. Was the System testing him? Or perhaps even pushing him to experiment until he managed to push his Creation to the next level. He already knew that there would be less hand-holding in the E-Grade, and that was probably even more so for Epic-Ranked Classes.

They were on the precipice of forming their own cultivation paths, and it made sense that the System tried to encourage you in that regard.

It also probably meant that his other Class, Fetters of Desolation, had a similarly inscrutable quest to gain the **[Blighted Cut]** skill. The name might sound simpler compared to **[Rapturous Divide]**, but he doubted that meant it was a weaker skill or an easier quest. **[Chop]** was a pretty simple skill, but it had become a staple of his fighting style, something that could be used in almost any situation.

Apart from the quests and the updated class, there was not much new in the Status Screen. However, there were still differences to explore, and Zac turned his vision inwards. His outward appearance was the same, but that couldn't be said for his interiors. Almost completely new Pathways had been branded onto his body after he passed the tribulations.

The pathways were far more intricate compared to before, and there was a sense of spirituality radiating from them that had been completely missing before. His skills were thankfully all still there, and from the looks of it, the fit of his skills was at least as good as before. However, that might not be the case on his undead side, as he had chosen a divergent class.

Zac immediately started to experiment with his new pathways, it felt as though he could cram massive amounts of Cosmic Energy into the pathways without damaging them. That would no doubt allow him to generate far more power in his attacks, provided that the Skill Fractals could accommodate all that extra energy.

However, even though the flow of Cosmic Energy far eclipsed anything he'd felt before, he still noticed dozens of spots in his pathways that worsened the circulation. They reminded Zac of stagnant ponds in the middle of a river of Cosmic Energy, disrupting the flow and tainting the outlet.

They could be found all over his body, but they seemed to mainly be in 'critical' spots, with almost two-thirds being found in his head and torso. But there were also places like this in every major joint, and next to the locations that housed or could house Skill Fractals. Were these hazy ponds the nodes he needed to break?

It was as though these stagnant pools in his pathways both contained some sort of leaks while simultaneously blocking the flow. With this happening all over his body he felt he could only use his body to a fraction of its real potential, and it was no wonder that fixing these trouble spots by breaking open nodes would boost one's attributes.

His mental image of nodes had been completely different compared to how these things looked like though. He had pictured something like a pressurized tank he needed to push more and more energy into until it finally popped. But it seemed like it was more like a clog in a pipe that needed to get flushed.

But even with all these obstructions in his upgraded pathways, there was no denying that the speed with which he could circulate Cosmic Energy had increased by at least five times. That was pretty huge as well as it would drastically cut down on recuperation time since it meant he would be able to absorb Nexus Crystals a lot faster.

He still was barely better than Thea who was still in F-Grade though, but he was doomed to fall short in this regard when comparing to elite Cultivators. But with his Vitality and Endurance, he would be able to keep fighting almost continuously, which would be needed if he wanted to move through the levels quickly.

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### **Chapter 491 - Clashing Versions**

Since he was done with checking what he needed to in his human form he finally swapped over to his Draugr side. The process activated as usual, but Zac frowned when he felt that it took almost 3 seconds to transform, which was a lot worse compared to before he evolved. Was it because the Pathways had become more complicated, and swapping them out took more time and energy?

However, there was still a solution. The transformation skill Yrial provided was geared toward the F-Grade, and it could hopefully be upgraded to once again shrink the time it took to change forms. The skill was unfortunately something that the C-Grade ghost put together without much thought, and it neither had proficiencies or an upgrade Path.

Zac would either have to figure out a way to recreate the skill or wait until he could enter the Inheritance Trial again. He could only put the issue aside before opening his Class Menu once again, as there were some things he wanted to confirm there as well.

**Class: [E-Epic] Fetters of Desolation.**

**Strength +50, +5%. Endurance +50, +5%. Wisdom +50, +5%**

**Level: Strength +11/22/33, Endurance +8/16/24, Wisdom +5/10/15, +10 Free.**

**Skills: Blighted Cut (LOCKED)**

Zac was a bit surprised that he had gained equal parts in the three attributes from the class, even though he would gain more than twice the amount of Strength compared to Wisdom at each level. But that was great news for Zac as he was already pretty lopsided toward Strength with his class choices, while his low Mental Defense was his biggest weakness.

A quick mental calculation confirmed what Zac had expected. The per-level gains from his old classes remained, but the flat class bonuses had been swapped out. For example, Undying Bulwark had provided 10% Endurance and 5% Vitality before, but 5% of the Endurance and all of the Vitality was swapped out for Strength and Wisdom.

There was still a net gain as the flat attributes increased drastically, but it was still a bit of a shame. One of his strong suits was his almost inhuman Endurance, but that advantage would slightly weaken in favor of the massive amounts of Strength he would rack up during the E-Grade. Perhaps it might even be worth putting some of his free points into Endurance to maintain the lead over normal Cultivators.

He opened his Quest Menu next, and interestingly enough, the Hegemony quest wasn't there in his Draugr form. Was the quest chain perhaps connected to the race he was when the integration started? He still hadn't gained his Draugr form when completing the first quest, after all.

There was a skill quest though, and Zac breathed out in relief when he read the task.

**Blighted Cut (Class): Kill an evolved being of equal or higher level with a single non-lethal cut. Reward: Blighted Cut Skill (0/1).**

The quest for Blighted Cut was thankfully a lot more straightforward compared to the one for **[Rapturous Divide]**. However, it was still not a free win by any means, as it seemed to put very high demands on the corrosive effects of his Dao. That was at least Zac's takeaway going by the name of the skill. He needed to make a non-lethal attack lethal with the help of his caustic power.

The Fragment of the Coffin contained a decent corrosive effect, but it always required him to stack up numerous wounds to create an effect strong enough to cause real harm. For example, Faceless #9 was completely covered in rotting wounds by the time he finally gave up, but it wasn't enough to actually take him out.

It meant that he would have to make some inroads into the death-aspect of his cultivation path as well to complete this quest. Perhaps the System felt that he had utilized too many Dao Treasures to prop up the Seed of Rot, leaving the foundation lacking.

Zac shook his head as he turned his sight inward, and unfortunately, it looked like the bad news would just keep coming. His pathways had been reformed just like in his human form, but there were some other changes. The once-perfect fit of the class skills was ruined for multiple skills, mainly those that dealt with pure defense.

However, he noted that the fit for **[Profane Seal]**, **[Deathwish]**, and **[Immutable]** was just fine while the fit of **[Winds of Decay]** had actually improved. This was just what Zac had expected though, where he moved away from a defensive class toward a more offensively geared one.

But more importantly, the nodes looked completely identical in his Draugr form as in his human side. The effect the nodes had on the flow of energy through the pathways wasn't exactly the same, as the two sets of pathways differed from each other. But the nodes themselves were in the exact same position.

It was clear to him that the Nodes weren't actually a part of the pathways themselves, but rather something tied to his body. However, they didn't feel corporeal at the same time, but rather intangible. Zac suddenly had an idea as a knife appeared in his hand and he stabbed his leg, aiming right for a node.

Black ichor started dripping down his leg, but the bleeding quickly stopped thanks to Zac's massive pool of Vitality. However, Zac was more interested in the fact that the node he just struck showed no reaction at all from being stabbed. It ruined one idea he had where he would forcibly rip the nodes open and rely on his inhuman durability to recuperate. It simply didn't work.

The situation clearly hinted at a situation where he would only need to break open each node once. This was great news for his leveling speed, but it was horrible news for his Attribute Gain. Of course, he would have to confirm his hypothesis by actually cracking open a node and gaining a level, but it looked pretty clear-cut from where he sat.

There was one more thing he wanted to consume before he ended his seclusion, but he first wanted to tell his sister he was fine.

However the scenes from the tribulation repeated in his mind upon thinking of Kenzie, and he was unsure what to think. Was their mother really on the way back to take his sister somewhere? And judging by the malice and madness in her eyes she might just kill Zac along with the whole planet if she was in a bad mood.

Her ability to simply conjure a spatial portal out of nothing proved she was a big-shot, though he had already suspected as much. Not only was she involved with a peak force like Firmament's Edge, but her necklace seemed to be some sort of ghost key that gave blanket access to Technocrat facilities.

The necklace by itself was a cause for concern, and he took it out of his Spatial Ring and looked it over. Reaching the E-Grade, unfortunately, hadn't increased his skills of discernment, and he still couldn't find any clues of how it worked. However, the moment he touched the token with his mind in an attempt to look inside, a drastic change occurred.

The token hummed to life and floated up into the air by itself. **[Verun's Bite]** was already in Zac's hand as he jumped up in alarm, though confusion plagued his mind. He had tried scanning the medallion the same way dozens of times, but there hadn't been any response until now. What had changed? Was there something different about his mental energy after evolving? Or was it the Remnants?

However, Zac had no time to figure it out as a figure appeared in front of him. The figure of his mother.

"Zac, my son," Leandra said with a smile marred with longing.

"Mom?" Zac said, his mind thrown into chaos once more. "Is that you?"

He had just seen a crazed incarnation of his mother during the Heart Tribulation, but now a completely different Leandra stood in front of him. Her demeanor was in stark contrast to the one the System depicted. There was happiness, but also sadness as she looked upon Zac.

"It looks the Integration took place, after all," Leandra sighed, not answering his question. "I am glad you are fine, and evolved at that. Where is your sister? Is she okay?"

"Kenzie's fine. Is this really you, or an AI?" Zac asked, some doubts worming into his heart when he heard his mother immediately ask about Kenzie.

"It seems you have learned a few truths," Leandra nodded. "You are not speaking with the real me, but a Synthetic AI based on me. I left it in the necklace, and it activated now that someone of my blood has reached the E-Grade."

"Why wait until now?" Zac asked with a frown.

"My identity is a bit complicated, I am an enemy of the System," Leandra freely admitted. "I couldn't allow any clues of my existence to appear on the planet right after it got integrated. The Cursed Heavens would have spotted me, which would have put your lives in danger. It should have taken you a while to reach E-Grade, and the System has long turned its gaze elsewhere."

"What's going on?" Zac asked, trying to calm his chaotic mind to not miss any details. "Why did you leave back then? Kenzie was just a newborn."

"My family, your family, has been working on a miraculous device with the help of some of the greatest minds of the multiverse for dozens of generations. But things turned awry and most of our clan died. Some people we thought were friends betrayed us at our moment of weakness out of greed, causing even greater losses," Leandra said, pain and anger flashing in her eyes.

"I was badly hurt, but I managed to barely escape. I set course for your homeworld as it was a desolate rock far from either integrated or controlled space, where our family once hid a small laboratory. The base was abandoned after the experiments were concluded, to not draw the attention of the System, but I discovered it in our family's archives. I scrubbed any knowledge of it to make it a safe harbor in case I needed it," Leandra said with a wry smile. "Who knew that the desolate world would have turned populated in just a few dozen millennia?"

"My wounds were too harsh, and a safety protocol kicked in where I lost my memories and any aura that could lead my captors to me. Robert found me as I wandered around in your world in a daze, and we had you two years later," Leandra

smiled. “But when I had Kenzie ten years later there were complications, and the pain woke the real me up from its recuperative slumber.”

“My aura was immediately noticed by both the Heavens and my enemies, and I was forced to flee Earth shortly after Kenzie was born. I couldn’t risk leading my enemies to you, especially not while I wasn’t strong enough to protect you. I don’t know where my real me is, but I am sure I am still working hard on finding a solution so that I can return to your side,” Leandra said.

“Is Kenzie here as well? The time I can stay here is limited, I want to see her before I go,” Leandra said.

“She is out in the wilderness training,” Zac lied. “She will be back in a week or so. Can you wait until then?”

Zac felt he could see a spark of turbulent emotions flash in her eyes, though it was quickly masked with a forlorn disappointment.

“Well, there will be time for us to meet in the future,” Leandra sighed. “Be careful, you two. Don’t mention your connection to me, it will cause you trouble. And stay away from the Mystic Realm that seems like a science fiction movie. Some unknown force found it and set up their own experiments after we abandoned the place. It might be extremely dangerous depending on what they did there. I didn’t have a chance to scout it out myself.”

“Are you really coming to get us?” Zac asked, his heart beating in fear-mixed anticipation.

“Earth is a low-tiered world with no strong points. The Multiverse is a magical place that you cannot even imagine. Staying there will only harm your future,” Leandra said with a shake of her head. “You need land, resources, and opportunities to reach your full potential. Earth is lacking on all three fronts. Staying there is a waste of your future.”

“Remember to protect your sister. I left a protective AI with her that will be able to help her out, but it is just an assistant in the end. It’s not infallible,” his mother added. “I must go now, or your location will be discovered. Stay safe, Zac.”

With that, she was gone, and the medallion once again turned into an inert ornament as far as Zac could tell. He stood frozen for a few seconds, unsure of what to believe. Seeing another version of Leandra just after seeing the vision hadn’t really made him clearer on whether his mother was a friend or a foe, or which version was the real one.

But there were a few snippets of information that probably were true as they were mentioned in both encounters. First of all, it really didn’t look like she had left willingly. Both versions seemed forced to leave Earth because her presence was made known.

Secondly, she was coming back. One version felt like a farmer who wanted to reap her harvest, and the other was a loving mother who wanted to provide a better future for her children. His heart wanted to believe that the second version was the true one, but something held him back. There was a voice whispering in his mind that all the projection said, was just a cover story to make sure he didn’t mess up her plans.

Then again, he had become pretty paranoid over the past year, and his opinions were already somewhat swayed after having been shown the original vision. Perhaps that was exactly what the System was aiming for by creating a Heart Tribulation like that, just as he had initially suspected.

But the real question was; did he dare to risk it? Could he really allow his mother to return?

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 492 - Heartbeat**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**We're in the endgame now boys! Just one more month to go of this cursed year. Why not jump over to [my](#) and wait for all this to blow over? Ignore the woes of the world and read up to 45 Chapters ahead of RR.**

Zac wasn't sure. Was he willing to bet his and Kenzie's lives on his mother being a friend who wanted the best for them, or should he start looking for ways to actively hide from her just like he was planning to do with the Great Redeemer? Perhaps the two plans could be fused, making sure neither party could find their way to Earth.

The more Zac thought about it, the better the idea seemed. He would try to stop Leandra from finding them, at least until they could protect themselves from whatever she had planned. One piece of good news in that regard was that she was wounded just thirty years ago or so. It might seem like a lifetime to him, but it was just the length of a single round of meditation for high-grade powerhouses.

Getting wounded enough to lose your memories at that level must mean that her enemies, possibly the rulers of Firmament's Edge, were extremely powerful, and healing from such a battle could take centuries. It was just like the Great Redeemer and his nasty scar that radiated terrifying energies. He would probably carry that wound for centuries before he could completely heal.

Leandra might be unable to come back for the time being due to being forced to focus on recuperating. She had been awoken ahead of time, and perhaps there were repercussions for that. The longer he had to prepare, the better he could hide himself and his sister. He would begin with the lantern, but he had a feeling that a Technocrat's tracking wouldn't be based on something like Karmic Threads.

Perhaps there were anti-technocrat arrays that would stop her from finding Jeeves. The orthodox forces had been fighting the Technocrats for millions of years, there should be all kinds of solutions in circulation.

Zac stood up with a grunt and walked out of his courtyard to let his sister know he was fine, but he was surprised to find a drone hovering just a few meters outside. He knew it must have been Kenzie who put it there, and she came running a few seconds later as expected.

"You did it," Kenzie said with a wide grin, and Zac nodded with a smile, inwardly thankful he had erected his obscuring arrays around his courtyard before he evolved.

Zac knew that he would have to tell her about his visions sooner or later, but now was not the time. However, he couldn't help but feel a foreboding as he saw the undeniable similarities between Kenzie's and Leandra's features.

His mother's appearance had always been a bit blurry in his mind, but it was refreshed upon seeing her twice in short order. And Kenzie really took after Leandra, no matter if you spoke of the slightly curled hair or their hazel eyes. Her appearance was a stark reminder that Leandra might come to collect at any moment, and it reignited his desire to become stronger.

And the first step toward that end was to open his first Hidden Node.

“I’m fine,” Zac said as he looked around. “I passed the tribulation without any issue. I just wanted to tell you that before I headed inside again.”

“What’s going on?” Kenzie asked. “Do you need to undergo the tribulation twice because of your two races?”

“No, I actually got two tribulations, but they descended at the same time, so it’s dealt with. I have gathered a few things I can finally use now that I’m E-Grade,” Zac explained. “I can use a few of them while heading toward the Dead Zone, but some need to be taken while in seclusion. I’ll be away for a few more hours.”

“Is it dangerous?” Kenzie asked with some worry. “You just passed the tribulations. Don’t you need to stabilize your foundation or something?”

“It should be fine,” Zac said, though he honestly had no idea.

Yrial didn’t explain exactly what would happen when he used the **[Eye of Har’Theriam]**, apart from that it would break open a Hidden Node. If you were lucky and knew to listen well it could also expose more of the Hidden Nodes spread through your body, but only the one node was essentially guaranteed.

However, the Lord of Cycles never divulged if there were any dangers to absorbing the treasure. Taking normal pills to gain a level wasn’t dangerous from what he had gathered though. It mimicked the method used when cultivating, but it sped up the process drastically. It would hurt a bit, but you wouldn’t cripple yourself from opening a node this way.

It was nothing like forcing them open by cramming the nodes full of cosmic Energy.

But opening a Hidden Node was his best shot at getting a direct power spike before setting out to the Dead Zone. He would be able to force a few nodes open as well while traveling, but he had no idea what to do about the skill quests for the time being. He didn’t have any Dao Treasures either, at least not that he was aware.

So the Hidden Node had the highest priority.

“Alright, I’ll keep helping old man Gemidir with the Array,” Kenzie said. “Be careful.”

“Don’t let that old thief scam you,” Zac smiled before he returned to the courtyard.

Zac erected the restrictive arrays once more, and he sat down as he took out the box he bought during the trial, the container that held the **[Eye of Har’Theriam]**. It was the most valuable item available in the inheritance, except for Yrial’s lock of hair, that is.

He gingerly took it out, and the whole courtyard was suddenly drowned in cascading waves of energy. The fluctuations were extremely exotic as well. They neither felt like Attuned Energies or Dao Energy, but rather something he had never encountered before. Of course, it could simply be a higher-tiered attunement that he was too stupid to recognize.

The so-called **[Eye of Har’Theriam]** didn’t really look like the eye of a beast, which wasn’t a surprise since it actually wasn’t one. The Pathfinder Eye he recently expended to create **[Love’s Bond]** was actually part of a slain beast, but this thing was something else entirely. It was rather a natural treasure, a convergence of specific energies that had been given physical form.

It was an object created by chance from some unknown event in a dead universe, something that had proven extremely hard or even impossible to reproduce. It meant that the supply was extremely limited, and not something that normally would appear

in the hands of someone like him. The name came from the fact that the crystalline clump had a discoloration in the middle that somewhat looked like an eye.

Zac didn't eat the treasure, but he rather took off his robe to leave his chest bare before he pushed the item against his navel. Next, he simply started infusing the thing with Cosmic Energy. The small rock was like a bottomless abyss, swallowing everything Zac threw at it. But it was finally satiated after Zac had spent more than half of his reserves, and treasure started to sink into his body.

He had expected to feel a scorching pain like he had put a piece of coal against his flesh, but nothing of the sort happened. It rather felt like he suddenly had eaten a massive feast, making him a bit bloated. The treasure was quickly getting ready to do its thing, and Zac immediately focused his mind again as he observed the changes.

The slightest fluctuation could be a clue to another hidden node going by how Yrial had explained it, and he didn't want to miss a single thing.

The amount of energy Zac could sense from the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]** was just shocking, like he had swallowed dozens of high-grade pills in one go. His own Cosmic Energy was just a fraction of the whole, something to mark the treasure with his own aura. However, the energy ball didn't spread out across his pathways and, but it rather set up camp close to his Duplicity Core.

One tendril after another reached out in various directions of his body, like they were some sort of scouts that looked for their target. After having looked around for a bit they returned, looking slightly expended. This repeated over and over, and Zac tried to engrave every movement and every pause in his mind.

However, he couldn't help but worry as time passed. He and Yrial had briefly wondered whether he actually had any Hidden Nodes due to his unique constitution, and things weren't looking too good right now. The ball of energy had almost halved in size over the hours as it sent out one tendril after another in search of a node, but it hadn't found anything of note just yet.

Zac refused to give up unless the ball of energy completely ran out of steam though, so the search continued until there was finally a change. Zac felt a surge of victory as one of the tendrils froze after having dug into his heart. One tendril after another joined it until there suddenly were ten of them reaching inside, clearly having found what they were looking for.

The next moment the main energy ball pounced like a predator going for its prey.

Only then did Zac see what the treasure was doing. A major section of his pathways ran through his heart, and six normal nodes were surrounding it. However, there was now a small distortion added to the mix right in the middle. Zac was 100% sure that it hadn't been there before, since he had gone over his whole body after his evolution.

Or rather it hadn't been visible to his internal vision.

However, the Eye had managed to find it, and the small disturbance was quickly enlarged as the ten tendrils of the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]** poured massive amounts of the mysterious energies into the hidden node. Another stagnant pond quickly appeared, though this one looked completely different to the other ones he had seen so far.

It looked like an actual black hole, and any energy that entered it was swallowed without a hint of where it was going.

A shudder spread across his body as it suddenly felt like he had two hearts, each one beating to its own tune. The new addition was deeper and slower, like the beat of a war drum. Each beat became heavier and heavier as the hidden node was getting unlocked by the remaining energies of the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]**, and Zac finally couldn't hold on as he spat a mouthful of blood.

He was shocked to see that the blood actually looked like brown sludge, but he didn't get a chance to even consider any course of action before he felt a crack in his heart, and a surge of energy stormed into his mind.

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Zac had once again been thrown into a vision, finding himself on an utterly lifeless piece of stone soaring through the vast cosmos. There were no stars around him, leaving the area almost completely shrouded in darkness. The weak light from a distant nebula was all that illuminated the surface of the celestial body, and the single feature that barely stood out against the bleak surroundings.

It was a man, or Zac at least guessed it was a man going by the muscular build, stoically sitting on top of a prayer mat. His features were shrouded in darkness, and most of his body was covered by a simple robe, giving no indication of who it might be. He was completely unmoving as well, utterly blending in with the surroundings to the point Zac would have thought he was a statue or a corpse if it wasn't for one detail.

The heartbeat.

A heavy heartbeat beat once every few seconds with such vigor that ripples pushed out from around the cultivator's unmoving form. But more interestingly it looked like there was a pushback the next moment, like a receding wave. The counterforce dragged dense amounts of energy into his body, before the man's heartbeat once more to send out another ripple to gather even more.

It felt as though his heartbeat was absorbing the power of space itself, and even the stars in the distance flickered as if they were affected by the beat as well. It was like this man was an actual black hole, taking everything from the surroundings for himself. It was no wonder that the meteor he was sitting on was completely void of life and energies. He had no doubt already consumed it all.

Was this some sort of cultivation method based on the heart? Or was it simply the effect of his unique constitution? Was he traveling across the cosmos like a locust, draining any area he passed of its vitality?

Zac quickly realized that the meteor was moving with shocking speed as well. They were rapidly closing in on a sun and looked like they could collide at any moment. However, the man was completely oblivious to his surroundings, and Zac soon understood why. The sun was completely helpless in front of that man's heartbeat, and a massive chunk of flames was ripped from the enormous sphere in an instant.

An odd crack in space appeared above the man's head, and the stream of flames was swallowed without leaving a morsel behind. Zac was flabbergasted at the scene, as just a fraction of those streams of flames were far more condensed than the whole scorching sun that Iz Tain summoned during the Battle of Fates.

Finally, there was a change in the man's demeanor as they whizzed past the dimmed-out sun. Steam rose from his body as he slightly shuddered, and Zac looked on with a mix of confusion and anticipation. It appeared as though the heart cultivator might have swallowed a bit more than he could chew, and Zac was curious to see if he would show some way to deal with the fallout.

Zac had found himself in the very same predicament a couple of times after all, and he had only survived by the skin of his teeth.

There was also one more question burning in Zac's mind. Was this man in front of him an ancestor of his, either living or dead? Dao Visions showed you people who were walking the same general path as you, such as the Axe-Man and the Immutable Defender, but this wasn't a Dao Vision. It was a vision brought forth from his own body, a hidden node in his heart.

And such a vision would probably be based on an ancestor of his.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 493 - Void Heart**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Hidden nodes could generally be categorized into two types from what Zac had gathered. There were the Racial Nodes that most cultivators of the same race had, such as the Three Gates. Pretty much all humanoids had these three hidden nodes, with one important exception. They could have been swapped out by Inherited Nodes provided by your bloodline.

Perhaps there were more types out there, but those were the two that Zac could gather intelligence on.

People with strong enough bloodlines had hidden nodes more specialized for their Paths, and these types of Inherited Nodes were one reason that families with amazing bloodlines churned out so many powerful warriors. However, he was a bit confused by what he saw, as the most likely source of any bloodlines and Inherited Nodes was no doubt his mother.

However, the shuddering man in front of him definitely didn't look like a Technocrat. He was emitting a terrifying force from his body, like his average-sized frame contained endless power. It was the same sort of fierce aura like he had sensed from Greatest, one of a warrior who used his own body as a weapon.

However, Zac felt this man was on par with those supreme existences he had seen in his previous visions, rather than some D-Grade warrior.

Finally, the man stopped shaking, but plumes of steam still rose from his body from the heat he emitted. A small dagger that seemed able to tear space apart by its very existence suddenly appeared in his hand, and he stabbed his leg in one swift motion.

A torrent of blood shot to the sky, and Zac was shocked to see the amount. The wound had closed itself in a fraction of a second, but hundreds of liters had poured out in that short window. Weirder yet, the blood didn't actually freeze from the glacial cold of the vacuum of space.

In fact, it did the opposite as it suddenly combusted like it was gasoline rather than blood, lighting up the meteor for a short moment before the area was once more plunged into darkness. It looked like expelling the burning blood had drastically improved the man's situation, and he had once returned to his statuesque demeanor.

The heartbeat the only proof that the man still lived.

Zac slowly woke up from the vision, but he somehow still heard the man's pulse deep in his soul. Each thud made Zac's blood rage like it followed the mysterious man's heart rather than his own. With every thud, their hearts synchronized a bit more until Zac's heartbeat was perfectly in tune to the hooded man's.

His blood started coursing through his body at unprecedented speeds, but he felt no discomfort at all. It was like his heartbeat was in tune with the universe, and a small ripple spread out from his body before space stabilized itself again.

A crackling sound from the sky woke Zac up from his reverie, and he was shocked to see a massive swirl up in the sky. Massive amounts of Cosmic Energy had gathered into a whirlwind of untamed power, and Zac's eyes lit up in anticipation as he waited for the energy to descend.

However, elation quickly turned to confusion, before he was filled with annoyance. The energy had no intention of entering his body as it did with the mysterious cultivator in the vision, but it was rather dispersing again now that Zac no longer heard the deep heartbeat. Zac's dreams of a few free levels crashed and burned just as they were born, and he instead turned his attention to a screen that had appeared in front of him.

**[Void Heart - An all-encompassing heart born from the primordial void.]**

Zac looked at the screen with some confusion, trying to understand just what this new node meant. It was clear that it was an Inherited Node he had opened, rather than something like the three gates. But the problem was that there were a huge number of these Inherited Nodes, and people rarely divulged them.

A hidden node was like a secret weapon of a clan, and one of the most guarded secrets. This had made it impossible for Zac to gain a decent understanding of Inherited nodes, like what limits and capabilities they usually had. But he had learned a thing or two from Galau, who freely admitted that his clan possessed no Inherited Nodes.

Him getting an unknown Inherited Node rather than one of the Three Gates could be both good and bad, as Inherited Nodes ranged from being extremely overpowered to utter trash. **[Void Heart]** seemed to be a Node that helped with cultivation rather than giving a direct boost to his power like the common nodes like the **[Flesh Gate]**.

But the description was unfortunately of the less informative variety.

The "all-encompassing" was no doubt referring to the man's ability to seemingly absorb any energy, as he swallowed anything he passed, even a sun. There was also no doubt an element of energy gathering to the node, evidenced by the convergence of Cosmic Energy in the sky just now.

Unfortunately, improving energy absorption might mean that it increased cultivation speed, which would be pretty useless to Zac since he couldn't cultivate. What if this **[Void Heart]** kept gathering massive amounts of energies around him, but he could only look at it from a distance, unable to take it for himself?

Wouldn't that be a novel way of torture?

But the vision gave him an inkling that it might not be exactly that case. There seemed to be two components to the ability that the node provided, judging by the vision. The first was the heart, and the second was the blood. The heart seemed to swallow the energy of the area, which was related to some sort of absorption, though not necessarily one related to normal cultivation.

The man also exsanguinated himself on purpose, and there was clearly something wrong with the blood. Zac's best guess was that it was a node that would allow him to absorb various types of energies better than a normal warrior, but that kind of absorption would fill his heart with impurities or toxins.

The exsanguination would in turn allow him to simply flush the toxins out of his body. It was a system of keeping the good and expelling the bad. Something like that seemed to match with Zac's impressions of his own body as well. He had survived his body getting crammed full of all kinds of weird energies until now.

There was the Cosmic Water, then the storm of Miasma in the Dead Zone, and finally the high-grade energies of the two Remnants in his mind. His body was clearly unnaturally resilient to all kinds of energies, and this Hidden Node might actually be the first step toward taking advantage of this, more than just surviving.

It was just a hypothesis though, but one easily tested. Zac took out a Miasma Crystal from his Spatial Ring and absorbed some of its energy. At first, he felt extreme nausea having condensed death-attuned energies in his system, but something mysterious soon happened.

The death-attuned energies entered his pathways and were shot in a few quick revolutions through his body, but each time they entered his heart the nausea lessened. A few minutes later the feeling was gone altogether, but there instead was a chilliness in his veins. Zac took out his axe and drew a small cut on his arm, and blood that was slightly darker than normal started dripping down on the ground.

It was barely discernible, but then again he had only absorbed death-attuned energies from the Miasma Crystal for a short duration. Perhaps his blood would turn into the black Ichor altogether if he kept at it long enough.

This quick experiment clearly indicated he was on the right path with the node, but this obviously wasn't the right way to utilize the hidden node. It would be a lot more efficient to simply use a normal Nexus Crystal in this case, as there would be no need to waste time and energy on cleansing it.

But some things might work, such as Natural Treasures. A lot of herbs and other Natural Oddities contained massive amounts of energy, but they were too chaotic and toxic to ingest unless made into pills or concoctions first. And sometimes even that was impossible. Besides, this sort of refinement always led to a significant loss in energy, at least among pills made by normal Alchemists.

Perhaps it wasn't the case with top tier Alchemists in the multiverse, but it wasn't like Zac had access to those kinds of people.

He didn't dare try that out right now though, as he might be badly wounded if proven wrong. But if he was right, then he might have found the key to leveling up quickly in E-Grade, perhaps even beyond. He might not be able to gobble up a sun anytime soon, but he might be able to bargain hunt for energy-rich items that were normally too chaotic to turn into anything useful.

He really wanted to find the little blue merchant and requisition some items immediately, but he knew that such experiments would have to wait until after the Undead Horde. Instead, he went out of his courtyard only to find Emily waiting some distance from the gates. She was lazily throwing rocks at a drone that deftly dodged the small projectiles.

Zac was a bit surprised to see the teenager here, as she was out at sea last time he heard, boosting the Intelligence for the scouts and water mages in charge of searching for the Jamming Arrays.

"You're back! But why do you look the same?" Emily added from the side as she suspiciously looked at him up and down. "And what did you do just now? I thought you were about to upgrade the Nexus Vein or something."

"It didn't work out, unfortunately," Zac said with a smile. "You'll have to make do with the normal one for now. And why would I look different?"

Suddenly a fiery axe appeared in her hand, and she threw it at Zac.

"WOW!" she screamed as she looked at Zac with wide eyes. "Monster! At least you got stronger. A lot stronger. How am I supposed to beat you up now?"

"I guess you'll have to work harder," Zac snorted.

“Aren’t people supposed to become more handsome when evolving? But you’re still the same monk as ever,” Emily said, waving at Kenzie who was coming over as well.

“You’re thinking of race upgrades,” Zac sighed with some exasperation as he ran his hand across his once-again bald head. “I haven’t upgraded that yet. I thought you were helping the others looking for the jamming arrays?”

“I returned when I heard you were back. I’m coming with you to fight the zombies,” Emily said, her face scrunching up with stubbornness when seeing Zac’s frown. “You might need me. What if you’re just too weak to win? Wouldn’t you feel stupid if you got stuck outside an array, just lacking 10% Strength to get through?”

“... Fine,” Zac sighed. “But you should know that even getting to the mainland will be risky.”

“I’m going as well,” Kenzie suddenly added from the side.

“What? Why?” Zac said, just stopping short of staunchly refusing.

“Calrin and I figured out a few of the Array Breakers while you evolved, but you probably won’t be able to use them,” Kenzie explained. “They either takes a few weeks of study or general knowledge of formations. So I need to go as well.”

Zac really didn’t want to bring his sister to the heart of the Dead Zone, but he knew that he might not have much of a choice. It was all hands on deck right now, and Kenzie might be the foremost expert on arrays among all the natives of Earth. There were more skilled people among the Sky Gnomes and the Creators, but he couldn’t bring them for something like this due to the limitations of the Mercantile System.

“Alright, alright,” Zac sighed before he turned to the demon who had appeared to the side as well. “Did you evolve as well?”

“No,” Ogras said. “Me evolving won’t change the grand scheme of things in the battle with the undead. I need a month or two to consolidate everything. So, what classes did you get? Epic? Or Even Arcane?”

“It’s too early for me to get an Arcane,” Zac said. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to get that rarity before you really know what you’re doing from what I gathered.”

“Well, I guess that excludes you. So what did you end up with?” the demon said, almost leaning forward in anticipation.

“What about you?” Zac snorted. “There’s no way you didn’t check out your options while I evolved.”

“He did, like two seconds after you left,” Kenzie smiled from the side. “But he won’t say what options he got.”

“Why aren’t you working on that reinforcement array?” Ogras said with some exasperation.

Zac laughed, but he was inwardly a bit worried about the demon. Was there some trouble with his evolution? He had seemed pretty intent on evolving the moment they returned based on their discussions in the tower, but something seemed to have changed his mind.

He knew that the demon had a Rare class right now. Was he perhaps lacking something to get an option? Or was it the opposite? Did he feel that he was on the verge of getting enough merit to be provided with an Epic class, and closing out the Undead Incursion might give him the final push to take that step?

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## Chapter 494 - Balance

### A note from TheFirstDefier

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Thankfully it wasn't critical to Zac's plan that Ogras had evolved. He mainly wanted to bring the demon for his obscuring capabilities, and those seemed to be mainly based on his Dao of Shadows. Getting a boost to his main attribute Dexterity probably wouldn't make those skills any stronger.

The fact that Ogras wouldn't be as strong wasn't a huge deal either, as he would personally deal with the Lich King. However, as Zac looked around at the three people he was reminded that no man was an island. Certainly, none of these people were nearly as strong as him in direct battle, but they all brought something to the table that would increase the odds of success.

He realized now how foolish his initial idea to deal with the Undead Empire alone was.

"I've done what I can about that array," Kenzie said as she pointed toward the house housing Zac's private Teleportation Array. "The old Gnome is performing the finishing touches over there."

"I'm thinking of leveling up immediately," Zac said, changing the topic. "Is there any problem for me to start taking the pills I've prepared?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Ogras said. "That's usually how it goes. Of course, most people spend years at the peak of F-Grade to solidify their progression. But you should be fine. You're a meathead who find your path in battle anyway, I'm not sure sitting down and meditating will do you any good. Just eat it and then stabilize your foundation by bashing zombies."

"Sounds good to me," Zac said as he took out one of the pills that would give him a level.

It wasn't the **[Four Gates Pill]** with spirituality he found during the Hunt though. He wasn't sure if he wanted to eat that thing right now, or rather save it for when he hit a roadblock. It might even be something that he could use to open up more hidden nodes in the future.

There were no guarantees, but Zac felt he had a pretty good idea about the location of one hidden node at least thanks to ingesting the treasure earlier. He had observed every movement of the energy tendrils from the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]**, and it had sent its tendrils to one specific spot multiple times, and they had stayed there with hesitation for a bit before moving on.

This node was close to a crossroads of pathways on the top of his head. He obviously couldn't be sure, but he believed that the node the tendrils had found might be the **[Spirit Gate]**, one of the three common Hidden Nodes. It supposedly increased your control over Mental Energy by a large degree, which was something Zac desperately needed.

His control was atrocious because of his non-existent affinity to the Daos, but opening the Spirit Gate might allow him to at least control his Daos to the same degree as most cultivators did. He probably wouldn't reach the level of people like Catheya or Iz Tavn, but it was at least something.

His goal wasn't to become the most powerful man in the universe or anything, but he still wanted to maintain his ability to punch above his weight class. Being an elite was the best deterrence, after all. People still spoke about the Eveningtide Asura in hushed tones after a million years. He wanted to create that same effect so that Earth would be left alone without him having to guard the planet day and night.

Of course, there was no guarantee that the pill he picked up during the hunt was any good for opening hidden nodes, and he didn't want to take the gamble just yet. Judging by the power it contained it might even be able to break open nodes at high E-Grade. Besides, he still knew nothing about his **[Void Heart]**.

Perhaps he would see far better results if he waited to take that pill until he could maximize the benefits with that node somehow. There was a chance that the Node might have an impact on the absorption of pills, after all. But until then there were still a bunch of normal pills he could take.

He couldn't wait any longer, and he took out one of his normal leveling pills. Zac really wanted to know how leveling would work in E-Grade. The attribute gains were split between opening nodes and gaining levels, and he still didn't know if the Node breaking needed to be done in both his forms.

"And eating these kinds of pills won't weaken or wound me before the battle?" Zac asked.

"It'll hurt, but not like forcing it open with excess energy," the demon said as he looked on with curiosity.

Zac nodded and immediately popped the pill in his mouth as he sat down. The pill felt like a small sun that ran down his throat before it hit his stomach. However, the energies didn't set up camp like the **[Eye of Har'Theriam]**, but it rather shot out like it had a life of its own.

The little packet of energy surged around his body with shocking speed until it suddenly stopped at one of the weak spots on his right arm. Zac was a bit surprised as he had simply assumed that it would go clock-wise from where his Duplicity Core was placed, but it looked like it was random.

The intensity of the pill energy kept increasing as a huge amount of warmth streamed into the node, and Zac was shocked at how much energy the unassuming bead had contained. It was just like Ogras had said, it hurt a bit but it wasn't too bad, it almost felt like he was getting pinched. However, his brows started to furrow as time passed.

Over twenty minutes had passed, and the pill was starting to lose its steam. However, the node showed no signs of changing, and the pill finally petered out. Zac felt the same, but he opened his status screen to be sure. But just as expected, he was still level 75.

"Wasn't this thing supposed to guarantee a level up to level 80?" Zac complained as he opened his eyes and turned to the demon. "What now?"

The demon looked perfectly jubilant as a grin spread across his face.

"I guess there's some justice in the world, after all," Ogras snorted. "If you gained level quickly on top of everything the rest of us might just as well have given up."

"Well?"

"I don't know? Take another one, you should have a few," the demon shrugged as he looked at Zac as though he was an interesting oddity.

He also threw a Cosmos Sack at Zac, who caught it with an inquisitive look. It wasn't like Ogras to freely give out any gifts.

“These are some of the gifts I gathered from the rich bastards in Base Town earlier. There should be a few dozen such pills inside. I handed most of it over to the gnomes to categorize,” Ogras said as a grin spread across his face again. “Now let’s see how many you need to eat to break open the first node.”

Zac sighed, but he could only oblige. He took out a second pill that guaranteed the same effect, and he was relieved to see that the pill energy stopped at the same node as the last one and continued the work there. However, his frown quickly returned as the pill energy quickly drained while the node stayed the same.

Only at the last second did he felt something change in his body. It was like he had cracked his neck and suddenly felt looser. His body felt lighter, and the energy surged through his body with greater vigor.

Zac quickly looked inward and saw that the weak spot had completely transformed. The murky pond that sucked energy had changed into a slowly rotating whirlpool that kept moving from its own momentum. It reminded Zac of the Dao whirl he had experimented with a bit during the time he tried to keep the Draugr-wound in check with the Seed of Trees.

A quick check on the status screen showed him that he had gained 7 points to the base attributes, but surprisingly enough he hadn’t gained the extra Strength and Vitality from gaining a level in Edge of Acadia. He frowned in annoyance and immediately ate another pill, ignoring the demon’s snicker from the side.

Ten minutes later the whirlpool had gone from a slightly weak swirl into a surging but stable whirlpool that empowered rather than weakened his pathways. He had finally gained a level and reached level 76 in his Edge of Arcadia class. It looked like two pills weren’t quite enough for both opening the node and gaining the level, but the third one did the trick.

He would probably have been better off using a Nexus Crystal after the node was opened, as breaking the node was the hard part. After that, he only needed to gather enough energy to qualify for a level increase. But he had been a bit impatient, and the condensed energies in these pills were far more efficient for this purpose, though they left some toxins behind.

Having to use three pills wasn’t great news when only one was supposed to ‘guarantee’ a level, but it also wasn’t too bad, especially after having gotten his new hidden node. However, there was one more problem. He didn’t gain anything from his Draugr side it seemed, neither from levels or nodes.

Zac gave it a thought before he activated his Duplicity Core, and he changed into his Draugr for the second time this day. A glance at his status screen proved what he already knew; Fetters of Desolation was still at level 75. However, there was an interesting change when he checked out the node on his right arm.

It had actually turned into a whirlpool as well, but it was so weak that it was almost completely unmoving. It was far worse than it had been in his human side at any point in time, and it looked like it could die out at any moment. It was obviously lacking energy, perhaps the full amount needed for a level.

Node-breaking was something that affected both his classes simultaneously it seemed, but he would need to fill the nodes with energy separately. That, unfortunately, confirmed that he wouldn’t get a second set of base attributes and that he no longer would get twice the amount of attributes from levels compared to others.

This was a pretty big blow to his unique advantages to becoming a powerhouse. His massive pool of raw attributes was his greatest ace against the cultivators who could fuse their Daos and empower their strikes with their Manuals. He would still get more points than others, but the difference was nowhere near as big any longer.

It was a very important reminder that he couldn't relax in the pursuit of power. You needed to keep pushing yourself and keep finding new opportunities to advance. If he couldn't steamroll people with raw stats any longer, then he would simply have to find another advantage. The first thing that came to mind was the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** that hopefully would be able to make his soul strong enough to handle the Remnants.

The second thing was the possibility of getting rewards for closing down the last Incursions and reaping the rewards.

"How are your preparations?" Zac asked as he got back to his feet. "How soon can we leave?"

"We're ready anytime," Kenzie said as she got up from the table she had summoned while Zac focused on leveling up.

"Good. There's no time to waste," Zac said. "We're heading out in 1 hour. Get a defensive squad of Valkyries as well."

"I can protect myself," Kenzie disagreed.

"Yes, but Emily is a Support class who needs guardians. We're going all out here, and we have no idea what we might be facing," Zac said. "I'll be able to unleash more power if I know you guys are safe."

"Fine. We'll get everything in order," Kenzie nodded. "Meet back here?"

"I'll go see if I can get some goodies from that slippery bastard we picked up in the underworld," Ogras muttered. "Knowing you, things will turn pretty chaotic over there."

With that, he disappeared in a puff of shadows, and Emily sat down on a rock and started to play with her tomahawks. Kenzie sent out a Drone before she walked back to the Teleportation House, no doubt to make sure the Stabilization Array would be installed in time.

"Good," Zac muttered as he simply sat down under the sun to start stabilizing his mind. "In one hour we'll assault the Undead Incursion."

*As long as we don't get ripped apart by the spatial turbulence,* Zac added in his mind.

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**Chapter 495 - Turbulence**

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"You sure you need me for this?" Ogras said as he looked at the modified Teleportation Array with some trepidation. "It might cause less strain on the array the fewer people who goes, it might be better if I just stay behind after all."

"This is our only shot, and I might not be able to deal with this alone," Zac said. "Besides, what are you whining about? Even a teenager is going, and you're afraid?"

“Sending two or ten people won’t really make a difference to the Array,” Kenzie adding from the side, a hint of schadenfreude in her eyes. “As long as we enter the same time we have as good a chance of surviving as when going alone.”

“Don’t speak such unlucky words,” Ogras muttered, but it looked like he had resigned himself to going with the rest.

“Is there anything we need to know?” Zac asked the old Sky Gnome to the side.

“The moment the [**Spatial Reinforcement Array**] activates it will cause a clash with whatever the unliving have planted,” Gemidir said. “If you see new destinations appearing in the teleportation screen it means it’s working. For the time being.”

“For the time being?” Zac repeated skeptically.

“Our array will probably only last a minute or two against the jammers of the undead empire, so you can’t dally or hesitate,” Kenzie said. “Immediately pick an option and we’ll all jump onto the array. We can’t waste a single second. Just make sure you don’t pick a town in the wrong direction.”

Zac looked around, his eyes turning to Joanna and her squad of six valkyries who silently stood behind her. Zac recognized all of them, as they were all among the oldest members who had followed him all the way from Greenworth. They had followed him to both close incursions and conquer the underworld. The constant battle had utterly reformed them into stalwart warriors.

Their gear was swapped out since the last time he saw them though. All of them wore massive shields made from chitinous shells on their backs, each one large enough to cover their whole bodies. Their goal in the upcoming fight wasn’t to boost Zac’s prowess, but rather use their newly-acquired War Arrays to protect the rear against unanticipated attacks.

He couldn’t always protect Emily and his sister, but this group of six would hopefully be able to stall long enough for him to come to their aid. Zac took a deep breath before he turned to the ancient Sky Gnome who stood by to the side.

“Do it,” Zac said as he opened his teleportation screen.

It only showed the handful of teleportation arrays that were studded across the island, but nothing beyond that. He heard some tinkering sounds as the Gnome drew some lines to connect the final power outlets, and a hum suddenly echoed out from the array as Zac felt his vision doubling for a second.

However, Zac forcibly ignored the odd effect and immediately chose a town he recognized. It was one of the newly created settlements close to the shore of Pangea, as he figured a shorter jump would have a higher success rate.

Zac jumped into the array, dragging a swearing Ogras by his lapel just in case the demon chose to change his mind at the last second. The array whisked them away, and his surroundings were replaced by darkness.

However, something felt wrong. It was as though he was being squeezed through a too-thin a pipe. The discomfort quickly turned to pain, but there was nothing he could do about it. He wasn’t in control of himself during these types of teleportations, and he could only endure the pain and pray that the others were fine.

But the darkness of subspace suddenly cracked, and Zac found himself far up in the sky, heedlessly tumbling from the wind as droplets of blood rained down all around him. Screams echoed out from every direction, and he saw multiple bloodied people flailing about. He was obviously wounded as well judging by the blood around him, but they were flesh wounds at worst considering his sturdy frame.

However, his sister and Emily weren’t so lucky, and they were utterly drenched in blood as they fell toward the ground. The scene made his heart burn with anxiety,

and four chains shot out as **[Love's Bond]** transformed to its backpack form. The emerald leaf appeared beneath him the next moment, and five seconds later the whole group was collected and safe.

Ogras and Kenzie had appeared on top of the leaf by their own means, whereas Joanna had managed to throw out ropes to half the Valkyries. Zac only needed to snatch up a screeching Emily and the rest of the Valkyries. Thankfully everyone was fine, apart from getting bloodied. No one had died and no one sported a crippling wound.

Only then did Zac take stock of their whereabouts, and he frowned when he realized they were above the open sea. No matter what direction he looked in there was nothing, just sky and water. There was a pretty nasty storm cloud in one direction, but there was not a hint of shoreline.

"Is everyone okay?" Joanna said with a hoarse voice from the side.

"I'm fine," Kenzie said as she ate a healing pill. "I think they booby-trapped the subspace by filling it with spatial tears or something. If we had continued the whole way we would probably have emerged as chunks of meat. Thankfully we installed a failsafe in the array that would take us out of subspace if it got deadly."

"You had?" Zac said with surprise.

"Do you think I would gamble with all our lives?" Kenzie retorted with exasperation.

"Where the hell are we though?" Ogras muttered from the side as shadows rushed through his alabaster hair and face to remove any blood.

"We can't be anywhere close to the Dead Zone," Joanna said as she looked around. "The array in the sky is massive, yet we can't see it at all. I think we might be some distance away from the continent."

"Well, we'll just have to fly," Kenzie said as she pointed in a certain direction. "We should hit land as long as we move in that direction."

Zac guessed that Jeeves had calculated it for her based on the suns in the sky or something, and he unhesitantly sent a mental command to the leaf. However, Zac soon enough handed over the task of steering the vessel to Joanna as he wanted to take the opportunity to start leveling up in earnest.

The leaf was terrifyingly quick, but New Earth was also shockingly large, so now was as good a time as any to start eating his stock of Node-breaking pills. There was the issue of Pill Toxicity, but right now wasn't a time to worry about that.

Besides, his new Hidden Node might even have some ability to deal with toxicity. He didn't feel any better after getting bled by the spatial tears, but he also shouldn't carry a lot of toxicity just yet. He doubted it would let him eat pills indiscriminately even if it worked, but it would still be a great help since he didn't have access to things like cleansing arrays at the moment.

Now that Zac knew what kind of energies he was dealing with he felt confident enough to swallow two Node Breaking Pills at once. He wanted to see whether they attacked different Nodes, or if there was some sort of system to which nodes were opened.

"Lunatic," a disgusted grunt came from the side as the demon looked on with shock. "The heavens won't abide with you forever, you know?"

Zac only flipped the demon off in response before he focused on the two balls of fire that had erupted in his belly.

He was happy to see that they both stopped by one of the nodes in his left leg after having skittered about for a bit, as that proved that he would be able to improve his leveling speed as long as his body could take the extra strain. But Zac started

sweating from pain immediately the moment the two streams of power entered the nodes.

There wasn't a simple doubling of pain when taking two pills, but rather an exponential increase by ten times. It felt like his leg was getting continuously stabbed, but he grit his teeth and endured it until the pain finally stopped after half an hour. Was this what it would feel like to brute-force nodes in the future?

This time the Node didn't even break open even after ingesting two pills, and Zac unhesitantly slammed two more of them. Another bout of agony lasting for half an hour passed, and the second node had finally been opened. He took a shuddering breath before he kept going. It felt like torture, but he wanted to gain as many levels as possible before he reached the Dead Zone, especially now that he had brought his people with him.

Zac didn't know how much time had passed as he crammed one pill after another down his gullet as though he was possessed. Sweat streamed down his body, and soon enough the sweat had turned red as he actually started bleeding from his pores. His sister tried to stop his manic assault on his nodes multiple times, but Zac shrugged away the attempts as he felt it was working.

But finally he couldn't take the pain any longer, but he had already broken open his fifth node and gained its equivalent level by that point. The suns had started to set by that point already, meaning that Zac had been occupied for at least 4 or 5 hours.

"Just what did you eat growing up?" Ogras muttered from the side when he saw that Zac finally had stopped abusing himself. "This was not what I meant that it was fine to start taking Node-Breaking Pills. Taking pills like that should be a straight ticket to the morgue, or at least the infirmary."

Zac could only respond with a weak smile, and he guessed that this wasn't the time to explain that he was actually a bit disappointed with the results of the experiment. When he was forcibly instilled with the Miasma from tens of thousands of Zombies he managed to eat ten purification pills in one go. Just three was supposed to be a death sentence, but he survived just fine.

He had thought that he would at least be able to take four or five Node Breaking pills in one go to speed up the process, especially after gaining the odd Hidden Node. But he honestly didn't dare to even try three of them at the moment.

The experiment also indicated that the **[Void Heart]** did not have much of an effect when ingesting pills. He couldn't sense his heart doing anything at all, really, compared to the noticeable effect when absorbing a Miasma Crystal. Did it perhaps only work on natural sources of energy, rather than refined ones? The man in the vision had eaten the void and a sun, after all, not a mountain of pills.

Another stark realization was that he couldn't simply eat Node Breaking Pills continuously. He felt that he was quickly building up a resistance as they traveled, and by the time he had cracked open the fifth node he wasn't very confident there was any point in continuing his mad consumption. He knew that once couldn't simply keep eating pills for a few days and reach the peak of the E-Grade, but he still felt it was too early to feel this kind of response.

"Isn't there anything I can do?" Zac asked. "I still have a lot of pills."

"The resistance will decrease with time, but the process is pretty tedious. And you won't get the full effect again no matter how long you wait. " Ogras leered. "But gaining levels through killing and cultivation also helps reset your body, so to speak. I guess you've reached your cap for now unless you find some Natural Treasure with similar effects."

Zac sighed, but he guessed he should be thankful there was a limit to how much you could gain from just cramming a bunch of pills down your gullet. If there were no restrictions then the Incursion leaders would all have been level 150 rather than 80 to 90 by now. Gaining 5 full levels in one day was still extremely good, and it had boosted his attributes by a shocking degree.

However, he still wasn't out of things to use just because he couldn't eat any more Node-breaking pills. Zac swapped over to his Draugr form and took out one of his D-Grade Miasma Crystals. He didn't have too many of them, but Zac figured it would be enough to fill up the five empty Nodes on his Undead Side.

Terrifying waves of Death-Attuned energies slammed into his body as he started absorbing a D-Grade crystal for the first time. It felt like he was deep inside the liquid miasma that surrounded Be'Zi for a second, almost drowning from the waves crashing through him. But he soon managed to steady himself and, it felt like he had ascended to the heavens because of how good it felt.

He could barely restrain himself from moaning out loud, which would have become an eternal point of embarrassment in front of this group. He would rather stab himself to snap out of it than being forced to listen to Emily's and Ogras' taunts over the following centuries.

Zac noticed that the death-attuned energy from the Miasma Crystal didn't have any idea where to move, in contrast to the Pills that almost seemed to have homing capabilities. Still, it wasn't too hard for Zac to push the excess miasma into the sluggish whirlpool on his right arm. It felt like the whirl was like a bottomless hole as more and more energies burrowed into the spot, gradually filling it with vigor.

The stagnant whirlpool slowly started to pick up speed, but it took Zac well over an hour before he felt a shudder through his body as the node stopped consuming Miasma. The time it took wasn't too bad, but it was still more than expected.

He had leveled pretty damn quickly with E-Grade crystals in the F-Grade, and he was already in the 40's by the time he got his hands on some. If he got some E-Grade crystals at level 1, then he'd blast through levels like they were nothing.

It only got worse from there though, as the second node took almost 50% longer to fill up until another wave of power spread through his body. He simply kept going though as land was still nowhere near in sight.

The third node took over three hours to fill, and the fourth node took five. It had cost him 9 D-Grade crystals to complete, which was pretty bad news. It had almost emptied his stock, and this was just for filling already opened nodes. The node breaking was the most energy-demanding part, and it seemed like using Nexus Crystals to level up would already be impractical for him by the time he reached level 80 with both his classes.

Zac still had one more node to fill with energy though, but he stopped as they finally could see land far in the distance.

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At first, there was just a thin green line, but they were able to make out the landscape soon enough. Zac breathed out in relief when he saw that it was a pretty normal coast with some leafy growth and grasslands.

It wasn't the sandblasted desert of the scorched continent, as the only greenery there was the strip of palms along the coast. Zac still couldn't see any massive Array in the sky though, which meant they were still quite far from the Dead Zone.

"We'll have to keep going until we find a settlement," Zac said as he put away his Miasma Crystals. "We will need to make another jump."

"Finally," Emily muttered. "It's so uncomfortable to sit next to you while you absorb that stuff. Feels like I am both cold and feverish at the same time."

"Sorry about that," Zac smiled as he turned back to his human form. "I needed to get some levels for my second Class as well."

Zac opened his screen again and couldn't help but marvel at the progress over the past day. Rushing levels in the E-Grade was just putting himself further and further apart from the rest of the humans of Earth.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**80**

**Class**

**[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia**

**Race**

**[E] Human**

**Alignment**

**[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Monarch-Select**

**Limited Titles**

**Frontrunner, Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th**

**Dao**

**Fragment of the Axe - Middle, Fragment of the Coffin - Middle, Fragment of the Bodhi - Early**

**Core**

**[E] Duplicity**

**Strength**

1988 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 199%]

Dexterity

766 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 170%]

Endurance

2004 [Increase: 99%. Efficiency: 199%]

Vitality

1278 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 189%]

Intelligence

492 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 170%]

Wisdom

814 [Increase: 70%. Efficiency: 170%]

Luck

321 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 179%]

Free Points

90

Nexus Coins

[F] 6 896 098 998

Zac's Strength had already passed his Endurance by this point, though **[Forester's Constitution]** was barely keeping it ahead in his human form. It was no surprise though, as his class choices heavily leaned toward Strength.

It was crazy to think that his Strength wasn't even 1000 just two days ago, and it was a clear justification why so many he met believed that choosing low-rarity classes was the way to go.

It made sense. He felt he had pushed the F-Grade to a point that was almost unprecedented in his whole Sector thanks to his combination of having two classes and snatching up almost all progenitor titles of Earth. He had then risked his life multiple times inside the Tower of Eternity to push himself even further.

Yet he had gained just as many attributes by simply gaining a couple of levels in the E-Grade.

He also knew it would be an extremely taxing challenge to form a Cultivation Core that was high-quality enough to be able to support someone like him, whereas a genius who chose an Uncommon E-Grade class would barely meet a bottleneck at all.

Zac's eyes turned to the 90 Free Points next, but there wasn't really a question of what he needed to do for now. He threw it all into his Dexterity, pushing it to 914. The flat points from the class had skewed his ratio, but the allocation had righted the ship once more.

However, he wasn't sure whether he could keep putting all his free points into Dexterity as he had done during most of the F-Grade. His fighting style didn't only rely on his massive strength, but also his nigh-invulnerability. The latter would take a hit during the E-Grade, as he only got 8 points in Endurance per level from his Fetters of Desolation class.

Meanwhile, he would get more than three times that in Strength if you counted the Strength coming from both his classes. Perhaps putting part of his Free attributes into Endurance to help it stay up was his best shot at keeping himself sturdy enough.

That combined with the Boosts from his Daos would probably be enough to stay an unkillable juggernaut.

Zac put the matter aside for now as he wouldn't gain any more easy levels in the short run. However, he was still a bit leery about the attribute cap, and he ate one of his basic Race Evolving Pills to push his attribute cap forward a bit. It was obviously not enough to completely evolve his race to D-Grade, but he could still improve his attribute cap from 2500 by at least a few hundred this way.

That was all that Zac needed for the moment, as it was enough to avoid any issues in case he had some Dao Epiphany during the battle with the Undead. An exuberant energy entered his stomach, and an intense warmth spread throughout his whole body. Streams of the power entered every single pore, filling them with power.

His cells were like a bottomless abyss, and they greedily swallowed everything he could give them. Unfortunately, the pill only contained so much energy, and the warmth quickly abated as his body absorbed the last of the energies. He hadn't made any breakthrough or, but his body felt extremely good, like he had just had a full-body massage.

Zac took a deep breath to enjoy the fresh air, but an abominable smell hit his nostrils and immediately dragged him out of his reverie, only to be met with ten appalled stares. He quickly looked down at his body, only to find his skin covered in an oily brown substance.

"You stink," the demon said with a disgusted snarl. "Why are you improving your Race in this cramped space?"

Kenzie didn't even speak up before she blasted him with cascading waves of water with the help of one of her skills, utterly drenching him and almost throwing him off the leaf. The torrent of water continued for a few seconds, but all the gunk was blasted clean when it abated.

"Uh, thanks," Zac said as he spat out a mouthful of water. "I'd forgotten that would happen."

It almost felt like he had made a social faux pas akin to releasing a fart in a cramped elevator, and he turned his gaze toward the horizon to hide his embarrassment, instead focusing on finding a town. Thankfully he had the perfect item for an occasion just like this, and he took out the **[Automatic Map]** from his Spatial Ring.

The area it showed was a bit limited, but it was still twice what they could see with their naked eyes, and there were even markings of Nexus Nodes on it. It didn't take them long to find a settlement with the help of the map. It was a walled-off enclave with about 200 houses hidden in the shadow of a mountain, with no roads leading to and from the place. Zac didn't bother announcing their presence they landed in the middle of the square.

Unfortunately, it looked like the place was one of the weakest settlements that hadn't even bought a Teleportation Array so far.

They were a small community completely cut-off from the world, and seeing the flying treasure and the weird retinue was a huge shock to them. However, Zac had no time for an orientation with these people, and they simply found the leader, a nondescript middle-aged man who had reached level 32.

There was a small exploit he had found while traveling before. Zac essentially explained who he was and exposed his level, and the mayor was more than willing to join his banner as a subordinate. Judging by how gaunt everyone looked they had a hard time even getting enough Nexus Coins for food, and joining the strongest man in the world was no doubt a godsent opportunity.

A small hovel like this would never have unlocked the ability to buy a Teleportation Array normally, but now that they were part of Port Atwood the mayor suddenly had a large increase in available purchases, including a slew of arrays. There were limits to how many places Zac could “boost” like this, but he was still well within his limits as he only had a dozen towns or so under his command.

Zac then donated enough money for him to buy the array, and he breathed out in relief when he saw that almost all of his connections were still there when checking out the Array Menu. The advance forts belonging to the Marshal Clan weren’t available though, meaning that anything inside or even too close to the Dead Zone was blocked out by jammers or the death-attuned energies.

They were gone from the remote village a few seconds later, having teleported over to one of the strongholds closest to the Dead Zone. It was a base controlled by the Underworld Council, and Zac felt it was their best bet at getting updated intelligence from the front-lines.

“Halt!” a man mounting a massive machine-gun shouted upon their appearance, but he quickly realized who they were and stood down.

“I need to speak with the Council,” Zac said, and he was immediately led out of the building housing the Teleportation Array.

However, Zac stopped in his tracks the moment he exited the building, and he couldn’t help but gawk at how the whole world was tinted in azure. The blue sky of Earth had been completely supplanted by the chilly light-blue tint of death attuned energies. If it wasn’t for the normal Cosmic Energy in the area he would have thought the world was already realigned.

However, there was an unmistakable hint of death in the ambient energies even though this camp wasn’t inside the Dead Zone, proving that the alignment was already in progress.

The azure hue was unexpected, but the most shocking scene was the gargantuan lines crisscrossing the sky, forming fractals whose size beggared comprehension. Just how much energy had been siphoned out of their planet to form this array? Zac started to worry that Earth would end up crippled even if they managed to deal with the undead somehow.

He hated to say it, but was this world even worth staying on if that happened?

**Death Defiance (Unique, Limited): The war between life and death is as old as time. Stop the realignment of your world. Reward: World Core Upgrade. Individual rewards based on contribution. (0/1).**

“Did you guys just get a quest?” Zac asked with confusion as he looked at the screen that had suddenly appeared in front of him. “To deal with the undead?”

“Yep!” Emily said with excitement shining in her eyes, and the Valkyries nodded their heads as well.

Zac frowned in confusion as he looked away from the ominous skies. Why was the System giving out a quest like this? It hadn’t done that when he fought any of the other Incursions. Did the system perhaps feel that people weren’t struggling enough against the Undead Empire, and wanted to push for a final cataclysmic battle?

They soon walked into a command tent, where six of the Underworld Councillors were already waiting.

“Thank god you’re here. We were starting to get a bit worried,” Gregor said, and it almost looked like he wanted to run over and touch Zac to make sure he was actually real. “We were even contemplating paying the fee to enter the Ark World. But seeing you shoot up in levels the past hours felt like a stay of execution.”

Zac nodded at the human Councillor with a smile before frowned in confusion at the unfamiliar word.

“The what? Ark World?” Zac asked with confusion, almost forgetting about the quest he just got.

“The New World Government approached us two days ago, shortly after we lost connection with Port Atwood. They said that they have discovered a spatial tunnel leading to a safe Mystic Realm. They call it the Ark World. They are currently shaking down the elites of the Earth to allow them to join the exodus,” Gregor explained.

“So they’re abandoning Earth?” Zac asked with a frown.

“Well, honestly I can understand them. There’s not much we can do. We can barely hold the lines against these undying bastards. Reaching the heart of the Dead Zone and taking out the leaders? Impossible. At least for us...” Gregor said pointedly.

“That’s why I’m here,” Zac said. “If the array in the sky activates, then I have failed. At that point, you might as well leave for the Ark World if you can. Humans won’t survive long on a death-attuned planet.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Romal, the official speaker of the council, said. “I would be honored to join you in battle. I would rather fight for our shared planet than hiding in some cramped Mystic Realm. Our people have already done that once, and I know what future such a decision will lead to.”

“And it’s not like the unliving are stupid,” another councilor added. “They will find us sooner or later hiding in that hidden realm. I bet they have ten ways of forcing a passage open for every way we have to keep it closed.”

“I will just take a very small group that will help with the arrays. I will deal with the Lich King myself. But you can still help me in other ways. Do you know if any of the Undead Generals are out on the battlefield?” Zac asked.

“We believe one still resides within the closest horde,” Gregor nodded. “It has stayed extremely cohesive compared to the other two hordes.”

“Can you make sure the horde and their army are occupied for the next two days?” Zac asked. “Things will go smoother if the Lich King isn’t aided by any generals or his hordes.”

“We’ll do what we can,” Romal promised. “When are you setting out?”

“Immediately after we’re done here. The sooner the array in the sky is turned off the better,” Zac said. “By the way, have you guys received a quest to stop the Undead Incursion as well?”

“We received it yesterday,” Gregor nodded. “Everyone who is above level 30 and beneath this cursed sky has it. I guess the rest are considered irrelevant in this fight.”

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**Chapter 497 - Attunement**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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“Are there any merit exchanges that have cropped up?” Zac asked as the quest reminded him of the beast waves back on his island. “And have you figured out what the World Core upgrade entails?”

“Merit exchanges? Not that we know of,” Gregor slowly said with some confusion. “We don’t know anything about the core either. Perhaps it will upgrade our planet to C-Grade? The System did mention it was D-Grade when we got integrated, after all.”

“You wish,” Ogras snorted from the side, drawing everyone’s glances. “This World is as wretched as D-Grade worlds come. The feels abundant now, but wait until the Origin Dao is gone and you’ve reached peak E-Grade. There is no way that a single quest will bump you all the way to a C-Grade Planet. Our whole Demon Horde with tens of thousands of forces only have one of them.”

“So what do you think?” Zac asked.

“It might push the world a bit further, to something like middle D-Grade. It might increase the size of the world as well, as it is quite small. A larger planet would allow larger forces and higher overall strength. Or it might even give the world an attunement, which would probably be the most valuable reward.”

“An attunement?” Zac repeated thoughtfully.

“It might not be useful for us, but for the following generations,” Ogras added. “A fire-attuned world would generate a lot of fire-aspected treasures and herbs, attuned crystals, and even the fire affinities of cultivators would slowly increase. Specialization begets power.”

Zac nodded in agreement. Such a scenario would probably be the best for Earth, though it was useless for him unless the attunement was Life. The planet becoming Death-aspected for his Draugr-side was obviously not going to happen, as that was the very thing the quest goal was designed to stop.

The Councilors also tried to discreetly inquire why he had been missing the past days and how he managed to gain so many levels in short order. Zac explained it by slightly mixing truths and lies. He said he left for the Tower of Eternity in order to evolve his Daos and gain achievements to the point that he could evolve. That was the only way he would gain enough power to assault the Dead Zone.

Lying about going to the Tower of Eternity was a waste of effort. It was just a matter of time before his activities were made known across Earth. It shouldn’t be too hard for people to figure out he was the one who caused such a ruckus the moment they went to the Tower themselves.

As for the levels, he didn’t bother hiding it and told them about the Node Breaking Pills. He had a massive surplus of them now that he couldn’t use any more for the time being. Most would probably be put into his Merit Exchange so they stayed within his force, but he could also consider selling some of them to outsiders.

In fact, Zac was already thinking of holding an auction of his own sooner or later, provided their whole planet didn’t fall to the Undead Empire. He had a lot of items right now that were pretty common in the Multiverse, but still unheard of on Earth. It was a perfect opportunity to make some money before people managed to find their own business connections.

No one on Earth was nearly as wealthy as he was, but the accumulated wealth of tens of thousands of elites should be pretty impressive by now. It was a bit unethical to overcharge his fellow countrymen, but it could be considered a fee for closing pretty much all the Incursions for them.

Zac didn’t want to stay in the base any longer than that, and he left after he had transferred all the latest intelligence reports to a tablet. The bad news was that the

Dead Zone was enormous by this point, having grown more than twice in size since he visited the last time.

The realignment array had not only increased the density of the Death-Attunement, but the forces of Pangea left multiple kilometers every day. Death spread forth like an intractable wave, and you could even see the process with your naked eyes. Every single one of the border towns was long gone, having turned into unlivable ghost towns by now.

Teleporting closer wouldn't work either due to the jamming. That meant that there was no time to waste, as the distance they needed to traverse was simply massive. He guessed that it would take over half a day to reach the core of the Dead Zone even with the flying treasure.

They still had some time according to Kenzie's estimate, but he didn't want to be late once more. The desolate landscape flashed past them as they soared through the air, this time hidden from sight with the help of a mobile illusion array that made them perfectly blend in with the surroundings.

He had gotten the idea from the seer during the climb. He had mentioned that his descendants had placed a treasure on a flying treasure and hid in the sky, making them impossible to find. The Dead Zone was no doubt crawling with those ghost scouts, but this would give them a small chance at arriving to the core unnoticed.

At the beginning of their flight they could see not only the undead horde far in the distance but also trucks and armies moving about on the ground. However, after one hour had passed there was no activity from the living. They saw a smaller horde move toward the larger one at the edge of the Dead Zone, but that was about it.

The hours passed but no one could relax. Everyone was afraid a storm of ghosts would blast through the clouds and attack them at any moment. But it really looked like their approach went by unnoticed. The Dead Zone was perhaps too big to monitor by now, allowing them to pass by unnoticed.

Zac was about to return to his meditation but something in the distance caught his attention.

"Wait, stop for a second," Zac said as he pointed at a specific spot. "Set down the vessel over there."

He had kept [**Cosmic Gaze**] running to keep watch of any hidden threats. But rather than ghosts, it had allowed him to see something unexpected, a beacon of life in a sea of dour death. Joanna immediately changed course and they landed where he indicated, and Zac's eyes widened with recognition as he looked around. He had been here before.

He once sat beneath the tree in front of him.

"What is it?" Ogras asked with confusion as Zac walked over to the mutated tree. "We don't really have time for a botanical study."

"I just want to confirm something," Zac said as he closed his eyes with one hand against the magnificent tree.

It was really the same one. He had found this mysterious tree once more, hidden in a sea of death. It felt like there was some sort of fate behind the second encounter.

"Hopefully you can help me in the future," Zac muttered as he ran his fingers across the bark. "I'll come back again after I've dealt with the undead."

"Heaven's help us," the demon muttered from the side. "He's lost it."

"Shush," Kenzie said as she kicked Ogras' shin before turning to Zac. "What is it?"

“Life and Death,” Zac said as he stepped back onto the leaf. “It’s pretty amazing. If I could bring it with me without killing it I would. I feel I can use it as a base to study my Daos.”

Seeing the small beacon of life in the sea of death not only resonated with his Daos, but it also made him remember his Skill Quest. Splitting Life and Death was such an obscure concept, but perhaps this natural oddity might guide him down the right path.

“Take note of this place,” Zac said to the Valkyries and his sister. “We need to return after we’ve dealt with the Incursion.”

The group kept flying through the Dead Zone, but the dense Death-attunement was, unfortunately, having an impact on his vessel, drastically slowing its speed. It was still a lot quicker compared to the old disk he had, but it felt like a crawl after the shocking speed it exhibited when infused with the Dao of the Bodhi.

Zac didn’t dare waste his mental energy on speeding up the vessel though in case something happened. He knew he was the muscle of the expedition, with the others acting as backup. The delay gave him enough time to finish filling his fifth node on his Draugr though, allowing him to balance out his two classes at level 80.

He put the 10 points into Dexterity once more before he turned back into his human form. He still didn’t want to expose his Draugr side to the undead invaders unless necessary, especially after learning about Catheya and her master. What if that Peak C-Grade monster became interested and tracked him down?

He was already traveling in search of something to break through, and wouldn’t Zac’s body make an interesting study? Even Yrial said so. Zac sighed for the umpteenth time over the fact there was no one to turn to for help regarding these issues. No old ancestor who could make their problems go away with a wave of his hand. Everything was up to him to solve, but he was out of treasures that could help him become stronger.

He instead turned his attention to the next thing; his skills.

With him having reached Peak mastery of multiple skills along with having evolved, then upgrading his skills was the next logical step. He had already learned some of the paths from Galau and his visit to the Undead Kingdom, and he had shored up his knowledge from the following encounters.

There were a few ways to upgrade his skills, demanding various degrees of interaction by himself. The simplest method was to adjust the skill fractal so that it would be useable in the e-grade as well. That wasn’t to say that his old skills suddenly had turned useless, but there was a limit of how much energy they could contain.

His miasmic bulwark would only be able to block so much damage, and the wooden hand he conjured with **[Nature’s Punishment]** would only be able to unleash so much destruction. But this could be changed.

The skill fractals were right now like crude drawings placed in the masterpiece that were the intricate E-Grade Pathways. You could slowly adjust these drawings to blend better, to take advantage of the higher amount of energies that could flow through them. The process of doing this was the same as when he manually drew the pathways for his two classes back in the F-Grade.

However, there was no blueprint provided this time. This meant that you were required to not only understand the skill to a great degree, but also how the skill fractals worked. You could actually ruin the skill altogether, forcing you to redraw the fractal from scratch. It wasn’t really a big deal for someone as durable as him, but it would no doubt hurt like hell and likely force him to delay his progression for a while.

This method was generally considered the easiest way of progress, but it wasn't really that case for Zac. Most people had grown up in a world of cultivation, spending their entire childhood studying fractals and pathways and the Dao in preparation of when they could finally start cultivating. He could still somewhat intuitively understand what parts of the fractals did, but his understanding was still far worse compared to any average cultivator in this regard.

The second method was to upgrade through epiphany, and Zac guessed that this was his best shot at rapid progress. Just like one could have a Dao epiphany mid-battle, so could he have a breakthrough for his skills. He had seen it a few times already with his skills, though that was just upgrading the proficiency.

Galau had also mentioned Skill Arrays, which was something that most forces and academies used. You could even say they were an integral part of a proper Heritage. They were like assisted guidance systems that helped you upgrade certain skills. They resulted in slightly worse compatibility compared to doing it yourself, but they would undeniably save time that you could spend on gaining levels instead.

You also needed an array that would work on your specific skills, and Zac was pretty skeptical he would be able to find something like that anytime soon.

Finally, there were the Skill Upgrade Quests that the System would reward, but the first one wasn't until level 90 as far as he knew. It was usually a branched quest that would either allow him to upgrade a skill or transform it, and he guessed that this was the best chance to fuse two of his skills into one.

Certainly, one could fuse skills without the assistance of the System, but you needed an extremely strong understanding to do something like that. Some treasures could put you in a state of faux-enlightenment to assist you in the process, but it was probably something better left alone until you had reached a much higher understanding.

Perhaps Yrial could assist him a bit the next time he entered the Inheritance, but that was still a decade away.

Zac didn't really have a lot of options right now, but he kept looking inward at his skill fractals, and their connection to the pathways. He figured that if he got a better grasp of the fractals and how they were lacking compared to the pathways, then he might be more likely to be able to gain an epiphany mid-battle.

Sort of like the heat of the battle was how he managed to form the bronze flashes inside the Tower.

However, no matter how hard he tried over the following hours, he simply couldn't make heads or tails about it. He would no doubt be able to redraw all the fractals in his sleep by now, but that didn't really help him in his predicament.

"I think we're just two hours away by foot now," Kenzie suddenly said, waking Zac up from his reverie. "What do you want to do?"

"Let's go by foot from here," Zac said after some hesitation. "We'll see if we can reach the core unnoticed."

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**Chapter 498 - Go Time**

Zac wasn't confident that their mobile illusion array would do them any good against the defenses of the Undead Empire. He figured that they would be able to hide

more efficiently as a small group of humanoids in a forest that was no doubt teeming with zombies, rather than on top of a lustrous giant leaf ripping through the otherwise dour sky.

There was no way that the Lich King hadn't erected any defensive arrays now that the realignment was so close, but there was a very big difference between a passively running array and an array actively controlled by an array master. Perhaps they would be able to crack open the entrance if they caught the Lich King by surprise.

Besides, they would have to be on the ground anyway if they wanted to deploy any of the array breakers they had brought.

The group landed inside the forest, and everyone already wore some sort of equipment that hid their life-attuned aura. Ogras and Zac increased the effect even further by adding a layer of shadows and dousing them in his Dao Field for the Fragment of the Coffin.

The coffin wasn't strictly Death-Attuned just yet, but it was death-adjacent, and it helped them blend into the surroundings a lot better than if they just walked in as-is. They soon got a chance at testing the efficacy of their disguise as they spotted a mob of zombies lumbering about. But they could breathe out in relief when their small group could walk by completely unnoticed.

The zombies treated them as though they were air, and the group kept running further toward the core of the Dead Zone. Of course, that small encounter wasn't enough for them to relax. Those zombies were still unawakened, which meant they were as dumb as they came. Real Revenants might not be able to sense that their group was alive, but they would no doubt understand that something was amiss with a group of strangers running toward their stronghold.

Luckily it seemed that the undead didn't bother planting any spectral scouts in the forest. Perhaps they figured that the increasingly dense number of zombies would be enough as an early warning, or perhaps they didn't even care if anyone came all this way, confident in their defensive capabilities.

But the group of 11 still avoided any undead they spotted as they inched closer to their target. It forced them to take some detours, but it still only took them three hours until reached their target, the true inner sanctum of the Dead Zone. Or rather the barrier that blocked them off from it.

Massive pitch-black runes hovered in the air, each of them humming with strength. They formed a long wall that stretched kilometers in each direction, and Zac could vaguely spot massive Unholy Beacons some distance behind them, no doubt powering them with a steady flow of power.

There was no physical wall acting as a foundation, but that didn't mean the barrier would be any easier to deal with. This was something that made use of the Dead Zone itself, and it would no doubt require a massive blast to crack open. However, reaching the target wasn't the only trouble they faced.

There was also the even thicker wall of zombies that stood between them and the array. The density of the undead lumbering about in the forest had gradually increased as the density of Miasma did, and they currently had zombies within 30 meters in pretty much every direction by now. However, they almost formed a solid wall of putrid flesh along the defensive array in front of them.

The swarm of zombies was well over twenty meters thick, and it seemed to stretch endlessly in each direction along the barrier. Millions and millions of former citizens of earth turned into nothing more than an unliving fortification. At least that was what Zac figured they were, as this band of zombies definitively hadn't come about naturally.

“How the hell are we supposed to sneak in like this?” Ogras spat. “There is no way that the people inside won’t be alerted if we start killing this rabble.”

“Can’t we just walk past them?” Emily asked. “Isn’t that what our talismans are for?”

“No way,” the demon said as he threw a humored glance at the teenager. “They’re stupid, but not *that* stupid. Besides, I bet there is some failsafe for that.”

“Some sort of diversion?” Zac muttered.

He briefly considered using the thing he had gotten from Void’s Disciple, but he eventually decided against it. This was still just an outer shield, and the real forces of the Lich King were nowhere in sight. Using that thing right now was a waste, and better left to use as a surprise when Zac was right in front of his target.

Besides, Void had said that he was meant to activate the black crystal it inside a ‘castle’ and there were nothing of the sort in sight just yet. That point alone made Zac a bit worried. It meant that his whole idea to sneak attack the leaders had already failed. Even if they rushed inside after blasting through the wall the Lich King would probably be ready to meet their assault.

Still, they had managed to get pretty close without getting noticed, which was worth something. It would be too late to recall larger forces to defend by this point, and there was no way undead general stationed in the horde would be able to come back in time.

“Can’t be anything big,” Ogras slowly said. “We want these rotting bastards out of the way without causing a scene. We need to hit the shield before the owners inside notice us. If they take active control it will be twice as hard to break inside.”

“What about Miasma Crystals?” Emily ventured. “We throw a few of them to the left and one to the right. I heard that zombies search out things that benefit their strength instinctively. Shouldn’t that split them up?”

The idea of throwing out Miasma Crystals as breadcrumbs sounded extraordinarily stupid, but it quickly became apparent that no one had a better idea. Joanna proposed they dig a tunnel, but Zac remembered how the slightest tremor in the earth was immediately exposed by geomancers when fighting the second beast wave.

Ogras also suggested for Zac to somehow telepathically control them in his Draugr form, but he simply had no way to do that.

Though to be fair, turning into a Draugr might push the zombies away, as there was a massive inherent difference in caste between the noble races and some newly turned zombies without sapience. But he wanted to keep that as an ace in the hole, so they had no better option than going with Emily’s plan.

Dozens of F-Grade Miasma Crystals soared through the air and landed in the densely packed groups of zombies as Zac started to throw them to their left and right. It took a few seconds for the undead to register what was going on, but they slowly started to congregate toward the energy-rich crystals on the ground.

It created a five-meter wide corridor almost completely devoid of zombies in front of them, and the group unhesitantly rushed forward and set up an illusion array right next to the barrier. A few zombies seemed to feel that something was amiss, but they soon joined the others in the struggle for Miasma Crystals after they couldn’t see anything odd in their surroundings.

This close to the barrier they could finally spot an almost completely transparent black film blocking them like a wall, proving the shield covered every inch of the Core Zone. Kenzie immediately set up a set of mobile arrays that blocked out their presence,

meaning the Zombies wouldn't find them even if they lost interest in the Miasma Crystals.

However, there was clearly no love lost between the zombies, and the attraction of the crystals was beyond their expectation as undead fought tooth and nail for them. It was just a matter of time before the ruckus was exposed or the zombies started getting ripped apart, so they were still against the clock.

The group had gone over the plan multiple times on the leaf and as they ran through the forest, and now was the time to put it into action. Zac and Ogras were both imbued with a fiery axe, whereas Kenzie got the one crackling with lightning that improved Intelligence and Wisdom. This was the benefit Emily had gotten from upgrading the proficiency of the skill. She could now boost three people in total, but she was only able to get one boost per type.

The six valkyries each took out a large engraved spike and stuck it into the ground, forming a perfect circle within their bubble. They then placed their massive bulwarks outside them to prevent any interference while further isolating their small circle. Kenzie withdrew a densely inscribed skull that emitted scorching heat, along with a bunch of Flame Crystals they had dug up from Zac's new mine in the underworld.

Six chains were attached to the skull in various positions, and the six valkyries each took one and attached it to their respective spike, effectively fettering the head to the ground. Kenzie made sure that the inscriptions held and that the array flags were properly planted, and Zac couldn't help but look at the odd scene with bemusement.

This was one of the array breakers he had found in the mentalist's Spatial Ring, and Kenzie had chosen this one for two reasons. First of all, it was fire-attuned, which seemed pretty effective against the undead based both on Zac's experiences and looking at the Church of the Everlasting Dao. Secondly, it was one of the breakers that were simple to use, with the downside that it carried low strength on its own.

Its strength was rather based on the power of the people infusing it. The users would feed it with their energy and Dao, and the Array would convert it into an attack especially suited for burning a hole in an array. It would allow Zac to not only take advantage of his recent boost in energy circulation but also release a blast of power without wasting any of his long cooldown attacks on the wall.

"Give me a few seconds," Kenzie said as she pushed one spike after another down into the ground, forming yet another array surrounding the treasure in the middle. "Get ready to infuse the main array with your Cosmic Energy and Daos. The more chaotic the better."

Ten spikes turned to dozens that embedded themselves in the ground as Kenzie threw them in rapid succession, forming an increasingly large array that soon enough spread even outside the confines of their illusion array. Small spikes shot out between the zombies with pinpoint precision and lodged themselves in the ground.

"These spikes will destabilize the energy flow in the area, making it harder for the shield to feed off the ambient energy. They might even disconnect this section of the barrier from the Unholy Beacons. They will burn out quickly though, so you need to activate the array breaker immediately," she said.

Zac and the others nodded, and cosmic energy was already coursing through Zac's body as he readied himself.

"Go!" Kenzie said the moment she had finalized connecting the inscribed skull with the six spikes that the valkyries controlled.

Zac, Ogras, Kenzie, and Joanna immediately placed their hands on the skull that was as large as an elephant's, and the whole area started to twist and turn as a massive congregation of power started building inside the hollow head. Its eyes started to flicker

with chaotic colors as the Daos of the four clashed with increasing ferocity. It even started to vibrate, causing the chains to rattle, but it still seemed like it could swallow more.

Emily was instead dancing around inside the array waving her tomahawks, and Zac realized that his mind felt extremely refreshed. Whatever she was doing was actually dispersing the negative effect of standing inside miasma. It was a lot like **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** in that regard, as it felt like the inhospitable atmosphere had suddenly turned into something uniquely suited to them.

It helped Zac move his energy with a lot more vigor as an unceasing torrent of energy coursed through his arm and into the inscribed head. He infused the head with his Fragment of the Axe as well, as he felt that Dao Fragment would increase the destructive might the most. In a perfect world, he would have wanted to use all three Fragments, but he simply wasn't able to do that.

The hollow skull was quickly approaching the limits of what it could contain, while the six remaining Valkyries focused on keeping the supportive Array Flags stable. The ground shuddered and heaved by this point, and the Zombies finally realized something was amiss.

There was no way for the illusion array to block out the terrifying amounts of energy they were churning inside as it was affecting the whole area by this point, and the zombies roared as they charged at the source of the disturbance.

"Shield!" Joanna shouted, and six streams of silver Cosmic Energy streamed from the Valkyries and fused to form a sturdy wall surrounding them, using the chitinous shields as a base.

The zombies desperately tried to cut through, but the War Array the Valkyries got from the quest showed it's worth as it didn't even shudder from the onslaught. Of course, these zombies were far from being the elites of the Undead Empire, but there were over a hundred attackers in just a second.

The stalwart shield allowed Zac and the others to wholeheartedly focus on the skull, and it finally rose into the air, stretching all the chains taut.

"Get ready to run!" Kenzie said as she swiped straight at the chains, breaking it in three swift motions.

A piercing screech seemingly from the abyss emerged from the mouth of the skull, and a blinding flame illuminated the sky it exploded into motion. Zac's heart lurched when he saw that the flaming skull actually flew straight into the sky, and he started to worry that the weird treasure would simply fly away. However, his worries were alleviated when Kenzie threw out a flaming spike straight at the closest of the black runes that was twenty meters away from them.

It looked like the skull had found its prey as it immediately did a 180 and shot toward the barrier with extreme momentum. It instantly broke the sound barrier as it flew toward the wall, causing waves of multifarious flames to incinerate everything close to its path, including dozens of zombies.

A terrifying blast spread out the next moment as the flaming skull actually bit into the black fractal, and Zac's eyes lit up when a small crack in the rune appeared in an instant. The crack quickly grew as the flames increased in intensity seemingly without limit, and Zac took a steadying breath as **[Verun's Bite]** appeared in his right hand.

It was go time.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### Chapter 499 - Pillars and Beams

The whole array of black runes lit up in an instant, but the runes around Zac's group were still dim thanks to Kenzie's efforts. However, explosions erupted in every direction as the Array Flags burnt out in quick succession. Thankfully the barrier couldn't hold it any longer, and it suddenly shattered as the maw of the fiery skull closed with a snap.

A massive crack provided an ingress for the group and they heedlessly braved the flames as they rushed inside, protected by the still-running War Array of the six Valkyries. A victorious roar sent a fiery discharge in each direction before the skull crumbled to white ash. Zac immediately summoned [**Nature's Barrier**] and blocked out the fallout, but the zombies on the other side of the array weren't so lucky.

Hundreds of them were incinerated in one fell swoop, and the shield had already mended itself before any new unliving could take their place. It looked like these pitiful creatures really weren't considered part of the Undead Empire just yet, as they were utterly incapable of following Zac and the others through the intangible barrier.

Zac knew that an advanced force like the Undead Empire would be able to erect arrays that could discern friend and foe, especially when there was such a striking difference between the living and the dead. But it looked like the Lich King had elected to keep even his own outside the core area. Perhaps too many zombies would be a drain on the limited Miasma in the atmosphere or something.

Of course, it wasn't like there weren't any zombies on the other side of the enclosure.

Large mobs of the undead were already rushing toward them from the distance, while Zac spotted clumps of Corpse Golems guarding the Unholy Beacons. These ones were the real deal as well, the crafty and ruthless elite zombies that probably were on the precipice of evolving into sapient Revenants.

Zac flashed away and gripped one of the zombies who shrieked as he tried to dig his rotting teeth into Zac's arm. Its assault was obviously futile with Zac's 2000 plus Endurance though. Zac shook the undead man for a bit to make him release his grip before he flung him toward the defensive array.

The nearby zombies roared in anger as they tried to mob Zac in retaliation, but they were immediately dismembered by a few lazy swings of his axe. The projectile zombie flew straight through the array, confirming Zac's guess. It worked like his own [**Town Defense Array**], only keeping people out in one direction. It was valuable information in case they were forced to flee later on.

"Let's go," Zac said. "They definitely know we're here by now."

The squad immediately started running toward the shining Incursion Pillar that was barely discernible in the distance through the thick miasmatic haze. However, they barely had time to move a few hundred meters before the sky changed, and one azure fractal after another started appearing.

These runes were clearly not the realignment array, but rather something meant to deal with intruders.

"Uynala, you were right," Ogras groaned. "It's not worth it."

"What?" Kenzie asked with a frown from the side.

Zac ignored the two as he activated [**Cosmic Gaze**] and turned it toward the sky. The arrays were obviously made from miasma, but Zac frowned when he saw that they contained something that could best be described as condensed death, and this weird energy was quickly accumulating more power. It was like the array was taking the death-attuned Cosmic Energy and taking away the energy itself, leaving just the concept behind.

He didn't know what use that stuff was, but it felt extremely dangerous. He needed to stop them from activating.

"Destroy the Unholy Beacons," Zac said as a massive fractal edge grew out from [**Verun's Bite**].

He activated [**Loamwalker**] the next second, and within moments he found himself in front of the closest beacon. It was more than three times the size of the mobile pillars he had seen so far during the two invasions of his island, and the hair on his arms stood on end from the extremely condensed miasma surrounding it.

A fractal blade grew from his axe and a wide arc swept through the guarding golems, causing them to fall apart into stale clumps of meat. A small amount of energy entered his body, but Zac frowned when he realized that it didn't target any specific node in his body like he would have assumed. It instead started to spread out across his limbs, until it finally started to dissipate.

Did he need to direct the energy himself?

Zac quickly took hold of the energy and condensed it into a ball, and it was thankfully an easy process to figure out the next step. He quickly pushed the ball of energy through his pathways until he felt some pliability from a node in his left leg. But he barely had time to push the small amount of energy inside the node before almost a hundred translucent green balls poured out of the massive brazier at the top of the beacon.

They caused an extremely uncomfortable weight to descend on him, and it felt like a mix of mental and physical pressure. However, Zac's Wisdom had shot all the way up to 800 over the past days, a number that even most early E-Grade mentalist would be hard-pressed to match. Combine that with a soul that had been forced to endure the continuous pressure from the Splinter of Oblivion for months, and he was starting to truly shore up his old weakness.

He didn't even need to infuse [**Mental Fortress**] with the Fragment of the Bodhi to effortlessly shrug off the mental pressure, and a few quick swings caused the tower to crumble. However, his mind warned him of danger the moment the beacon started to collapse, and he hurriedly flashed away.

It was just in time as well, as a chain of explosions turned the whole area around the beacon into a frozen hellscape. At least half of the odd spheres had been filled with ice-attuned energies it seemed, and while their individual destructiveness wasn't too threatening they still were a cause for concern when there were almost a hundred of them balled together.

Zac glanced at the sky and was relieved to see that a handful of the newly appeared fractals had dissipated, but most were still going strong as they condensed their energies. One of them suddenly activated, and a wave of darkness shot down at Ogras and Kenzie who were whittling down another one of the beacons.

Ogras had already taken out the Corpse golems and was working on the tower, whereas Kenzie waved her staff to conjure dozens of fireballs in an instant that shot out at an incoming wave of zombies. The flames seemed to have a life of their own as they hopped from target to target and caused an extremely impressive amount of destruction for how little energy she seemed to have consumed.

However, there was no time to admire his sister's growth as the wave from the sky was almost upon them.

"Watch out!" Zac shouted at the demon, who immediately was swallowed whole by a shroud of shadows.

Another ball of shadows started to rise around Kenzie, but she had already flickered away in a gust of wind, narrowly avoiding the darkness. The demon wasn't as lucky, as he was actually forced out of the shadows a few meters away from his earlier position as the wave swallowed him whole. The area turned back to normal the next moment, but Zac knew something was wrong when he saw how pale the demon was.

He instantly flashed over and immediately sensed an overwhelming death-attuned aura coming from the demon. It was like he was being forcibly converted into a Revenant in front of his eyes, and the process looked extremely painful. Zac quickly grabbed the demon's shoulder and flooded him with the Fragment of the Bodhi as he gobbled up the large amounts of death-attuned energies for himself.

He felt a bit queasy from the incompatible energy, but his [Void Heart] would deal with it soon enough.

"Urh," the demon groaned as he spat a ball of black phlegm. "Zombifying beams. Just great. Thanks, by the way."

"No problem," Zac smiled. "Thank you for protecting Kenzie."

"What protecting, just making a fool of myself," Ogras grunted as he shakily got back to his feet.

The next moment he disappeared and reappeared next to the Unholy Beacon once more. A storm of strikes slammed into the base as a forest of shadow spears rose to meet the falling balls, piercing all of them with expert accuracy. The beacon toppled the next moment, but the demon was obviously out for blood, or at least unwilling to let the arrays in the sky keep shooting at them.

The demon didn't even stop to loot the potentially valuable pillar as he shot toward the next one, repeating the process. However, the arrays in the sky were all starting to power up by now, and they clearly didn't only rely on the closest Unholy Beacons for power. Staying around and taking out the pillars was a waste of time, and the group instead started rushing toward the core.

Wave after wave of elite zombies appeared to impede their path, but Zac's group was like a grindstone that turned anything that came too close into shreds. Zac was occasionally shooting out a fractal blade or flashed away to take out another beacon, but he mainly relied on the others to break open a path so that he could reserve his strength.

It was rather Kenzie and Joanna that did the heavy lifting. The Chief Valkyrie seemed to have gained a repeatable area strike upon reaching level 50, and she was using it freely at the moment. It was a pretty odd one as well. She kept conjuring a silver ball in the air in front of her, but the moment it appeared she attacked it with a powerful stab with her spear.

The ball immediately cracked like a broken mirror, and sharp shards reminiscent of all kinds of crude weapons shot into the zombie horde with even greater momentum than her strike had. Some of the shards were shaped like speartips, and they punched gruesome holes into the undead. Others were bladed weapons like swords or axes, and these shards cleanly cut limbs or heads off any zombie they passed.

Zac shot a surprised glance at Joanna, feeling that she was walking down an interesting path. It made him think of the War Stele and the Dao of War, one of the possible upgrade-paths of the various Weapon-based Daos. If Joanna managed to walk

down that road she would have a chance to become as powerful as the great general in the vision.

Kenzie's side was an ever-changing scene as well, where the undying got incinerated one second and flash-frozen the next. She had also summoned a mysterious wheel that hovered above her head, and every time it turned 90 degrees a devastating blast from one of the four elements was launched.

It reminded Zac of a drone as it kept pace with Kenzie, but he could quickly confirm that it was a construct made from Attuned Energies with the help of **[Cosmic Gaze]**. Zac didn't understand what kind of skill it was, but it felt a bit like the massive demonic angel that Iz Tayn had summoned. Was the wheel some sort of companion, but perhaps more akin to a golem than an Elemental?

However, while the recent improvements of the two were impressive, their low levels was an undeniable weakness. Each strike could only kill so many of the unthinking rabble, but there was an unending stream of them that kept trying to tire them out before they reached the core. At least that was what Zac thought the undead were trying to do.

They were beset by an endless number of elite zombies as they ran, but they had not encountered a single revenant or another elite unit of the undead Empire since taking down the Unholy Beacons. Worse yet, the group was constantly bombarded by waves of death from above, and they often had to interrupt their strike to desperately scramble out of the way.

Kenzie was already panting from the exertion, but she insisted that she could keep going. Zac didn't say anything as he knew they tried to help as much as they could while allowing him to save his strength. Because these waves of unliving were just the appetizer, whereas the main course was finally coming into vision in just ahead.

A massive black fortress, reaching toward the sky with a backdrop consisting of an azure pillar that pierced the miasmic haze.

This was the first structure Zac's group had encountered inside the Dead Zone, aside from the endless ruins of the countries it had gobbled up. But Zac guessed that this monstrous structure would have no problem housing every single elite that was brought over from the Undead Kingdom of the Zecia sector, along with tens of thousands of the best zombies who were 'recruited' here on earth.

It might even be more apt to call it a city than a castle if it wasn't for the fact that it really seemed to be one cohesive structure. It's pitch-black wall rose almost twenty meters into the air, wrought from some stone that Zac didn't recognize. It was covered in both azure fractals and intricate carvings reminiscent of European Gothic architecture.

Dozens of towers protruded from within the walls as well, each of them well over a hundred meters tall. They all seemed to house terrifyingly powerful Unholy Beacons at the top, probably responsible for providing energy for the whole building. They almost looked like fountains as dense clouds of Miasma billowed down along their lengths as though it was liquid.

They could vaguely spot the roof of many more sections, but the towering wall made it hard to make out any real impression of the layout inside. However, finding their way inside was the least of their concern at the moment, as they first needed to break through the army waiting at the wall walk.

Thousands of Revenants, Golems, and Corpse Lords stood at the front, their killing intent palpable as they looked down at their small squad from above.

"Super-Brother Man, or should I say Zachary Atwood?" a decrepit voice full of power flowed down from up high, which helped Zac spot an all-too-familiar hooded

being. "You came after all, not that you had much choice. But you'll find the Undead Empire a completely different target than the invaders you've fought until now."

Fury surged in Zac's chest as he looked at the man at the wall.

It was him. The Lich King.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 500 - Wallbreakers**

It was the man that had almost killed Alea. The man who had left him no recourse but to either let her die or turn her into a Spirit Tool, not to mention causing the creeping death of their whole planet.

His appearance was all-too-familiar, as it was the very same one as the four ghosts he had fought back on Port Atwood. Zac had already known that the hooded beings he killed were clones or projections, as destroying the four identical copies provided no Cosmic Energy. He had also suspected him to either be the Lich King or one of his Generals, but it looked like he had his answer now.

He was accompanied by a powerful-looking female to his left, and a wretched ghost to his right. If one of the generals was occupied in the zombie horde, then these two might just be the last two generals of the Undead Incursion. The Abbot had killed two of the six when they tried to take down Mount Everlasting Peace, and Zac dealt with Mhal himself, leaving just three. A host of ghosts who hovered behind them in the air as well, perhaps there to provide the three with War Arrays.

Anger burned inside his chest, and his mind worked a mile a minute in figuring out a way to get up on that wall-walk to rip that man into pieces. However, he was surprised to sense the Demon next to him sporting a similar killing intent.

"It's that bitch," Ogras muttered from the side, his eyes trained at the ghastly woman standing to the side of the Lich King.

She looked almost like a pale human with long, black, flowing hair, but her hands were replaced by grisly claws with unnaturally long fingers.

"You know her too?" Kenzie asked with surprise. "She's the one that almost killed me and Ilvere. I thought we had killed her by detonating the mecha."

"All the more reason for me to skewer her," the demon muttered. "That crazy banshee almost caught me inside an array when we fought last time. This time we'll see who will be the Scuttlecreeper and who'll be the Gwyllgi."

A roar from behind interrupted their discussion, and Zac turned around to see that the zombies pretty much had caught up with them. There were thankfully no zombies between themselves and the wall though. Perhaps the Lich King was afraid of friendly fire.

The Undead saw zombies as something between children and potential recruits, after all. They both were and weren't part of the Undead Empire just yet, and while they wouldn't really mourn their true death, they also weren't keen on killing them with their own hands.

The six Valkyries set up their war array once more, and they started a methodical slaughter of anyone that came too close under the direction of Joanna, allowing Zac and the others to focus on the castle.

"Do you people have any better ideas than charging right at them?" Zac asked.

“They are obviously prepared for a siege,” the demon said with a frown. “I can’t sense anything, but I bet this place is covered in both defensive and Offensive Arrays.”

“He’s right,” Kenzie said from the side. “The wall itself is full of array flags. Those huge towers contain offensive arrays as well.”

“We can’t dally too long,” Joanna said from the side as she looked behind then. “We will be overrun in a few minutes without assistance.”

“I can’t keep boosting you either for very long,” Emily muttered. “It drains way more energy now than it did before. Perhaps because you’re E-Grade and boost me a 100 points?”

Zac’s brows rose in confusion as he looked over. Her skill was supposed to boost his attributes by 10% after having been upgraded to High Mastery. However, a glance at his status screen confirmed that it truly only gave him 100 Strength.

Perhaps there were limits to how much the skill could provide, and 100 Points was no doubt a huge amount for most people in the F-Grade. It made sense that she couldn’t use it on a B-Grade monster and gain tens of thousands of points too, which would allow her to skip multiple grades and kill D-Grade Hegemons without much effort.

But now was not the time to experiment with the limits of Emily’s supportive capabilities.

“Let me see how the arrays look,” Zac said as he shot forward, a surge of warmth entering his back as Emily reapplied her buff.

A pillar of light rose toward the sky as a shockingly large fractal edge appeared. It glistened with sharpness as it stretched almost a hundred meters into the air, far exceeding the height of the wall. **[Chop]** might not be able to evolve, but just being able to cram five times more energy into the Skill Fractal before he lost control made a huge difference.

The ground cracked for dozens of meters in each direction as Zac launched himself into the sky, and the air screamed as he swung the towering fractal edge straight down toward the Lich King, seemingly intent to cut the whole fortress in two. The area heaved as a black shield materialized just before the blade would hit them, forcing Zac’s edge to a stop.

The clouds of miasma churned as blade and shield met, and winds buffeted the zombies who were approaching. Zac grunted in annoyance though, as he was incapable of cutting the shield open even after having infused the skill with the Fragment of the Axe. He lost control a second later and the blade dematerialized while the barrier remained.

However, while the shield held against Zac’s strike it didn’t do so effortlessly. It didn’t crack, but it did shudder and fluctuate a bit, and Zac noticed that a few of the core members of the Incursion took a step back or reached for their weapons upon witnessing the strike. The shield wasn’t invincible after all.

It looked like the Lich King hadn’t completely ruined his finances when erecting the defensive arrays around his fortress. Perhaps he had spent too much of his invasion budget on the massive fractal in the sky and thousands of Unholy Beacons. This was the only reason Zac had a chance at taking them down at all, as there were obviously way more powerful arrays than this readily available in the Undead Kingdoms.

But those were too expensive to bring, and a Kingdom would rather cut their losses than overinvest in an incursion.

“Not quite enough, Monarch-Select,” the Lich King snorted as a green fractal appeared in front of him.

He reached out a withered hand and tapped it, and a massive copy appeared above one of the Array Towers the next second. Danger screamed in Zac's mind as the fractal started humming with power, and a torrent of what looked like radioactive toxins shot toward him while he was still mid-air.

Another fractal blade shot into the array with tremendous speed, this time forming a stab aimed right at the Lich King's head. The Lich welcomed the strike without a care, and the shield unfortunately held against the assault once more. However, piercing the shield with a normal **[Chop]** had never been Zac's intent.

He shot away from the rebound like a bullet, narrowly dodging an acid beam that would have swallowed him whole if he didn't react in time. It was the downside of **[Loamwalker]**; the skill didn't do him much good while mid-air.

However, Zac could always move around with the help of **[Chop]** as long as he had some fixtures to generate momentum with. He could probably even generate some push by simply swinging in the air quickly enough. He landed some distance from the wall and immediately flashed away, appearing next to his squad the next moment.

They were currently embroiled in a moving battle where they kept running back and forth while keeping a safe distance to the fortress' wall while dodging the constant blasts from the fractals in the sky.

"It's strong," Ogras muttered as he threw out a barrage of shadows at a clump of zombies. "But not impenetrable. What about that thing you used in Base Town?"

"It's too soon," Zac said with a shake of his head after sending a mental thread into his Spatial Ring. "It is still drained from the last strike. I'll have to use **[Nature's Punishment]**."

"Wait," Kenzie said. "I still have a few ideas. We should use some treasures so you can save your strength."

"What do you need us to do?" Zac asked, agreeing immediately.

"Can you hold their attacks off for a few seconds while stationary if we get closer?" Kenzie asked.

"Those Array Towers are pretty scary, but it shouldn't be a problem," Zac nodded. "Worst case I'll have to use a defensive treasure."

He was out of powerful offensive treasure from the mentalist's collection, but he still had a few defensive ones. He figured he might as well use them sooner rather than later, as they would become useless soon enough with his rapid growth in attributes.

"Good," Kenzie said as she took out a golden eye that was a bit reminiscent of the skill that the Mentalist used to fracture his soul during the climb. "This thing should both weaken the shield and give its controller a backlash."

"What if it fails?" Joanna asked with some worry.

"The drones are not completely restored, but they'll be able to launch one strike," Kenzie slowly said before she turned to Ogras and Zac. "If that fails as well you'll have to do the rest yourself."

"What are you doing playing with those cursed things anyway, girl? Don't you know you'll draw the ire of the Heavens by getting involved with that stuff?" the demon muttered.

"It's not like we have a lot of options right now," Kenzie said as she put away her staff. "Oh, and this attack will cost some of the Soul Crystals."

"That's fine," Zac nodded, feeling it was worth the exchange if it gave a shot at wounding the soul of the Lich King. "Ogras and I will guard Kenzie, the rest stay behind."

The group didn't tally any longer as they rushed toward the wall as one. A storm of attacks quickly descended from the undead elites at the wall walk, but between **[Nature's Barrier]** and Ogras' ability to slightly move the trio by holding their shoulders they reached their targeted distance without wasting too much energy.

Of course, the attacks were not the full force of the Undead Empire, as neither the Lich King nor the generals had made a move. That changed though as the Lich King swung his hand, causing a full five of the array towers to light up and form a series of different runes in the sky. Each of them contained even more power than the toxic attack from earlier, far exceeding Zac's expectations.

Zac's eyes widened as he turned to his sister who was fast at work with the golden eye.

"How long?"

"Ten seconds," Kenzie said as a sheen of perspiration covered her forehead, mostly from the pressure of the situation Zac guessed.

The two generals, at least Zac assumed that the unmoving ghost to the Lich King's side was general as well despite his weak energy signature, were thankfully still unmoving though. Zac still gave up any thought of defending that long with the help of **[Nature's Barrier]**, as the arrays alone would prove too much to handle.

His defensive skill in his human class was designed to withstand many smaller hits, not to take on extremely powerful blasts like this. His Draugr side would probably be able to deal with it, but it was still too early to expose that side. He instead activated one of the rings on his finger. A golden gate appeared in front of them, each door branded with a fractal that emitted extremely dense power.

"What?!" the Lich King exclaimed, seemingly taken by surprise for the first time since they arrived.

Zac wasn't surprised, as the quality of his defensive treasures wasn't something that should exist on a newly integrated world, perhaps not in the Zecia sector at all. But it was too late to cancel the attacks as they shot toward the defensive treasure. The whole area was suffused in a storm of chaotic energies the next moment, but the divine gate held fast, protecting the trio behind it.

However, the threat wasn't over as Zac sensed something that he had been ready for the whole time. He stomped into the ground with his full force, causing a massive explosion that spread out in each direction. Rampant waves of his Dao spread through the cracks as Zac had flooded his leg with the Fragment of the Bodhi as well, and Zac felt a small of Cosmic Energy entering his body.

Kenzie hadn't been prepared for the massive shockwave, and she helplessly fell over, barely managing to hold on to the Array Breaker.

"Sorry, there are ghosts in the ground," Zac explained, and Ogras instantly disappeared.

He reappeared among Emily and the Valkyries the next moment, just in time to rip two spectral assassins to pieces with a barrage of swings. A vast sea of shadows spread out from their position the next moment, no doubt making it impossible for any more backstabs to take place. Zac had already seen this tactic being used before and he wasn't about to fall for that trick, especially not after having learned how to deal with the ghost warriors during his climb.

Kenzie shot another glare at Zac before she crammed a bunch of Soul Crystals into the eye as she realigned the pedestal that came with it. It was covered in dense inscriptions as well, and Zac felt his mind blurring a bit just from looking at them. His sister wasted no time as she adroitly activated the Array Breaker, and a gargantuan sapphire eye appeared in the sky.

The blue eye didn't launch an attack, but it rather shot straight toward the Lich King until it hit the barrier. However, no explosion wreaked havoc on the barrier. It rather looked like the eye had jumped into a pond of water as the whole barrier started to ripple like a pond as the Array Breaker entered the defensive layer itself.

It somehow seemed to have managed to brand itself on the barrier, like an enormous sticker on the shield that gazed down on the soldiers on the wall. Multiple warriors keel over from its stare and even the Lich King hunkered over from its assault.

But the shield still held true.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 501 - Death's Embrace**

The Lich King was clearly hit by a psychic attack, but he still seemed very much in control of the shield. And while the barrier had dimmed by a certain degree it wasn't to the point that a swing or two would break it.

"I guess we have no choice," Kenzie muttered as drones started appearing above her in rapid succession, each of them independently dodging any errant attack that came too close.

This was the first time Zac had seen his sister control more than one or two of them, and his eyes widened when he saw that she had summoned almost a hundred of them and had them coordinate with perfect precision as they charged up a beam. Something like this would no doubt demand great control even if she was assisted by Jeeves.

If he had a tenth of this skill when controlling his Dao Fragments, then he would be nigh-unstoppable.

The brand of the eye remained on the barrier no matter what the Lich King tried, but he obviously wasn't dismayed to see the appearance of the drones. Zac's brows rose when he saw the arrays on the wall light up as an uncountable number of the same balls floated out to create a second barrier.

They were similar to ones those that had poured out of the Beacons earlier, but Zac' felt some disgust when he noticed there seemed to be screaming faces inside the balls. They only appeared for a second before they were replaced by churning mists, making Zac wonder if his eyes were playing a trick with him.

"These are the souls of your people," the white-clad general laughed to the Lich King's side. "Are you ready to sacrifice them to break our shield? They can still enter the Wheel of Samsara, but not if you destroy them like this."

Zac froze as his eyes widened. Those things were really the souls of former Earthlings? Were the Unholy Beacons of the Undead Empire actually powered by souls? Kenzie paled at the words, but Zac put a hand on her shoulder.

"Keep going, I'll deal with these things. Destroying the balls is the best thing we can do for them. Imagine being trapped by these lunatics forever," Zac said as Cosmic Energy surged to the fractal close to his heart. "Besides, there's no way that E-Grade people are strong enough to affect the afterlife."

Zac at least hoped that was the case.

There was no time to lose. He felt that these things would impede and weaken the strike of the drones, ruining their best option to break inside the fortress. He

needed to do something about it, but a couple of **[Chop]**'s wouldn't be enough. It was a bit of a shame to bring out his big guns early, but it was time to activate **[Deforestation]**.

Zac figured that at least only one of his swings would be wasted on these floating spheres, and his arm grew taut as a huge surge of Cosmic Energy entered the skill fractal. This time he didn't feel any pain or pressure at all, and he immediately swung his axe as he imbued the **[Axe of Felling]** with his Fragment of the Bodhi.

It wasn't as powerful as his Fragment of the Axe, but that was against normal targets. He wanted to purify these souls and release them to the afterlife if there was such a thing. The Fragment of the Bodhi was no doubt his best chance for accomplishing that.

A green ripple of destruction shot forward, and a deafening wail made Zac stumble for a second. It was the innumerable souls getting cut apart, causing a massive backlash to rush back at Zac. If this had been before, then his soul might have actually cracked like during the climb, but now he only felt a splitting headache as he started running forward.

The way was paved, and Kenzie seized the opportunity to follow through on her end. Heat blared down on Zac as dozens of beams of pure energy passed above him before they tore into the weakened shield, right on top of the blue eye. Cracks immediately spread across the whole barrier as multiple fractals on the wall broke.

The wound quickly started to close though, but a massive torrent of shadows followed the blast, and they wriggled inside the cracks in an instant. A few of the shadows stayed inside the cracks, reminiscent of the scars on Zac's own soul, whereas others continued through the cracks and shot toward the Lich King.

Ogras was obviously not trying to kill him, but rather to divert his attention by forcing him to deal with an attack while controlling the Array. The desiccated Lich was unfortunately a powerful E-Grade warrior, and a swing of his staff was all that was needed to disperse the dozens of shadowy spears.

However, the small delay was all Zac needed as his second swing of **[Deforestation]** was already in full force, and the **[Infernal Axe]** unleashed a rampant wave of flames at the weakened barrier. This time he did utilize the Fragment of the Axe, and the splintered shield was quickly cut to ribbons before the wave continued forward into the physical wall.

The flames climbed up the pitch-black fortification, utterly destroying the remaining fractals and ornamental details before it reached the crest of the wall. A large number of the elite soldiers of the Undead Empire were instantly incinerated, but the Lich King quickly prepared a response. An enormous avatar appeared in the sky, a chained-down corpse that spewed an unending stream of green bile from his mouth.

The putrid liquid fell onto the flames of Zac's attack, and a rapid shockwave of noxious gasses shot down in Zac's direction as the green bile was vaporized by the wave of flames. Zac also sensed that his skill was quenched in one move, though it was slightly expended already from breaking the barrier and destroying half the wall.

The cloud rapidly closed in on him and Zac's hairs stood on end as he realized just how potent the toxin was. There was no way that his sister or even Ogras would survive taking a single breath of that stuff.

"Back away!" Zac shouted and was relieved to see Kenzie flashing away to rejoin the others, but he didn't follow his own advice.

The Fragment of the Coffin churned through his body, and he thanked the gods for his recent boost to his Vitality as he rushed through the broken barrier before the

Lich King had time to repair it. Even then, he felt extremely weakened for a few seconds, but his heart suddenly thumped with increased vigor.

It was the **[Void Heart]** that had activated once more, and Zac's heart beat with enough force to cause some ripples in the noxious fumes around him. Of course, it was nothing like the massive effect of the man in the vision, but the poisonous vapors right next to him slowly seeped into his pores and were absorbed into his heart. Zac couldn't worry whether this was a good or a bad thing right now though, as he was in the middle of a battle.

His vision was completely obscured by the extremely dense poison, but he could still spot Death-Attuned hotspots when activating **[Cosmic Gaze]**. However, he noticed something odd when he looked around. The general stood like a beacon of power on top of the wall walk, but the Lich King standing next to her was barely contained a third of her power.

Had he somehow swapped his real self with a clone the moment Zac lost vision of his target due to the toxic fumes? And where was the original? Zac had planned on taking them all out in one move by unleashing the third swing now that the barrier had been breached, but it looked like that idea was out the window.

It felt a bit of a waste, but he couldn't keep the **[Axe of Desolation]** on the back-burner for too long. If he didn't use the swing within a minute or activated another skill, then the skill would reset and enter its cooldown period. The last thing he was lacking at the moment was Cosmic Energy reserves, so not using the attack with this many targets in front of him would be a huge waste.

He quickly ran up the wall, using the cracks from his previous strikes as a foothold to reach the crest with a few jumps. The ghost was gone, but the female general immediately launched a swipe with enough power to make Zac's danger sense prickle. A shield appeared on his left arm as his amulet transformed into its defensive form.

The massive swipe was blocked without issue, but it had left a few small marks on the surface of **[Love's Bond]**. Still, seeing his new Spirit Tool get damaged like that filled Zac with a towering fury as he rushed straight toward the banshee, utterly destroying the clone of the Lich King with a sideswipe, almost as an afterthought.

Zac was in far better control of his emotions now that the Splinter was properly locked up, so he didn't completely give in to his anger. However, that didn't mean he couldn't utilize it, and he channeled his churning killing intent into **[True Strike]**, launching it toward the Undead General's back.

With Zac's amount of accumulated killing intent the skill could barely be considered a feint any longer, but almost a compulsion. It probably felt like a D-Grade Hegemon was bearing down on her from behind, and the general couldn't ignore it just as expected. She quickly turned around to meet the attack as a shimmering shield appeared to block out Zac, but nothing met her furious swipe toward the rear.

The general immediately understood she had been duped, but she didn't have time to retreat before she was slammed in the face with a shield-bash powered by 2000 Strength and rage. A crunching sound echoed out as she was thrown back like a ragdoll, black ichor spewing in every direction.

Zac couldn't activate **[Loamwalker]** at the moment, but the wall collapsed beneath his feet as he pushed forward to catch up to her flying form, and **[Verun's Bite]** keened as a Bodhi-infused swingripped through the air. The general unfortunately had enough mental presence to desperately block the swing with her claws.

However, she couldn't match Zac's power output at all and was flung toward the inner section of the fortress with a wail of pain, four of her fingers cleanly cut off. Her bad luck wasn't ending there though. The coffin shield quickly returned to its necklace

form while Zac growled as he swung **[Verun's Bite]** in a wide arc toward the general. A massive half-moon of death spread out as the final swing of **[Deforestation]** had activated.

Zac figured that if he couldn't locate the Lich King, then he might as well just destroy everything.

There was no need to even use **[Hatchetman's Rage]** to activate the third swing it this time, his evolved physique more than enough to handle the massive strain. A coruscating wave of destruction ripped into the inner structures of the fortress, causing a chain reaction of buildings collapsing. The ground shuddered as almost a third of the fortress was leveled with one attack.

A series of interlocking shields in front of the Miasma Towers eventually managed to exhaust the energy of the strike, but the ground still shook for a few seconds as a few structurally unsound parts of the fortress collapsed. A shocking surge of cosmic energy entered his body as the **[Axe of Desolation]** no doubt killed hundreds of the undead who were staying inside the buildings he destroyed, and he immediately directed it toward the node he located earlier.

He dispatched the few Revenants foolish enough to actually attack him before he turned his sight inward for a second. He had started feeling some discomfort in his Node when he kept infusing it with energy, and it even resisted his attempts at pushing more of his accumulated energies inside.

He wanted to see if it was ready to burst open, but was quickly disappointed. The node looked pretty much the same as before, apart from there being a decent amount of energies swirling about beneath the surface. Even more Cosmic Energy was needed it seemed, and he tried instilling some of his left-over kill energy again.

This time it worked, but he really had to cram it inside. It felt like the node was completely full, and he was currently increasing the pressure inside by forcibly instilling more Cosmic Energy. The pain was gradually increasing, but Zac sighed in relief when the pain abated a few seconds after the last of his surplus energy had been pushed inside.

Just how much energy would be needed was something he would have to worry about later as bursting nodes mid-battle seemed like a spectacularly stupid idea. He instead activated **[Cosmic Gaze]** again as he looked around for his next target. The Incursion was still very much active, which meant that the Lich King still hadn't left Earth even after Zac had made his way inside.

That meant he was currently hiding somewhere in the area, most likely protecting the core of the realignment array. The ghost was nowhere to be seen as well, and Zac didn't remember killing it. However, that was of lesser concern as it didn't seem to be a combat-oriented cultivator. Perhaps he was the strategist of the invasion or something.

However, Zac frowned in annoyance when he noticed that the other general was still alive as well. She had probably managed to flicker away just in time to avoid getting engulfed in the wave of desolation, and was now standing on top of one of the Array Towers.

Her face was completely disfigured and black ichor stained her dress, and her aura was clearly a bit unstable. She touched an array atop the tower before she floated down again. Zac saw her running further into the fortress before slinking inside a massive palatial section that was built on top of the roof of a more common-looking barrack.

He was just about to go after her, but he sensed a presence to his right.

“You go find the boss,” Ogras said as his eyes were trained on the fleeing form of the undead general. “I’ll deal with that one. I want to see what she has prepared inside her own lair.”

“What about the others?” Zac hesitantly asked. “There might be more of the ghosts.”

“They can keep the trash at bay for hours if need be,” the demon shrugged. “And your sister has erected some anti-ghost array. If my clan had someone half as talented in formations as that girl back home, we wouldn’t just be a bottom-feeding clan at the edge of our planet.”

Zac nodded in agreement, but his eyes widened in alarm when he saw the surviving towers all light as one. It looked like the undead planned on unleashing everything in one massive blast before Zac dismantled the rest of the forest.

“Run!” Ogras screamed as he was swallowed by shadows, but Zac shrugged off the demon’s attempts at bringing him along.

Instead, he instructed [**Love’s Bond**] to retake its defensive form, and he unhesitantly activated the circular fractal on its lid. This was the first time Zac actually activated one of the two skills, this one called [**Death’s Embrace**].

The whole coffin shook as the chains that held the lid shut twisted and moved until a small opening appeared. A dense black cloud spread out and rose into the air until it formed a massive torso, making it look like he had summoned a genie. But Zac’s heart was still thrown into chaos as it was no ordinary elemental that had appeared.

It was Alea.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 502 - Scourge**

Zac froze as he looked up at the sky with shock in his eyes, but he quickly regained his wits. However, he couldn’t help but feel some sourness in his heart as he looked at the familiar figure in the sky, as he knew it wasn’t Alea come back to life.

The avatar looked a lot like the poison mistress, but there were also undeniable differences. Its eyes didn’t have the signature red irises, but they were rather pitch-black and without emotion. The same went for her usually expressive features, as it was the same delicate face but without any of the emotions.

The previously beautiful horns that shimmered in red like a sunset or crystallized fire were replaced by far longer curved horns, these ones tainted by green and purple. She no longer looked like the Torrid Demonkin that all the members of Clan Azh’Rezak belonged to, but was rather an avatar of corruption.

Perhaps this was what she would look like if she had managed to perfect and awaken her poison constitution before she fell, though Zac felt her appearance had more to do with the materials that went into the creation of [**Love’s Bond**].

The skill didn’t create a whole body either, which was yet another reminder it wasn’t actually Alea. Beneath her upper torso there was only black smoke that reached down into the coffin. Yet this semi-corporeal avatar was still more than ten meters in height, and it completely blocked Zac from the Array Towers’ barrage of attacks that were bearing down on him.

The demonic avatar's arms were formed as well, and they reached up toward the incoming attacks as though she wanted to embrace them. A small sphere appeared in between her outstretched hands, a small seed that started to rapidly spin around its own axis. It was as though this unassuming ball was a black hole, and the air around it immediately started to twist and distort.

The torrential downpour of poison, ice, and miasma was seemingly unending, but it was all dragged into the small seed. It almost looked like the attacks tried to ignore the suction, but they were distorted and bent beyond their normal shape as they were dragged inside kicking and screaming.

Zac first thought the attacks were weaker than expected, but then a trail of ice broke free from the suction of **[Death's Embrace]** and slammed into the wall twenty meters from him. The wall immediately froze right over, creating a huge ice block that sealed over thirty unlucky Revenants inside. Even Zac felt some pain in his feet as the ice spread across the wall-walk, and he had to circulate some energy to not get frozen as well.

But there were only a few such examples as most of the attacks were sucked into the rapidly rotating ball. It grew larger and larger until it had turned into a chaotic sun that illuminated the whole fortress in green and azure light. Only then did the offensive arrays run out of steam, and the arrays slowly stopped radiating power.

The ball stayed where it was between the arms of the avatar though, and Alea's avatar slowly cradled it in her arms as she put her cheek against its surface in an embrace. Zac couldn't help but feel some trepidation as he looked at the ball. If that thing destabilized and exploded then it would probably be game over even for him. He wouldn't get away without some serious wounds at the least.

But the ball appeared completely inert, and Zac's eyes widened as Alea's maw opened wider and wider until it swallowed the thing whole. It looked absolutely horrific as the glowing sphere was even larger than Alea's head, but it was still gobbled down whole. The whole avatar lit up with terrifying power, but it didn't unleash a strike or something with the excess energy.

Instead it started to dissipate into clouds that receded toward the coffin.

Zac couldn't help himself, and he tried to send his mind to the avatar in hopes of getting a response, but Alea didn't so much as look at him. There was no connection like the one he felt with Verun either, and Zac shook his head before he gave up. The lid snapped shut the moment the avatar had returned to the coffin, and Zac didn't even get a chance to look inside.

A few violent shakes rocked the Spirit Tool, but it still seemed fine overall. In fact, it felt like it had just eaten a treasure, and it gained a slight green luster as it turned back to its necklace form again.

This was the first skill of **[Love's Bond]**, a terrifyingly powerful summon that not could defend against most kinds of attacks, but it could even take the energy for itself. The full-powered blast of the undead fortress would probably have been able to seriously harm him in his human form, but now it was turned into food for his new Spirit Tool instead.

However, while the skill was extremely powerful it wasn't without its limits. It would take days for the skill to be usable again, perhaps over a week if it took longer to refine the ball of poison. But it was still just what Zac needed. The defensive charges on his robes were essentially useless for someone like him by this point, and this was an excellent replacement.

His life wasn't in danger very often, but when it was he needed an extremely powerful, and preferably reusable, skill that could turn calamity into opportunity.

Having stolen a full-powered blast of the array towers meant he had avoided crisis for now, but he still didn't want to wait around for the towers to recharge for another salvo. He immediately rushed into the fortress toward the closest tower, but he was immediately beset by attacks from hidden mechanisms from every direction as the remaining soldiers on the wall followed him into the fortress, joining the hidden defenders in assaulting him.

Arrows, ice spears, and blobs of poison shot toward him from hidden vantages, and Zac could barely see the dour sky any longer from the chaotic waves of power. It looked like the Lich King had already expected his outer shields to be broken, so he had set up a second layer of defense. These attacks by themselves weren't a threat to someone with 2000 Endurance, but they still required him to either dodge or block with **[Nature's Barrier]**.

It would slowly drain him of his energy, which had already taken somewhat of a hit from activating **[Death's Embrace]** and **[Deforestation]**. However, his recent increase in attributes came with a massive boost to his Cosmic Energy reserves, while his skills were still all F-Grade. It meant his endurance was through the roof, and he would be able to keep going for a lot longer even in a frantic situation like this.

A fractal forest rose from the ground, turning the dour fortress into one filled with greenery. It was immediately beset by a storm of miasma though, causing a battle between life and death inside the fortress. However, even if he couldn't utilize the skill to its utmost potential, he still gained most of its benefits.

It felt like he had gained a thousand eyes, and Fractal blades started to shoot out in seemingly random directions as his right arm was turning into a blur. One wall after another crumbled, exposing squads of soldiers hidden within.

More Cosmic Energy entered his body, and he kept forcing it into the node in his leg as he reached the first Array Tower. He finally reached a point where he didn't dare to infuse any longer, as he clearly felt the node was on the verge of cracking open. He could only reluctantly let the remaining energy dissipate, as this fight was too important.

He couldn't risk crippling himself from an experiment while the Lich King was still standing, but he could always open the node at a later date.

Zac grunted as **[Verun's Bite]** screamed through the air as he focused his frustration on the tower in front of him instead, but a fractal appeared on the surface of the stones the moment the edge was about to bite into bricks. A concussive mental wave exploded out from the inscription, but Zac was barely phased as he swung again.

This time the defensive array was expended, and a fifty-meter fractal edge cut the massive tower clean off after Zac bombarded the skill fractal for **[Chop]** with Cosmic Energy. Zac couldn't help but feel that the skill description was right; there was greatness in simplicity. Now that he could control far more energy thanks to his improved pathways, **[Chop]** had grown all the more lethal.

A terrifying punch followed, and a cloud of dust billowed out as the lofty structure crumbled.

Zac wouldn't stop there, and he destroyed one tower after another in quick succession, taking out over fifty squads of elite soldiers along the way. A shudder in the distance told Zac that Ogras had begun his assault on the general as well, and he couldn't help but worry about the safety of his sister.

However, not only did she carry two of his Defensive Treasures, but she also had Jeeves to detect any surprises coming her way. He would be able to return and help the squad in case they were starting to get overrun, but he felt that he would be able to deal with this place before it came to that.

A crash resounded next to him as his unique fractal blade blasted through a wall, utterly ripping it apart. Zac had instructed the special fractal blade to cause maximum structural damage, and it was like a hurricane that accompanied him on his rampage through the fortress. It kept expending Cosmic Energy, but Zac had more than enough to spare.

The last Array Tower finally crumbled as Zac unleashed a barrage of furious stikes at its base, and it toppled over and crushed another section of the wall. With the Lich King staying out of the way he had become completely unstoppable, and the towers didn't even get the chance to launch a second round of attacks before they were all smoldering ruins.

The gargantuan Array Towers also doubled as Unholy Beacons, and their destruction would hopefully put a stop to the various arrays in the area, including the ones in the sky that kept shooting down waves of death toward the ground. It was pretty clear to Zac that the Lich King was an adept Array Master, perhaps even having that as his main class.

So taking out the towers was in a way directly cutting limbs off the Incursion Leader, as he wouldn't be able to utilize their power any longer.

However, even though a battle between Ogras and the banshee raged in full in the distance whereas Zac was running around inside the fortress like an enraged bull, the Lich King still hadn't shown his face. Zac couldn't help but feel the Lich was cooking up something, and his eyes turned toward a seemingly inconspicuous structure to the side of the fortress.

Or rather toward the ground beneath it.

He had kept watch for any suspect energy fluctuations during his rampage, but the Lich King had truly hidden himself well. There were no hotspots of Death-Attuned energies anywhere that could give Zac a clue to either the location of the incursion leader or the core of the realignment array. Zac had first thought the Lich would go to some throne room to prepare his last defense, but the cathedral-like castle in the back of the fortress was completely devoid of both movement and energy.

However, Zac had made some discoveries.

The towers actually seemed to form a pattern around the building he was looking at, almost forming a star shape if you would draw a line between their placements on a map. Zac felt it possible that the Lich King had used those towers as a conduit to the realignment array, and he might therefore stay inside that building where the power would be concentrated.

It was either that, or the Lich had fled through a hidden tunnel toward the Incursion Beacon that was placed some distance behind the fortress.

Zac dismissed his fractal edge as he ran over to the building, and simply punched a hole through the wall before he walked in. A normal door might be booby-trapped, so it was better to create your own entrance. However, the structure was just as unexciting on the inside as outside. It seemed to have been some sort of administrative building, with dozens of desks placed with some distance between.

It was empty now, but the place was stacked with various missives and reports, somewhat skewing Zac's impression of how the invasion had worked. It looked a lot more structured from this side, compared to the seemingly mindless hordes that had spread across the continent like locusts with just the smallest of inputs from a few leaders.

But this showed a lot more refinement.

However, that wasn't why Zac came here, and he walked back and forth through the building until he found what he was looking for. There really seemed to be

something beneath this building, though he couldn't find an entrance. There were occasional waves of Death Attuned energies rising from beneath, indicating something was going on. They were pretty minute though, and he probably wouldn't have noticed them without **[Cosmic Gaze]**.

The ground shook and pieces of gravel flew in every direction as Zac started to cut a path down, and he quickly destroyed the floor as he dug a twenty-meter deep hole. The cuts started to sound hollow at that point, and Zac started to make his way forward with greater care. Finally, the edge cut straight through the ground, displaying a dimly lit hall beneath.

There was no way his digging had gone by unnoticed, so a sneak attack was out the window. He still took out a corpse from his Spatial Ring and threw it inside, waiting for any potential trap to spring. A thud echoed out a second later, and Zac guessed the hidden chamber had a fifty-meter ceiling.

There was no response, so Zac simply activated **[Nature's Barrier]** while infusing the always-running **[Mental Fortress]** with a Dao Fragment as he jumped down. His eyes glared in every direction as he fell, but there was no attack coming at him. Instead, he found himself in an enormous room full of inscribed pillars. The only light came from purple crystals embedded in the room, giving it an oppressive feeling.

Was this the core of the Realignment Array? Zac immediately moved to start destroying the pillars, but he froze when he suddenly heard a voice on the other side of the room.

"It seems I made a miscalculation," a sigh echoed out across the vast chamber. "To think that your power had increased to this degree in just a few short days. It shouldn't be possible, yet here we are. You stole my precious poison corpse and somehow turned it into a treasure shield, and now you are ruining my mission. You truly are a scourge."

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**Chapter 503 - Hidden Aces**

"And you killed countless people and almost converted our world," Zac said as he looked around. "How about this? Undo what you've done with the Realignment and I'll let you leave this world alive, or your version of it at least. I let bygones be bygones, and your Kingdom will give up any claim to this planet. I don't think that your Kingdom wants an enemy like me anyway."

Zac's biggest worry right now was the realignment array. Kenzie was coming along with her knowledge of arrays, but there were no guarantees she'd be able to deal with such massive formation. That left Zac's far cruder method, finding the Array Core and bashing it. But none of them had any idea what that would result in.

What if doing so would cause the array to go out of control, completely crippling the planet?

The best outcome would be the Lich giving up and backing away, based on the potential of Zac's future growth. Besides, revenge was a dish best served cold. Zac definitely would deal with the Lich King because of what he'd done sooner or later, but it didn't have to be today. He could always visit the Undead Kingdom as his Draugr persona in the future and track this guy down. Saving Earth was more important.

But a laugh echoed across the halls as a robed figure emerged from the darkness, and a glance with **[Cosmic Gaze]** could confirm that this was the real Lich King. The hooded undead teemed with power, far more than he ever had on top of the wall.

“What makes you think it is reversible? Death is the shadow of life, a natural absolute of the universe. Our arrays only speed the process up,” he laughed. “You’re long past the point of return.”

“Bullshit,” Zac growled without hesitation. “The thing hasn’t even started up.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not,” the Lich snickered as the fractals on the hundreds of pillars lit up in an instant. “But does it matter when you are about to join us?”

The energy density of the chamber grew by a terrifying degree in an instant, and Zac’s danger sense prickled as he looked around with a frown. He unhesitatingly shot out a series of fractal edges toward the closest pillars, but the blades actually crumbled mid-air as it looked like a million motes of darkness fed on them until they couldn’t maintain their form.

Zac activated **[Loamwalker]** to flash to a pillar instead, but it felt like he was trying to move through solid matter. Was nature blocked out in this place? He activated **[Hatchetman’s Spirit]** next to rid himself of the effect, but it didn’t work either. It was like he had lit up a weak candle of life in a raging storm of death, and his skill was ripped apart in an instant.

“I’ve reinforced this array for a year and it contains the will of the Undead Empire. It is powered by an enormous fortune of crystals and is perfected by the ancient sages. How could your little domain possibly resist it?” the Lich laughed. “You are indeed powerful and bursting with potential, but you are too confident in your strength. You are not fighting me, but an Empire, and the only result is Death.”

The intensity kept increasing, and Zac soon found himself on his knees. His skin burned like someone had thrown acid on him, but it was the black motes that tried to burrow into his skin. He tried to block them out with the Fragment of the Coffin and the Fragment of the Bodhi, but neither could help him for more than a second.

This array was just terrifying. It had created an absolute zone of death, and he as a living being was completely restrained. However, he still had one more card to pull, and a pitch-black crystal appeared in his hand as he readied himself. He quickly infused it with Cosmic Energy to activate it before he slammed it into the ground.

The whole area shuddered as the darkness turned into a vast nebula, and Zac felt the immense pressure of the array disappear. He immediately pushed all the Cosmic Energy he could muster into **[Chop]** as **[Verun’s Bite]** lit up with sanguine luster. He wanted to take out the pillars and the Lich King alike in one massive swing.

However, Zac had barely time to begin his swing before he found himself on the ground again, the vision of the cosmos so brief that it might just as well have been a figment of his imagination. The crystal lay cracked on the ground, completely devoid of power.

“Void’s Disciple,” Adriel snorted. “A supreme talent, to even have managed to catch a glimpse of the Dao of Space at such an early stage. He would be welcomed with open arms in most forces of the Zecia Sector. It’s his bad luck to have been attached to such a wretched master.”

Zac sighed as he looked at the cracked crystal in front of him with mixed emotions. It was a big setback that this thing didn’t work at all, as it would force him to expose his Draugr form. But it was also was a bit of a relief. He had built up Void’s Disciple into some sort of mysterious powerhouse after their last encounter, but this was a good reminder that the Zhix warlord was just someone with an incomplete heritage and a bit of a headstart.

He had wanted to deal with this without exposing his undead form, but he was just restrained too much by this array of death. He sent the command to his duplicity core, while he circulated some energy to shoot out a feeble fractal blade toward the Lich king. Of course, it didn't even make it half-way before it crumbled as well.

"You knew?" Zac croaked, trying to stall for a bit.

"He is talented, but just a native barbarian in the end. Just like you. How could I not notice him scanning the arrays in my domain?" Adriel said. "But there is time for us to discuss all this after you have awakened anew."

Zac was just about to complete his transformation, but his mind suddenly screamed of danger. He used everything in his power to slightly adjust his torso as a pitch-black spike descended out of nowhere, aiming straight for his heart. He just managed to adjust his chest enough to avoid getting his heart pierced, but the weapon still punctured his lung.

Bad turned to worse as a massive storm of miasma tore through his body, and Zac knew he would have died then and there if it wasn't for his unique constitution. Zac arduously looked around only to see a gaunt spectral assassin shrouded in a robe of pure darkness. He had never seen this assassin before, but he radiated a dense aura of killing intent.

Who was this? His aura was even stronger than that of the banshee general he fought earlier. And his mind had only managed to warn him at the very last second, barely allowing him to avoid getting his heart ruined. Was that ghost from before not actually the last general, but there had actually been one more lying wait all this time?

If that was the case then he was a true assassin. Zac had never seen a hint of his aura or his impressive killing intent, something that would only be born from a lot of carnage. He didn't do anything while Zac tore down half the fort and killed most of the soldiers, but waited to strike until he was confident in succeeding.

"Don't soil the body," the Lich said from the side, though he clearly seemed to be in a good mood. "I lost the poison constitution lass, but we can still submit this body. It might be even better for my purposes. The dreams of the Heartlands are not yet dead."

Zac's chaotic mind wandered, but he snapped back into focus as the transformation into his Draugr form finished. The waves of miasma that crashed through his body due to the spike were no longer harmful, but rather invigorating. The spike still hurt, but getting gored by a small spike wasn't a wound that really bothered Zac any longer.

Zac had been in this exact situation before, and there was no need to change a winning concept. A bladelike fist full of the Fragment of the Bodhi punched into the chest of the spectral assassin as Zac leaped to his feet.

"Wh-" the ghost said, but he didn't have time to react before his throat was caught in a vise-like grip.

The extremely powerful array that once had threatened to crush his body and soul was no longer an impediment at all. In fact, Zac had never felt this comfortable in his undead form before. This place felt like a paradise for cultivation, and he already started thinking of whether he could bring these pillars back home to create a proper cultivation ground.

This was why Zac had been confident in jumping down into the hole at all. Most of the attacks that the Lich King had brought forth had either been based on death or poison. And in this form, he was confident in dealing with either.

There was no crunch as Zac ripped the ghost general's head clean off with another infusion from the Fragment of the Bodhi, but a surge of energy entered his body as he followed it up by crushing the head.

"What!" the lich screamed as he fell back. "Draugr? It's you? It has been you all along?! This is impossible!"

"You keep saying that," Zac said with an abyssal voice as a child-sized coffin appeared on his back. "You should know by now that nothing is impossible in the Multiverse."

Four chains shot out the next moment, each of them aiming for the Lich with a palpable eagerness. Zac followed suit as a black armor covered his body, and Zac stomped down on the ground to appear right next to the Lich.

The Lich King was clearly frazzled by the turn of events, and Zac couldn't blame him. This array he had set up would be the bane of almost any living warrior dumb enough to get caught inside, and even if Zac could withstand it he should have been severely weakened. But how could the lich have expected to run into one of the few living people in the multiverse that the array was utterly useless against?

The fractal cage sprung up while Zac simultaneously pushed the taunting function of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** to its peak. He had already shown his hidden ace, and he couldn't let this man escape no matter what. The Lich King screamed as he unleashed a barrage of poison from his body, and Zac noticed that the real body of the Lich had once again been replaced by a copy.

However, the real body appeared just ten meters away, and the chains of **[Love's Bond]** were already twisted around his body before he had time to realize that he hadn't escaped as he had planned.

The massive avatar once more appeared in the sky as a waterfall of toxins started to fall, but the chains effortlessly moved the lich out of the way. Bursts of poison emerged from his own mouth next, but if there was one thing the chains were unafraid of, then it would be toxins. They twisted even harder until sickening crunches echoed out through the subterranean hall as one bone after another snapped by the pressure.

Zac suddenly felt a tremendous surge of energy entering his body as the Lich finally couldn't take it any longer. Zac had been worried that there would be even more tricks to the Lich King, but he and his personal assassin had placed too much trust in the arrays in this chamber. It allowed him to take them out in quick succession, and Zac could already confirm that the Invasion has failed as the familiar prompt appeared in front of him, telling him that the area had come under his control.

There shouldn't be many surviving invaders after Zac had torn the whole place apart, but they would probably be fleeing toward the incursion by now. Zac didn't care about that as he hadn't exposed his Draugr form to anyone on the surface, and unless there was another ghost that could hide against his scans there were no witnesses down here either.

They would only be able to retell the situation of a terrifying Progenitor, and they would sooner or later connect that with "Zac Piker" of the Tower of Eternity, which would explain how this was all possible. Hopefully, that meant that any issue with the Undead Empire would end then and there, as Catheya had indicated that she would make sure no problem would crop up even if he booted the local undead from Earth.

But honestly, Zac couldn't bother going over every eventuality. He closed his eyes as he felt a sense of calm spreading through his body. He had done it. He had defeated the Undead Empire, which would allow Earth to keep going for a while longer.

At least until the next threat would come along.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 504 - Broken**

Zac took another look around before he released [**Profane Seal**] as he gazed down at the corpse of the Lich King. This wretched half-man half-corpse had caused so much trouble for Earth, but he hadn't even been able to resist one attack of his new Spirit Tool. He couldn't help but shake his head as he bent down to look for treasure.

He pried a low-quality Spatial Ring from the man's hand and found a top-quality Cosmos Sack hidden within his robes before he threw the body into his Spatial Ring. He walked over to the ghost next, which had turned into a pile of shimmering sand upon dying.

It felt a bit weird digging around in a pile of ghost ashes, but Zac found a spatial pouch and a set of throwing darts inside. He popped a healing pill next as he explored the chamber, and he could quickly confirm there were only two points of interest apart from the numerous inscribed pillars. The first was a pedestal holding a large black rock, and the second was a proper entrance in the direction of the palace.

It didn't require a genius in formations to figure out the pedestal, or rather the rock, was the core of the array, but Zac left it alone so that Kenzie could look at it instead. As for the entrance, it was sealed shut, and Zac had more pressing things to do than to look for treasure in the palace. A massive amount of energy coursed through his body after his two kills.

The Lich might have been the highest leveled individual on Earth apart from the Dominators, and the amount of energy he had gained from the kill was staggering. This energy alone was more than all the kills above-ground, and it would probably take him weeks to grind the equivalent with any targets he could find on Earth.

He really needed to make sure everything was okay on the surface though, and he ran back to the hole in the ceiling, speeding against the clock as the accumulated energy already had started to dissipate from his body. But he froze just as he was about to jump up before he looked down at his chest.

The wound to his lung had mostly healed by now thanks to the pill, and he activated his duplicity core again. With [**Profane Seal**] expended his undead form was severely weakened, not to mention there might still be curious eyes upstairs. He felt a stabbing pain in his chest when the transformation completed, but it wasn't too bad.

Zac jumped up through the entrance he came from, and soon enough found himself back in the open air. It wasn't too different from how he left it, but he saw a clear change as he jumped up on one of the tallest buildings that were still standing after the battle. Streams of the surviving undead were rushing toward the Incursion Pillar, and the fortress was fast losing its population.

This was just how it usually went. The invaders all got a warning the leader was dead, and the countdown before the Nexus Hub closed had begun. A glance over in his sister's direction showed they had moved away even further from the fortress, and the unthinking zombies seemed to have lost interest in them by now.

Perhaps they were unsure what to do after having lost connection to the Lich King.

“Good job,” a bloodied Ogras said as he emerged from the shadows. “That girl suddenly lost her composure, I’m guessing she got the prompt of her leader’s untimely demise.”

“I dealt with the other General as well. There should be no more threats, but are you okay to guard the others for a bit?” Zac asked. “I think I found the array, but let these people clear out a bit before I bring Kenzie over. I want to use the energy to break open a node before it’s too late.”

“These guys don’t seem to have any fight left in them,” the demon nodded as he looked around. “Go ahead, I’ll look after things.”

Zac nodded and entered the building he stood on, finding a secluded spot. There was no point in him going after the fleeing Revenants and Corpse Lords, as that would only result in a net loss of accumulated energy with the speed he was losing energy from killing the Lich King.

He only hesitated for a second before he sat down on his prayer mat. The fighting above had only left him with some grazes, and the stab wasn’t too bad either. Most of the danger had come from the torrent of miasma, which had been completely neutralized and absorbed moment he turned into a Draugr. Apart from having spent most of his big skills he was essentially in good condition.

He couldn’t discard this opportunity to become stronger, and he directly started pushing the remaining energy toward the node in his left leg. The Undead Empire was dealt with, but he still needed every advantage he could get in the upcoming fight against the Dominators. He needed to break open a few more nodes, and he turned his vision inward.

The node in his leg was just like before; partially opened and chock-full of energy while still impeding energy circulation. Seeing that nothing had changed from swapping classes back and forth he started to forcibly infuse it, and the pain quickly grew to uncomfortable levels.

The minutes passed and Zac started to brace himself for what was coming, but even he hadn’t expected the extreme agony when the node finally exploded. His white robes got drenched in blood as his a chunk of his leg exploded as well to the point that bone was exposed. But that pain was still nothing compared to the agony he felt on a spiritual level.

The nodes were something between corporeal and intangible, fixed on what Ogras called a Spirit Body. It was essentially an energy copy that perfectly matched your physical form, and it was the housing of the pathways. And now this Spirit Body was wounded from the explosion, causing the pathways in his legs to become messed up.

He finally understood the difference between opening a node the normal way and forcing it open. The normal way was akin to unclogging a drain by pouring down some solvent before snaking it dislodge whatever caused the bad flow. Forcing a node open was rather like throwing a stick of dynamite down the drain and blowing up the clog, along with half your house.

This self-inflicted carnage did not only hurt a lot, but Zac also realized it had weakened him drastically. His Energy circulation was all out of control, even in the parts of his body that weren’t harmed. He immediately took out another pill, this one intended to heal souls.

It helped with the pain somewhat, but there was no time for him to properly heal as an immense pressure suddenly descended upon him. Zac barely had time to get on his feet before a blinding golden light bled through the cracks in the wall, and then he was falling as the building collapsed.

A blistering heat was pushing down from above as well, almost immediately making the stones to burn upon the slightest touch. A new set of shallow wounds covered his body as he was buried in an avalanche of stones, but he immediately started to dig himself out. But there were just golden flames and smoke all around him, robbing him of his visibility. He didn't even know if he was digging in the right direction.

Worry gripped his heart as Zac pushed the heated stones out of the way. What the hell was going on?

The strength required to unleash an attack with that kind of impact was not something anyone in his group could deal with, and it didn't look like something that the undead would use. There was only one group who could conjure something like this.

The cultists.

He quickly circulated energy as he tried to forcibly push himself out of the mountain of rubble. But a blaring pain erupted in his left leg after putting too much pressure on it, almost making him black out from the agony. The events had made him forget about the wound from blasting open the node, but at least he had managed to break free from the building.

Only to be met with an utter inferno.

Golden flames had embroiled the fortress in every direction, and scorched corpses of elite Undead Warriors littered the wall. Zac had already killed most of them through his earlier rampage, and there couldn't be many still around after this salvo. The cultists must have bombarded the fortress with massive siege weapons to cause this kind of destruction in an instant.

Panic really started to set in but opening the Ladder screen allowed Zac to breathe out in relief. He could spot both his sister and Emily on the Dao Ladder, and Joanna on the Level ladder. Whatever was going on right now hadn't affected them just yet.

That didn't mean he could relax, but he simply couldn't find any target. There were just flames and corpses everywhere, and a sky on fire. He hobbled toward one of the broken towers, each step feeling like he was getting stabbed. A few jumps later he found himself on the broken peak, looking across the landscape.

Nothing.

There was no zealot army amassing outside the gates, just a grey haze in every direction except for the Incursion pillar. The bombardment was thankfully confined to the fortress, and he believed that Ogras was experienced enough to avoid getting scorched. Zac felt a fluctuation from his spatial ring, and he took out a communication crystal with surprise.

These things hadn't worked since they had reached the core of the Dead Zone, but now he heard his Sister on the other side of the line.

"What's going on?" Zac asked. "Is everyone okay?"

"It's the cultists! A huge flying vessel suddenly appeared in the sky, and we immediately fled into the woods to not implicate you," Kenzie said from the other side. "Ogras shrouded us, so we're fine."

"Stay hidden," Zac said. "I can deal with this alone."

"Be careful. I don't think they just came for the undead. They are probably here to deal with you as well," she said.

"It seems that way," Zac sighed as a storm of flames was falling straight toward him.

Cosmic Energy surged in his body, but a blazing pain made itself reminded as the recently opened node flared up. He could only grit his teeth as he forced the Cosmic

Energy to move. However, he barely managed to form a 30-meter fractal edge with **[Chop]** this time, compared to the 100-meter blade he easily conjured earlier.

It wasn't enough. The blade cut into the wall of flames like a knife, but it was swallowed whole without breaking apart the attack. Zac didn't hesitate to activate a defensive treasure, and a sphere enclosed him and the top of the tower in an instant. The flames slammed down like a furious waterfall the next second, and Zac felt the scorching heat even within his protective bubble.

The base of the tower was quickly incinerated, and the tip was just held in the air with the help of the barrier. But the flames finally subsided, which allowed the skies to clear out. Only then did he finally spot the source of the attacks. A large vessel in gold and red hovered a few hundred meters above the fortress, something that looked like a mix of a flying treasure and a floating island.

Zac couldn't see how it looked from the top, but it seemed to be kept in the air with a massive ball of flames. Zac sighed with a shake of his head as he took out his own flying treasure. The cultists really liked their fire. He quickly rose into the sky as the tower fell to the ground behind him, no longer supported by the shield.

Nausea and double-vision plagued him from the pain of opening a node, so he needed to end this fast. He forced the unruly Cosmic Energy into his arm as he prepared his last skill of mass destruction. He had used up **[Deforestation]** in his earlier fight, but there was still one more card he could bring out; **[Nature's Punishment]**.

His whole body was covered in sweat from the pain of forcibly utilizing his maimed pathways, but he couldn't stop at this juncture. Space cracked and the familiar hand flew out, though Zac couldn't help but feel a bit disappointed that the hand hadn't changed at all from him evolving.

It still radiated terrifying might due to the Fragment of the Bodhi though, and it shot straight through a burst of flames without even getting its leaves singed.

The hand placed itself straight above the floating warship, and Zac didn't delay a second before the familiar branch started to descend. There was no way to tell what these unhinged lunatics had planned, and he needed to strike before it was too late.

The branch quickly grew in size as it shot down at the ship, but a burning whip covered in white-hot flames shot up to meet its descent. Zac spotted a lizardman standing at the fore of the vessel, his eyes lit up like two blazing beacons as five swirls of pure-white globes of fire circulated behind him.

Zac had fought one of the other generals just the other day, but the power this man emitted far eclipsed him. In fact, this man even felt more threatening than the Lich King himself, though much of the danger from the Undead Leader came from his command of formations.

Had the leader of the Church of the Everlasting Dao come in person?

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**Chapter 505 - Fate's Obduracy**

If this really was the Incursion Leader of the Church of Everlasting Dao, then a massive chance had presented itself as Zac still didn't know where the cultist Incursion was located. They had somehow managed to hide their base of operations all this time while sending out roving death squads that killed everything in their path.

The best idea his people had to find these guys were to investigate the zones of Pangea that had no reports of human activity. They figured the lack of surviving towns could mean that everyone had already been killed by the Church, and the Incursion Pillar was close. But killing the leader here would save them all that trouble, as the Incursion would still end if he died.

However, the Head Priest of the church was clearly no chump. One of the flaming balls hovering behind his back entered the whip as it elongated to reach well over a hundred meters. The very air burned while the whip ripped through the sky as the weapon's flames increased in intensity many times over. Zac instantly felt a blistering pain in his arm as the damage to the branch was transferred over.

It was like the whip was a boa constrictor that tried to squeeze the life out of the branch as it looped around it multiple times over, preventing it from freely growing in size. The white-hot flames had quickly latched on to the branch as well, and an inferno raged on across its surface. Burnt bark fell like rain from the sky as new layers grew out at the cost of even more of Zac's Cosmic Energy.

Zac felt like a fool when he saw the scene. The pain from opening his node had made him activate the skill as usual, instead of thinking things through. He had always used the wooden punishment since gaining the Fragment of the Bodhi as the two resonated the best, but he would clearly have been better off using the mountain or water punishment this time around. Still, there was no point in crying over spilled milk.

The fight had turned into a battle between destruction and creation in a sense, and Zac intended to emerge the victor of that struggle.

He kept infusing **[Nature's Punishment]** with his Dao and Cosmic Energy while he tried to force the branch to descend. The priest on the other hand was forced to infuse one globe of flames after another into his Spirit Tool to power the fires raging across the swelling branch.

But Zac still hadn't met anyone who was able to outlast him in a clash of endurance, but he actually felt the skill starting to destabilize much quicker than usual. He had no choice, and the energy around him veritably exploded as he activated **[Hatchetman's Rage]**. The branch suddenly radiated powerful waves as well, and the flames were quickly subdued.

Zac saw his chance as he made a final push, and the whip simply snapped as the branch exploded in size. Newly born branches spread in every direction before they all turned toward the warship, like hundreds of falling spears. The wooden punishment had finally gained its momentum, and it crashed into the warship with enough force to push both the miasmatic clouds and the flames aside.

A golden shield appeared to block the strike, but it quickly broke as the main branch punched a massive hole. Flame and metal rained down toward the ground as both the ship and the sun that powered it broke apart and screams echoed across the golden sky as dozens of cultists plummeted toward the ground. Zac managed to kill most of them with a rapid flurry of fractal edges, but his focus was still on the leaders.

The head priest was still alive, as the surge of cosmic energy he felt was nowhere big enough to correspond to killing someone that powerful. Finally, his target emerged through the smoke on top of a far smaller flying vessel with four powerful warriors to his side. Zac prepared himself for a final clash, wanting to end the battle before the timer for his buff ran out.

But his eyes widened in shock when he realized that there would be no cataclysmic battle in the sky. The so-called zealots left a burning trail in the air as they fled for their lives.

Zac couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the Church Leader escape with enough gusto to almost punch a hole in the sound barrier. Was this the same faction as the one where pretty much everyone was ready to blow themselves up just at a shot at dragging you with them to hell? Where was the fanaticism?

The leaf ripped through the air as Zac instructed his flying vessel to pursue, as he didn't want to let the cultists get away. A chance like this wouldn't come again. The smaller vessel shot away with shocking speed, but Zac's own leaf wasn't any worse than whatever some local cultists could bring to the table.

It whizzed after the group of five, taking advantage of the fact that the cultists were actually burning away the death-attuned haze in front of them, forming some sort of a wind tunnel. But Zac soon realized that he actually was unable to catch up to the group, as they seemed to have an endless supply of fire-attuned Nexus Crystals that they fed into the vessel, allowing it to burn through the Dead Zone.

Zac immediately started peppering them with fractal blades from behind, but he sighed when he saw the man with the whip crush them one by one without overtaxing himself. The Spirit Tool in the Head Priest's hand was no doubt top-tier, and he was clearly some ways into the E-Grade as well.

Zac kept trying to take them down while **[Hatchetman's Rage]** was still active, but he was out of cards. The sense of power was soon replaced with weakness, and he wasn't sure what he should do. He didn't want to leave these guys alive. But he also couldn't leave Kenzie and the others alone in the middle of the Dead Zone while he harried the Church of Everlasting Dao for god know how long. Besides, there was still the Realignment Array to deal with.

A few more minutes passed as he adapted to the state of weakness while they flew further and further. But finally, he had an idea, and the amulet around his neck slithered to his back to gain its backpack form. The inscribed circle on the lid was dimmed out after having used **[Death's Embrace]**, but there was another set of inscriptions that were still in working order. Zac infused a large chunk of his remaining Cosmic Energy and the two lines of fractals running along its length lit up.

The scripture started to slither back and forth across the coffin lid for a second before they suddenly rose into the air, forming two actual chains wrought from darkness that shot toward his targets. However, the Head Priest unleashed a massive arc of flames that crashed into the two chains, causing them to shatter in an instant.

However, a skill from **[Love's Bond]** obviously wouldn't be defeated so easily. The two shattered chains suddenly regrew into four before they resumed their pursuit. The cultists desperately swatted them down over and over, but it was useless. They just split and grew back when they broke apart, just like the heads of a hydra.

Zac had already gotten a hint of what the skill would do, but his eyes still widened in shock when he saw the sea of darkness rushing after the vessel with wild abandon. Finally, the cultists couldn't hold the tide back any longer, and they were swallowed up by a ball of chains that frantically writhed as it tried to crush everything within its cage.

The ball was quickly dragged back toward Zac who could hear crunching sounds and screams from within. However, a massive blast of flames suddenly erupted from within, forcing the chains away long enough for a flash of light to escape the stranglehold.

Zac frowned as he looked at the river of flames that rushed toward the horizon with a speed that superseded Zac's leaf by many times over. He knew it wasn't an errant burst of flames, but rather some sort of escape skill or treasure, something in the same vein as the top tier escape skill that was in Thea's possession.

Zac sighed as he knew that there was no way he'd be able to capture whoever had fled, and he turned his attention back to the ball of chains that hovered in front of him. The chains of darkness had pretty much turned into a solid by this point, and things had turned completely silent by this point as blood dripped down from the bottom.

This was the second skill of **[Love's Bond]**, called **[Fate's Obduracy]**. This skill could be used like now to wear down a single target with an unceasing wave of chains. Another strategy could be him sending the set of chains out to cause widespread destruction, where any attempt of stopping the advance would worsen the situation. In either case, it was a nigh-unstoppable skill of destruction.

Just like **[Death's Embrace]** it had a pretty long cool-down. He wouldn't be able to use the skill for a full two weeks, and he would need to feed the coffin with some energy-rich treasures to recharge itself.

There was also a limit of just how many times the chains could reproduce. The cultists hadn't actually been that far from shaking off the attack. If the Head Priest hadn't burnt all five of those globes of flames to deal with **[Nature's Punishment]** he might have been able to exhaust the skill completely.

Zac instructed the mess of chains to unravel, and it displayed an utterly crumpled ship along with three barely distinguishable corpses. That meant that the burst of flames had contained two people, one of them being the man with the whip. Zac sighed as he instructed his leaf to fly back toward the Undead Fortress after looting the corpses.

He couldn't help but feel some disappointment upon failing to kill that man. If he had just died with the rest of the cultists he would have been done by now, having killed the two most annoying Incursion leaders in one fell swoop. But he guessed he couldn't always luck out, even with a Luck of over 300.

The emerald leaf whizzed through the air as Zac returned toward the undead fortress. However, he started to worry again as he flew, as he saw terrifying numbers of zombies stream toward the core of the Dead Zone as well. He had already noticed that the outer shield had been deactivated, perhaps as a result of him breaking the Array Towers in the base, and now the enormous number of zombies who were previously stuck outside were on the move.

Zac didn't hesitate to infuse the leaf with the Fragment of the Bodhi to speed up his return, but he quickly changed course when he saw a group of familiar faces some ways from the ruined fortress. It was everyone except Ogras who had planted themselves on top of a small hill, and the Valkyries had once again erected a shield wall as they were utterly surrounded by a sea of zombies.

However, it barely seemed necessary. The shield occasionally received a swipe from a close-by zombie, but there was no concerted effort to push past the barrier. They all kept moving forward, streaming toward the fortress as though they were under a spell.

"You're back!" Kenzie said with a relieved smile. "What happened?"

"I've dealt the cultists, but a few got away. What's going on?" Zac asked with bemusement as he landed next to them. "And where is Ogras?"

"He went off to check things out," Kenzie said. "As for these guys? We think they are heading toward the Incursion, it started just a minute or two after you flew away. It's like something luring them toward the teleporter."

"We think the Undead Kingdom is doing something to attract the Zombies to bring them over to the other side," Joanna added.

"Why aren't you fighting them?" Zac asked curiously. "It should be a good opportunity to level up."

“It feels weird,” Kenzie said. “It was one thing when they were attacking us, but now they are just ignoring us. They are former Earthlings after all. We were thinking it would be better to simply let them go if it means they’ll at least live on in some way.”

“Besides, we’ve even gained a lot,” Emily said with a wide grin.

“Oh?” Zac said with confusion, but he suddenly remembered the teenager should have gotten a part of his Cosmic Energy due to her buff. “How much did you gain?”

“Six,” she said, her widening grin almost splitting her face in two. “I gained more than six levels thanks to you! I told you we should go out hunting together. I’d pass Thea Marshall in a week or two.”

“If you always ride the coattails of others you’ll turn into a useless vase,” a voice echoed out across the hill as Ogras appeared from the shadows. “You need to rely on yourself.”

“What about you playing all cool and saying you’d deal with that lady general? Kenzie detonated a bomb right in her face just a few days ago. Zac almost knocked the soul out of her body and then cut off her hand. It’s not like you’re any different,” Emily retorted with a scathing glance.

“You were a lot cuter after Zac picked you up from the streets. Feels like I’ve lost a daughter,” Ogras sighed with an exaggeratedly forlorn expression.

Or perhaps it was just his wretched appearance that gave that impression, as he looked like he had been oven-roasted for a few hours. His body sported multiple new scorch-marks that weren’t there when they met earlier, and even his white hair had been singed clean off.

“What’s with your look?” Zac couldn’t help but ask with a snort, as the demon really cut a sorry sight. “I thought you left the fortress before the cultists arrived.”

“Those netherblasted lunatics really didn’t hold back. Who knows how much wealth was destroyed? I tried to salvage what I could before it was too late,” the demon explained.

“Hey, you two are matching now,” Emily said with glee as she pointedly looked at Ogras’ bald head.

“Shit, don’t lump me together with that eunuch,” Ogras spat as his white hair quickly grew back until it reached his shoulders again. “That’s better.”

“Did you find anything?” Zac asked with a frown.

“Not much,” the demon shrugged. “A storeroom full of half-burnt herbs. I don’t recognize the thing, but there were massive quantities. I am guessing it’s something used on zombies from how much of it they had. So what happened with the cultists? Did you get the leader?”

“I don’t think so,” Zac sighed as he retold his encounter with the zealots.

“A whip? That’s a pretty rare weapon for a man,” the demon muttered. “I never heard of him from any reports either. It should be the leader of the incursion who only ventured out to deal with you. Shame. Such life-saving measures usually come with a price though.”

“Let’s hope so. I’ll go check things out at the Incursion,” Zac finally said as he took out the flying treasure again.

However, the moment he was about to instill the leaf with some energy to activate it, he felt the whole world shudder and turn slanted. An agonizing pain ripped through his body, and he felt his vision close in on him.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### Chapter 506 - Triv

Zac woke up with a start, his head a chaotic mess, but he instinctively shot to his feet with his weapon at the ready. He barely had time to stop himself from bisecting a shocked Valkyrie before he remembered where he was.

“Sorry about that. How long was I out?” Zac asked with a hoarse voice.

“Around forty minutes,” Kenzie said with worry. “What’s wrong? Are you poisoned?”

“It’s nothing,” Zac said as he rubbed his temples. “I broke open a Node by force earlier because of all the energy I gained. I think I overextended myself a bit.”

“I completely forgot after seeing you zip around as usual. I’m surprised you could fight like that at all,” Ogras said, his eyes wide. “I guess that even the Heavens has finally had enough of your luck and sent some cultists in your direction. Karma always comes knocking sooner or later.”

Zac turned his sight inward, and he was a bit better than before. His pathways were still a mess, but his flesh was on the mend already. He guessed that he had fallen unconscious because he had used his pathways when he should have been resting. It was a valuable experience though, learning what kind of effect exploding a node had on his body and combat readiness.

But the node wasn’t the only problem that ailed his body at the moment. He thought a second before he walked a few steps away, and shocked exclamations echoed across the hill as he stabbed himself in his arm. A large spurt of blood stained the ground, but the wound quickly scabbed over.

“Don’t worry, just expelling some toxins,” Zac said as he took out his flying treasure. “I feel a lot better already. Get ready. I’ll check out the situation around the pillar for threats before we deal with the realignment array.”

Zac really did feel a lot better after having exsanguinated himself. **[Void Heart]** had absorbed both a bunch of miasma and poisons during the fight, and having been bled a few times helped him get some of the impurities out. He still would have preferred to rest up some more, but there was still the aftermath of the invasion to deal with. He gingerly tried activating the flying treasure again, and this time it went smoothly.

He soon closed in on the azure pillar and he actually saw a familiar figure fretting back and forth some distance away from it, the ghost who had hovered right next to the Lich King earlier. It looked unsure whether to enter or not. However, the moment it spotted Zac its visage turned even ghastlier and became marred with horror, and it immediately shot toward the Nexus Hub.

The ghost wasn’t all that quick though, especially not compared to a top-tier flying treasure like Zac’s. Just a second after the ghost spotted him he had been caught, held firmly in Zac’s grasp. A few Revenants were overseeing the zombies as well, but they unhesitantly jumped into the teleportation array, abandoning their colleague.

“Who are you?” Zac asked as he shook the ghost for a bit.

“Sir, I am just an attendant to Lord Ad- ah, I mean the Wretched Lich Adriel. A thousand blessings upon you for freeing me!” he hurriedly said. “Please spare this useless one, I am not a threat to you or your planet. I am just a custodian, a non-combat class ordered to come to this planet against his wishes.”

“Shameless enough,” Zac snorted. “What’s going on here?”

“We’re bringing back the children,” the ghost explained, not hesitating to spill the beans. “They will have a better future coming with us than staying here, and it will rid your planet of these walking Holy Beacons.”

Zac frowned as he looked at the zombies who mindlessly shuffled forward until they disappeared into the Incursion Pillar. Perhaps the ghost was right. The death-attunement should dissipate sooner or later, and what would become of these people?

Some might turn sapient and find themselves stuck on a planet with a hostile environment full of enemies. But most would simply be cut down by cultivators gathering Nexus Coins and Cosmic Energy. At the Undead Kingdom, they would at least have a chance to be born anew.

“...Fine, I’ll let them go. Now, tell me how to turn off the Realignment Array,” Zac said.

This was the most pressing issue now. The quest to stop the realignment still hadn’t completed. He had actually noticed that the massive lines in the sky had started to fade while he hunted the cultists, but it seemingly wasn’t enough. The most likely suspect was obviously the array below the surface, but he still believed that having this attendant to turn it off the safest bet.

But his hopes were quickly dashed as the ghost frantically shook his head.

“I can’t!” the ghost cried. “I would love to explain to the young master, but I can’t.”

“The first directive?” Zac asked with a frown.

“Yes, yes! You are very well-read. The first directive precludes me from helping you no matter my personal wish to assist!” the ghost nodded.

Zac frowned as his eyes bore into the squirming specter. Catheya had never really explained exactly how binding the commandments were, but they didn’t seem like complete compulsions to Zac. There should be some wriggle-room, and Zac felt he might as well do some name-dropping to see if the Draugr girl could help him one last time.

“I recently became friends with Catheya Sharva’Zi from the Empire Heartlands when I visited the Tower of Eternity. It appears she is visiting your Kingdom while her master is in secluded cultivation?” Zac said as he took out the Teleportation Token she gave him before he flashed his Tower Title. “She gave me this token, you might recognize it.”

“This! Ninth Floor! And you know that Exalted Mistress?” the ghost veritably screamed as its incorporeal eyes darted back and forth between the title and the token.

Catheya actually hadn’t given him a Token representing her force, but he was willing to bet that some random ghost wouldn’t know the difference. For all it knew, it might very well be a teleportation token leading straight to the Empire Heartlands rather than the Twilight Harbor.

“I can put in a good word for you next time I meet her, or I can do the opposite,” Zac shrugged. “I will turn off the Realignment array sooner or later even if I have to rip this whole Fortress apart. I don’t mind turning you into a pile of ghost dust first though.”

The ghost sputtered for a few seconds until it calmed down.

“Did you know that the attunement of a planet is based on its World Core? It is a magical crystal residing in the deepest core of a world. Some believe that a world core is essentially alive, and the planet’s attunement a result of its cultivation where it absorbs the energy of The Cosmos. What do you think would happen if such a core was flooded with Death while it was sealed off from the cosmos?” the ghost said before it dimmed as though it was wounded.

Zac's eyes widened as he looked at the wretched appearance of the ghost. Was it actually wounded from divulging some information like that? However, it still hadn't answered his question, at least not straight out. Most of what it said was just general information and theories, and nothing that he wouldn't be able to piece together himself.

However, Zac obviously understood the implied meaning behind the ghost's words.

"The array in the sky was just blocking out the cosmos," Zac muttered before he looked down at the ground.

It seemed as though the people of earth had gotten things a bit backward if Zac had understood the ghost's explanation correctly. The enormous array in the sky wasn't actually the realignment array. It was at best half of it responsible for isolating the planet from the universe, preventing it from absorbing normal energy. The real realignment was taking place underground.

Both parts were important to stop, but the most important might be whatever was going on in that underground chamber. It looked like he would have to bring his sister, after all. Catching other undead wouldn't do him any good either, as they no doubt would be implicated by the same compulsions.

"You'll be coming with me for a bit," Zac said to the ghost as **[Love's Bond]** transformed into a coffin on his back.

The next moment four chains wrapped around the screeching ghost, each of them imbued with the Fragment of the Bodhi. One twist would rip the hostage apart if he tried anything, but it looked unlikely judging by how weak it felt. Zac still kept his eyes on the ghost as they flew back to his group to pick up his sister.

Ogras might be helpful as well, but he seemed pretty wrung out. Zac left him on the hill instead so that he could protect the group while he recuperated. After all, there was still one Undead General on the loose who could appear at any moment.

"What's this?" Kenzie asked as she curiously looked at the captured ghost.

"Young Master, you should not mix with the forces of the Boundless Path," the ghost said, pointedly ignoring Kenzie. "Living or Dead, we still follow Heaven's Path. Consorting with heretics will only lead to a lifetime of suffering."

"She's not a Technocrat. She's my sister," Zac snorted. "I just closed a Technocrat Incursion and picked up some tools that are helpful until we've grown stronger. And you talk pretty big after almost having killed our planet."

"A thousand apologies, mistress!" the ghost exclaimed, his attitude taking a dramatic turn. "This humble one is called Triv, I worked as a caretaker of the previous lord of this manor."

Zac suddenly realized that the ghost would be a pretty good source of knowledge. It obviously wouldn't be as knowledgeable as someone like Catheya, but he was still the right-hand-man to the Lich King. He should have listened in on all sorts of conversations and had free access to a lot of intelligence.

Perhaps keeping him on Earth wouldn't be such a bad idea, provided he could be controlled.

"I thought he might be useful in turning off the realignment array," Zac added. "It is obviously still going since the quest hasn't completed."

"But the massive arrays in the sky seems to be weakening," Kenzie skeptically said. "They should clear up in another hour or two."

Zac quickly recounted his experiences below ground as they reached the entrance to the hidden subterranean chamber. The group jumped down as one, but

Kenzie immediately fell over, completely pale and shuddering. Only then did Zac remember the extremely dense death attunement in the air.

It wasn't too bad for him now that the Lich King wasn't there to amplify the effect, but someone like Kenzie was clearly worse off. He quickly handed her an E-Grade Divine crystal as he spread out his Dao Field for the Fragment of the Bodhi. It helped alleviate her symptoms, but it also made the ghost scream in pain until Zac moved the chains out of the field.

"Thank you," Kenzie said with a hoarse voice. "That was pretty scary."

"No problem," Zac said with a smile as he looked around. "What do you think?"

"These things are part of one array. I think the condensed death energy in here is just an after-effect. Kind of like radiation in a power plant or something," she muttered as she looked around, her eyes flashing in red a few seconds before they dimmed again.

"How do we turn this thing off?" Zac asked.

Kenzie walked over to the closest pillar, and she went over every line for a few minutes. They also tried to go over the mysterious core, but they couldn't even get close before the aura of death became too overpowering.

"I think we can deactivate the pillars if we make our way from the outside," she hesitantly said. "We'll leave the core for last."

Zac nodded as they moved to the edge of the chamber, where Kenzie started breaking a few inscription lines that connected the pillar with the dense runes on the floor. Zac helped out by ripping crystal after crystal out of the sockets, rapidly expanding his stockpile of Miasma Crystals. They spent the next hour going back and forth, where Zac essentially acted as a mobile counterforce to the death attunement in the air.

However, even he was starting to grow tired as it was a constant drain on his mental energy to keep his Dao Field active in this environment. Zac initially wanted to start smashing pillars, but Kenzie was afraid that would cause a massive final discharge of death energies that might hurt the World Core.

But Kenzie got more and more skilled at turning off the pillars, and soon enough they had all dimmed down, leaving just the pedestal. It emitted a terrifying amount of death-attuned energy even though the pillars were all turned off. The energy clearly came from the rock. It was pitch-black and polished smooth, making it almost look like an egg.

The egg emitted mysterious fluctuations as well, and Zac frowned when he realized that it rendered his Dao Field utterly useless. Kenzie couldn't get close to it at all, and they had to retreat after a short while.

"What is that thing?" Zac asked with a frown as he turned to the ghost who was still chained up. "And don't tell me you don't know."

"I'm not exactly sure what it is," the ghost said. "They are called Seeds of Uneath. Our kingdom receives them from the Empire along with this array."

"Like a realignment kit?" Zac asked.

"Precisely," the ghost nodded. "Even small Kingdoms such as ours can obviously convert a planet on our own, but our means require high-graded items that are impossible to bring through an Incursion. But the empire provides these things as a solution."

It didn't get any further though before massive convulsions wracked its intangible form. Zac sighed in annoyance, as it looked like they couldn't get anything more out of the ghost without it exploding for breaking the commandments.

“So, now tell me. Why shouldn’t I kill you now that we know everything?” Zac asked as his eyes bore into the translucent orbs of the ghost.

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**Chapter 507 - Lump of Coal**

“Kill me?!” Triv shrieked with dismay. “No! Let me stay on this planet. I can be useful for you!”

“You’d stay on a life-attuned planet rather than return to your Kingdom?” Zac snorted.

“I’m fine while my master is dead. There is no way I will survive returning to face Lord Rexus. My soul will be tortured until it finally crumbles from age,” Triv hurriedly said, the words veritably spilling out of his mouth. “That’s why I resisted the call earlier.”

“I thought you couldn’t resist the compulsions of the empire?” Zac said.

“That’s different. The one calling was Lord Rexus, Lord Adriel’s master, and the investor of this Invasion. I’m technically part of his force though he didn’t awaken me. Adriel did. His call is hard to resist, but it’s nothing compared to the rules imprinted onto our very souls.”

“What level are you?” Zac slowly asked. “And what can you bring to the table?”

“I’m a level 73 Custodian, and I even have gained two Dao Seeds after staying here,” the ghost said with some pride piercing through fear, as he shared his status screen. “I am practically guaranteed to advance to an E-Grade Butler in the future. I will be better assistance to your daily life than any custodian burdened with a corporeal could hope to be, provided you help me purchase Miasma Crystals for my survival.”

Zac shook his head in bemusement when he saw that the ghost really was telling the truth. Its class was **[F - Uncommon] - Spectral Custodian**. There were really all types of classes in the world. He also noted with some interest that the ghost only was aligned to the undead Empire. Normally it wouldn’t look like that.

You were aligned to your local force, not the empire it was a part of, just like Zac was aligned to Port Atwood, rather than Earth itself. Triv should have been aligned to his master’s force, but he must’ve had mentally cut ties with it, leaving only an alignment with the Undead Empire.

“A ghost butler,” Kenzie mumbled, her mouth rising with intrigue. “Might be pretty convenient with your situation.”

“Sign a contract to serve me properly and you can stay on Earth,” Zac said after a brief hesitation.

He knew how it would look taking in an undead after what they had done to Earth, but Port Atwood had long since passed the point of no return in picking up stray aliens. If it had been one of the generals or the Lich King he wouldn’t be so willing to leave them alive, but a non-combat attendant couldn’t be considered as culpable. Non-combat classes almost never had a say in the decisions of a force, after all.

“Nothing would have pleased me more,” Triv said with a sigh, though Zac felt he didn’t really mean it. “But our commands precludes me from entering contracts with the living.”

“Oh? Is that so?” Zac said as his eyes slowly turned pitch-black. “That won’t be a problem.”

The cooldown for his change had passed while he was unconscious, allowing him to turn into his Draugr form once more. The ghost looked on frozen with incomprehension, its mouth ajar.

“Now,” Zac said with his abyssal voice. “The contract!”

“It was you the whole time... The mystery undead! This is impossible!” the ghost screamed.

“The Lich King said the same thing just before he died,” Zac shrugged.

“Such a pure bloodline... No wonder the Noble Lady made your acquaintance!” the ghost spoke, and his whole form shuddered as his excitement quickly mounted. “I’ll sign, I’ll sign!”

The next moment the ghost had entered a lifetime contract of servitude with Zac, and Zac finally released him from the chains that bound him. The ghost had obviously just wanted to serve as means of survival before, but now it looked beyond excited.

“Why are you so happy all of a sudden?” Zac asked with confusion.

“I’m a custodian, a caretaker of the elite. When our master is strong, we benefit as well. Our bloodlines become stronger if our master’s bloodlines are stronger.”

“So you’re like a parasite?” Kenzie asked from the side. “Will you slow down my brother’s cultivation?”

“No, no, not at all,” Triv hurriedly said when Zac’s brows furrowed together. “This comes to no detriment to our master! You can see us as a mix of a supportive and non-combat class.”

“Can you buff me in combat?” Zac asked curiously.

“Alas, no,” Triv said with a shake of his head, but he quickly followed up when Zac’s eyes dimmed with disinterest. “My skill set is more linked to your home. I can help improve its environment to better suit your needs. Lord Adriel’s Dao Chamber was largely set up by me, for example. It will take some time until I can sync with you to that level though.”

“What else?”

“I am there to deal with all the small things that flutter’s on my lord’s periphery. Cleaning, lighting incense, keeping track of servants, maintenance of private arrays, poison and threat detection. As I evolve I will also gain some small healing capabilities and the ability to deal with unwanted spying or Karmic manipulation. We allow our masters to focus on what’s important, becoming stronger,” Triv hurriedly said.

Zac had to admit it sounded pretty convenient having a butler, though that might just be Triv upselling his usefulness. But he first needed to deal with the realignment array before he went into detail about what Triv could do and what limitations he had from his compulsions. However, Zac suddenly felt a weird presence appear in his mind, and his eyes once more turned to the ghost.

The chains of **[Love’s Bond]** trapped the ghost the moment he felt the foreign presence in his mind, and the ghost wailed as he was about to be ripped to shreds.

“What did you just do?” Zac growled as Kenzie looked on with confusion and worry.

“My apologies, Lord! It’s my skill called **[Deathbound Attendant]**. This is just our connection that you can use to send me commands,” he screamed.

Zac took a steadying breath. He had overreacted a bit due to his history with getting his soul cracked. But there really was nothing wrong with the mark after a

second glance, not that the ghost could harm him with a Contract of Servitude active. He dropped the subject and once more focused on the Seed of Undeath.

“We’ll talk more about what benefits you can bring later,” Zac said as he turned to his sister. “What do you think? Just yoink that thing?”

“The podium seems to be some sort of absorption array,” Kenzie nodded. “I think it will be fine to just take it. But perhaps put the thing in a separate Cosmos Sack?”

“Okay, stand back just in case,” Zac said as he walked over.

The closer he got to the egg the fiercer the death buffeted him. It felt like he was inside an extremely refined Dao Field of death-attunement, but it wasn’t painful at all in his Draugr form. The Seed of Undeath wasn’t fastened to the podium itself, but rather placed down into a groove.

Zac simply reached over to put it into his Spatial Ring, but a surge entered his arm the moment his hand touched the smooth surface. A storm of death spread through his body, and his recently opened node was instantly filled with miasma to the point that he gained a level in his undead form as well.

He had already reached level 81 in his human form earlier. He had lost most of the energy from killing the Lich King due to the cultists’ interruption, but he had gained enough to at least fill up the opened node by killing most of the zealots shortly after. Now his classes were once more in balance.

His eyes lit up as he felt just how magical the thing was, and he already had an idea what to do with the egg.

There was already a life-attuned cultivation cave back on his island that used the Lotus as a core. What if he created an adjoining cultivation cave steeped in death, using this egg as a core? With the help of Kenzie and his new butler, it would quickly be turned into cultivation heaven that would give him a leg up on his cultivation, no matter if it was his **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** or pondering on the Dao.

The egg calmed down after the initial burst, and Zac safely stowed the thing away. A prompt appeared the next moment, confirming that the quest **[Death Defiance]** had been completed. Zac sighed in relief as that meant that Earth was finally safe from being turned into the latest branch of the Undead Empire.

As to whether the planet would rid itself entirely of the Miasma, it was too soon to tell.

The quest being marked as completed was just the beginning of the good things coming his way. An inscribed box had appeared next to him just as expected. It was the same with Kenzie, who eagerly reached for her own reward and opened the box.

A small tool was placed inside the chest. It looked a bit like a pen, but there were a couple of attachments that reminded Zac of the bits to a screwdriver. Finally, there was a small crystalline bottle containing some dark-purple liquid.

“What’s that?” Zac muttered with some interest, as he hadn’t seen anything like it before.

“It’s an inscription kit,” the ghost sighed. “The small parts are for inscribing on different surfaces, such as array flags, stone, or skin.”

Zac’s eyes lit up when he heard the explanation. It looked like his sister had gotten a reward tailored for her needs, or perhaps based on the fact that she had mainly contributed by erecting arrays. In either case, it probably meant that a customized reward was waiting for him as well, rather than some random thing that might be useful or just something to throw into the Merit Exchange.

But before he opened his own box he noticed that it looked like the ghost was on the verge of tears.

“What’s with you?” Zac asked with some bemusement.

“I just failed a quest,” Triv groaned. “As the custodian of the Incursion Leader, I would no doubt have received an extremely valuable reward.”

Zac immediately understood that the ghost probably had an opposing quest for **[Death Defiance]**. After all, Catheya had mentioned that the System was very much in favor of the Undead Empire causing struggle all over the multiverse and that it brought some special benefits. He only snorted in response and instead focused on his own box.

A grin was spreading across his face as he opened his box, and Kenzie walked over with interest as well. He was the one who took out the Lich King and two of the generals, after all. His reward should be the best one around.

But he couldn’t believe his eyes when he saw what was neatly placed inside.

“A lump of coal? Have you really been that naughty?” Kenzie laughed, and Zac once again found himself questioning his relationship with the System.

However, he somewhat got his hopes up as he noticed Triv staring at the box with greed in his eyes.

“This! High-grade Bloodline Marrow!”

Zac was about to ask what the ghost knew, but a shudder suddenly rose from the ground, like a small earthquake.

Was it the World Core?

-----

“Anything?” Ogras muttered as Leech flittered back and forth among the ruins like a snake extending from his arm. “You better find something to evolve or I’ll figure out some way to eat you. Blocking my evolution, you really have a deathwish.”

A few coruscating waves rippled along the tentacle, and it started to look through the rubble for race-boosting opportunities with more fervor. Ogras snorted as he kept looking as well.

He really couldn’t catch a break.

Ogras didn’t ask for much. Some good wine, a few pretty girls to accompany him, and a decent class evolution. Hadn’t he earned that much by now after being dragged through one near-death experience after another by that walking calamity? But no, this bastard attached to his soul wasn’t ready to evolve, which meant that Ogras wasn’t ready to evolve either, apparently.

Now he was stuck looking for something to help this netherblasted Planeswalker take the next step. He had already found a few valuables among the ruins, and there were also quite a few natural treasures in the Cosmos Sack of the general he killed, but nothing that would help Leech evolve.

It didn’t help either that the blasted shadow couldn’t tell him what it needed.

“And you better gain the ability to communicate soon enough,” the demon added. “I’m tired of guessing what ails you every day.”

A sudden shudder spread through the whole fortress, and Ogras stopped his search for a bit. It looked like Zac and the lass had finally managed to turn off the array. A box appeared to his side as well, and he snatched it up without hesitation before he flashed out of the ruin. Ogras looked around with anticipation, but he frowned when he couldn’t sense anything in the air.

There was no influx of Cosmic Energy, and neither was there any new attunement that he could sense. Then again, anyone would be hard-pressed to make any real assumptions after the undead and the cultists had tainted the air of the area. Not that he really had any idea what a World Core upgrade actually entailed.

He had sounded pretty confident in front of the humans, but he was honestly just spitballing. They needed to be reminded of his value as that human cockroach knocked off one threat after another, after all. So that the demons, or more importantly himself, weren't left by the wayside the moment the last incursion was closed.

He turned his attention to the small box in his hand, and he opened it with some anticipation. Getting a last-minute boost before evolving couldn't hurt.

"What the hell is that?" the demon muttered with a frown, but the tentacle on his arm vibrated with glee.

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**Chapter 508 - Bloodlines**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**That's it for 2020! TFD is now entering vacation-mode until January. Don't want to wait that long to continue reading? [Don't I have the solution for you!](#)**

The time was finally up, and the azure pillar winked out of existence, leaving yet another inert Nexus Hub behind. If things worked as usual, it would soon disappear without a trace like the others, leaving just the one on his island behind. The last zombies in the area had passed through the portal over an hour ago, leaving the surroundings of the fortress bare.

It was nice to get a confirmation that the Undead Incursion truly was over, but Zac still had a hard time celebrating.

Zac sighed as he looked around the rubble. The Lich King was dealt with and the array was turned off, but as he didn't really feel like a victor as he looked out across the desolate landscape. No matter what the "World Core Upgrade" entailed it hadn't cleaned up the dour atmosphere at the core of the Dead Zone at all.

In fact, they hadn't noticed any change at all after that weird tremor. Ogras said that the upgrade would take a while though, so there was no point in completely giving up on this area.

But Zac had to admit that this place felt dead in a completely new sense of the word. Was there really a return from this? Getting blasted by the furious flames of the cultists at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour had turned things from bad to worse, and it had turned the whole area into a desolate region. Whatever those flames contained had somehow canceled out much of the miasma in the area, causing it to become almost completely void of any Cosmic Energy at all.

It felt like just breathing was a chore right now, like there was no oxygen in the air. The Lich King was probably spouting the things about Earth's death to mess with his mind, but there was perhaps a nugget of truth hidden inside the taunt. His new butler was no use either, as it had quickly become apparent that Triv wouldn't turn into the wellspring of information as Zac had hoped.

Any question that was related to restricted knowledge of the Undead Empire caused a battle between the Contract of Servitude and whatever compulsion the ghost was born with, and it started to shake in pain as the two orders clashed. Zac was forced to cancel his questions to save him a few times until he finally gave up learning anything of use.

They did however manage to confirm that Triv could be used as a confirmation of source if Zac already had the answer. For example, Zac could say that there was one general alive, and the ghost could confirm it. But probing where he was and what skills he or she possessed was impossible.

There were also no limitations on general knowledge or non-classified intelligence of the Undead Empire, meaning that he could still be useful in the end. He might not be able to talk about his own Kingdom, but he was more than happy to spill any rumors he could think of about the living forces of the Zecia Sector.

The ghost had left him alone to recuperate earlier, instead joining Kenzie in her attempts to take control of the large number of arrays that were still active in the area while Zac kept watch and recuperated. But now that the incursion was closed and there was no sign of the Cultists Returning, there was finally time to go over his gains.

The Cosmos Sack of the assassin unfortunately didn't contain a lot. There were a set of similar spikes like the one he used during the fight, along with two daggers shrouded in darkness. They seemed to be decent Spirit Tools, but Zac couldn't think of anyone they were suited for at the moment. Perhaps Ogras, but that demon had already gotten more than enough benefits for free, and he would have to purchase the daggers with Merit Points if he wanted them.

There was also a cultivation manual and a few information crystals. One of them contained surprisingly detailed intelligence of the forces of Earth, including up-to-date docket on the top elites. His own report was actually decently accurate as well, though it was based on the period when he was closing incursions left and right. Which was a shame for the assassin, as Zac was many times stronger compared to back then.

However, there was one piece of information that was a bit shocking. There was actually a mention of the Tal-Eladar and their recent actions. They had been seen together with the Brindevalt Clan, which apparently was the name of one of the three remaining Incursions that neighbored the Dead Zone. There was even a small notation that the Brindevalt Clan had some sort of business dealings with other factions of the Tal-Eladar.

Was this their plan? Give up on Earth and somehow leave through the Nexus Hub of another force? Zac didn't even know whether that was possible or not, but he couldn't see any other reason for Verana to contact some random force. He had always wondered why the Tal-Eladar hadn't stepped up and fought with Port Atwood when they had their backs against the wall, but it looked like he had found the answer.

They had always had an exit strategy in case things turned south.

The intelligence was days old though, and Zac still didn't know what had come from the discussions, but it still left a bad taste in his mouth. However, his annoyance was quickly alleviated as he turned toward the next Spatial tool. The Assassin had traveled lightly it seemed, but Spatial Tools of the Lich King was a different story.

The Cosmos Sack contained a large number of Unholy Beacons, though Zac realized they weren't activated. It further confirmed Zac's guess that the souls of Earthlings were used in their creation, while these things were just spares brought from home.

There were also several siege tools left completely unused, along with a vast array of cultivation resources. The Cosmos Sack was clearly a superior variant of the sack he looted from Rydel, the de-facto leader of the Demon incursion. That meant the Spatial Ring was Adriel's private stash, and Zac could immediately confirm that the quality of the things stored inside was a lot higher than the things in the Cosmos Sack.

One look was enough to confirm that Adriel truly was a formation master. There were at least a thousand array flags in the Spatial ring, though most of them seemed to be empty flags waiting to be inscribed.

There was also a large number of herbs and powders, and Zac quickly realized they were poisonous after taking out a few of them. There was also a large cauldron that reminded Zac of the one he had seen the Imp Herald use in the heart of the cave systems of his island. There were a large number of crystals as well, but most interesting was a milky-white crystal as large as a washbasin.

He took it out with interest, and his eyes lit up after instilling some Cosmic Energy into it. It was suddenly showing an enormous horde that looked ready to completely crumble. An army comprised of all four races of Earth was nibbling at its heels, but the real problem came from within.

The zombies had gone crazy, attacking anything around them, which usually meant they were attacking other zombies. It was like the horde had lost all cohesion, and it was suddenly everyone for himself. Zac figured that the death of the Lich King had removed or lessened whatever restraint that kept them from killing each other, and it had turned into pandemonium.

Zac tried to change the scope of the long-distance spying array, but his vision was stuck in place until he finally was forced to give up. But Zac believed that Kenzie or someone on the island would be able to figure the thing out. Having this thing mounted in his courtyard would be pretty convenient, as it would allow him to check in on all his islands without alerting anyone.

He had always been a bit leery about Big Brother until now, but surely it was a different thing if he was the one watching?

The crystal and everything else of interest was thrown into his own spatial ring, where he spotted the lump of coal once more. Or rather, the Bloodline Marrow. Triv had no idea what kind of beast it came from, but he did know what they were used for. Not surprisingly it affected bloodlines, but not as Zac had expected.

It was actually akin to poison to warriors with a bloodline. If whatever genes were preserved inside the marrow entered the body of someone with a bloodline, there would be a clash. The resident bloodline would become agitated and force out the intruding bloodline. It didn't sound very useful on paper, but it actually had a very specific purpose.

It would force a slumbering Bloodline awake, and the struggle would condense and strengthen it. It was just like normal cultivation, where fighting for your life ended with you stronger, provided you survived, of course. There was also a small chance of gaining whatever bloodline hid inside the marrow in case you didn't have one originally, but that was generally seen as a waste.

It was also something that could help upgrade what Triv called Beastcrafted Spirit Tools, which essentially meant Spirit Tools that used animal parts. Zac still didn't trust the ghost even with a Contract of Servitude active, but he seemed to be telling the truth based on the fact that **[Verun's Bite]** really wanted the thing, while **[Love's Bond]** was completely indifferent.

It was a relief, as that meant there wouldn't be any conflicts of interest in case he decided to feed it to Verun. Zac figured that he could finally provide his axe with a feast when they returned to Port Atwood, providing all the things he had saved up until now. However, he was still leaning toward only giving his axe the Dragon Core, while keeping the marrow to himself.

The recent opening of his Hidden node and talking with his mother had made him think more and more about his heritage. Not really in terms of wanting to reunite

with Leandra, but rather to make the most of the odd constitution he had been given. [Void Heart] clearly felt like a special node based on a bloodline, and he was sure that there would be exponential benefits the more Hidden Nodes he opened.

Especially if he managed to wake up a bloodline to match them.

But Zac felt that simply boiling a piece of marrow and drinking it as a soup was too crude, and he wanted to do some more research to improve his odds of waking up his constitution. He kept going through the Cosmos Sack a while longer, but he soon got tired of the dour view and he started to make his way down from the peak of the broken tower.

The wound in his leg had mostly healed over the past 6 hours, but his pathways were still a bit of a mess. He believed he'd be back at full power in a week's time tops though, provided he wasn't forced to go all out in another battle. The biggest issue was redrawing the broken pathways, which was both painful and took a lot of time and effort now that they were so intricate.

Zac was pretty disappointed with the long recuperation times, but he soon enough remembered Galvarion's experience. The aquatic cultivator had spent over a century in the E-Grade, most of it on a sickbed. Being slightly weakened for a week per node was nothing compared to that. Of course, that was provided that the damage didn't get worse with each successive node.

Triv was hovering just by the base of the broken-down tower, apparently having left Kenzie's side some time ago.

"You're really stuck here with us now," Zac said as his eyes turned to the spot where the azure pillar had once stood. "Come with me."

"It is my pleasure to stay with the young lord. How can I be of assistance?" the ghost asked as they walked around the rubble.

"Take me to my sister," Zac said, and they found her resting in an emptied warehouse with Joanna keeping guard.

Zac figured this was as good a place as any, and he bought the Teleportation Array. However, he frowned when he couldn't see any towns on the teleportation screen.

Was this place still jammed?

Kenzie immediately realized something was wrong as well, but she simply threw out a large number of Nexus Crystals.

"It's working, but it will cost a huge amount of crystals to teleport out," Kenzie muttered. "The teleporter can't use the energy of the atmosphere here because there is none. I don't know if it's because of what the cultists did or if it's an effect of the Dead Zone itself."

"Well, we have more than enough crystals," Zac shrugged. "Most of the zombies in the area have left, and we have broken the Unholy Beacons. Perhaps the Array will work by itself as soon as the area clears up a bit. But what about the jamming?"

Port Atwood had appeared on his Teleportation Menu after Kenzie had thrown out the Nexus Crystals, but that didn't really alleviate Zac's fears after their last experience. He couldn't stop himself from throwing a glare at the Ghost who floated by the corner, and Triv could only weakly smile in return.

"Either the jammers broke from us pushing through it, or more likely our people have found the arrays and disabled them," Kenzie said.

"We should send something over with a note side to make sure it safe," Joanna suggested from the side, sharing Zac's sentiments. "In case there are there still are some traps."

Zac nodded in agreement. No need to play with your life when there was no hurry to go home.

"I guess," Kenzie said as she got to her feet. "Have you found anything interesting?"

"A few things," Zac said. "I've been busy recuperating for most of the time. I guess Ogras has gotten his hand on anything of value by now. Do you need my help taking apart those pillars below-ground?"

"No, it's fine now that they've been inactive for a while. Joanna helped me pry them out of the ground. By the way, I found out something interesting from your ghost butler earlier."

"Oh?" Zac said as he looked over at the ghost, who seemingly tried to make himself look agreeable.

"Did you know? It seems that a surprisingly large number of all Earthlings have pretty good bloodlines, some that are completely unknown in the Zecia sector?" she said.

"Is that unusual?" Zac asked.

"There are sometimes some interesting bloodlines that pop up when visiting a newly integrated planet, but not like we've seen on this see- ehm, on Earth," Triv said from the side. "It is no doubt from the escaped test subjects."

"The what?" Zac asked, but he immediately realized what the ghost was referring to.

The Mystic Realm.

"The undead believes that the Mystic Realm was used for researching Bloodlines. Some of the test subjects escaped thousands of years ago, and they became our ancestors. Isn't that crazy?" Kenzie said with excitement.

Zac's thoughts went back to the lump of coal in his Spatial Ring once more. A mysterious base researching Bloodlines?

Wasn't that just perfect?

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 46 chapters ahead) please check out my**

**Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have a**

**Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!**

**Chapter 509 - Challenge**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**And we're back!**

**2021 will hopefully be amazing, and you can take the first step to make sure of that. Head over to [my](#) to read up to 46 chapters ahead! 2020 was pretty rough, so treat yo self!**

Zac had just lamented that him using the Bloodline Marrow by itself would be a bit wasteful, and now this opportunity presented itself? What if he could find something to bring out the most of the marrow and guarantee that his bloodline could awaken?

"Perhaps we can find things to strengthen the people of Port Atwood," Kenzie exclaimed, echoing Zac's thoughts. "There might be bloodline manuals or elixirs stashed inside the Mystic Realm. Perhaps even things to open Hidden nodes."

“There are also werewolves and god knows what else in there according to Ogras,” Zac said to calm his sister down before he turned to Triv. “Do you have any proof of this theory?”

“Young master, I don’t. But we are quite good judges of the quality of bodies, and as far as we can tell, the inhabitants of this planet aren’t natural,” Triv said.

“That’s impossible though. We have mapped our evolution for millions of years,” Zac countered, though the words of his mother’s projection echoed in the back of his head.

According to her, she was surprised to find Earth inhabited at all when she arrived.

“Yes, this planet has a natural seed of life, but many heritages do not belong here,” Triv conceded. “I personally believe that some accident happened inside that Mystic Realm a few thousand years ago. The owners left, and a group of test subjects managed to break free and ended up on this planet.”

Zac quickly understood what would happen next if what the ghost said was true. Those escapees would find themselves on an unintegrated planet utterly devoid of cosmic energy. They would be like castaways, unable to become stronger, and unable to leave. Their children wouldn’t have any chance to become cultivators, but their bloodlines would still be passed on.

Was this the source of Billy’s golden blood? And was it perhaps even the source of his own bloodline? He had figured that it came from his mother, but perhaps that was completely wrong. Perhaps his **[Void Heart]** came from someone who had fled the Mystic Realm thousands of years ago.

“What kind of experiments do you think would take place in such a hidden base?” Zac asked.

“We believed it was related to some boundless faction, they’re always up to something. Perhaps they wanted to create a new bloodline suited to their needs, using other bloodlines as a base. Perhaps they wanted to evolve bloodlines and sell the results to wealthy families. It is impossible to tell without gaining access to the research data,” the ghost said.

“The Undead Incursion was after the Mystic Realm as well, and so are the cultists,” Kenzie added.

“I know,” Zac nodded.

Void’s Disciple had said as much when they met, and the invaders had pretty much confirmed it by sailing toward his Mystic Realm entrance even after failing their attack on Port Atwood. He still didn’t know what was so alluring about that place, but it might contain some treasure valuable enough to cause waves in the whole Zecia sector.

“Well, did you know that the Church of Everlasting Dao already controls three different portals that all lead to our Mystic Realm,” Kenzie said. “According to Triv, at least.”

“How come you’re so talkative all of a sudden?” Zac asked skeptically. “You almost exploded last time I tried to have you divulge some minor secrets.”

“This matter regarding bloodlines was a welcome surprise, but it’s not related to the goal of the Undead Empire,” Triv explained, this time taking a spiritual hit.

“So you were after something else,” Zac said.

“Yes,” the ghost croaked, further wounding himself.

“What was it?” Zac muttered curiously, but he hurriedly corrected himself when he saw that Triv was starting to shake and expand. “Wait, don’t answer that!”

But he was still extremely curious about what could elicit such a response. Two major factions and the Dominators were all gunning toward that item, yet he was somehow still kept out of the loop.

“Julia might be able to find out more,” Kenzie said, seemingly reading his thoughts.

“What? Julia?” Zac repeated with confusion “How would that be possible?”

The former government official had simply stayed on the island since jumping onto the teleporter with him, sometimes assisting with diplomatic issues with the Marshall Clan. How would she know something that he didn’t about the mystic realm?

“The New World Government actually performed an all-out assault on one of the cultists’ bases and killed one of their Generals. That’s how they got access to the mystic realm and started the ‘Ark World’ project,” Kenzie explained. “They should have found out a few things if they’re taking such drastic measures.”

“The one time that little faction showed some spine,” the ghost muttered from the side. “The humans of this planet are wholly unimpressive. If it wasn’t for young master and the many bloodlines running around, then this world would be completely worthless.”

“So you’re saying I should send out Julia as a spy? I doubt she will be able to return to her position after these months,” Zac said, ignoring the ghost.

“She should still have some contacts who would want to make a connection with you, especially now that the Undead Incursion is dealt with,” Kenzie explained.

“I’ll talk with her when we get back,” Zac nodded before he turned to the ghost.

However, Zac couldn’t help but feel himself being dragged against his will once more as he thought about the Mystic Realm, just like when the System had placed him in front of the two remnants. It seemed like he really didn’t have a choice but to explore its depths this time either. All his enemies would be there, and it was related to his family to do with his family. The mystic realm was his best bet at figuring out whether Leandra was a friend or a foe.

And now it might even help him with his constitution?

Him having some sort of bloodline was pretty much confirmed from getting the odd Hidden Node [Void Heart]. If it was based on some previous captive, then there might actually be more information and even a manual waiting for him inside the Mystic Realm. After all, he wanted to maintain his above-average power, and opening additional Hidden Nodes was one of the best available methods in the E-Grade.

Just like the F-grade was the best opportunity to farm Titles, the E-Grade was the best opportunity to open up nodes that might benefit him for the rest of his life. Every grade was like that as far as Zac understood. He wasn’t sure about how the higher grades worked, but it seemed like D-Grade was the only rank where you could perfect your Cultivator Core.

“What else do you know about the Mystic Realm?” Zac asked Triv.

“Not much,” the ghost said, but he hurriedly explained after getting a glare from Zac. “The scant intelligence we had was based on spying on the Cultists and capturing a few of their warriors. We were focused on the realignment. As long as it completed the planet would be ours, including the Mystic Realm.”

Zac asked a few more questions, but he soon realized there was not much else that the butler could divulge between lack of first-hand information and the compulsions. Hopefully, he’d be able to gain more information through Julia. Of course, by this point he could probably just fly over to New Washington and demand answers from Thomas Fischer.

Seeing that the teleporter was up and running was a relief, but there was one more thing that Zac wanted to take care of before he left this place.

“Take me to the residence Mhal used before I killed him,” Zac said as he turned to Mhal.

“It was you?” Triv blurted with surprise as he led the way. “We figured it was the Monks.”

Zac only shrugged in response as he ushered the ghost out of the warehouse. The fortress was only so big, and they soon reached a structure, or at least the ruins of one. The above-ground manor had been completely destroyed from the battle, but the ghost informed him that there was a large underground compound as well after it activated some sort of ocular skill.

A quick search led him to a reinforced steel hatch in the ground. But a physical barrier was no match for Zac who simply ripped the thick metal plate out of its hinges. However, he immediately regretted his action as a rancid odor immediately rose from the dark hole. It was so bad that he nearly swapped over to his Draugr-form to avoid keeling over.

“What is this stench?” Zac blanched.

“Mhal performed quite a few experiments in his spare time. I believe he tried to find a suitable upgrade for his current constitution. Corpse Lords are usually like that, obsessed with their bodies. Better to discard the body entirely, if you ask me. You become a bit weaker, but you only need to focus on one type of improvement,” Triv said as it looked down at the tunnel with some disdain.

“I found a notebook on his body after I defeated him. He brought something valuable to this place, something that he hid from you and the Lich King. He was instructed by his clan to experiment on this planet, away from prying eyes.” Zac said. “I need to find it.”

“He did?” Triv said with surprise. “He never struck me or Lord Adriel as the clever type, but rather a brute. But perhaps that was exactly what he wanted.”

Zac quickly found the source of the stench as he walked down a set of stairs. Three massive holding cells were filled with dismembered bodies in various states of decay. There were a handful of zombies as well who desperately charged at the bars when they sensed him. Zac made short work of them all before he threw out a massive amount of corpse destroying powder.

It alleviated the smell a bit, but Zac still worked at maximum efficiency to look for the hidden Draugr samples. Triv was flying straight through walls and the ground in search of hidden compartments as well, eager to prove its worth.

“Young master, over here,” Triv said a while later as he rose from the floor. “How curious, I couldn’t sense anything at all until I hit a barrier. It really seems like this little vassal force was keeping a lot of secrets. Are they planning a rebellion?”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with you, remember?” Zac snorted as he walked over. “You’re an Earthling now.”

“Of course, of course,” the ghost hurriedly nodded. “But the young master should know that returning to the embrace of the Empire is the only way for a pure-blood Draugr to realize his full potential.”

“How do you know I’m pure-blood?” Zac asked with some curiosity as he started digging up the ground.

“I cannot be certain, but your bloodline is certainly a lot stronger than anything I’ve encountered before. And it feels... Old. That’s how it feels with the ancient clans of the Heartlands, I’m told,” the ghost hesitantly said. “If I may, why cling to your

human form at all if you have the chance to discard it? You even have the opportunity to awaken without losing your sense of self, something that is usually extremely difficult to achieve.”

“Well, being human doesn’t seem so glamorous to you, perhaps, but I like it,” Zac muttered, his eyes trained at the box he had unearthed.

Zac hesitated about what to do for a few seconds as he looked down at the pitch-black container. He could sense that this truly was what he was looking for, as there was a slight resonance between his Specialty Core and the box. But what now? Were the samples of his bloodline any use to him any longer?

He eventually stashed away the box without opening it, much to Triv’s disappointment. Zac was afraid that there were traps in the chest itself that would break the samples inside. Who knew, they might become useful for upgrading his Specialty core in the future? He had the System to help him out for the first evolution, but next time he might not be so lucky.

There was nothing else of interest in the chamber, and Zac quickly returned to the surface, the stale air feeling like a fresh gust after that rancid environment. If there had been any lingering feelings of pity for the Corpse Lord’s Clan before due to the letter he read, then that pity had been utterly quashed after seeing the aftermath of Mhal’s experimentation.

In either case, there was not much left to do in the Dead Zone, and Zac prepared to get going. However, he realized that the ghost presented a problem as he returned to his sister’s side.

“Is there any way you can hide?” Zac asked as he turned to the ghost who kept pace two steps behind. “I can’t be bringing you around in the open. I already have enough people talking behind my back from working with the demons.”

“Here,” the ghost said as he produced a small black tower no larger than three centimeters in height. “I can stay inside this, as long as young master don’t put it into a Spatial Treasure. With your permission, I’ll rest for a few days as my soul is wounded. If you need me, just call by nudging the mark in your mind.”

Zac nodded and the ghost disappeared the next moment as the small tower started giving off a weak azure light. Zac curiously looked at the thing, but he couldn’t figure out if it was a Spatial Treasure or if the ghost could actually shrink itself to such a diminutive size.

“I don’t understand why you don’t just kill that thing,” Ogras muttered with disgust as he stepped out of the shadows. “Nothing good will come from keeping that one.”

“I’ll destroy any Karmic Ties he might carry later,” Zac said. “I have the lamp now.”

“Karmic Ties is just one of the many dangers in the Multiverse,” Ogras shrugged. “Another one is consorting with the unliving. It usually ends with you joining them.”

“A bit late for that,” Zac snorted, which elicited a laugh from Kenzie as she fiddled with her new inscription tool.

“One of them playing with ghosts, the other with Technocrat toys. You two siblings are truly testing the limits,” the demon muttered. “You better pray the Ruthless Heavens don’t take you up on your challenge.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 46 chapters ahead) please check out my**

**Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have a**

Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

## Chapter 510 - Eveningtide

### A note from TheFirstDefier

New year, new [plugs](#)! Fulfill that old New Years' resolution to read more by reading up to 48 chapters ahead!

Zac only rolled his eyes at the demon's slightly ominous comment, but he did somewhat agree. The two of them were playing a dangerous game, him with the remnant and Kenzie with Jeeves. Such powerful items really shouldn't be in the hands of piddling low-grade cultivators, and it would only drag them into trouble with the System.

But there wasn't much he could do about it right now, apart from growing stronger to tackle whatever came their way.

"Are you done here?" Zac asked instead.

"I managed to dig out some of the intelligence crystals from the place you indicated, but most of them were ruined. Also, I can't read them," the demon said as he threw it over to Zac.

He tried to activate it as well, but his Cosmic Energy was immediately rebuffed. Even worse, some cracks spread across its surface, prompting Zac to hurriedly retract his energy.

"I'll try as an undead later," Zac said as he placed Triv's tower in a pocket. "If we're done here, then you can call over our people. I'll leave as soon as we can confirm the situation on the other side. Send this to Port Atwood please."

He quickly imprinted a few instructions onto a crystal and handed it to his sister. Kenzie grabbed it before she poured hundreds of Nexus Crystals out on the ground in a circle around the Teleportation Array. She looked a bit hesitant about what to do next though, but Ogras seemed to understand her thoughts.

"Here," Ogras said and threw a massive leg from some unknown beast onto the array. "Harvested it during the climb. It tasted like wet fur anyway."

Kenzie nodded and placed the crystal on top of the leg, and the next moment the two items flashed away.

"We're returning to Port Atwood?" Joanna asked as they waited for a response on the other side.

"I want that tree, but I need to see what's happened with the ship heading for Mystic Island. I'll go back if there's still a chance to protect our teleporter," Zac said after some consideration. "If not, I'll simply fly and get the tree. I'll be able to observe the Dead Zone that way as well."

Ten minutes later a group of soldiers emerged from the teleporter, including a sun-tanned Ilvere.

"You did it," Ilvere said with a grin as he looked around at the ruins. "Must have been some battle. I wish I was here to kick these damn zombies off the planet as well. What about Alea's...?"

Zac sighed as he saw the demon general's downcast expression. Zac had made sure that only a few core members could know about Alea's situation, but the two remaining demon Generals were among the group of people he felt should be aware of what was going on. The normal demons would only think that she had been killed by the invaders when they assaulted the island.

"I ripped him apart with her chains," Zac simply said.

“Good!” Ilvere roared. “Then her soul can be at peace no matter what happens next.”

“What’s going on with the boat?” Zac asked, eager to change the subject.

“We failed,” Ilvere sighed. “Those ships are so slow, but it suddenly spat out a small vessel that shot toward the Mystic Island with a speed that eclipsed our ships. Worse yet, they managed to break the tunnel just by detonating something on the shore. We currently have around 100 people trapped inside the mystic realm. We managed to sink the large warship in retaliation”

“At least our people safe,” Zac said as he turned to his sister. “Can you see what you can do?”

“Sure,” Kenzie nodded.

Since there wasn’t much he could do now that the spatial tunnel was already broken, he decided to go fetch the mutated tree instead. Ilvere would lead the squad of soldiers to search out the core of the Dead Zone instead, while simultaneously taking away all the Unholy Beacons that were still standing.

After all, they still hadn’t found any natural resources in the area. All the other Incursions had been placed near some valuable resources of Earth, so it stood to reason that it should be the same here. Of course, there was the possibility that the perk of the Undead Empire was getting placed in an extremely population-dense area, as corpses were the most valuable resource to them.

Seeing his army get to work with practiced ease let him bring out his Flying Treasure without worry, but he was surprised to see Ogras jumping on top as well.

“I have nothing to do, so I figure I’d come with you,” the demon shrugged with a grin. “What if you suddenly pass out again and fall into a horde of zombies?”

“Well, the company is always welcome,” Zac slowly said.

“I’m curious if you can actually gain something from the tree. You’re a mortal but you keep getting insights left and right. I want to figure out if there’s something I’ve missed. Just look at that giant. Sometimes there’s genius hidden within a haze of stupidity,” the demon smiled.

“Well, thank you,” Zac snorted as he turned to Joanna who had also joined him on the leaf.

“I’m just here to help you steer in case you need to relax,” Joanna explained.

Emily and the rest of the Valkyries would return to Port Atwood with Kenzie though. They weren’t as high-leveled, and they had stayed long enough in such a Miasma-dense area. Any longer and they might have adverse effects.

The trio soon set off, and the atmosphere was a lot more relaxed as they returned toward the outer reaches of the Dead Zone. Zac took Joanna up on the offer to steer so that he could focus on recuperation, whereas Ogras took out a jug of some liquor and drank as he gazed out across the horizon.

Zac got a bit bored after an hour though and joined Ogras for a drink instead.

“By the way, I found out some more about the Eveningtide Asura after you left the Base Town,” Ogras said as he handed Zac a jug. “Figured it might be useful as some see you as the second coming of that guy after your display with erecting a netherblasted Corpse Tree right in front of the Tower entrance.”

“A what?” Joanna asked from the side.

“And?” Zac coughed with some embarrassment, ignoring the question. “Is that good news or bad news?”

“Hard to say. Unattached elites cropping out of nowhere is always a cause for concern. It will usually result in multiple forces getting destroyed before a balance is restored,” the demon said.

“But that rarely happens to the peak forces because of their hidden reserves. The attacker would have to overpower and ancient Empire, and that’s easier said than done. So they have grown complacent,” Ogras continued.

Zac nodded in agreement. If it was before he visited the Base Town he would have believed it wasn’t too hard for a powerhouse to take out a slightly weaker force, but he had seen just how desperate things had become upon him exiting the tower. And that was only a few hundred warriors with limitations on what sort of items they could bring to the special dimensions.

What about the biggest forces? They would be able to bring out billions of warriors and an almost inexhaustible number of treasures to defend themselves. Taking them out as a lone powerhouse would be almost impossible.

“But then the Eveningtide Asura came along,” Ogras smiled “And now there’s you.”

“Just who is that guy, and what did he do?” Zac asked.

Zac had been repeatedly been compared to that man since he had conquered the 8<sup>th</sup> floor, so it was a bit interesting to hear what kind of man the so-called Asura was.

“He utterly annihilated a fifth of the peak forces in this sector,” Ogras said with gleaming eyes. “Killed them to the last man. Trillions of lives lost, even a C-Grade continent was grievously wounded to the point it decreased in grade. A murderous lunatic, it sounds like.”

“Why would he do something like that?” Zac said with shock.

No wonder so many seemed so leery about him after the fight outside the Tower. The problem was whether the forces of the multiverse would want to stomp him out before he grew powerful, or whether they would instead try to nurture a good relationship. Some obviously tried the latter, such as Boje and Pretty, but that didn’t necessarily represent the intentions of their ancestors.

“To resolve grudges. Those who died had tried to hunt him down to get their hands on his treasures before he grew powerful, and he was almost killed dozens of times. But he barely managed to slip away each time, until he finally disappeared for 100 000 years,” Ogras said. “But then he finally came back, as a Peak C-Grade Monarch. Blood flowed like rivers for 500 years before he was satisfied and left our sector for good.”

“Wait, just Peak C-Grade? Did he manage to do all that without even breaking into the B-Grade? How is that possible, don’t all the peak forces have Peak C-Grade Monarchs hidden in seclusion?” Zac asked incredulously. “With the help of their arrays, they should be able to defend even against someone like that.”

“I actually learned something interesting regarding that,” Ogras snorted. “Our sector is a bit generous, or rather boastful, when it comes to assigning grades to forces.”

“What?” Zac asked with confusion.

“There are probably less than 10 High C-Grade Monarchs in the whole sector,” Ogras said, drawing a surprised exclamation from both Joanna and Zac. “Some say even less than five. And not a single Peak C-Grade warrior unless they are hiding their strength for some reason. The reason that Dravorak Dynasty is so famous right now is that they have one of the few confirmed High C-Grade Monarchs.”

“What?” Zac said. “Are you messing with me? What about all the peak C-Grade forces?”

“Having a Pseudo C-Grade Monarch makes a force C-Grade. Having a true C-Grade Monarch, no matter how weak, makes the force Middle C-Grade. Having an Elite Early C-Grade or a weak Mid C-Grade makes the force a High C-Grade force. Finally, Forces with at least Mid-Grade C-Grade warriors and strong foundations are called the Peak C-Grade forces of the Zecia Sector,” Ogras snorted.

Zac was about to refute the man, but he suddenly remembered Anzonil. His force was regarded as a weak D-Grade force simply because he had formed a Pseudo Core. It sounded like the same was possible with whatever was required to move into the C-Grade, and a remote sector like Zecia considered that good enough.

It also explained why Catheya’s master seemingly held such a level of esteem in the Undead Kingdom. Perhaps it wasn’t only the fact he came from the heartlands, but also that he simply was stronger than anyone else in the whole sector. No wonder that Catheya could decapitate 40 people without anyone lifting a finger to retaliate.

It didn’t make a big difference for Zac as things were, but it did actually lessen the pressure he felt somewhat. It meant that if he managed to reach at least Early C-Grade in the future, then there was probably no force in the whole sector that would dare mess with him or Earth. He had thought he would have to reach High C-Grade for that effect.

Of course, the revelation also indicated that the might be something lacking in the Zecia sector as a whole if no one was able to reach Peak C Grade. Perhaps it was resources, or perhaps the cultivation techniques. In either case, it was bad news for him. If not even the most talented cultivators could reach Peak C-Grade, how would he, a talentless mortal do it?

Of course, he was way early in worrying about the C-Grade. But it was worth remembering, as it meant that following the “standard” elite route of Zecia would have an end-point that was even lower than that of his master, Yrial. He would have to go above and beyond somehow. But it was clearly possible if the Eveningtide Asura managed to break through.

“Is he still alive?” Zac asked curiously. “The Asura?”

“No idea,” Ogras shrugged. “This happened something like a million years ago. Perhaps not even the ancient bastards from the strongest forces were alive back then. There were rumors that he had offended some terrifying unorthodox force a few hundred thousand years ago, and after that, he hasn’t been heard of. Sounds like someone who loved getting himself in trouble, and perhaps his luck ran out. Also, considering how many mortals he killed in his quest for vengeance he might have been punished by the Ruthless Heavens.”

The atmosphere on the leaf became a bit subdued as they looked out across the landscape. Zac prayed that things wouldn’t play out as they did with the Eveningtide Asura. It also confirmed the importance of keeping anything valuable with you hidden, at least until you were strong enough to defend yourself.

However, his mood soon lightened again as they closed in on their target; the mutated tree that was somehow generating life through death. Joanna set them down next to the tree, and Zac walked up to it once more. However, no matter what he did he found himself unable to push his Dao any further, and he couldn’t make any inroads on his skill quests either.

He was forced to give up after five hours, but he still felt that the tree held some secrets worth exploring. He took out a large barrel and filled it with dirt before he

gingerly cut three branches and placed them inside. He also inserted a couple of miasma crystals into the earth after some consideration.

He hadn't gained much from the last set of saplings he took, but that might be because of him having placed them into his Cosmos Sack. He had long forgotten to replant them, which had turned them into worthless sticks in his back. But now he was planning on building a death-attuned cultivation cave, meaning he would have a proper home ready for them.

They set out a minute later, and they actually reached the edge of the Dead Zone a bit faster than expected. However, they soon realized that it wasn't because of their speed, but rather because the Dead Zone seemed to be shrinking. It was a huge relief to see the world naturally heal itself so quickly, and it felt like a good indicator that hadn't been damaged beyond repair.

But that didn't mean that the undead threat was completely dealt with, as they saw massive swathes of zombies lumbering around as they flew closer to the battlefield he had seen in his crystal. Some of them seemed to be heading toward the core of the Dead Zone, whereas others trailed off toward inhabited lands.

It would take a lot of work to deal with the hundreds of millions of Zombies.

Some were already working on it though, and Zac was surprised to see the battle was still raging. It wasn't an all-out battle though, as the humans mostly seemed to fight in an effort to corral the zombies away from the area with human settlements. However, the horde still looked extremely rowdy. Some drifted back toward the Dead Zone, but most seemed intent on feasting on the living.

Zac looked inward to check the status of his body. The node had mostly stabilized by now, and while the pathways were still a bit messy he had started to work on redrawing them over the past day. He still had a long way to go but he felt he had made enough progress to comfortably dish out a couple of fractal edges.

"I'll help them out a bit," Zac said as he jumped down from the leaf, hurdling toward the zombies like a human cannonball.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 511 - Plans and Schemes**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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"How is it?" Gregor asked as he spat out some blood from his mouth, reminding him of his internal injuries.

A decent number of wounds covered his body from ceaseless fighting over the past two days, and the two newly gained scimitars in his hands felt as heavy as mountains. But there was not much else to do. The zombie bastards had gone crazy out of nowhere, and it only became worse when that shudder went through the planet.

But the pain was intermixed with a sweet sense of bliss, as that shudder had indicated the continued survival of Earth. That man had really done it. One man and a small support staff charging into the core of the Dead Zone to kill the Lich King, and somehow living to tell the tale.

If only the other undead bastards could take the hint and throw in the towel as well.

“We won’t be able to hold much longer,” Lararia frowned as she looked out over the frontlines. “I think our best bet is fighting a battle of retreat, leading them away from our sector.”

“Some of these bastards will still ignore us and do whatever they want,” Oksana muttered. “Our scouts are indicating that packs of zombies are appearing all over the place, causing havoc.”

“What about Enigma?” Gregor asked.

“We can’t find him,” Lararia said with worry. “He took his squad to search for the general, but we’ve lost contact.”

“Well, let’s hope he’s just held up,” Gregor mumbled. “Our faction will need - Wait, is that him?”

The other Councilors followed his gaze, and their eyes immediately lit up. It wasn’t their unsociable strongman who essentially lived out in the battlefields, but rather an emerald leaf that pushed through the clear blue sky.

The others didn’t have time to comment before someone jumped out from the flying treasure, falling straight toward the sea of zombies like a meteor. A terrifying impact erupted the next second as a coruscating wave of rock and mud spread out like a tsunami, swallowing hundreds of zombies in an instant.

A massive plume of sand rose to the sky from the impact and obscured their vision. However, Gregor barely had time to register the series of events as an enormous blade ripped the dust apart as it shot out with terrifying momentum.

It was at least fifty meters long, and the zombies were cut apart as though they were made from paper. Was this the same wretched creatures that caused their soldiers so much trouble due to their sturdy bodies? A shocking corridor of destruction ripped forward, leaving not a single body intact. Gregor had to rapidly blink a couple of times as he stared at the edge’s advance, as it almost felt like his eyes were cut by just looking at the skill.

Gregor himself and many of the councilors had tried to take advantage of the thick density of zombies in a similar fashion, utilizing their area skills to cause as much damage as possible. However, the zombies were just too tough. Each zombie drained their attacks, like they sucked up some of the energy like sponges, causing the skills to fizzle after a dozen kills or so.

However, Lord Atwood’s attack seemed to face no such impediments. It kept flying until they destabilized well over a hundred meters away from him. Was it a difference of Dao? The fractal blade that cut through the horde like butter either had a greenish tint, the color giving the attack a distinct power.

They had already guessed that Lord Atwood had surpassed the stage of Dao Seeds, and this seemed to be a confirmation of it.

However, it quickly became apparent that the enormous blade was no ultimate strike, as Lord Atwood seemingly was able to keep conjuring them at will. One, two, three blades followed suit in short order, each of reaping their own set of the unliving as Lord Atwood moved with impossible speed within the horde. Each blade took out thousands of the clumped-together bastards.

“So many of them dead in an instant,” Oksana muttered with disbelief written all over her face. “Is this the power of the E-Grade?”

“No way,” Lararia said with a shake of her head, her tail nervously flitting back and forth from watching the bloody display. “If that was the case, then the general would have singlehandedly decimated our army. This is Lord Atwood’s personal power.”

“Shit, didn’t he just fight the Lich King yesterday? And now he’s already back at full power?” Gregor sputtered with disbelief. “Is that man unstoppable?”

Each step moved Lord Atwood fifty meters forward and resulted in another gory wave of destruction, and a primordial fear gripped Gregor’s heart as he looked at the carnage. They could sense his immense aura even all the way from where they stood, and Gregor felt like a helpless hare gazing at an apex predator.

An eruption of darkness suddenly swallowed another section of the zombie horde, and the undead fell by the hundreds. Gregor looked at the spectacle with confusion until he suddenly noticed the horned demon emerging out of the shadows to decimate everything in his surroundings, only to disappear a moment later.

He kept moving the battlefield through teleportation, like a grim reaper toying with the mindless undead. Gregor had thought Lord Atwood to be an outlier after he essentially dealt with the Fire Golem Incursion singlehandedly, but it looked like he extremely capable followers as well.

“Enigma isn’t even a match to the right-hand man,” Lararia muttered, echoing his thoughts. “We’d probably need the whole council to secure a kill. Provided that this is the limits of that man’s power.”

“Don’t speak such unlucky words, what if they hear us?” Oksana said with a frown. “Besides, they are our saviors.”

“Should we join them?” Gregor ventured after a while.

“No point,” a new voice said, and they saw Romal walk over, his bloody shovel slung across his back. “We might just get in the way. Let’s hold the line and deal with stragglers until they’re done.”

The other Councilors nodded in agreement, and they spent the next hour dealing with the scraps while the two monsters kept wreaking havoc. Joanna, the spear warrior following Lord Atwood, joined them early on and confirmed the destruction of the Undead Incursion.

The demon joined them half an hour later, appearing in their midst without notice. However, Lord Atwood kept mowing down Zombies for over two hours, methodically decimating the undead. Every three seconds the air would shudder as he released a massive fractal edge, and he would move toward the next group without bothering to look at the results.

Gregor had already turned numb to that man’s actions, but he couldn’t help but wonder just how much Cosmic Energy that man had used by this point. But it looked like even Lord Atwood had a limit, and he finally stopped his carnage as he started walking toward their army.

A tremendous aura radiated from his body, but Gregor was surprised to feel a refreshing aura coming from it. However, the zombies clearly didn’t share his sentiments as they fled for their lives, desperately moving out of the Dao Field as he walked toward the Council’s Army.

Releasing the aura essentially ended the battle, and over a hundred thousand warriors silently watched the approach of a single bloodied man. Even Gregor felt mesmerized as he looked at Lord Atwood’s approach, as he drew quite the picture with the suns setting behind his back.

The bestial axe in his hand glistened in the sunlight as dark blood dripped from the teeth fastened to its axehead. However, the white flowing robes he wore were

unmarred by even a speck of dust, proving that he hadn't even been close to becoming injured during the fight.

However, the most gripping things were his eyes. It felt like they contained a boundless power that made Gregor shudder from hundreds of meters away. His very existence was cause for pressure, and it looked like the army felt the same as a wide passage in the ranks opened up without any order. It wasn't surprising, of course.

Who'd dare to block a man who had just mowed down millions of zombies?

Lord Atwood soon appeared in front of them and nodded as he stashed away his weapon.

"Have you found any clues about the general who was leading this horde?" he simply asked.

"Ah- Ehm, no," Gregor said, quickly finding his bearings. "I'm afraid not. The horde suddenly turned chaotic and rowdy without warning two days ago, we believe it might have been because the general fled. Enigma set out to find him with a group of elites, but we haven't heard any news."

Lord Atwood nodded with a sigh.

"Well, the portal is closed and the Dead Zone is shrinking. We'll be able to smoke him out sooner or later. Contact Port Atwood if you hear anything," he said.

"Of course," Gregor nodded.

"Where's the closest teleporter?" Lord Atwood asked.

"An hour by foot in that direction," Romal said with a weak voice as he pointed westward.

"Thank you for your hard work," Lord Atwood said as he jumped back onto his flying treasure. "But remember, this isn't over. There are still multiple dangers threatening Earth, so don't let down your guards. I will hold an auction in a few weeks, there will be a lot of items that will be helpful for the elites of our world. You should come."

"Port Atwood next?" the mysterious demon asked, but Lord Atwood shook his head.

"No, there's someone I need to talk to first," Lord Atwood said with a shake of his head.

"Who?" the demon asked with surprise.

"Verana," Zac simply answered as he nodded for his bodyguard to start flying. "I need some answers."

A bloodthirsty laugh echoed out across the area as the demon joined him on the leaf, leaving a subdued group of councilors behind. Only when the trio had turned into a small spot on the horizon did Gregor remember to breathe, and he realized his back was completely drenched in sweat.

"Imagine if we actually had gone with the original plan to fight that monster," Gregor wryly smiled. "We'd be skeletons tossed into some corner of the Underworld by now."

And more importantly, he felt very happy that he wasn't related to that Verana character, going by the fire in Lord Atwood's eyes.

--

A subdued silence lingered in the large conference room, with no one of the 10-odd people present wanting to be the first one to speak up. Thomas wasn't in any hurry either, so he slowly looked out across the room of representatives to get a sense of their thoughts.

The power dynamic of the New World Government had slowly changed with democracy giving way to hegemony, but such was the natural result in a world like theirs. However, Thomas knew all-too-well that his current position was nowhere near as stable as that of the Super Brother-Man, Zachary Atwood.

He was unable to completely subdue the other factions of the government with his force alone, so he was still forced to accede to the will of the many in many scenarios. It did bog down his plans a bit, but he could only blame himself for being lacking in talent.

“It’s closed and the array has been turned off,” Francis Girardot finally muttered as he looked over at Thomas.

Thomas slowly nodded in confirmation, but he didn’t speak up just yet. Zachary Atwood had made his move after all, and he was curious to see what the others had to say about it. His biggest worry right now was that the other members would start flocking to his rising star, abandoning the arduously crafted plans of theirs.

“Is this good news or bad news?” Johana, the Russian representative, asked.

“It is obviously good news to have one less threat to worry about,” Asano said from the other side of the table. “The question is whether it changes our plans.”

Multiple heads slowly turned toward Thomas sitting at the short end of the table. Asano’s words had a clear implication. What can you provide that the Super Brother-Man can’t?

“This doesn’t change our plans,” Thomas finally said. “Zachary defeating the Undead Empire is not wholly unexpected. The undead were powerful, but ultimately limited by the rules of the System. The real threat to Earth is not. The threat of the Redeemer remains. We will proceed with the Ark World Project.”

Murmurs of agreement went around the table, though a few faces looked troubled.

“What about bringing Zachary Atwood into the plan?” a councilor ventured. “It would greatly improve our chances to seize the item.”

“Absolutely not,” Thomas Fischer said without hesitation. “Remember the uses of the Dimensional Seed? We want it to create a safe haven for our people. But what would Zachary Atwood use it for?”

“The C-Grade,” Asano muttered thoughtfully.

“Exactly. All our intelligence indicates that he only cares about the safety of his sister. He even left his whole army to fend for themselves for weeks against the undead. He mysteriously disappeared for a month while humans died by the millions. He will no doubt save the seed to break through in the future,” Thomas said without missing a beat.

“But he’s facing the same threat as us. The master of the Dominators,” another representative muttered. “Surely he can be convin-“

“We already possess two tokens that would take us off-world,” Thomas cut him off. “There is no way that Zachary Atwood doesn’t have at least as many. He can always cut and run, bringing his closest people with him after having looted all the treasures of Earth.”

The representatives slowly nodded in agreement, clearly seeing the problem as well.

“Besides. It’s not like we’re hopeless,” Thomas added with a smile. “I’m happy to announce that Silverfox and I have finally managed to broker an agreement with the True Sky-faction of the Ark World. Zachary Atwood is strong, but can he contend with their high E-Grade ancestors?”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 512 - Regret**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Verana sat by a flowerbed in her garden, absentmindedly stroking Lulu's soft fur as the beast slept in her lap while cradling a beast crystal. A sense of impending doom had filled her heart the entire day, and she finally knew it was time for a reckoning the moment Lys hurried into her room with worry in her eyes. Not that her maid needed to explain what was going on as she had already received the prompt.

Zachary Atwood had arrived.

The humans under her employ had already divulged his evolution and explosive gain in levels over the past days, and the fact that their surroundings weren't drowned in Miasma was proof enough of what had transpired. The young master of the Brindevalt had sent a message as well five hours ago, confirming her hunch. The Undead Empire was thrown off from this baby world, making Zachary Atwood its de-facto leader.

This should normally have been a joyous occasion, but she had messed up. She had been frozen in hesitation about the implications of offending the undead and the Church of the Everlasting Dao, until the point that they lost connection through the teleporter. Now Zac was back, and his thoughts about their actions were known only to himself.

Why had she hesitated back then? It was not like either of those forces were on good terms with the Tal-Eladar. In fact, it was the opposite, with the higher-tiered tribes having joined more than one excursion to curtail the expansion of the Undead Kingdoms.

She finally understood the weight of command that her grandmother had tried teaching her about, but now it might be too late. Her mind ran a mile a minute as she tried to figure out the optimal path to take from here on out. There was a palpable pressure on her as the course of the meeting might decide whether she and her people would survive the day.

Because one thing was clear. If the Super Brother-Man had arrived with the intent to kill, then there was nothing she could do. He had taken out almost a dozen forces stronger than heirs, and even the undead wasn't a match to him. She still couldn't believe it as she had seen him in action on multiple occasions, but it was hard to argue with the facts placed in front of her.

She finally concluded that her best course of action was to feign ignorance; that she was preparing her forces to assist when Port Atwood was under attack, but the arrays had suddenly disappeared just when they were about to set out. So she adorned a welcoming smile when the human and his annoying companion stepped into her garden.

Verana gasped as she felt a terrifying pressure spread out through her backyard. Zachary Atwood was clearly making his stance known, and the few attendants were forced to flee from the immense pressure as the flora was pushed to the ground. Even

Verana felt the strain, and Lulu whined in her lap as she was startled awake, her little muscles growing taut.

There was no longer any confusion about how Zachary Atwood had defeated the undead after feeling this terrorizing aura. It was almost incomprehensible how much he had grown since they last met. Verana already knew that he had gone off-world for some opportunity, but just what kind of encounter could utterly transform someone to this degree? She still maintained the smile though, wanting to make it feel like nothing was amiss.

However, that smile turned extremely forced when she heard Zac's first words. "I thought you would have left for the Brindevalt Clan by now."

----  
Zac looked at the frozen smile of Verana with a snort before he sat down opposite her.

"I am not sure what you've heard, but I assure you that the Tir'Emarel Family has upheld their part of the agreement without any deviance," Verana said after a second. "We have not divulged any information about you to the Brindevalt. I feared the worst had happened to you when we lost contact, and we sought out an ally."

"You know, I wondered what made you so willing to stay behind on a planet invaded by not only the undead but also the insane cultists," Zac said, freely speaking his thoughts. "It turns out you had an escape route from the beginning."

"Can't trust the pointy-ears, they are only true to their beasts," Ogras snorted from the side, drawing an angered look from Verana.

"I can understand how it looks, but I hope that you can understand my predicament. I wanted to assist, but I also had orders from my family to not offend any powerful forces while I was cut off from the clan. By the time I found the resolve to go against my family's wishes we had lost connection to Port Atwood," Verana explained. "Also, I believe the Brindevalt can become a great asset as well. They are--"

"You can send a message to your friends," Zac cut her off. "I am heading back to consolidate my gains. But I will head out and slaughter every invading force that remains on Earth the moment I'm done. They better be gone within the week unless they're ready to face me in battle."

Zac stood up, not caring that Verana's smiling face had turned into an emotionless mask, her eyes the only thing that betrayed the churning emotions within.

"I'll uphold my bargain, you are welcome to stay as a trading partner. However, since you're unwilling to fight for this planet's survival, then you can forget about taking part in its resources. I will see any expansion from the Tal-Eladar as an act of war, and I will act swiftly in response," Zac said as he walked out without another word.

He had said what needed to be said, and he was in no mood to stay any longer. His wholesale slaughter of the zombie horde had tired him out, and he just wanted to sleep for a few hours. Ogras stood up as well, but he didn't immediately join Zac as he left. Instead, he turned toward Verana with a grin.

"What?" she snorted with annoyance after Zac had left the garden. "Don't pretend a calculating coward like you would have acted any different when faced with such a situation."

"I might be a coward, but I at least have a nose for opportunity. You've just pissed off the first person to reach the 9<sup>th</sup> floor of the Tower of Eternity in a million years," Ogras said, his grin almost splitting his face apart. "You better pray that the Tribal Elders of your race doesn't sacrifice your whole clan as a form of appeasement to the second coming of the Eveningtide Asura."

“WHAT?!” Verana exclaimed with shock, but she quickly calmed down. “Another life from a demon’s poisonous tongue.”

However, Ogras noticed that the Beast Master was not as calm as she let on, and he decided to twist the knife a bit.

“Believe what you will. Would I bother lying about something like this? The news will sooner or later spread across the whole Sector, and the natives will bring back news over the coming years. You’ll see. Silly girl, you stayed on this little planet for its opportunities, but you let it all slip through your fingers,” Ogras laughed as he flashed away, effortlessly avoiding an infuriated swipe by Verana.

He appeared right at the exit of the garden and looked back at Verana who stood rooted in place with a stormy expression. One of them looked physically ill and the other looking like he had just won the lottery.

--

“What were you doing?” Zac asked when Ogras appeared by his side again.

“Rubbing some salt in the wound,” the demon snickered. “Never forget to kick your enemies when they are down.”

“What do you think they’ll do?” Zac asked, ignoring the comment.

“The potential value of a trade route like this is too valuable to simply give up,” Ogras slowly said. “They will definitely leave at least some people here. Not that I think that they can simply leave as they want through someone else’s Incursion. There should be a massive cost to that. I didn’t even know it was possible. At best the girl and a few of her elites will be able to escape this planet, leaving the rest behind. Doesn’t really matter now, does it? You have gained many superior allies since we met these bastards.”

Zac nodded in agreement. If things fell through with the Tir’Emarel clan, then there would be a hundred stronger factions that would probably be more than willing to trade with him after the System’s shroud was lifted. Provided he didn’t become a pariah of the Sector, of course.

The Tal-Eladar kept a wide berth around them as they walked through the town, and they soon reached the Teleportation Array. They appeared in Port Atwood a bout of darkness later, and the two let out a collective sigh of relief. He had seen the others step through just fine, but almost getting ripped to shreds while stuck mid-teleportation had left a small seed of fear in Zac’s heart.

He just wanted to run home and sleep, but there was one thing that couldn’t wait.

“You want to see your girlfriend?” Zac asked after having nodded at the soldiers standing guard at the teleportation tree.

“What? Who?” Ogras blurted and took a step back.

“Emma MacHale,” Zac snorted.

“Oh, her?” Ogras muttered. “What a waste. Why are you seeing her for?”

“I need to speak with Julia,” Zac explained. “I want information from the New World Government.”

“Why not just go over and cut off a couple of heads before demanding answers? The amount they had badmouthed you would have gotten them all killed long ago on my home planet,” Ogras asked.

“I might disband them, or I might not,” Zac shrugged. “I haven’t decided yet. There should be quite a few turncoats who are willing to offer up intelligence though, so I’ll have Julia work a bit in the meantime.”

The two soon found themselves at the sprawling mansion that Emma had demanded as remuneration for getting 'kidnapped'. They found the two sitting outside, with Emma reading some scripts while Julia cultivated.

"What are the two of you doing here?" Emma said with a raised brow. "Questions about same-sex relationships? The two of you finally tying the knot?"

"That bore wouldn't be able to land me in a thousand years," Ogras laughed as he snatched the bottle of wine next to Emma. "He's here for your little lover."

"What's going on?" Julia said as she opened her eyes.

"Are you interested in some work?" Zac asked as he looked down at the former government official.

It turned out that the answer was a resounding yes, and Julia almost ran out of the mansion before Zac had explained the situation in full. Staying still for months on end on an isolated island was clearly fraying her nerves.

They eventually decided that Julia would go to Westfort, bringing two bodyguards with her upon Emma's insistence. As for her next step, that would depend on what she found out in the town. She seemed to have the matter in hand, so Zac left after giving her a deadline of a week. If she couldn't find out anything by then he would have to take some more drastic measures.

Zac and Ogras left soon after, and Zac started walking toward his private area.

"What will you do next?" Ogras asked.

"I need to recuperate," Zac sighed. "Cracking open a node caused more trouble than expected. It's really a pain to be a mortal."

"Yes, you're one unlucky bastard," Ogras muttered, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he flashed away.

Zac made his way back to his compound and found that his sister had left a note. She had left for Mystic Island by teleporting to the closest island. The teleporter on Mystic Island itself was apparently blocked by spatial turbulence, probably due to whatever the cultists did to close the tunnel.

Since there was nothing else to do he finally let himself rest for a bit, and he drifted off before his head even touched the pillow. He only woke a full six hours later, feeling a lot better compared to before.

Seeing that no one was looking for him he took the opportunity to start redrawing his pathways again. A map of the extremely intricate lines had thankfully been imprinted in his mind when he evolved, so there was no guesswork involved. However, the process was anything but simple just because he knew how things were supposed to look.

He slowly carved the extremely thin pathways with the help of his Cosmic Energy, but he was repeatedly forced to stop and redraw the lines. The slightest deviation would ruin everything, and he kept slipping up, forcing him to start over. Minutes turned to hours, but when he finally paused he realized that he had just redrawn a centimeter's length, even though it felt like kilometers of interwoven lines.

This was going to be a lot of work.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 513 - Pathways**

### A note from TheFirstDefier

Last [plug](#) this month, and the last opportunity to allow yourself to get suckered into the deal of your life by the bright colors! Head over to [and read up to 48 chapters ahead of DotF!](#)

Zac grunted as he got to his feet after having finished his recuperation for the night. One week had passed since the events in the Dead Zone, and he had finally restored the pathways in his leg to optimal condition. It had also given him some time to take it easy and find some stability. Having first rushed through the levels in the Tower of Eternity, only to be thrown into a hectic battle against the Undead Empire had taken its mental toll.

Redrawing the pathways had felt like a chore the first days, but he quickly realized the benefits of doing so. One of his weaknesses was a lack of familiarity with the patterns and fractals that made up pathways and skill fractals alike, but he was slowly shoring up that weakness while redrawing his fractals.

The process was slow, but it allowed him to gain a far greater insight into how the fractals actually worked and how they interacted with nodes and skill fractals. He had generally considered them magic veins until now, pumping Cosmic Energy instead of blood, but he realized that was a reductionist way to look at it.

The pathways created an extremely intricate network of thousands of fine energy routes, that actually worked together to transform the Cosmic Energy he used. You could say that raw cosmic energy entered his pathways from his cells, where it was stored until he would form a Cultivation Core, but that Cosmic Energy wasn't in tune with his class.

However, the energy was split apart into thousands of minuscule streams through the fractals, and when they recombined in the Skill Fractals the energy had transformed a bit, like the previously raw Cosmic Energy had been forced to all stay on the same wavelength. Zac guessed that the pathways also did the same with Cosmic Energy that was absorbed through cultivation, though he couldn't test that for himself.

He hadn't been completely certain why the pathways between classes were so different before, but this was the most likely explanation. It was not only about fitting with the skills but rather forming a specific type of Cosmic Energy. It didn't quite go as far as give the energy an attunement though, but perhaps that was exactly what would happen at higher grades.

Having spent most of his waking time redrawing these pathways had given Zac a newfound understanding not only of the fractals but also about his class. He still lacked a theoretical foundation, but he felt that his understanding would perhaps even eclipse that of most cultivators by the time he reached peak E-Grade.

Furthermore, his week of introspection had also given him a better understanding of the pathways, then he had also gained a better understanding of what the Nodes actually did. If the pathway was a pattern of pipes helped remold his Cosmic Energy, then the spinning whirlwinds of the Nodes were essentially self-sustaining repeaters that sped up the process.

He still couldn't figure out exactly how his Hidden Node fit into this system just yet, but he hoped he'd be able to find out more when exploring the Mystic Realm in the future.

Seeing as he had essentially been holed up in his courtyard since returning, Zac decided to take a stroll through Port Atwood. Most things were pretty much the same as usual, but there was an extraordinarily large number of Tal-Eladar and their beast

companions walking the streets. Zac knew that these were only the ones on a break as well, with most of them working on the surroundings of Port Atwood and Azh'Rodum.

Verana had quickly made her stance known as she appeared in Port Atwood just a few hours after Zac, bringing with her most of her non-combat class clansmen. They had quickly gotten to work at rebuilding broken parts of the town, replanting burnt-down trees, and even expanding the town with new structures.

The leader herself had spent a lot of time in the Atwood Academy, teaching the kids what she knew about beast rearing and cultivation, even bringing a couple of litters of infant beasts. Zac had half-expected her to flee with the Brindevalt Clan, but she clearly felt there was more value to stay on, even with the cooling relations with Zac.

Zac obviously didn't really buy into this PR-campaign, but he also wouldn't say no to free labor.

As for the Brindevalt, they were long gone. The few remaining Incursions had all closed their doors and returned to wherever they came from by now, apart from the cultists. The Brindevalts had even sent a batch of resources and their congratulations through Verana before leaving, while setting things up so that taking over their domain would go smoothly.

Verana was most likely the reason for their congeniality, as the others had simply slunk away in the night after looting everything they could. They probably understood that the natives would come for them next, even if they had fought against the Zombie hordes together.

Or perhaps they had heard about Zac's existence and his deeds inside the Tower and had decisively left.

He still had no idea exactly what kinds of waves his emergence had created. He was still a small shrimp, but he had done something that hadn't been accomplished for a million years. No one living in the whole Zecia Sector had reached his level in the Tower of Eternity, at least not to his knowledge.

Zac had asked Calrin to try to buy some reports of what was going on, but he still hadn't heard anything from the Sky Gnome. It wasn't that surprising though as less than ten days had passed since he left the Base Town. With Calrin's limited network it might take some more time before they got hold of the news.

But that very same uncertainty made him unsure about his next steps. One of the first orders he had sent out to his people after returning was to look for places with high numbers of E-Grade beasts. Mystic Island was the best place in the archipelago, but much of its core had been cleansed of beasts to secure the base camp by the spatial tunnel.

Unfortunately, there weren't a lot of other good options. He had essentially out-leveled Earth, making it extremely hard for him to advance. He had gotten his hands on quite a few Teleportation Tokens by now though, allowing him to go to a lot of interesting places. He alone had the tokens from Galau, Pretty, Boje, and Catheya. But that was just the tip of the iceberg.

Ogras had received over a hundred tokens from all kinds of forces during the time he stayed behind in the Base Town. Zac essentially had access to every major Empire in the Zecia sector, except a few xenophobic and racially uniform ones. Unfortunately, it turned out that all the tokens he had gathered were useless at the moment.

The Nexus Hub was still inert, most likely because the Cultists were still on the loose.

That meant he was stuck on earth for the time being, unable to whizz off to some off-world hunting grounds to grind out a couple of levels. His predicament had

also made him understand why the Dominators barely had gained any levels apart from the boost from the hunt. It simply wasn't possible on Earth.

Zac's aimless wandering soon led him to the Academy, and he entered after having thought of something he had put off until now. He found Alyn sitting at the veranda of her house like many times before, and he sat down next to her.

"A cup of tea?" Alyn asked as she looked over with a smile.

"No thank you," Zac said. "A lot to do today."

"Be careful, or you will get addicted to the stress," Alyn said. "It's okay to take a break sometimes. In fact, it's advisable. It allows your Dao and your path to harmonize with the real you, the one that isn't forced into one desperate situation after another."

"I will hopefully have time for that when I've closed the final Incursion," Zac smiled, though he honestly wasn't so sure.

"Have you found their whereabouts by now?" she asked. "They've killed quite a few of our people through their two visits to this island."

"Not yet," Zac sighed. "I've been busy, but I have my people looking into it. We'll probably hear back soon."

"Good," Alyn nodded. "You are nurturing the heart of an Emperor. Let others deal with the little things while you focus on your cultivation."

"Got any tips?" Zac smiled, feeling a bit reminiscent of the days the two spent in the Nexus Crystal Mine while Zac was working on ridding his body of his Cosmic Water dependency.

Life had felt a lot simpler back then.

"What tips can I give you?" Alyn shook her head. "My teachings are meant to bring the most out of the talentless cultivators, turning them into contributing cogs in the machine. Neither I nor Clan Azh'Rezak knew anything about raising true elites. If we did we wouldn't have been a clan that could barely be considered nobility. You will have to find your own path, or find a better teacher."

"I was just kidding. On another note, can you call back any students who participated in the Dao Funnel last month, in case they are out training? Not a single one can be missing," Zac said.

"What's going on?" Alyn said, a small frown adorning her face.

Zac was about to explain, but he froze for a second and instead took out the Lantern. He immediately infused some energy into it, and he suddenly felt a connection to the thing as a ghostly white flame lit up behind the glass.

The two were doused in the spectral shine, and Zac was suddenly covered in ribbons in all kinds of colors. A few were pretty thick, but most were thin as a strand of hair. Alyn also had a few bonds, most of them stretching out in various directions of the town. There were also two that rose straight into the sky, but Zac was relieved to see that they looked completely different than those of the Great Redeemer.

They rather had the same red color as the Demon Incursion had while it still was active, making Zac believe they were rather Karmic Links to some family or friends back on her home planet.

Satisfied that there was no hidden problem with Alyn quickly turned off the Lantern, unwilling to spend any more lifeforce than needed. He had actually seen a grey hair when his hair started to grow out the other day, a reminder of how much lifeforce he had already lost because of the Shard of Creation.

He would gain it back many times over when he reached D-grade Race, but it was still pretty disconcerting to see, considering his lifespan should be over 500 years by this point.

“I need to do this with everyone who was there,” Zac said. “It turns out the Redeemer guy is actually a bastard from a C-Grade clan of Karmic Cultivators. This thing will root out hidden dangers. Keep this to yourself.”

The truth about Vordis A’Heliophos, or rather The Great Redeemer, was still not disseminated among even the core of Port Atwood. No one present really knew too much about the means about the abilities and limits of that mysterious power, so they kept it on the safe side. The fewer who know any real details, the smaller the risk of inadvertently forming any Karmic Links.

“I understand, I will arrange things properly,” Alyn nodded as she took out a crystal. “When do you need them gathered?”

“Make it three days from now,” Zac said as he stood up. “A few of the soldiers are out to sea right now I think.”

Since he couldn’t scan for Karmic threats right now he could only focus on one of his other projects while he waited for Julia to return. Zac couldn’t help but smile when remembering the former government employee’s excitement to get some responsibilities. She had lived a quiet life while her partner had worked on Ogras’ movie along with a few PR gigs across the archipelago, and she seemed bored out of her mind.

Ogras had said that it was suspicious how eager she was to go talk with some unknown people at the New World Government, but Zac didn’t believe she was a spy. There were no doubt spies on the island judging from how the invaders seemed to have known about the general situation, but Julia wasn’t a prime suspect.

She had been restricted to a far greater degree compared to others to avoid this very situation, so it was more likely that she just wanted to do something productive. Besides, she seemed to have gotten extremely complicated feelings for the New World Government since hearing Emma’s stories. The suspect was likely someone else.

Not that it really mattered any longer. The undead were dealt with and the Zealots were next, and any planning or scheming of the New World Government was redundant in the face of pure power. Besides, they seemed more invested in their ‘Ark Project’ than world domination by now, even after the undead threat was dealt with.

Zac was soon back in his private area, and he stepped onto his private teleporter. The next moment he appeared in a small nondescript cave. It looked like any other place among the subterranean tunnels of his mountain range, apart from being illuminated by Luminous Pearls rather than the luminescent moss.

But it was anything but normal.

Zac started walking toward an empty wall, but when he passed an almost invisible layer the surroundings changed, and he was inundated in dense waves of energies. The hair on his arms stood up as he was simultaneously buffeted by both life and death.

It looked like his cultivation cave was finally up and running.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 514 - Cultivation Cave**

Zac had finally set up a private cultivation area for his Draugr-side and Soul Cultivation, or rather his sister and Triv had. They had completely transformed the cave system around the original cultivation cave, and it would barely be recognizable by this

point. He felt bad about constantly having his sister work on one array project after another, but he had no one else to turn to.

The demons were completely incompetent in that regard, and the Creators couldn't help with this project. The Sky Gnomes had helped with a portion of it, but they were only allowed to help install arrays that were bought through them. Triv was a welcome addition though.

The ghost was just acceptable in his skill of placing arrays, but he had shown a surprising insight and attunement to natural energy flows, a genuine Feng Shui Master. That knowledge allowed Kenzie to take advantage of the rich energies in the cave to a much higher degree, drastically increasing the efficacy of the formations.

Between that and Kenzie's unnaturally high precision in array placement, they had managed to make amazing progress in one short week. He would have to hire a genuine Array Master to improve things even further, but those kinds of services weren't available in the Town Shop. It was a restriction put in place by the System to prevent people from having too easy access to means of empowerment. It wanted people to struggle, after all.

There were a lot of buildings he could purchase from the store, but they were almost all services that were geared toward various types of convenience. He had for example purchased a bank to go with the Merit Store in the square of the town, though there were pretty strict limits on how much you could deposit. Not by the bankers themselves, but on the System.

Zac had already deposited his maximum allowance as an Early E-Grade warrior, 1 Billion Nexus Coins, which would be directly handed over to his sister in case he died. It would be just a small portion of his full wealth, but he couldn't be certain what would happen if he got himself killed. The people of Earth might turn on Kenzie because of greed, but she could just use one of his Teleportation Tokens and withdraw the money on some other world instead.

The cave Zac stood in right now was simply the entrance rather than the real cultivation area, as Triv insisted that a Teleportation Array would cause too much spatial turbulence. Besides, Kenzie would be able to teleport here now without inadvertently disturbing him mid-cultivation. The shudder he had felt as he stepped forward was a simple illusion- and containment array, hiding the real entrance and stopping the dense energies from escaping.

The tunnel had changed a lot since he visited the last time. Before it had been filled with subterranean plants such as the mushrooms and glowing moss, creating a magical passage into the hidden cultivation chambers. But now it was like the tunnel had been split in two, each side representing either life or death.

The left side of the tunnel still looked very much the same, but the right side had turned dour and colorless as an ashy haze emerged from the rock wall itself. Some of the plants had already died off, whereas others were barely hanging on. New growth had started to emerge though, mainly a pitch-black moss that had supplanted the luminescent one.

It was an odd feeling walking in the middle of the tunnel, with half his body feeling the vigorous life coming from the Lotus, while the other side was drenched in the cold grip of death. This was obviously not an accidental design, but rather meticulously planned. However, the miraculous environment was nothing compared to the cave he entered next.

It was a perfectly circular cavern that had actually been turned into a small forest, with the domed ceiling reaching almost fifty meters in the air. Half the chamber

was filled with Death-attuned trees that had been brought over from the core of the Dead Zone, and the other half were trees that had grown in the secluded valley.

It was Triv's idea to plant the trees here, based on Zac's preferences. Some liked to cultivate in sheer chambers without any distracting components, whereas others liked to be surrounded by things that made them peaceful. Zac had chosen this type of environment as this was how usually had meditated since the beginning, sitting in the forest by his campsite.

In the middle of the cave was a large glade, with a prayer mat placed perfectly aligned to be in the center. There were two more mats in the chamber, though Zac couldn't see them from his current vantage. They were placed at central locations in the respective attunement of the cave. The area around the left mat would be full of life-attuned energies, whereas the other one would be surrounded by miasma.

The trees might seem haphazardly planted, but that was anything but the truth. This was the work of Triv, who had meticulously aligned every tree to form the embryo of a natural formation. The formation itself wasn't anything special, but it filled a very important purpose. It would gather the energies in the room and have them naturally flow toward the prayer mat in the center.

If he sat down on that mat he would be able to see two passageways perfectly opposite each other, one to the left and another to the right. The left one would lead to his original cultivation cave, where the Life-attuned Lotus still resided in the pool of Cosmic Water. Dense waves of purest life-force entered his subterranean forest from that side, but it met an opposing force coming from the other.

The right door led to a completely new chamber that had been dug into the mountain, and it was a smaller and modified version of the array they had found beneath the Undead Fortress. In the center of the chamber was the Seed of Undeath, surrounded by the very same pillars as before.

However, the pillars didn't blast miasma toward the world core any longer, but rather extracted it from the Seed to push it toward the central cave.

There was also a hidden room beneath it filled with Unholy Beacons. They took the Cosmic Energy that the Nexus Vein emitted and transformed it into Miasma that fed the Seed of Undeath and its array. Together with a couple of shielding arrays that kept the Death Attunement from spreading out, it had formed a hidden eco-system of death in the heart of the mountain.

Zac heard some rustling on the life-attuned side of the forest, and he walked over to see his sister scrutinizing a large stone pillar. It was embedded into the ground just outside the glade on the life-attuned half of the forest. It did look a bit like the pillars that now stood in the Death Chamber, but they were actually Array Flags that Kenzie had created herself.

Normally such a flag would just be a few decimeters long, but she was still unable to make them as small as the small sticks he had bought from the System.

"How does it look?" Zac asked as he walked over.

"It should work as intended, I've compared it with the disks you gave me. I've also recreated similar pillars on the other side of the cave," Kenzie smiled.

"Why?" Zac asked curiously. "Was there something wrong with the Array Disks?"

The array that Kenzie was working on wasn't something related to energy flow, but it was something much more pressing. It was the array to practice his Soul Strengthening Manual. The Remnants were still very docile in his mind, but he hadn't forgotten just how dangerous they could be. It felt like a miracle that he was still standing after the events in the tower, and he needed to be proactive in dealing with them.

The Remnants were still extremely weak, but they were slowly but surely regaining their strength. Most of the energy they gained still entered his soul and his body to strengthen them, but a part of it remained. For example, he was pretty certain that he would be able to conjure a bronze flash by this point just based on the amount of energy contained in the markings covering his soul.

Part of him wanted to just exhaust the energies that had gathered up til now to avoid any danger, but part of him was reluctant to waste his hidden ace. Who knew when he would need to be able to blast something with a ball of pure destruction?

“No, they were honestly better than what I created. But I can’t create Array Disks, and the Arrays would become lopsided if one was a small disk and the other half a forest in size,” Kenzie said, looking a bit embarrassed. “I talked with Triv, and he believed that it might cause the death-attuned energies to push into the life cave too much.”

“That’s fine,” Zac said. “Thank you for your help, and sorry I keep asking you to do stuff like this.”

“I’m not in a hurry to reach the E-Grade, and I don’t care about ladder positions or stuff like that,” Kenzie shrugged. “This way I can at least help you and help protect Earth.”

The two walked around the cave for a bit longer, where Kenzie made a final inspection of the pillars.

“It good to go. I won’t disturb you any longer,” Kenzie said as she packed up her things. “Good luck with this stuff.”

“Thank you,” Zac said as he walked over to the mat placed on the right side of the cave.

Dense clouds of miasma slowly swirled around it, somewhat reminding Zac of how it looked in his opened nodes. The mat itself was actually a piece of the massive mat that he had looted from the dragon cave.

Calrin had identified it to be made from extremely valuable materials that aided in cultivation, with the inner pieces holding the most value. It had been cut into almost 100 pieces and refashioned into a set of mats with the inner mats going to the core warriors of Port Atwood, with the rest being put in the Merit Exchange.

Zac took a deep breath before he sat down. It was finally time for him to start working on his **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**.

The cultivation method for the first Reincarnation of the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** was quite simple. There was not much he needed to do, except alternate between using the Death-Array aptly called **[Death Soul Array]** and the counterpart that Kenzie had just finished setting up, the **[Life Soul Array]**.

There were some ways that one could improve the efficacy of the two arrays though. The manual mentioned cultivating in life- and death attuned cultivation caves for example, and there were also a few treasures listed that could help speed up the process. However, Zac had only taken the most basic steps with the help so far by relying on the attunements generated by the Lotus and the Seed respectively.

But it was entirely possible that he would start using more expensive methods to boost the cave even further. Triv was quite adept in improving the atmosphere this way, though his knowledge was mostly limited to death attunements so far. But the ghost was already studiously working on expanding his knowledge of life attuned measures to be more of service.

Honestly, Zac was becoming more and more pleased with his decision to keep the ghost around. Triv had already proven an extremely valuable asset in the

construction of this cave, and he had all sorts of ideas to improve the state of Port Atwood in general. Most of the changes would be pretty expensive to enact, but Zac wasn't too worried about cost at the moment. Now that the undead threat was dealt with his force had started to focus on expansion rather than war, and his income increased every day.

There was still the Zealots and the Dominators to deal with, but they weren't a threat that required his whole force. He himself and perhaps a small strike squad would be all that he needed for those two threats, whereas the endless number of Zombies had required the cooperation of the whole world.

Zac went over the cultivation method in his mind, still keeping his human form. He wanted to get the hang of things before he started to experiment with swapping races for the cultivation.

A low hum echoed across the glade as Zac activated the array, and it felt like the Miasma around him stirred. His skin prickled as well, and he quickly started to become a bit uncomfortable. However, he ignored the impulses to turn into a Draugr as he infused the array with some spiritual energy.

The moment his mind made a connection with the array he felt a weak, but constant, drain on his mind as the array absorbed more and more of his mental energy. It wasn't a problem in the beginning, but he started to feel a bit queasy after half an hour had passed. He even started to wonder if there was something wrong with the array.

However, just as he was about to abort the experiment a surge of energy rose from the array, and he felt a powerful stream enter his mind. It was his own mental energy, but it was tinged with death this time. Zac nodded in satisfaction and kept going, and the array had completed a circulation after roughly 45 minutes.

Zac kept going according to the manual, seeing that the array worked as intended. He slowly completed one revolution after another, and his soul became a bit ghastlier every time. The two Remnants even woke up from their slumber for a few seconds, but they quickly calmed down again for some unknown reason. Perhaps they knew that whatever Zac was doing wasn't a threat to their existence.

Only after nine full revolutions was the first half of the cultivation session complete. His mind was completely permeated by death by now, and he almost felt like a ghost. The Miasma around him no longer felt uncomfortable, but rather inviting to the point that Zac almost thought he had changed to his Draugr constitution subconsciously.

It even felt so good that he was inclined to lay down and take a nap in the soothing mists. However, he immediately snapped out of it as he walked over to the other side of the forest. The usually soothing life-attuned energies that had turned the greenery even lush felt like scorching gusts that threatened to blister his skin, but Zac ignored the illusion as he sat down at the second prayer mat.

Another revolution began, but this time his Mental Energy brought back some warmth after it had passed through the array. He completed the nine revolutions once more, and only then did he feel like he was back to his normal self. Zac stood up from his mat and stretched before he checked on his gains.

And truthfully, they weren't all that great.

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### Chapter 515 - Divide

A lot of work for little benefit. That was Zac's first impression of the results from completing a full cycle of the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]**.

His soul was in very good condition, all things considered, and it looked like it had turned a smidgeon more condensed. However, Zac had spent almost fourteen hours in this session, and the results felt a bit lackluster for such an investment. He started to understand why so few warriors chose to spend time on a Soul Strengthening Manual.

But he didn't have a choice.

The two Remnants would wake up sooner or later, and he needed to empower his soul before then. He needed to be the one in charge, a fact that had become even more apparent after seeing the name of the Arcane Class he was presented. He didn't just want to be a vessel, he needed to be the controller.

But it was undeniable that there was a problem with the time expenditure. He couldn't waste 14 hours a day on this array, he needed to gather Cosmic Energy to crack open nodes, ponder on the Daos, and work on his Race Evolution as well, besides all the other stuff that required his attention in Port Atwood.

The situation wasn't hopeless though. This was just a trial run in unoptimized conditions, and he was hopeful that he would be able to expedite the speed of each revolution. If he could decrease each Revolution from 45 to 15 minutes with the help of his unique constitution he would suddenly only need to spend four and a half hours a day on Soul Cultivation, which was far more acceptable.

And Zac already had ideas on how to improve efficiency. The two arrays were essentially dialysis machines for his mental energy. It sucked the energy out and ran it across the arrays, where some impurities were shed while some attuned energies were infused. Each revolution would increase the attunement until his soul was stuffed, at which point he swapped array.

The clash between life-attuned energies and death attuned energies at the second set of revolutions seemed to strengthen his soul without really hurting it as well, and he had a feeling that this controlled clash was one of the interesting aspects that set this method apart from other Soul Strengthening Manuals.

The other was obviously the transformative impact when enough cycles had taken place to form a "Reincarnation".

Another small benefit came from his **[Void Heart]**. It had actually absorbed some of the dense energies in the cave and pushed it into the next node to break open; this one located in his right leg instead. It wasn't a huge amount, but it also wasn't negligible. If he also managed to get his hands on a better version of the **[Mother-Daughter Array]** the benefits would be quite noticeable over time.

Zac also felt pretty relieved that the nodes in early E-Grade seemed to be located on his extremities. A lot of nodes were located on his torso, neck, and head though, and they were the cause for a lot of sleepless nights. Those around his heart and organs could always be cracked open in his undead form, but others felt extremely dangerous. What if he accidentally decapitated himself when he cracked open a node in his throat?

He needed to find a way to contain the damage from node-breaking to only his spirit body somehow, leaving his flesh intact. Either that or become sturdy enough that a node explosion couldn't harm him. Zac wasn't all that worried though, as a lot of E-Grade mortals had passed this hurdle before him. He just needed to find out how they did it.

Part of Zac wanted to sit down again and immediately start tinkering with the process, for example trying to perform a revolution while changing his race. There was no time to experiment with improving the process right now though. The Manual said that he could only do one revolution a day. Any more would just needlessly tax his soul without any benefits.

He walked over to the central glade instead and looked down at the small tree that grew there.

It was the very same branch he had brought from the Dead Zone, the tree that encompassed both life and death. He had planted it right at the delimitation of the two attunements, which meant that half of its branches were drenched in death while the other half enjoyed the sweet succor of life. He hoped to study what changes that brought to the mutated tree, and perhaps even gain some insights from the process.

A second branch was placed in the life-attuned side, with a final one being steeped in Miasma. He wanted to see how the saplings adapted to the different environments. The branch shouldn't have any problems surviving being replanted in the area teeming with miasma, as that would be the same conditions it had in the Dead Zone.

But what about being placed in a place already teeming with life? Would it double up on producing vibrant energies, becoming a beacon on verdure? Or would it perhaps swap over and start creating miasma? Zac couldn't wait to find out. Of course, something like this wouldn't change in a day or two.

Not much had happened in the few days since the tree was replanted, but Zac was relieved to see that it was doing just fine. There were no signs of wilting or that it hadn't taken to the earth, and after infusing it a bit with the Fragment of the Bodhi he could confirm that roots had already taken hold.

A glance with **[Cosmic Gaze]** showed that the tree was still mostly attuned to death though, which wasn't a surprise considering where it grew up. However, life was slowly gaining a foothold in the branches, and it didn't seem impossible that it would reach a true equilibrium in the future.

Zac nodded with satisfaction before he sat down at the central mat. It was already getting late, and Zac wasn't in the mood to leave this place for the day. Many people would still be awake all the way until 2 or 3 am now that they only needed a few hours of sleep, but old habits die hard. You couldn't just pop in at someone's place at 11 pm.

He instead focused his attentions on Fragment of the Bodhi. Zac hoped to gain some sort of insight by sitting in an area where life was in a constant struggle against death. The battle with the Lich King, unfortunately, hadn't provided any real inspiration, and the only thing he could do now was to grind at it until it was time to face the last threats to Earth.

That was not to say that his experience in the Dead Zone was without any benefits. His battle of attrition with the Head Priest, where his Bodhi-infused branch managed to overpower the scorching flames, had resonated with him. Following that it was his meditation in front of the mutated tree.

The two together had pushed him forward, and it felt like he was on the cusp of crystallizing some sort of breakthrough. But it still needed more time or some sort of breakthrough.

He needed to make the best of the time, as he actually sensed that the Origin Dao was slowly starting to dissipate. It wasn't like it was a rapid decline, but the peak had clearly been met. What would follow would be a gradual dissipation of the Origin Dao until Earth was indistinguishable from any other world of the Zecia sector.

It was a bit surprising the decline was happening so fast, the snippets of information on the subject indicated that it could stay for well over a decade. However, as things looked now the Origin Dao would run out in a year or two. One possibility was that there actually were more Dao Funnels like the one Salvation carried on Earth.

If The Great Redeemer really was planning to harvest the Origin Dao of a planet, then it also made sense that he would leave more than one funnel behind to collect it for him. That way he would only need to pick up the Funnels upon arrival before he did whatever the Fulcrum-plan entailed.

Another possibility was that the Realignment Array had caused some irredeemable damage to Earth even if it was shut off in time. It still was anyone's guess whether the massive swathe of death around the undead incursion would ever heal completely, but the damage was perhaps also done to a more fundamental level.

In either case, the time of rapid growth for Earth's population was coming to an end as quickly as it began, and most cultivators of Port Atwood had been instructed to focus on the Dao rather than leveling to make the most of it. Anyone could reach peak F-Grade in a few years with the right support system, but gaining and evolving a Dao Seed was something else entirely.

It was by far the most common reason for people to not being able to evolve. People simply didn't have the affinities or opportunities to form a Seed on their own. A large number of the citizens of Earth might never form a Dao Seed if they didn't seize this opportunity.

The scenes of his recent battles flashed through his mind as he occasionally looked over at the branch that was able to perform such a miraculous transformation. He even thought back to the original vision with the cherry tree, where the blessed tree had created a magical realm beneath its branches.

The canopy had turned into a perfect barrier that took on the heat and the desolation from the badlands outside and fed it into its Buddhist Kingdom inside. It was just like how the branch in front of him took the miasma of the area and turned it into life.

However, the transformation process was just one part of the miracle. The other was to form and protect the core of life that was allowed to grow powerful without outside interference. The Seed would be weak at the beginning, and only through protection would it be able to grow. Otherwise, it would be like a candle in the wind.

"Isolation. Creation through protection," Zac muttered, and his mind shuddered as he felt a resonance from the Dao.

Zac followed the instinct and kept searching for answers, various scenes flashing before his eyes as they slowly congealed into something new. It all began with the vision in the Tower. The general had been allowed to grow into his potential only due to the stele shielding him from the outside worlds for millennia, which echoed his current thoughts.

The hours passed until something finally congealed in Zac's mind. A surge of warmth spread from his mind to every corner of his body as the Fragment of the Bodhi evolved into middle stage. He felt more powerful than ever, but he held off on checking his gains as his intuition told him that he wasn't done. There was more to gain.

Zac stood up, pushed forward by an intangible momentum, and he swiped his right through the air as though his hand was a bladed weapon. A shudder spread forward as the swing actually was infused with the Fragment of the Bodhi. However, the energies in the air didn't turn chaotic from the action, but rather the opposite.

The whole air around the central glade was one big conflict zone between life and death, where miasma and divine energy fought for supremacy. At some places, the

miasma had encroached a bit on the other side, whereas life had managed to gain a small foothold on places at the death attuned side.

However, the moment Zac swung his palm the fighting stopped, and a clean line of demarcation could be seen. The miasma spread to an invisible line but didn't move an inch further. Order had been brought to the area, and life was split from death.

This was thanks to Zac's latest insight into the Fragment of the Bodhi, and Zac marveled at the scene until the effects of the swing dissipated, causing the thousand small conflicts to once again erupt all over the glade. But it had been enough to reach his goal, and Zac opened his Quest Screen to check it out.

**Rapturous Divide (Class): Split Life and Death. Reward: Rapturous Divide Skill (1/1) COMPLETE**

A fractal appeared the next moment, taking a spot on his left arm, essentially mirroring the fractal for **[Nature's Punishment]** on his other arm. The fractal looked a lot different though, forming two completely separate lines that didn't have one single fractal that connected each side. The only fractal until now that had even been a little bit similar was **[Cyclic Strike]**, though these fractals were a lot more intricate.

Zac's heartbeat sped up with excitement, but he restrained himself from immediately busting out the skill. Who knew what effect the skill would have, he's get lambasted by his sister if he accidentally tore apart the arrays she had spent so much time and energy to set up.

Zac instead only turned his sight inward, to try and get a sense of what kind of skill **[Rapturous Divide]** was. But there were no clues he could glean at all from the new pattern. However, he did notice that the two lines looked far more intricate compared to his previous skills, like it was an embroidery using extremely fine silk threads compared to the coarse rope of the F-Grade skills.

He marveled at the fractal for a while before he eventually retracted his sight. He also wanted to see his attribute gains, so he opened his status screen to see the boost he got from his upgraded fragment.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**81**

**Class**

**[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia**

**Race**

**[E] Human**

**Alignment**

**[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord**

**Titles**

**Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Monarch-Select**

### Limited Titles

Frontrunner, Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th

Dao

Fragment of the Axe - Middle, Fragment of the Coffin - Middle, Fragment of the Bodhi - Middle

Core

[E] Duplicity

### Strength

2090 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 199%]

### Dexterity

992 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 170%]

### Endurance

2229 [Increase: 99%. Efficiency: 199%]

### Vitality

1476 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 199%]

### Intelligence

545 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 170%]

### Wisdom

911 [Increase: 70%. Efficiency: 170%]

### Luck

340 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 179%]

### Free Points

0

### Nexus Coins

[F] 5 919 241 817

**Fragment of the Bodhi (Middle): All attributes +20, Endurance +140, Vitality +160, Intelligence +30, Wisdom +80, Effectiveness of Vitality +10%.**

He had made shocking progress in one night, though the two breakthroughs were related. However, Zac knew he couldn't rest on his laurels as things stood. Some things had gone above expectations, but he was still struggling in other compartments.

Perhaps he should have realized that his unique situation with dual races would cause complications when upgrading them.

### A note from TheFirstDefier

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### Chapter 516 - Beastcrafting

Miasma spread out through Zac's body as he activated his Specialty Core. He walked over to the Death-Attuned side once more and took out a large tub that he filled with water before he threw in a dozen E-Grade Miasma Crystals. Next were a handful

of stalks of Netherbloom, along with various other herbs that he had found in the Cosmos Sack left on the body of Adriel.

It was time to work on his Race once more.

He had already used up the **[Fruit of Rebirth]** the moment he returned to Port Atwood, and the massive amount of progress made on his racial upgrade allowed him to realize a somewhat surprising with his body. His nodes were the same between his Races, but his actual Races were separate.

Zac had somewhat figured that his Racial Rank would be shared between his two sides as he only had one body and because his two classes shared the same Node System. However, that wasn't the case. He could clearly feel that his Human side was on the cusp of evolving into D-Grade, whereas his Undead Side barely had improved at all.

That was starting to become an extremely urgent issue now that his third Dao Fragment had evolved. Even worse, the insight had been partly based on protection, which had caused the Fragment to boost Endurance more than expected. One more breakthrough and he might actually hit the Attribute limit on his undead side.

Of course, Zac had already tried to remedy the situation by eating the remaining Racial Upgrade Pills he bought at the Base Town Auctions, but he had almost killed himself doing so. It turned out his Draugr side was extremely picky, and the pills that humans would use were essentially poison to him.

Triv was no use either. It could barely confirm that the Undead used various methods of improving races. For example, they created incense sticks using herbs, where the composition depended on what race the original body was. There were also the standard medicinal baths according to Triv, but its helpfulness ended there.

The ghost was unable to divulge a single mixture, as his commandments apparently regarded that as betraying the Undead Empire. However, the ghost didn't have any issues at all mixing up a medicinal bath following a recipe that Zac provided, proving there were loopholes to the limitations. Unfortunately, the same issue arose with the normal medicinal baths; they didn't work on his undead side either.

Zac had no idea what would happen if he passed the attribute cap as things stood. Would both his classes lose out on points? Or would his Draugr alone take the hit? Zac really wasn't willing to find out, and he was doing everything he could to stave off that ever happening.

He had no idea how things came to this. He had specifically asked about race upgrades while visiting the Undead Kingdom inside the Tower of Eternity, but he heard no clues about his current predicament. He had been afraid that he would need a Lich to help him upgrade his race to D-Grade as they were responsible for giving Revenants sapience, but that thankfully wasn't the case.

They had assured him that cultivation and treasures would work just fine, but the care package they had provided him with hadn't contained anything to improve his constitution. Perhaps they expected his 'master' or elders to have prepared far superior materials for him already and felt it would almost be an insult to give him their scraps.

The freezing bath he had concocted was just a stopgap measure as he was all out of ideas. The dense death-attuned waters along with random herbs from Adriel's Cosmos Sack did help a bit, but properly preparing a medicinal bath was far more complicated than what he was haphazardly throwing together. It required precise measurements of the different herbs, and they needed to be processed and added in a certain manner.

Using it as he did was essentially wasting over 95% of the efficacy, and he would run out of herbs long before he upgraded his race at this pace. He was rapidly burning money for very little gain. The **[Void Heart]** was no use for upgrading his Race either,

but rather the opposite. It just stole some of the energies of the medicinal baths and fed it into the node in his leg, leaving a bunch of impurities in his bloodstream.

He did get small amounts of refined energies from the Shard of Creation though, but he had no idea if that mysterious energy actually helped with his race, or if it had some other sort of effect on his body.

He had already sent Valkyries and Demons to look for manuals or clues in the ruins of his newly acquired Death Fort, but he didn't hold out much hope. Zac knew he most likely already was in possession of the recipes anyway, locked away inside the crystals of the Lich King. But those were still out of his reach, as even the old Sky Gnome had failed in cracking their protections no matter what he or his little pet tried.

He felt as though he was falling into the same old predicament as last time. He had managed to improve his constitution a small bit, but he didn't know how much his attribute cap had increased as a result. His Strength had already passed his Endurance by now, and it felt like the tragedy of the F-Grade cap could take place again at any moment.

But he also knew he needed to keep pushing himself forward. Inevitability was level 111 by now, and Void's Disciple was level 108. Zac still felt that the older Zhix warrior was a far larger threat compared to the unhinged maniac he battled during the Hunt. He felt pretty confident in dealing with Inevitability if they met again today, but he was far less certain about the Dominator Leader.

He had given him Zac an extremely oppressive and mysterious feeling when they met, and Zac had no clue exactly what skills he had. The Zhix Hordes had no idea either; everyone who had seen Void's Disciple in action had been killed. He was like a murderous ghost that moved back and forth across the hives.

Zac knew that catching him was impossible, even though he still coordinated with the Zhix Armies to track his movements. He had somehow opened up a rift in space and walked straight through it when they met, and the Lich King had indicated that Void's Disciple actually had gained the Dao of Space. How was he supposed to catch someone like that?

Even if Zac found him and started fighting, he could still just slink away if he started losing.

The best solution was taking him on inside the Mystic Realm, and Julia would hopefully return with good news today. Until then he needed to do what he could to improve his power, even if it meant him wasting mountains of precious herbs.

Zac only stepped out of the vat two hours later, and he swapped back to his human form immediately. A knife appeared in his right hand as he cut a deep wound across his forearm. Ice cold blood spurted out for a few seconds until his extreme Vitality closed the wound, but Zac repeated the process a few times to release well over two liters of blood.

His makeshift medicine baths did have some effect on his Draugr race, but it also came with a huge amount of impurities that the **[Void Heart]** puked out into his bloodstream. Just one bath meant he would have to bleed himself for a few more times over the coming day, and there was also the impurities from the Soul Strengthening session to deal with.

The lackluster results of his racial upgrade had somewhat put a damper on the excitement of upgrading his Dao Fragment, and Zac sighed with annoyance as he left his cultivation cave. He teleported back to his compound, but he didn't immediately head over to his Courtyard. Instead, he left the small number of mansions behind and entered the wilderness.

He walked for two minutes until he appeared in a secluded spot hidden deep in his private forest. It was actually a place that held some significance to him; it was the very spot where he woke up after the integration.

However, the small glade was completely unrecognizable by now, with its bloodroot and cardinals replaced with a sanguine pond with a diameter of five meters. Even Zac felt a bit pressured as he walked next to the pond of Dragon Blood, and he felt that he could even hear distant roars. The pressure no doubt came from the Dragon's bloodline, as it felt similar to the pressure that he had felt during his fight with the primordial beast.

The pond had shrunk a bit since his last visit, which surprised Zac as that was the third time. He still topped the pond off with more Dragon blood from one of his vats, realizing he would run in a week if things kept up like this. However, he had no direct usage for the blood anyway, and he felt it was best used like this.

He also threw in a few more Beast Crystals for good measure as he couldn't sense the unique energy fluctuations from the previous ones he threw in. He didn't know if he was simply wasting money, but Verun had seemed to like them any time he got close to one. A sense of anticipation gripped Zac's heart as he looked at the large crystal sticking out in the middle of the pond.

It was the latest transformation of **[Verun's Bite]**. The Spirit Tool had been pushed hard in the latest fights against the Lich King and the elites of the Tower of Eternity. He honestly wasn't confident that the weapon would be able to keep up for the coming fights, and this was his best bet unless he actually chose to swap it out for a new axe.

That's why he chose to feed it the Dragon Core the moment he returned to Port Atwood, though he still kept the Bloodline Marrow for himself. The weapon had immediately turned into a crystal like the previous time it underwent massive changes, but it had still sent out a mental plea for more Dragon blood.

It still looked there would be some time before the evolution finished, and Zac was extremely eager to see the result. Zac hoped that the primordial bloodline of the Dragon along with the Beast Crystals would cause some equivalent of a Bloodline Evolution of Verun.

It didn't really work like that for normal Spirit Tools as far as he knew, but it was possible for Beastcrafted weapons according to Triv. Bloodline evolutions were obviously a pretty impressive boost to the potential power such Spirit Tools could exhibit, but beast crafted weapons had downsides as well.

First of all, their upgrade ceiling was generally low to start with. Secondly, they were a lot pickier for upgrade components compared to normal weapons, and two seemingly identical weapons could have completely different requirements. The latter in particular was a big reason why pretty much all weapons he had seen at the Base Town were made from metals, wood, or crystal.

They were simpler to evolve, and the upgrade paths were generally a lot clearer. No one wanted to risk being stuck with a weapon that couldn't evolve any longer, forcing them to get a new weapon instead. One's weapon was a huge component of your combat prowess, after all, and it was impossible to immediately exhibit one's full strength after changing weapons.

But Zac didn't really have either desire or the ability to swap out his axe to a better one, and his eyes were locked at the pupa as he conjured all kinds of possibilities in his mind. Zac only spent a couple of minutes by the pond though before he got ready to leave, a crack echoed out across the glade just as he turned away.

Zac's eyes lit up in anticipation as the red crystal crumbled bit by bit, slowly showcasing the weapon hidden within. A sudden shockwave blasted the crystal to pieces though, and an enormous shape appeared by the pool as the blood was sucked into the weapon.

It was Verun, who still looked like an oversized ancestor of a hyena, apart from his massively oversized maw and multiple sets of eyes. Zac had almost thought he would turn into a half-dragon or something after eating the core, but its changes were a lot more subtle than that. Its fur had turned from a dusty brown to a glossy black, with red highlights covering its body.

It almost looked like he had scales, but a second glance showed that it was just a pattern. It had also grown a thick mane that ran from its head all the way down to its short tail, somewhat reminding Zac of the spikes of the black dragon he fought. Its claws had changed as well, turning bigger and darker.

Its whole image had turned more refined, without losing its aura of lethality. There was a sense of sharpness and danger to it, like it was a true predator that didn't only use its brawns to take down its enemies.

Finally, there were streams of energy that circulated each of its four legs, and a glance with [Cosmic Gaze] displayed two swirls just above its paws, both with a different color. The first one was had a sanguine hue, which wasn't surprising as its favorite food had always been blood. The other one was a bit more surprising though.

The second swirl was felt like was steely gray and felt pretty similar to his Fragment of the Axe, though the Heaviness was swapped out by something else. Force maybe? In either case, it thankfully wasn't fire-related, something Zac had worried would happen from ingesting a Dragon Core.

Dragon Flames were obviously powerful, but not something that suited Zac's current path. So the fact that the addition felt element-neutral was a relief. The massive beast looked down at Zac from the other side of the pool, happiness radiating through their mental bond. It raised its head and let out a massive roar the next moment. The terrifying cry was powerful enough to cause the closest trees to shake, and even Zac had to take a step back from the volume.

Birds screeched in panic in the distance, and Zac wouldn't be surprised if the whole town heard the roar. It felt like the Verun wanted the whole world to know there was a new alpha in town.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 517 - Jammers**

Volume was not the only thing extraordinary with Verun's roar as dozens of trees suddenly exploded, utterly ripped to shreds. It almost looked like Verun had torn them apart with its mouth, but Zac guessed it should have been the soundwaves.

The Tool Spirit leaped over the now-emptied pond and buffed Zac's chest once before it dissipated into a stream of energy that entered the axe that now was embedded in the ground of the dried-out pool. Zac jumped down and ripped it out, but he almost lost his balance from how heavy it was.

The axe had always been on the heavier side, and he would never have been able to [Verun's Bite] before the integration. But its weight had increased by over ten times from absorbing the Dragon Core and evolving, and that wasn't the only thing that

had changed. Its overall design was the same as before, but the handle was now pitch-black to match Verun's fur.

But more importantly; a third rune had lit up, meaning another skill or function should have been unlocked from the upgrade.

The axehead itself had slightly changed as well. It had turned even bigger, with its edge gaining over five centimeters in length. The bone it was made from felt sturdier as well, and the edge was sharp enough to easily draw blood on even his durable skin. There were also thin red lines running across the bone, almost looking like cracks in the material.

However, Zac didn't feel any weakness or damage when holding the weapon, and he guessed the new pattern was just mirroring the red streaks in Verun's fur. He jumped up from the pond and swung it around a bit, and deep growls echoed out as it split the air apart.

He had initially worried that the increased weight would make it feel unwieldy, but it was actually the opposite. The weapon felt far sturdier, and it resonated better with his Dao. It felt like every swing contained a gigantic and undeniable force, like a mountain was crashing down where he swung his weapon. But he put away the weapon after a while and started to walk back toward his courtyard.

Between his Dao Epiphany and working on his race morning had already come, so just Zac planned on resting for an hour or two before starting his next day. However, he noticed a drone zooming about outside the entrance to his Courtyard as he returned. Kenzie had painted it red to be more easily spotted as well.

It was no longer a surveillance drone, but more of a flying butler to his sister who sent it on all kinds of errands. She, or rather Jeeves, had even equipped it with speaking capabilities, though Zac had made sure that it wasn't an actual AI.

**[Julia has returned]** the consciously mechanical voice of the drone spoke up.

"Is Kenzie home?" Zac asked.

**[Yes. The mistress is working on her arrays.]**

"I'm coming over, there's something we need to talk about," Zac sighed.

Seeing how his sister was becoming increasingly comfortable with using Technocrat tech, he knew he couldn't hold off any longer. He needed to tell his sister about his visions of his mother. What if she kept going like this, and one day connected to the Digital World of the Machine God Faction? Who knew what kinds of alarms that would trigger?

Earth already had enough to deal with without dragging a full-blown Technocrat Armada to the Zecia sector.

Zac soon arrived at her mansion, or rather series of towering structures that his sister had let erect. Only the smallest of the houses, a rusting one-story house with a large garden, was her residence though. The other buildings were rather workshops for her experiments, Technocrat Technology and Arrays alike.

He found her tinkering with a massive onyx stone in the middle of one of the workshops, surrounded by protective arrays. Zac's brows rose in alarm when he saw the series of formations, as it felt like her experiments were far more dangerous than she had let on. Kenzie looked over when he entered the workroom, and she finished up whatever inscriptions she was adding to the block with the tool she got from the quest last week.

"Good timing, I've made a breakthrough with these jamming arrays. I think we can actually use them when we're finished. They should work as long as you activate it

in your Draugr form.” Kenzie said but frowned when she saw Zac’s expression. “What’s wrong, you look so serious? Didn’t the soul boosting array work?”

“The array worked great, I just need to figure out some way to make my Soul Cultivation faster. Zac said as he walked over and poked a defensive shield. “What’s with these shields? You’re not risking your life for this are you?”

“It’s a precaution so I don’t blow up his building, but I’m not in any danger. Jeeves will notice if it starts destabilizing so I can run away with time to spare,” Kenzie said. “By the way, what was that roar earlier? It almost made me ruin this thing.”

“Just remember to be careful. These things come from pretty damn dangerous factions,” Zac sighed. “The roar was Verun, it finally finished absorbing all the materials.”

“It sounded pretty powerful,” Kenzie smiled.

“Let’s hope it will be enough to deal with the Dominators,” Zac said as he looked closer at the Jamming array. “Will these things be as effective as when the undead used them?”

“They should work the same,” Kenzie nodded. “Just put Miasma Crystals into the sockets and everything within a day’s march will be blocked out. But we still need to finish some modifications to circumvent restrictions on these things, and that will turn them into consumable items. They’ll only work for a handful of times before they break down.”

“How many?” Zac asked.

“Probably more than ten, but no more than twenty,” Kenzie hesitantly said.

“That’s plenty,” Zac said with a sigh of relief.

These things would come in handy over the following month, and it was something his force sorely lacked. Because Earth was about to be plunged into a civil war, and this would give them the advantage they needed. The war wasn’t against the New World Government, but against a far more dangerous enemy; The Dominators.

The Zhix hordes had cleanly split into two camps by now, either gathering behind the Anointed or the Dominators. Now that the undead threat was dealt with the tensions had risen to an unprecedented degree. The followers of the Dominators needed to be rooted out, but the efforts of the other Zhix had proven futile since the integration took place.

Their previous methods at dealing with the Dominators and their followers had been crude but effective. They had sent wave after wave of soldiers after their target, drowning them in a sea of relentless violence. The Dominators ran out of Cosmic Energy sooner or later, at which point they were slaughtered.

The Zhix were still more than willing to sacrifice themselves to root out the final vestiges of corruption in their bloodline, especially now that they knew of the source. But the emergence of Teleportation Arrays had turned their efforts useless. The War Council of the Zhix had already contacted Port Atwood in search of a solution, and he would meet up with them in a week, provided he didn’t need to change his plans due to Julia.

These jamming devices would allow him to trap the Zhix hives who had defected, and with the help of the Zhix hordes take out anyone that might have formed a Karmic Link with the Great Redeemer.

Zac didn’t feel it was enough to locate the leading Dominators to secure Earth. His instincts told him the Dominators were using these traitors as a back-up. Void’s Disciple had been slowly converting hives to join their side over the past year, and mercilessly slaughtering some of the staunchest detractors.

There had to be a purpose to this, and the most likely reason Zac and Ogras could fathom was to form a karmic link. The Great Redeemer would perhaps be able to find Earth as long as there were enough followers spread across the planet, even if the main perpetrators were already killed.

Or perhaps it wasn't about back-up plans, but about boosting the signal. The Karmic Link between the Great Redeemer and the Dominators couldn't be too strong, as they hadn't even met in person. Vovidis had visited the Zhix planet thousands of years ago, and the link should have weakened by now. But what if there were tens of millions of insectoids praising his name? It might give him all the clues he needed to find Earth.

It would also explain why both the Dominators and the Medhin Clan were so intent on taking over the planet, apart from avoiding the Incursions spawning. The more who were under his banner, the easier the planet would be to find.

So he needed to deal with the traitors as soon as possible, and these jammers were the key to fighting them.

"So what's up?" Kenzie said, dragging him out of his thoughts. "Scarlet said you needed to talk?"

"It's about mom. There's something I haven't told you," Zac sighed before he started recounting his visions.

This time he held nothing back, retelling both his visions of their mother and the words Leandra spoke. He connected that with what he had learned so far about Firmament's Edge and added his own analysis of the situation. He knew it would probably upset his sister, but she needed to know that their mom might be an extremely dangerous character and as large a threat to them as The Great Redeemer.

"You really met mom?" Kenzie said with a low voice. "Why didn't you get me? Then I would at least have been able to hear her voice, even if it was just a projection."

"I didn't dare let Jeeves close to her, even if it was just an AI," Zac explained. "Something about the way she talked felt unsettling."

"Jeeves said that no one but me can access him," Kenzie said with a downcast voice.

"Would he really know if that was true?" Zac countered. "Can he really know more about any hidden functions than his creator?"

The two kept going back and forth for a while longer. Kenzie initially refused to believe that their mother might wish them harm. The fact that she might even have been used as a test subject seemed to be too much to even consider, and from the rapidly changing expressions on her face she didn't seem to hear the answers she was looking for from Jeeves either.

"In any case, we don't know which version was the true one. Perhaps both were false. But if Leandra really is a top tier warrior of the technocrat faction, just her appearance might plunge the whole planet into a storm of blood. Just getting close to the technocrat incursion gave me a quest to kill them all," Zac said. "We can't deal with the battle between the System and the Technocrats for the time being, and Jeeves seems to be right at the heart of the conflict."

"I know," Kenzie sighed. "You might be right. It's definitely suspicious she only called Jeeves an assistant. Jeeves definitely isn't like other Technocrat technology. He doesn't follow any rules these things do. He's alive, which shouldn't be possible to technology under the rule of the System."

"For now, see if you can figure out a way to hide Jeeves' location. The stronger he grows the easier he might be to find. I doubt Technocrats would use Karma to find

him, but rather some sort of hidden bug or connection through the Soul World,” Zac said.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Kenzie said with a slightly hollow voice.

“I’m sorry I didn’t have any better news to give you,” Zac sighed.

“That’s okay. We’re still better off than most people on Earth,” Kenzie said. “Besides, we might find the truth when we start looking into the Mystic Realm in earnest. Who knows, it might even be one of the labs where they researched Jeeves. Even if some other force took it over later, they still left a lot of the infrastructure intact according to Ogras. There might be records that only Jeeves can access.”

“That’s what I’m thinking as well. There is no rush to find Leandra. We will both be able to live thousands of years. We can slowly figure out the truth without risking our lives or the lives of everyone on Earth,” Zac nodded. “Perhaps Julia will have some good news as well.”

“That’s true,” Kenzie said, her eyes lighting up a bit again. “I told her that you’d meet her at 7 am in the government building. ”

“Thank you,” Zac said as he stood up. “Will you be okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Kenzie said.

Zac felt a sense of heaviness as he walked back to his courtyard. Things had gone pretty much as expected, and he could only pray that would be the end of his sister’s attempts at looking for their mother in the short run. But he honestly didn’t feel completely secure, and he made a note to look into whether it was possible to block out the Technocrat’s Soul World, like a multiversal wifi-blocker.

There was still a few hours before the arranged time, so he just took a short nap before he started consolidating his latest gains, getting a feel of his upgraded Dao Fragment. The insight mostly felt defensive in nature, which Zac was pretty happy with. His defensive capabilities were starting to slip now that he got so little Endurance, but this would push him a step further.

He was also surprised to find out that the insight actually had changed his Dao Field by quite a bit.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 518 - Artifact**

It was now extremely clear how big the improved Dao Field was, as it formed an almost perfect bubble around him spreading for up to 200 meters. It looked like he used a defensive treasure, though his Dao Field was more transparent.

It even had a direct defensive capability, as Zac noticed that a few falling leaves were rebuffed and pushed to the side. He didn’t expect the Dao field to protect him against ultimate strikes or anything, but who knew how strong such a field could become as he progressed.

His other Dao Fields were a lot more diffuse, with his Dao Field of the Axe being a pretty much invisible field full of razor blades. Zac found it interesting how they started to move apart in how they looked, and it made him curious about how things would work at the higher grades. The time quickly passed as he meditated though, and it was soon enough time to get going.

Zac walked over to the enormous government building, and he couldn't help but notice that the sprawling structure had grown in size in between every time he visited. This time another wing had been added, built in an interesting mix of human and demon architecture that was a blend of living wood and glass.

The building was full of people even though it was still pretty early. Zac walked over to the desk and was soon led to a secluded meeting room overlooking the square, guided by an extremely flustered office clerk he didn't recognize. He guessed it was someone who had been transferred to Port Atwood recently from one of the satellite towns in the archipelago.

It still felt a bit odd to see strangers on his island, as he still somewhat considered Port Atwood the desolate place where he had spent months alone with the demons. Even when new people finally started arriving it was still in small numbers, and he could pretty much place every single face. But the last months had seen an explosion in citizens, though everyone was thoroughly screened by Adran and Abby.

Julia had already arrived, gazing at the town below through the large window with a cup of coffee in her hands.

"One of the things I like about our new lives," Zac smiled as he sat down at the conference table, pouring himself a cup. "Spiritual coffee-beans."

"Now if everything didn't want to kill us, then we would have been golden," Julia responded with a wry smile as she turned toward him.

"So? What did you learn?" Zac asked.

"It's a mess," Julia said, looking completely crestfallen. "The New World Government is beyond salvation. The cultist shapeshifters had infiltrated extremely deep, but a core section led by Thomas Fischer has actually taken up with the Dominators. A lot of the cultists were purged soon after, but I don't know if they got them all or how they were exposed."

"If we could buy that **[Origin Array]** to root out any aliens, then so can they," Zac shrugged. "Did you find out anything else about the cultists?"

"Not much, honestly. It feels like the shapeshifters had gone through huge lengths to obfuscate anything tangible about their origins," Julia said as she took out a tablet. "However, I did manage to find the location of both the government's spatial tunnel, along with the location of another entrance currently held by the Church of Everlasting Dao."

"Good," Zac nodded with relief. "I might have to enter from somewhere else in the future unless the spatial turbulence around ours dies down."

"You should know that at least the government's entrance is booby-trapped," Julia said. "Officially it was to protect everyone in case they needed to flee the undead, but it would work just as well against you. There are also strict checks to get inside. The whole entrance is a fortress, anyone coming by foot will be attacked without pardon."

"Pretty careful," Zac muttered. "Well, it makes sense. They're essentially the weakest group around. I still don't understand how they expect things to work out in their favor. They're only around because no one can be bothered with wiping them out."

"Well, I actually learned quite a few things about the Mystic Realm, in case you want to move on from the subject of the invaders," Julia said.

Zac slowly tapped the table in thought.

“What do you think?” he finally asked. “You haven’t been with the government for a while, but you were still a part of the upper management during a time when the infiltration most likely already had started. They must have come from somewhere.”

“I have a theory, but I am unable to confirm it,” Julia slowly said.

Zac didn’t say anything, only indicated for her to keep talking.

“The Government secured a handful of hunting grounds for our soldiers during the early stages of the integration, even before you appeared,” Julia began. “We had found one place in particular, just one week’s travel from Main Paris, one of the larger secondary hubs of the government. Better yet, the route to get there was pretty safe, which was key as we still hadn’t set up too many teleportation arrays. The cost constant of mass teleportations was also something we had trouble affording.”

“We sent soldiers to Main Paris through arrays, and then put them on cargo planes or convoys. Some would return directly to New Washington by teleportation array later, but others would stay there. There was constant traffic both the old way and through teleporters, and infiltrators could easily have used Main Paris as the point of ingress,” Julia said as she showed Main Paris on a map.

“Main Paris is located in the middle of Pangea,” Zac muttered. “They would have been able to travel to most major towns of Earth within a month or two even if they traveled by foot. Such a trip would be suicide for most humans, but it shouldn’t have too difficult for the church.”

“Exactly,” Julia nodded.

“So you think the Incursion is in this forest?” Zac asked.

“Probably not. We should have found it if that was the case,” Julia said with a shake of her head. “The training ground was a medium-sized forest full of Derriers, a pack animal from the Ishiate world. They are quite aggressive, but not very powerful, and there’s a lot of them. Makes for perfect target practice. The forest was blocked to north and west by an inhospitable mountain range and a massive saltwater lake to the east. We came from the South. It created an enclosed area that allowed the Derriers to multiply freely.

“We mapped the forest easily, but we never managed to get past the mountain range due to extremely aggressive birds that lived there. They were hunting Derriers as well, so our soldiers mostly stayed at the southern side of the forest. But if the invaders could find a path through the mountain...” she continued.

“So they might be on the other side,” Zac nodded in understanding.

“Exactly. The area on the other side of that mountain range is one of the twelve yet uncharted territories of Pangea, and my best guess of their whereabouts,” she explained.

“Sounds like our best bet,” Zac agreed. “I will go there to check things out as soon as I’ve prepared everything I need.”

“Be careful, those birds in the mountain are extremely territorial. They even ripped apart a couple of our fighter jets that we sent to scout things out,” Julia said.

“The more powerful they are, the better,” Zac shrugged. “I could use the experience. What have you found out about the Mystic Realm? Have you found what everyone’s after?”

“Thomas is keeping a lot of details close to the vest. But it’s impossible to keep everything secret in this big an operation, so my contacts and I have managed to piece together some things,” Julia said. “The fact that there are a lot of people who wish that they joined you instead of New Washington made my job a lot easier as well.”

Zac wryly smiled in response, but he honestly wasn't all that interested in taking on a bunch of flaky diplomats from the New World Government. Especially not after hearing the disgusting stories from Emma MacHale and seeing how they mismanaged his hometown.

"Thomas Fisher seems to believe there is some sort of dimensional artifact inside the Mystic Realm that will save them not only from the cultists and Dominators, but even the Great Redeemer himself. It's this item that every force is after," Julia said, immediately dragging Zac out of his thoughts.

"Dimensional artifact?" Zac repeated with confusion. "What's that?"

"No idea. But from what I gathered it seems to be still growing in the depths of the realm. Thomas is moving a lot of his resources into the Mystic Realm, and many of the elite squads never leave any longer. Even Thomas only exits for a few hours at a time. I believe..." Julia said, gathering her thoughts.

"Yes?" Zac asked.

"It is because of this dimensional artifact. The moment it's uncovered it will temporarily destabilize the Mystic Realm, cutting off the entrances. That's why everyone's missing. The Dominators, the Cultists, the New World Government. No one wants to be caught outside. That's at least the conclusion I and my contacts reached," Julia said.

"Do you have any timeline for when that would happen?" Zac asked with worry.

If it really was true, then he needed to get going quicker than he anticipated. He absolutely couldn't be locked outside if both the Incursion Leader and the Dominators were inside the Mystic Realm. Not only would that leave the most powerful invaders unchecked, but it would also make it impossible to kill the Dominators.

He didn't know whether The Great Redeemer could find Earth while the Dominators were inside the Mystic Realm, but he didn't want to risk it. What if Void's Disciple managed to lock the Mystic Realm down completely, and simply stayed there until Vordis appeared?

"We couldn't find an exact date, but you should have at least a month. I got a hold of various orders to the military and a few departments. There are multiple projects related to the Ark World that have a delivery deadline of 36 days from now. I think the government is confident of the entrances being open until then, while the elites are already standing by in case something unexpected happens," Julia said.

"Thirty-six days," Zac muttered. "A month."

It wasn't a lot, but it was better than nothing. In fact, it might even be for the best to deal with this matter as quickly as possible. However, he knew that the number of power-ups he would be able to gain in such a short time was limited.

"What makes the government think they can actually compete for that item though?" Zac asked next, which was the most burning question in his mind. "I could simply fly over to their entrance and snatch their entrance if I wanted to, and I bet the Dominators could do the same."

"You shouldn't underestimate them," Julia said. "They control most of the old world's weaponry. Thousands of missiles and other types of explosives."

Zac made a noncommittal shrug, not feeling too threatened by something like that any longer. He would be able to push them all away with a few swings of his axe, or just move out of the way with [Loamwalker]. Or just block them with some defensive skills.

“You also shouldn’t take their entrance unless you have to. They’ve already made it clear that multiple people can set off the booby-trap to the entrance. Stealing the entrance and jumping inside would be suicidal,” Julia said.

Zac grunted with annoyance, but he had to admit it was a pretty good deterrent. He almost died the last time he entered a booby-trapped teleporter after all. If it wasn’t for his sister adding a safety measure he would have been ripped apart instead of thrown out over the ocean. But would that method really work in a spatial tunnel to a mystic realm?

Where would he be thrown out if he exited mid-transportation? The void of space?

“But more importantly, they have apparently brokered an agreement with some of the forces inside the Mystic Realm,” Julia added, dragging Zac out of his thoughts. “They are currently advertising it, how they have allied with multiple powerful E-Grade warriors.”

“They have? What do the aliens get out of that deal?” Zac said skeptically.

“Freedom. Getting out of the Mystic Realm when this is all done,” Julia said.

Zac frowned when he heard her explanation. Joining up with a bunch of strangers who were far more powerful was a recipe for disaster, something that Catheya had driven home during their talk. The government obviously had some way to restrain them though, as Earth wasn’t already crawling with escapees.

Ogras had mentioned the extremely strong security measures in the research base, perhaps the government had managed to use those checkpoints to their advantage. Still. It only took one mistake to release the floodgates, at which point any agreement would be null and void. Why would a bunch of powerful E-Grade warriors bother following the orders of Thomas Fisher and the useless diplomats?

“Wait, forces plural?” Zac asked, but he suddenly remembered Ogras’ description of his visit to the Mystic Realm.

He had met two peak F-Grade warriors fighting to the death, meaning they might come from opposing factions.

“There are at least five forces in the Mystic Realm, each trapped inside and in control of their own section of the research base,” Julia said explained, opening a rough sketch on her tablet. “It’s apparently shockingly large, like a country. But no one has access to the core region of the base as I’ve understood. But the restrictions are weakening inside for some reason, and everyone is looking for a path to the dimensional artifact.”

Zac looked down at the sketch that looked like a hexagonal star, his eyes drawn to the ‘X’ marked in the center of the map. An artifact that could deal with even The Great Redeemer? He couldn’t let that fall into the hands of anyone else.

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**Chapter 519 - Cleanse**

Zac already knew there were some natives living inside the Mystic Realm since long ago, but the situation that Julia described had exceeded his expectations.

“Do you know the strength of the aliens?” Zac asked with some worry.

“The Intelligence said High E-Grade, but it’s hard to know what that means,” Julia said.

Zac nodded in agreement. Just level alone was an imprecise measurement of someone’s power. For example, the Dragon he had fought in the Tower of Eternity was likely only early E-Grade, but extremely powerful due to its race and bloodline. Meanwhile, there were Mid-E Grade warriors by this point that was essentially no threat to Zac.

With his recent gains, he felt confident in dealing with some high E-Grade warriors as well, though that would depend on whether they had any unique advantages of their own. Ogras’ said that the energy inside the Mystic Realm was pretty sparse, and perhaps it was hard to ponder on the Dao as well.

However, the base was most likely used to research bloodlines once upon a time, meaning every force should have one or multiple powerful bloodlines to boost their combat power. Besides, the E-Grade warriors he had fought up until now were mostly newly ascended, whereas those in the Mystic Realm might be thousands of years old.

What if he met someone who had polished their skills for millennia while spending centuries on opening each and every one of their Inherited Hidden Nodes? The leaders might even be stronger than the Dominators.

“There are also large unpopulated sections as far as I heard, and the government is currently busy exploring the sections that the natives are locked out of. There are even large forests full of monsters,” Julia added.

“There are forests? Like real outside forests?” Zac asked with surprise. “Is there a world outside this star-shaped structure?”

“No, it’s still inside, with walls all around. I have no idea if there’s anything outside,” Julia said with a shake of her head. “The government’s entrance has ended up in one of these forests, but it is vastly different compared to the one you describe in the information package you gave me.”

“Different how?”

“The forest is massive, almost half the size of this island I reckon. And it is full of powerful beasts at peak F-Grade,” Julia said. “The government can only use their entrance at certain times a day when the beasts sleep, and rush to an entrance they have secured. Perhaps the builders of the research base were breeding the beast once, but they have definitely gone by feral now.”

Zac nodded in understanding, and his heart still sped up a bit.

A bunch of powerful beasts? Wasn’t that exactly what he was looking for? These ones were just F-Grade and mostly useless to Zac, but perhaps there were similar forests full of early E-Grade beasts further inside the realm?

“There are all kinds of information on this tablet,” Julia said as she handed it over. “But it is mostly about the government’s latest movement and the situation on Earth. The government has barely scratched the surface of the Mystic Realm, and I think you would have to go for yourself to get a real understanding of that place.”

“Thank you. Good job,” Zac said as he stood up.

It looked like the real showdown with the Dominators would take place in a month or two. He wasn’t confident in being able to lock down Void’s Disciple even with the Jamming arrays, but the situation inside the Mystic Realm would likely force them into each other’s crosshairs.

The only time Void’s Disciple had lost his cool was when Zac threatened to take the item inside the Mystic Realm. Snatching that item would force the Dominators to come to him rather than him trying to find them, which was the best solution he could

think of right now. It was no doubt crucial to the Great Redeemer, and it beat having to scour every Zhix hive on the planet.

The biggest flaw of the plan would be the delay. Vovidis might reach Earth's universe at any moment, and there really wasn't any back-up plan if that happened. It would be every man for himself. The only relief was the massive amount of teleportation tokens he had amassed in the Base Town. It would allow everyone close to him to leave earth, as long as he closed down the Cultist Incursion first.

Of course, that only went for something like 200 people.

"Ah, one more thing," Julia said as Zac was about to leave.

"Yes?" Zac asked with confusion.

"I want a job," Julia said. "A Permanent one."

"Oh?" Zac asked as he stopped in his tracks. "What do you have in mind?"

"Alea was in charge of law and order for a while, until she wasn't," Julia said, drawing a frown from Zac. "Security is still high in Port Atwood with your existence as a deterrent, but things are more chaotic in your other settlements. You are still maintaining control thanks to your armies, but we need civil law enforcement as well. I want to help build such a section."

Zac slowly mulled over for a few seconds without giving a direct response. He had honestly dropped a ball regarding this, but he could absolutely understand if normal non-combat classes and the weaker citizens felt unsafe if there was no one around to keep law and order.

But the whole concept of law enforcement was a bit tricky in their new world as well. It was easier said than done keeping a population in check when anyone could gain superpowers. Perhaps there was some service he could purchase as more options became available in the Town Shop?

"I'll talk it over with a few others before making a decision," Zac said after a while. "But it sounds like a good idea."

He had a lot to think about, so he sent a message to his sister as he left that he needed to consolidate his gains before he retreated to his cultivation cave. He started up the second cycle of the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** since he felt he might as well be productive while sitting around, and he decided to try the array as a Draugr this time.

He didn't change much, apart from starting at the life-attuned side of the array. His mind was soon filled with life, and the life-attuned energies no longer felt like poison to his undead body. Seeing that things seemed to work just fine he started circulating the manual by rote while he went over his meeting with Julia.

The array didn't take too much of his concentration while it was active, and he could even look through the tablet while his mental energy was drained and infused with attunement. Most of it was reports of movements of the various forces of Earth just like she said, which wasn't really something Zac cared about.

There were some minor conflicts brewing between the council and the New World Governments according to the intelligence, and Zac was actually a bit surprised at how unified the Council Stayed even after returning to the surface. None of the thirteen councilors had joined any of their racial factions as far as Zac could tell, instead choosing to stay with their former group.

In either case, squabbles between local forces wasn't really something that Zac wanted to get involved in, as long as they didn't involve his people or hurt innocents. Some internal strife might even toughen them up, which would prepare the Earthlings for when the planet was properly integrated into the Multiverse in the future.

Zac was more interested in the more pressing issues; the Dominators, the cultists, and the mystic realm. He was trying to figure out the best approach, one that would allow him to rid the world of lingering threats with the highest success rate.

He eventually decided against assaulting either of the two tunnels that Julia had located. He was curious about the pocket realm since he still only hadn't been able to explore its mysteries, but it felt like a safer route to reopen their own entrance. Kenzie had already made some preliminary measurements that were positive.

The cultists had detonated a massive bomb on the shores of Mystic Island, but they were forced to do it far from the tunnel itself. So it had only destabilized rather than broken down completely. Right now they were still waiting out the spatial turbulence, but it would gradually calm down over the following weeks. They might even be able to add some stabilizing arrays or treasures to the tunnel, which would force it open early if necessary.

More preparations were needed for the war against the traitor Zhix as well, which left the Cultist Incursion. Closing the incursion next felt like the most optimal route. It might leave some cultists spread all across Earth, but they could methodically be purged with the help of **[Origin Arrays]** over the following 100 years.

Closing the incursion would come with a lot of benefits as well. Earth was still in a "trial"-phase as things stood, and some parts of the System were still locked away from them. Closing the Incursion would allow him to purchase more structures, and it would probably activate his nexus hub.

Succeeding in proving your worth to the System by booting out all invaders also came with direct benefits according to Abby, though what kind of benefits differed since the System was always trying out new methods of integration. For example, the Ladder system was something that neither Abby nor Ogras had heard of before.

Dealing with the Cultists sooner rather than later was the best option as well. He had almost killed the Head Priest, and only a week had passed since then. He might still be severely weakened from barely escaping **[Fate's Obduracy]**, allowing Zac to strike while the iron was hot.

The bird mountain was also pretty interesting from Julia's description. There was a critical lack of good grinding spots, but those birds sounded pretty formidable if they could even take down airplanes soon after the integration.

The hours passed as Zac finished his second day of Soul Cultivation, and the results were identical to when he cultivated as a Human. He was about to work on his Draugr race next, but his communication crystal suddenly shook, delivering the message he had been waiting for.

The time to scan everyone for lingering karmic threats was finally here, and Zac teleported over to the Atwood Academy. A Valkyrie informed him that everyone was already waiting, so he flashed over to the Dao House.

He noticed a few Tal-Eladar standing in the distance, looking at the Dao House with thoughtful faces. They had probably figured out some things about it after staying at the Academy for a few days, but they only nodded at them before entering. The thirty-odd people were already gathered in the inner chambers of the Dao House, and they all looked over when Zac arrived.

Even Ogras had emerged from his bout of secluded cultivation, though Zac could sense that he still hadn't evolved.

Zac nodded at the familiar faces before he glanced at the wall. He was surprised to feel that he still could sense a small echo of the Dao in the walls themselves, imprinted from when they cracked open the funnel. If people kept pondering on the

Dao inside this place over the years it might become a real treasure even though it was made from normal materials, kind of like the Cherry Tree in his vision.

The mysterious grooves covering the Dao House wasn't the only interesting change. He spotted Sap Trang standing with two of the valkyries, and Zac barely recognized him as his hair had turned completely black over the past week. Having taken Medicinal Baths for months had improved the old fisherman's constitution tremendously, but the latest improvement was far more drastic than anything up til now.

"Long time no see," Zac smiled as he walked over to Sap Trang. "How do you feel?"

"Better than I've had in decades," Sap Trang said with a toothy smile. "That compound you sent over has worked wonders. It felt like it helped me absorb the Medicinal Baths better as well. I talked with Little Alyn earlier, and she believes my odds at evolving my constitution has improved by a lot. You don't happen to have some more? Not for me, but the other elderly in the town."

"I'm glad it worked," Zac said with a smile. "I'm afraid I don't have much of that stuff left over to help the others, but I'll see if we can buy some through the Consortia. We'll catch up later."

It was truly great news that things were looking up for the old fisherman. He was essentially the first human member of his force, and he had proven himself over and over. It would have been a real shame if he passed away from old age just as the doors to nigh-immortality had opened themselves to the people of Earth.

The compound that Sap Trang mentioned was simply some Longevity Pearls that had been ground down by the Sky Gnomes, together with a few dried herbs that were there to stop the efficacy from immediately dissipating. The short remaining lifespan of the old fisherman was one of the biggest hindrances to evolving his Race, and Zac wanted to see if the pearls could help with that situation.

To put it a bit bluntly, it was also an experiment that would benefit Zac. He had wasted a lot of lifeforce during his climb, and similar situations might arise in the future as well, as long as the Shard was stuck in his head.

Seeing the effect of longevity treasures on Mr. Trang was a way for him to prepare for the future.

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**Chapter 520 - A Clean Break**

Zac had tried the compound on himself as well, but the efficacy was extremely limited in his case. He didn't believe it was because of his constitution or anything like that though, but simply because he was already E-Grade Race. He would probably have to get his hands on better pearls. These longevity treasures were something he picked up on the second level of the Tower after all, so they weren't some supreme treasures.

Of course, there was also the possibility that the life-force sucked clean by the Shard was gone forever, but Zac wouldn't take that for a given until he had tried to remedy the situation with better materials. Even if that was the case it wasn't the end of the world though, as long as he reached D-Grade and restocked on a few millennia of additional lifespan.

In fact, he felt it was a possibility that his lifespan was already longer than most people as he had to evolve his Race twice. Wasn't it more than fair that he got twice as much life-force from the double upgrades?

The discussions in the room had died down as soon as Zac arrived, and he quickly realized what was going through their heads going by their expressions.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you all, but this is not another opportunity," Zac smiled as he looked around at the hopeful faces. "We are just making sure that there are no lingering side-effects to our earlier experiment. You don't need to do anything, just stand still while we do our thing."

With that, Zac took out the **[Lantern of Fate]** and activated it, illuminating the whole inner chamber and the participants in an ethereal light. Hundreds of strands appeared in the room, with Zac singlehandedly being the source of almost half of them. The others couldn't see anything except the spooky light from the lantern, but Zac could quickly figure out what was going on as each strand emitted a unique aura.

"How is it?" Ogras asked as he walked over, and Zac sighed in response.

Most of the lines attached to the people in the room weren't anything special, mostly leading toward various directions in port Atwood. Zac and most of the demons also had additional strands pointing toward the sky, with the demons having blood-red lines that pointed toward the same direction.

Zac and Ogras had an additional mix of different colors, no doubt representing the connections they had made in the Tower of Eternity. However, there was a group of people who had all had an ashy-grey strand that pointed toward the sky, people who really shouldn't have any connection to anyone outside earth.

It looked like the gift of Origin Dao came with a price after all.

"What do we do now? How does that thing work?" Ogras asked from the side with a low volume. "Should we...?"

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head, but he still took out **[Verun's Bite]**. "The lamp has a solution."

The changed appearance of the axe drew a whistle from Ogras and appreciative looks from the demons, who could easily understand that the Spirit Tool had become even more powerful. Zac didn't immediately swing at the ribbons though, but he rather opened a small compartment on the lamp, exposing a small reservoir of oil.

This part was just as important as the lamp itself, as just seeing the Karmic lines was just half the battle. The second part was cutting them, and a normal weapon wouldn't be able to accomplish that. The best would be things like the dagger that the Abbot gave him back then, but it had broken apart after one usage.

However, the lamp wasn't a top-tier treasure without reason, and it came with a solution that even he could use.

"I only have a little bit of this," Zac said as he smeared some of the oil across the edge of his axe. "Let's hope we won't have to use this thing too much."

He did have the second treasure of the Undead Kingdom as well, the item of erasure. However, he wanted to save that for the Dominators and their items since they should have a much stronger karmic connection to the Redeemer compared to these weak ribbons.

The students of Atwood Academy recoiled in fear as Zac suddenly appeared in front of them, but he didn't dare explain what was going on in case that would ruin their preparations. He moved as quickly as he could and swung his axe at the closest grey ribbon with such speed that the young girl in front of him couldn't even react.

Ogras was just one step behind, though he simply moved the girl away from the others in case something would go wrong. Groans echoed across the hall as one person after another coughed up a mouthful of blood and fell unconscious until less than twenty people remained standing. Most of the students were among the unconscious, but one demon and a few of the valkyries had been affected as well, along with Sap Trang.

Zac wasn't surprised by the group of unconscious people. They were essentially the same group as those who had been accosted by those ghosts when he cracked open the funnel. He couldn't help but feel that these people were a bit pitiful, not only reading the smallest rewards from the funnel but also getting all of the drawbacks.

The rest stood rooted in place, not completely understanding what was going on. They had only seen Zac starting to swing his axe in the air like a lunatic, while one person after another collapsed onto the floor. They looked warily at Zac and Ogras, but they breathed out in relief when they saw Zac put the lamp away.

"Take them to the infirmary," Ogras said to the demons who stood by before he walked Zac away from the others. "We should do this again at a later date to make sure it worked. Can't be too careful that old bastard."

"We'll do a second scan before we enter the Mystic Realm," Zac nodded in agreement before he properly looked up and down at the demon. "You still haven't evolved? What's going on?"

"It's the netherblasted shadow-beast," Ogras sighed after making sure no one else was within earshot. "The bastard has complicated things for me. I heard from your sister about the Mystic Realm. I really need to go into seclusion if I want a shot at evolving before then. Can you deal with the rest yourself?"

Zac thought it over, and he eventually nodded.

"I'll head out to find the cultists next," Zac said. "They are different from the Undead Empire though. I should be able to deal with it alone."

"Their defenses seem a lot simpler; just kill everything in the surroundings. But be careful. Don't forget how crazy they are. That's how I got my arm replaced by this bastard," Ogras said as he knocked the metal cast on his arm.

"I know," Zac sighed. "I'll go alone. I'm not sure I'd be able to protect others from their fire if they start exploding themselves."

"Well, your past year has led to this moment," Ogras snorted. "Some zealot fire shouldn't be able to take out the unkillable cockroach."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence," Zac snorted at the demon who melded into the shadows the next moment.

Zac left as well after having made sure that everyone was alive and stable, and headed over to Thayer Consortia to pick up some items he had ordered. While he was there he also asked Calrin to look into blocking Technocrat tech, though he didn't hold too much of a hope of him finding anything useful.

He also asked them to start preparing for the auction. He still hadn't decided whether he should hold it before or after he dealt with the Mystic Realm, but he leaned toward the latter. No point in empowering outsiders just before the showdown that would decide Earth's future. It might come back to bite him in the ass.

He returned to his compound next and found Emily having dinner with his sister.

"I'm heading out to deal with the cultists," Zac said to the two. "Be careful while I'm gone."

"Already? You need me to call the shield squad?" Kenzie asked.

“No, I’m going alone this time,” Zac said with a shake of his head, ignoring the pout coming from Emily’s side.

Since Ogras had gone into seclusion to prepare for his breakthrough he didn’t feel comfortable bringing Emily and the others. He had mostly brought them last time because of the high stakes of the Undead Incursion, but it was different now. If things went according to plan he would find a half-abandoned Incursion base as most of the cultists were busy exploring the Mystic Realm.

He would either close it down or flee with the help of the emerald leaf, allowing him to try again later. There was no point in risking the lives of his people in such a scenario.

In fact, he felt that anyone except Ogras might turn out to be a liability, where Zac would have to split his attention between protecting others and taking out the invaders. The Valkyries had made tremendous gains over the past months, but they still weren’t ready to tackle people like the cultists head-on.

Meanwhile, he felt confident that his recent gain in power was enough to close the incursion. After all, he had managed to defeat the Head Priest once already in a head-on collision, and that was before his Dao upgrade and while being weakened from the node opening. He was in tip-top shape right now, and he even had a charge from the Splinter as a back-up in case things turned really dire.

“Fine,” Kenzie sighed. “But be careful. They seem pretty insane, but they are an ancient faction. They must have some things to rely on after being able to avoid getting eradicated after making enemies left and right.”

Zac talked with his sister and Emily a bit longer before he walked over to his teleportation house. He changed his appearance with [Thousand Faces] before he entered though, as he didn’t want his movements to be tracked. His vision turned black for a minute before he appeared in Westfort.

The teleportation station was bustling with activity, and over a hundred warriors were coming and going. The small British town was quickly becoming a proper world hub, though Zac believed that they hadn’t managed to upgrade the town through the System just yet.

He showed an ID given to him by Thea at the security checkpoint, and he was quickly escorted to a secured area without another word. A somewhat familiar face hurried over the next moment, and Zac remembered he was one of the intelligence officers of the Marshall Clan.

“Lord Atwood,” said with a small bow. “What brings you here today?”

“Is Thea around?” he asked after some thought.

He had only talked with her through correspondence after closing the Undead Incursion, as Thea and Billy had already healed up enough for them to leave by the time he returned to Port Atwood. He wasn’t running against the clock right now, so he could spare some time to discuss things with her before he set off for Main Paris.

“She and Mr. Trask Jr. are currently in the library. Would you like for us to arrange transportation?” the officer asked, and Zac soon found himself sitting in the back of a town car with tinted windows.

All the defensive perimeters around the Old Homestead opened up without issue, and he was quickly led to the shell-like tower. His appearance reverted back to normal as he stepped through the door, and he found Thea sitting on a sofa where he read about Galvarion a few month back. Billy was dozing off next to her, his snores likely blocked out by an array.

However, he woke up as Zac approached and waved at him with a big grin.

“How are you two feeling?” Zac smiled as he sat down on a sofa opposite them.

“Haha, Billy is good,” the giant said as he waved his massive arms with enough force to create a gust, which earned him a slap from one of Big Blue’s tentacles. “Stupid fish.”

Zac wondered if the two would erupt in battle, but Thea smoothly distracted Billy by taking out a grilled turkey leg, as though she had done this dance many times before.

“That’s good to hear,” Zac said as he looked over at Thea who had put aside the crystal she was reading. “I have some news.”

He quickly recounted what he had found out from Julia regarding the Mystic Realm, though Billy quickly zoned out until he mentioned the large number of powerful beasts. He immediately wanted to head out for some thwonking, but Zac and Thea managed to calm him down.

“So what do you want to do?” Thea asked after a while. “Are you heading in now?”

“I’m completely healed up now,” Zac slowly said. “So I am thinking I’ll hit the Cultists first. That way I’ll both gain a new entrance, while also cutting off their escape route. We can slowly flush them out afterward. Those lunatics doesn’t deserve any leniency. Besides, that way we can limit the spread of information about Earth.”

“They probably have already sent back information about the Mystic Realm though. I think that’s what prompted the extra investment,” Thea countered.

“Still,” Zac said.

Another reason he wanted to close the incursion was to free himself up to use both his classes while battling the invaders without risking the news immediately reaching the church. However, he wasn’t really willing to discuss that matter in front of Big Blue and Billy. He didn’t believe that Billy would betray him, but the giant didn’t really have any filters and might blurt it out at an inopportune time.

“Do you need help with the cultists?” Thea asked, changing the subject.

“Billy want to help as well!” the giant roared. “Stupid fire-lizards burned Billy’s clothes.”

“Just focus on recuperation,” Zac smiled. “It will be all hands on deck in the Mystic Realm later.”

“We’re mostly better. Billy and I have already talked about it. If you don’t need help with the Incursion, can we enter the Inheritance while you are away?”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 521 - Birds**

“You want to enter right now? You sure you don’t want to wait?” Zac asked with surprise. “You might die, you know. As I told you in the letter, the masters of the Inheritances all seem to be eccentric characters. Why not wait until you’ve reached level 75?”

Zac had gifted them each a shot at an Inheritance as thanks for protecting Port Atwood while he was away. So he wasn’t surprised to hear her bring it up, but he was a bit confused that she already wanted to take the trial. They knew they only had one

chance, so he had assumed that the two would wait until they reached peak F-Grade. After all, that came with a set of powerups, such as titles, bonus attributes, and skills.

Their efforts had slowed down the approach of the invaders by hours, which was the whole reason he could complete the climb without worry. He didn't know what he would do if he suddenly got the prompt of the invasion while he was inside the tower, but he most likely would have left early. He would have lost out on so much if that happened, including the Shard of Creation.

Not only that, the two had actually completely missed out on the quest for defeating the Undead Incursion because of their wounds. Thea and Billy should have been two of the highest contributors in the battle against the undead except himself and the Abbot, but they never got the quest as they were stuck in sickbeds on his island.

Giving them each a shot at an inheritance along with some of the things he had gotten during the climb was the least he could provide in return. The inheritances were limited, so any spot he gave out might mean that some descendant of his missed out in the future. But he figured that he would be powerful enough to be able to provide even better things to his grandchildren if it ever came to that.

Better use the inheritances now while they still could provide a lot of value.

His sister had already claimed the Invoker inheritance, and Adran was keeping his eyes on the craftsmen who had started perusing the Celestial Artisan Heritage. Someone might be worthy of taking on the inheritance as well.

As for the last two inheritances, Zac wasn't sure. It would depend on which inheritances Thea and Billy decided upon, though he had a pretty good idea what they would go for.

"We're sure," Thea nodded. "We can't keep playing it safe. I feel we're not powerful enough to help out as we are. We won't be able to reach level 75 in thirty-six days, there's just no way. We'll enter in a day or two after I've confirmed a few things here."

"Billy wants the Titan," Billy said from the side. "Billy doesn't know why, but it feels familiar..?"

"It does?" Zac asked with interest.

Was it perhaps his bloodline calling to him?

"Billy thinks he dreamt being a big giant that was called a Titan?" Billy muttered with a frown. "Can't remember..."

"Well, I think it suits you," Zac said. "I've seen the statue of the master of the Titan Inheritance. He looks just as strong as you, so you should be able to get things that make you stronger as well."

The Titan felt like the given choice for Billy, though Zac also felt that the Undying Fiend might be able to provide Billy with means of shoring up his lacking defenses. But the Inheritances were ultimately a matter of compatibility rather than what people needed, and Billy was definitely the most compatible with the Titan inheritance.

"Good!" Billy fervently nodded. "Billy has slept too much. Last fight hurt, Billy needs to get better at thwonkin'."

"What about you?" Zac asked as he turned to Thea.

"I'll take the Blade Emperor if that's okay," Thea said after a few seconds.

Zac nodded, feeling inwardly relieved. There wasn't really any standout in Port Atwood that could benefit from that Inheritance. The only one using a sword of the core forces was Sap Trang, but he wasn't really a sword master, but rather a water mage or beast tamer. Besides, Zac also had the heritage for the Blade Emperor, which probably contained half of the value that the old master left behind.

“What kind of test was there?” Thea asked. “Is it based on strength or suitability?”

“Suitability,” Zac said after some hesitation. “It got a bit dangerous for me because I kind of cheated a bit, and Ogras was only in danger because the master he chose was a lunatic. But the trials should be achievable by normal talented people, as they were meant as gifts for the descendants of Brazla, the tower’s creator.”

“Good,” Thea said with some relief.

“I’m not sure how long I’ll be gone this time while looking for the cultists. Just have my sister lead you in if I’m not around. Oh, the tool spirit is slightly insane as well, so don’t try to anger it. It might mess with your trial out of spite,” Zac said, drawing an even stare from Thea.

“Anything else...?” she asked.

“No, that’s it,” Zac with a shake of his head. “Or well, just compliment it a bit and it might make your lives easier. I need some help from your family with the teleporters, but I’ll just grab someone from your intelligence office.”

“Good luck,” Thea said as she quickly scribbled a letter. “What we can do is limited, but don’t be afraid to ask for help if you need it. I don’t think anyone over at the Intelligence Bureau will cause any trouble for you, but take this letter just in case.”

Zac nodded and left, and he walked over to the building that housed the intelligence department of the Marshall Clan. Charles Marshall immediately met up with him, and Zac couldn’t help but snort when he saw that he looked at the shadows with some worry. The demon had apparently left quite an impression during his last visit to the Bureau.

“Ogras isn’t here,” Zac said with a smile. “I need to be teleported to Main Paris without anyone finding out.”

“Main Paris...?” Charles repeated with a calculating look. “You’re not...?”

“I’m not planning on taking out the New World Government,” Zac snorted as he handed him Thea’s letter. “At least not yet. I am looking for the base of operations of the cultists. You don’t happen to know anything else?”

Charles’ eyes lit up, and he quickly took out a stack of documents. He quickly provided a rundown of their findings, and much of it was similar to what Julia had said. The old spy had singled out three possible locations, one of which was the same uncharted territory as Julia pointed out.

A second one was in the middle of a vast marshland that spread out to the south of the heartlands of Pangea. There were some settlements there, but only at the edge. The place was swarming with hostile wildlife, the worst of which being the millions of massive mosquitoes that could suck a person dry in a second.

The high humidity of the area had turned the core of the swamp essentially uncharted as well, which was why Charles believed that an incursion could hide there without notice. The pillars weren’t lighthouses that could be seen from tens of miles after all, and Zac had only spotted the undead one through the miasmatic haze when he was almost upon it.

The final spot was a remote area to the far north, an inhospitable world of ice north of the even most distant of settlements. It was the least-likely place in Charles’ opinion, but he had scribbled a note that said that they might like the hostile environment to temper themselves since they were fire-attributed.

Zac went over the documents as Charles read Thea’s letter, and Zac felt some relief that it probably wouldn’t take too long to deal with the cultists. He personally felt the northern location was a long shot, which meant he only needed two trips to

find his target. The fact that both Julia and Charles had landed on the same spot was a good indicator as well, as both had access to vast, but different, intelligence networks.

“Inheritance,” Charles muttered from the side. “May I ask if this is a real inheritance like the ones described in our library?”

“It is. A peak D-Grade inheritance. I have a few of them, and I gave Thea one slot. Keep this to yourself though,” Zac nodded

“Certainly, though I need to share it with Henry. May I ask if there is there danger?” the thin old man asked with worry.

It was easy to forget that this kindly old man was a ruthless assassin who had murdered a family member for breaking the family rules, rather than a doting grandpa worrying for Thea’s safety.

“Some. She can give up though if it gets too hard,” Zac shrugged. “I’ll take a look at the place near Main Paris first. Do you have a method to take me there?”

“You appeared in Westfort with a disguise. Are you able to take on specific faces with your skill?” Charles asked.

“I can, but it doesn’t hold up to scrutiny too well,” Zac nodded.

“That’s fine,” Charles said as he started tapping on a tablet before he handed it over.

“This is an informant of mine who has access to Main Paris. If that doesn’t work we also control a remote town roughly half a day’s flight from the city. It’s up to you which you want to utilize,” the old man said.

Zac eventually decided to forgo his plan of going through New Paris in his search for the Cultist Incursion. After seeing the location of the Marshall-controlled town on the map, he felt it would only delay him a couple of hours. There were a lot more mountains to cross going from that direction, but it didn’t matter to Zac who had a flying treasure.

This way he was less likely to tip off any infiltrators hiding in New Paris or getting spotted when flying above a trafficked route.

“I’ll go through the smaller town,” Zac said as he stood up. “One more thing. The remaining Invaders gained the ability to use teleporters the moment their Incursion was closed. You might want to increase security going forward. Who knows what a bunch of zealots trapped on earth will do.”

“We have been preparing for this for some time,” Charles nodded. “We’ll slowly ramp up our measures over the next day to not cause any alarm.”

Zac nodded in agreement and things from there went quite smoothly. Zac was led by a nondescript family member of the Marshall Clan to the village called Peyraud. It was apparently a small French town with less than a thousand citizens that had turned to a minor stronghold.

It had survived until now because it was just outside of the hunting range of the mutated birds of the mountain range. The ferocious flocks hunted everything else though, which had scared off any stronger beasts from the area.

Of course, Zac knew that this place would be overrun in a year at most, like most places that only survived thanks to a lack of natural predator. The birds would sooner or later evolve, which in turn would increase their appetite and hunting grounds. These villagers were lucky enough that they at least had managed to get a Teleporter, allowing them to flee before they got gobbled up.

Zac didn’t immediately jump onto his flying treasure but rather kept running through a dense forest for an hour until he was far away from any human activity. Only

then did he take out the emerald leaf and set off for the massive mountain range. He quickly understood why people hadn't ventured past the mountains until now. They were simply enormous.

Something this big was hard to properly gauge, but he guessed that they were a match to the Himalayan mountain ranges of old Earth. However, these mountains were made from an almost pristine white rock, making Zac believe they came from one of the other planets.

The second reason why people avoided the mountains soon presented itself as well, as hundreds of small spots rose from a mountain peak as Zac approached. The distant spots quickly grew in size until Zac realized that some of the incoming birds were just enormous. There were some with a wingspan of just a couple of meters, but the larger ones looked like they could snatch up a fighter jet in their claws.

Zac didn't want to get embroiled in an aerial battle at this juncture, so he immediately urged the leaf to take evasive maneuvers. But the mutated eagles had no problem matching his speed as they intercepted. A piercing cry suddenly exploded in his ears with enough power to make him dizzy, but he quickly righted himself just in time to see a bird bursting forward with shocking speed.

It seemed like the bird had activated some inherent skill, as it appeared right in front of him in almost an instant. A light flashed among the clouds as Verun was unleashed, and a rain of blood followed as the eagle was chopped in two. The massive bird had been on the threshold of reaching the E-Grade, but it was cut apart like paper in the face of the upgraded Spirit Tool.

More importantly, the weapon actually emitted a primordial aura that made the eagles stop in their tracks. It allowed him to increase the distance as the flying treasure was pushed to its limits. However, their territorial instincts soon won over their primal fear for the aura the axe emitted, and they swooped toward Zac like kamikaze pilots.

Zac could only sigh in annoyance as he started pushing Cosmic Energy toward [Chop], but he suddenly stopped himself and moved the energy toward the fractal on his left arm instead. He still hadn't tested [Rapturous Divide], but wasn't this the perfect opportunity? He was still just at the edge of the mountain range, far from the supposed location of the Incursion.

However, as he pushed Cosmic Energy into the fractal he realized a problem; the skill refused to activate.

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**Chapter 522 - The Abyss and Arcadia**

The massive eagles soared ever closer, but Zac didn't panic as he opened his skill menu while fleeing from the flock. He had already looked at the description, but he wanted to use it as a clue to what might be the problem.

**[E] Rapturous Divide - Proficiency: Early. Between the Abyss and Arcadia is an endless chasm. Upgradeable.**

The [E] in front of the skill was unique, as the other skills were without any tag. However, that wasn't important right now, but rather finding out why he couldn't use the skill. His eyes bore into the text like he was trying to see any hidden truths behind them, and his mind furiously worked to put together the clues so far.

“Split life and death...The Abyss and Arcadia,” Zac muttered with a frown as he tried to understand the fractal, and something suddenly clicked.

He quickly pushed Cosmic Energy into **[Chop]** as well, and a terrifyingly large fractal blade grew out from **[Verun’s Bite]**. He was still only able to maintain a stable edge that was around 10 meters, whereas anything larger would start to destabilize after a few seconds.

However, a change quickly spread out through the blade as a powerful twinned surge of energy shot into the fractal edge from his left arm. The shaky blade immediately stabilized before it started to transform. The blade grew even larger and more robust as a new set of overlapping fractals covered its length, one golden and one black.

Zac felt a completely new connection to the blade like it was part of himself, and he finally understood what his new skill would do. He infused the massive edge with the Fragment of the Coffin before he swung it in a wide horizontal arc toward the hundreds of enormous eagles that were still bearing down on them.

The evasive maneuvers while he tried to figure out his skills had incited blood-lust in the flock, and their eyes shone with a sinister light as they flapped their wings with enough force to cause a storm. The fractal edge didn’t shot toward the beasts like how **[Chop]** usually worked, but a black wave instead spread out from it as the edge itself turned into a lustrous gold.

The wave was extremely swift, and it covered a large number of the eagles before they even had a chance to react.

However, there was no scene of carnage that followed the swing. A few eagles screamed in pain as they were assaulted by the corrosive components of the Fragment of the Coffin, but there was blood raining the mountain walls this time. The eagles were instead shrouded in darkness, like Zac had thrown a can of black paint rather than a ferocious attack at them.

The odd scene wasn’t surprising to Zac, as he had only set up the first half of the attack. The air screamed as he swung the golden fractal edge once more, and another wave shot out, this one looking like a wave of sunlight breaking through the clouds. The fractal edge still stayed attached to **[Verun’s Bite]**, but it crumbled shortly after the second wave had left it.

The golden wave passed through the flock of birds as well, and a shocking change occurred. A clear line ran straight across the flock, with the upper side only holding the golden sheen, and the lower side drenched in darkness. It reminded Zac of his bout of inspiration inside his cultivation cave where he split the two conflicting energies apart, though on a far grander scale.

The odd scene only lasted for an instant before the horizon cracked, the dividing line between gold and black turning into a crack in space itself. Two opposite shockwaves spread out, one toward the sky and one toward the ground. Hundreds of birds fell apart mid-flight, looking like they had been cut apart by a laser.

The two shockwaves caused a cascading halo to emerge on the horizon, and Zac froze in awe as he looked at the spectacle. The golden wave had turned into what looked like a massive sunset that spread for over a hundred meters. Even more amazing, Zac felt like he could hear Buddhist hymns coming from a paradise he could barely discern through the golden haze.

The golden sun was matched by a black opposite, the two halves forming an almost perfect circle. The hair on Zac’s arms stood on end as he turned his attention to the darker half, feeling like he was looking at the netherworld itself. Distant wails

of lost soul rattled in his mind, and Zac felt like someone or something was staring back at him from within the darkness.

The effect only lasted for a few seconds before it dissipated, leaving a sky clear of any aggressive birds. The attack hadn't hit every eagle, but it looked like a couple of them had been swallowed by half-suns, not even leaving a corpse like their bisected brethren. Zac nodded in appreciation as he kept flying, thankful he had done this test on the outer side of the mountain range.

**[Rapturous Divide]** was a lot flashier than he had expected, and he could only pray that no lizardmen scouts were hiding in this remote part of the mountain range. Of course, he knew that he had pushed the skill pretty hard as well, and he realized now that he didn't actually need to use a 100-meter blade to create it.

He could have activated the skill by adding a small half-meter edge over **[Verun's Bite]** as well, which would allow him to use the skill in a one-on-one melee battle.

The skill took advantage of the opposing natures of life and death. The two were each other's opposites, and this fact was utilized to create a divide in space itself. It was a high-concept empowerment that would turn most defenses useless, just like a spatial tear would. If he had this skill when fighting the battleroach king or the dragon he wouldn't have been so hard-pressed to wound them, as he doubted they were able to stop a tear in space itself.

Such a divide might not completely be what he looked for when it came to his insights to his cultivation path, but Zac felt it didn't matter too much as it was just a single skill. Not every action he took needed to be an echo of his insights. It was still based on life and death, which better than most of his other skills, proving that his new class moved in the right direction.

Zac looked inward for a second, and he was somewhat disappointed to see that he had lost connection to the Skill fractal, just like when his other skills were on cooldown. It looked like he wouldn't be able to shoot out a rapid barrage of space-splitting life-and-death waves. Then again, that wasn't really on the table in any case, as that single strike had cost him almost 10 percent of his total Cosmic Energy reserves.

At least it didn't seem to be a long cooldown skill like **[Deforestation]**, which could only be used every 12 hours or so. He kept a close look at the fractal as he flew between the mountain peaks, and could soon confirm that **[Rapturous Divide]** could be used again after three minutes.

Tree minutes wasn't bad, but not great either. Most intense fights felt quite long, but they were usually over in less time than that. However, it would be a great addition in prolonged battles, providing a repeatable destructive boost to just shooting out an infinite number of fractal edges. However, he still didn't use the skill at the next group of predatory birds that assaulted him, and instead opted to take them out with **[Chop]**.

The pack of eagles that Zac annihilated earlier wasn't the only one, but most likely a single roost out of the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of the mountain range. His flight through the towering peaks quickly turned into an endless battle, where the skyline was covered by frenzied birds defending their mountain.

Most of the birds were F-Grade, but the occasional early E-grade alpha appeared as well. The feather of the evolved birds was like steel, partly absorbing the strikes of a normal **[Chop]** even though **[Verun's Bite]** had been upgraded. Zac realized that this wasn't the fault of his Spirit Tool though, but rather on the skill itself.

The skill had definitely become stronger with the upgrade of the axe, but the effect was only partial. It seemed like a simple F-Grade skill wouldn't be able to keep

up with the upgrades of an E-Grade axe. He sighed in disappointment when he realized that his main skill would peter out into obsolescence sooner or later.

However, the skill was still useful, not only as a delivery method of his E-grade skill, but on its own. The skill itself might not be able to outright kill these powerful birds, but it was another matter entirely when he infused the blades with the Fragment of the Axe. One silver flash after another lit up the pristine mountain peaks as desolate cries resounded, each wail marking the end of a king of the sky.

An ever-increasing amount of energy surged toward the turbid node in his left leg, and Zac realized that he would be able to burst open a node in a day or two if he kept going like this. However, Zac slowly started to look for some way to get out of this situation. It felt like no matter how many beasts he killed, there were still more and more that appeared in the skyline all around him.

It did allow him to get acquainted with his new skill though, and now and then a group of birds would be split apart as the white mountain wall was lit up in golden splendor. He quickly figured out that his maximum limit of the skill was a 150-meter spatial tear, while he actually realized there was a lower limit as well at 75 centimeters.

The cost of the activation wasn't quite linear though. Just activating the skill was the cause of over half of the energy expenditure, while the length of the tear added an almost linear expenditure.

The strength of the attack was based on the length of the tear as well, with the shorter tear unleashing a more intense wave of destruction. However, the shortest tear was at best twice as strong as the largest one, meaning that the massive divide wasn't all that weak compared to the one-on-one strike.

However, the hours passed and Zac couldn't take it any longer. He was starting to tire even when fighting while holding a D-Grade Nexus Crystal for energy restoration. He flew into a narrow canyon and jumped off the leaf mid-flight, immediately taking out an Illusion Array Disk the moment he landed. He shot forward a few hundred meters with the help of **[Loamwalker]** the next second, hiding inside a cave.

A sleeping bear yowled in surprise at the unwelcome intruder, but it was quickly cut in two before it could warn the frenzied eagles that flew back and forth outside. Their screeches caused the walls of the cave to shake as their feathers carved deep grooves in the mountain walls, but they couldn't find the target no matter how hard they looked.

They finally left after taking out their frustrations on a group of poor mountain goats who failed to blend in with the white rocks, allowing Zac to breathe out. He wasn't really worried about being overrun by the bloodthirsty birds, but rather that he was causing too big a ruckus. He had passed most of the mountain range by now, and he was closing in on the uncharted territory on the other side.

Thousands of massive eagles clumping around a foreign object in the sky while screeching at the top of their lungs would probably be spotted from miles away, and he wanted to retain at least some of the element of surprise. The birds were gone, but Zac didn't immediately move out, and instead sat down to recuperate his lost Cosmic Energy for a few hours.

Only when he was completely topped off again did he move out. This time he didn't take out his flying treasure though but instead tried to stay as inconspicuous as possible between the mountains. There were pretty much not a single beast barring his path down on in the canyon, which wasn't surprising considering what lived on the mountain tops. It allowed Zac to make good speed, and he reached the end of the mountain range just an hour later.

And what met his eyes was an endless primordial jungle.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### **Chapter 523 - Jungle**

It turned out that on the other side of the expansive mountain range was a basin, a vast depression in the landscape. It looked like something left behind by a meteor millions of years ago and it almost felt like he had entered a different climate zone as warm winds wafted onto his face. The humidity had gained a huge spike on this side of the mountains as well, like all the moisture was trapped in the basin.

That wasn't surprising though as massive waterfalls could be spotted to the west, no doubt stemming from the inland sea Julia mentioned before. He would have turned completely clammy in seconds if it wasn't for his improved constitution. Judging by how healthy the enormous plantlife looked there was no doubt a lot of rain as well, perhaps as the clouds would get stopped by the mountains.

Zac still couldn't spot any Incursion pillar yet, but he had a good feeling about this place. First of all, the energy was quite dense in the area. The second reason was simple as well; there were a lot of fire-attuned energies in the air even though there was so much humidity. Zac first thought there might be a fire-crystal mine beneath the ground, but he soon found the real source of the energies.

He could barely discern a volcano in the distance, standing roughly in the middle of the basin. It was pretty far away, and he guessed that it would take half a day getting there on foot even if he kept a high pace. Smoke rose from the top, proving it was active, and it looked like it was continuously releasing energies out into the forest around it.

It really looked like a pretty good starting spot for a force like the Church of the Everlasting Dao. A volcano in an energy-dense valley was probably a treasure trove for a fire-based force. Better yet, the humidity had created a large amount of low-hanging clouds that limited his vision. It wasn't nearly as dense as the clouds of miasma in the Dead Zone, but it would do just fine in hiding an Incursion pillar if you were far away.

Especially if the cultists helped improve the effect somehow.

The volcano spread small amounts of fire-energies across the whole jungle, but when Zac activated [**Cosmic Gaze**] there was an odd sight. The whole jungle lit up in a dim red glow from his special sight, but the volcano itself was utterly devoid of energy. Something close to the volcano was either hiding the energies or absorbing them.

The clammy haze thankfully allowed Zac some protection as he took out his flying treasure once more. He honestly would have preferred to travel by foot, but he had a mission to complete. His desire wasn't about safety or stealth though, but something more primal. It felt like the forest was calling out to him somehow.

It wasn't as strong as when he had come close to great natural treasures like the Cherry or the Tree of Ascension, but the feeling was similar. It felt like the forest itself had gained a semblance of spirituality that resonated with his body, or perhaps more accurately his class. He felt like he would be able to progress both his nature-based skills and his Dao in this place a lot more efficiently than even staying in his cultivation cave.

Progressing skills wasn't necessarily about energy density, but rather about opportunity and insight. So secluded cultivation might be good to improve some aspects of his strength, but skills were not one of them. A few of his skills, like **[Forester's Constitution]** and **[Loamwalker]** were still stuck at Late Proficiency, and this might be a good place to practice those skills.

However, Zac knew that would have to wait until he dealt with the cultists, so he set off on top of his flying treasure, heading straight for the volcano.

He kept a much lower altitude than normal this time, staying close to the treetops in hopes to blend in with the enormous leaves of the tree crowns. A roar suddenly echoed out across the area as a five-meter panther jumped up straight at him, but Zac killed it with one swift swing. Its carcass joined the mountain of high-grade meat in his Cosmos Sack before even a second had passed as Zac whizzed past the area.

It was no wonder that the desolate mountain range could support so many birds, the jungle below was simply littered with beasts. Everything from ten-meter snakes to insects as large as dogs tried to strike at him as Zac whizzed through their domains, and the area was drenched in a constant clamor of thousands of different animal calls.

The beasts unfortunately weren't very powerful even though many of them were quite large. The birds might have already hunted anything that could be a threat to them, or perhaps it was the cultists' doing if this indeed was their hidden base of operations. It was even possible that the stronger beasts were smart enough to figure out that he wasn't some tasty morsel drifting around on a wayward leaf.

A streak of flames suddenly shot toward him out of nowhere, forcing Zac to quickly swivel out of the way. It pushed past him toward the skies and only ran out of steam after having flown hundreds of meters. Zac first thought there was some beast spewing fire at him, but he quickly spotted an inconspicuous tower among the tall palms, colored so that it would blend in with the surroundings.

Another fireball soared just past him, and Zac felt the familiar aura of the zealots from the golden flames. Zac shot out a **[Chop]** and the tower crumbled, its defensive shield utterly incapable of withstanding a middle-grade fragment. He was quite happy that he had probably found the right place, but it would take him half an hour before he reached the volcano even if he pushed the leaf to its limits.

There was no way he would be able to launch a surprise strike at the cultists any longer, but there was only so much you could prepare in thirty minutes. They should still be unable to utilize any teleportation arrays, making it impossible for them to recall any forces from the Mystic Realm. Unless their Incursion spawned right on top of one of the entrances they wouldn't be able to return in time.

Zac quickly scoured the surroundings, and he soon realized there actually was a neat perimeter of similar towers forming a circle around the volcano. However, Zac felt that these things weren't meant to deal with cultivators, but rather to scare off the flocks of birds. They would be almost useless to deal with forces on the ground with the thick foliage blocking their fireballs.

If that was the case it might still take some time before they realized something was wrong, but Zac wouldn't hold his breath. The cultists were crazy, but not stupid. They should be fully aware that he was coming for them sooner or later, as they were the last invaders remaining on Earth.

Deep thuds echoed out from his chest as his heart started beating rapidly in anticipation of the upcoming battle, but Zac took a few calming breaths to steady himself as he started to fly toward the volcano again. He quickly realized that the various sounds of the jungle were steadily growing few and far in between, like the beasts knew better than to stay close to the mountain in the middle of the jungle.

Zac kept his eye peeled for any hints of the Incursion, and his eyes lit up when he saw a shimmering glow as he started to make his way around the volcano. He had figured that the pillar would either have to be inside the volcano itself or hidden behind it, and it looked like it was the latter.

A minute later the whole pillar was on full display, rising into the clouds right behind the plumes of smoke coming from the volcano. The cultists were full-fledged lunatics, but Zac had to admit they had a flair for architecture. The back of the mountain was lit up with splashes of gold and red, and grand temples and mansions built from the pristine white stones seemed to compete with each other in how elaborate their designs were.

The Incursion Pillar itself started right at the foot of the mountain, while the town itself was comprised of an ascending series of tiered structures ran halfway up the volcano. It did look a bit odd, as the most important structure was essentially located furthest out, while it was the temples that took the best spots at the highest positions of the mountain.

However, the buildings only reached halfway up the volcano, after which they abruptly stopped. Above that was only one thing; a gargantuan rune of three lines. The three simple wavy lines were the insignia of the Church of Everlasting Dao, and the huge rune emitted a pressure that even Zac could feel from the distance. The lines apparently represented The Heavens, The System, and The Dao; their concept of divinity.

The scene reminded Zac of the consecrated mountain that Abbot Everlasting Peace lived on, where prayer and conviction had brought forth a true power. It was a reminder of how contradictory a force the Church of Everlasting Dao was. Triv had talked about them at great length over the past week, seemingly taking real pleasure in causing trouble the enemies of the Undead Empire.

It was more correct to call the Church of Everlasting Dao two entwined forces rather than one single unit, with one being the fanatics and the other the body-merchants.

Some considered the fanatics as just a front, but the massive rune was a stark reminder that there were quite a few members who wholeheartedly believed in the Divinity of the System. Mount Everlasting Peace had been consecrated over a thousand years to gain spirituality upon the integration, but this mountain was coming close to emitting the same holiness after just a year.

The confusing layout of the town itself made Zac a bit unsure of how to proceed though. Normally he would bash through a wall and defeat the armies, and finally corral the remaining enemies toward the Incursion pillar. But the Nexus Hub was already within his reach unless the open-aired temple surrounding the red-and-gold pillar contained some hidden safeguards.

It felt a bit too simple. Abby had already explained the rules of taking over towns, and it worked the same with Incursions. If he walked over and claimed the Nexus Hub a quest would start where the invaders had a short time window to rebuff him before their invasion ended by default. That was why the Incursion Leaders seldom left their base of operations.

But seeing the pillar unguarded like this made him feel there was some sort of trap, which was only reinforced by the fact that he still hadn't spotted a single person so far. The whole town looked abandoned, like they already had fled before he arrived. However, there was no way that a force like the Church of the Everlasting Dao would simply pack up and leave without a fight.

Besides, there was no prompt from the system that the Incursion had failed, which meant that the Head Priest was still around somewhere. Zac activated [**Cosmic Gaze**] to see if any suspicious energy movements surrounded the Nexus Hub, but the pillar itself drowned out any potential clues. It almost blinded him from how much energies it contained, and he was immediately forced to look away.

Indecision gnawed at him for a few seconds, but he eventually made his decision and instead shot toward the largest temple, a resplendent structure placed right beneath the enormous rune. It was a massive construction with spires well over a hundred meters high, each of them holding a radiant fire.

In fact, every single building had a golden fire burning at the roof, though the ones at the main temple were quite a bit larger than the others. Zac chose to target the temple because those spires reminded him of the array towers at the undead fortress. He could always claim the Nexus Hub after destroying the temples and the gargantuan rune, which would hopefully preempt any booby traps the cultists had left for him.

The leaf made a detour around the pillar before it made a beeline for the temple, and there was finally some activity from the cultists' side. A hundred warriors streamed out of the gates of the temple, seemingly rearing for battle. Just a hundred warriors wouldn't even slow Zac for more than a few seconds, but he still activated [**Nature's Barrier**].

Zac felt that there was no way that this was all these guys had prepared, and his suspicions were quickly proven right as hundreds of fiery globes moved to intercept him. It was the braziers on top of the houses all along the mountainside that rose into the air, creating a beautiful spectacle.

The air screamed as Zac whizzed back and forth, dodging the incendiary attacks. But there were just too many of them. One projectile after another slammed into the leaves he had conjured, setting them on fire. It quickly turned Zac's whole vision into a golden inferno. He lost a steady stream of energy just to keep the initial salvo at bay.

The emerald shield surrounding the flying treasure was still holding on just fine, but Zac knew it was just a matter of time before a breach happened. The emerald leaf didn't seem to be made for anything but travel. There were no offensive arrays, but just decent set defensive options. It wouldn't hold for too long against a barrage of this magnitude.

Zac infused the leaf with the Fragment of the Bohdi, and it blasted toward the town with regained momentum. The intensity of the barrage just increased as he closed in on the temple, but he finally was close enough for his purposes. A hundred-meter fractal blade reached toward the sky as Zac raised [**Verun's Bite**], preparing for a vertical swing.

Two streams of opposing forces crawled up along the blade, reinforcing it and allowing it to grow another fifty percent as it was colored in gold and black. The flying treasure stopped in its tracks a few hundred meters away from the temple, and Zac pushed as much of his Fragment of the Coffin as he could into the towering blade.

It felt like the world split apart as the blade swung down, unleashing a wave of unadulterated darkness toward the temple and the top of the volcano itself. The attack passed through the barrage of golden flames like they weren't even there before it covered the radiant temple in a desolate gloom.

It was time to send these cultists to a true paradise.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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### Chapter 524 - Fanaticism

The zealots seemed enraged rather than wounded after being drenched in the darkness of **[Rapturous Divide]**. It was like they took it as a personal affront that he had shrouded their temple and part of the massive rune in darkness.

They all started emitting flames that actually seemed to counteract the darkness, and Zac's eyes widened in surprise when he saw that even the temple itself seemed capable to resist the effect of his skill. Nothing like this had happened when he fought the massive eagles before, but they were just dumb birds after all.

It was naïve to think that there was no way to counteract his newly acquired skill, and Zac knew he couldn't waste any time. He had already tested this before. The separate clouds didn't hold any individual power, they were only useful if they worked together. If the cultists managed to destroy the first wave before he managed to release the second one, the skill would have been wasted.

He hurriedly swung his golden blade in a second arc, the fractal edge crumbling into motes of light as a second wave shot out, this one reinforced by the Fragment of the Bodhi.

A few cultists welcomed the golden wave as they peppered Zac with a barrage of flame-based attacks, but most seemed to understand that something was wrong. They immediately used movement skills to get out of the way, clearly treasuring their lives higher than the well-being of their temple. Zac didn't care about that though, as his main goal wasn't some weak footsoldiers.

Zac looked at the golden wave flying toward the mountain with anticipation as he conjured another set of leaves **[Nature's Barrier]** to block out the attacks that still tried to bring him out of the sky. However, there was still a sense of unease lingering in the back of his mind. The problem wasn't that he felt pressure from the large number of attacks, but rather that it all felt extremely haphazard for such a powerful force.

A few simple fireball arrays and a hundred soldiers from a force that was a scourge known across the whole Multiverse? He had taken out far more than that during the invasion of Port Atwood, and everything indicated that there should be thousands of cultists remaining on Earth. What was going on?

Zac's first instinct when he saw how empty the emptiness of the town was that this place actually wasn't the incursion, but rather one of their bases. But it was hard to argue with the massive pillar in red and gold that rose into the sky behind him.

Did the cultists perhaps conduct multiple simultaneous invasions on Earth, allowing them to discard all pillars but one? Their go-to method was to simply snatch the Incursion opportunity from other forces as far as he could tell, and perhaps they sometimes doubled up by mistake.

However, all that would have to wait as the golden wave pushed into the temple shrouded in darkness, causing the whole mountain to rumble. Screams of fury and grief echoed across the mountainside as the whole temple was cleanly split into two, and the opposing shockwaves toppled the four spires in one go.

Zac only managed to glimpse the opulent decor of the temple before it was utterly reduced to rubble, and a cascading wave of destruction followed in its wake as massive pieces of white boulders and raw rocks started falling down the side of the volcano, smashing everything in its path. It started to look like a mountain slide that

kept growing in severity, and even Zac was a bit shocked by how effective his attack was.

Of course, his success was aided by the fact that the temple itself was unaided by any defensive arrays, apart from the natural aura that seemed to resist the darkness of his first wave. Zac figured that the swing wouldn't have been anywhere near as effective against the undead fortress and its sturdy formations.

The large rune remained though, and Zac started to launch a series of Fractal edges at it, all infused with the Fragment of the Axe. A few zealots tried everything within their power to stop him, but they were like flies to Zac who stood far up in the air, launching his punishment upon the lands like a god of death.

His hunch about the rune was quickly proven right as it was far better protected against strikes compared to the rest of the buildings. A fiery aura burst out from the three wavy lines and rebuffed the fractal blades, turning them into cinders before they could bite into the engraving itself.

However, Zac wasn't discouraged, and his arm turned into a blur that rapidly launched blade after blade without exhaustion. What he was doing was high sacrilege judging by how pissed-off the zealots down on the ground appeared. One had actually burst into flames and exploded out of sheer anger, and Zac figured that if this couldn't draw out the Head Priest, then nothing would.

He still moved about in random patterns in the sky as he whittled down the energy of the rune, afraid that the Zealots were setting up a death beam or something similar. However, he was completely left to his own devices, apart from the occasional fireball coming from the few still-standing houses of the mountainside.

Blind faith ultimately wasn't an opponent to a sharp edge, and the three runes finally ran out of its mysterious energy, allowing Zac to turn the whole section of the volcano into a broken mess full of jagged scars. The three runes were replaced with a hundred cracks in less than thirty seconds, and part of the wall even collapsed into the center of the volcano, allowing a stream of magma to escape the volcano and crawl down toward the Incursion Pillar.

The scene made Zac's brows furrow as he had no idea what would happen if the Nexus Hub was swallowed by magma. Would the Incursion end, or would he become unable to claim the crystal? He looked around to get an indication of what was going on from the remaining invaders, but they weren't much of any help. Most of them had simply slumped down on the ground with tears running down their eyes, looking at the destruction with despair.

Zac felt a small sense of relief, as they looked utterly incapable of mounting any sort of trap. Had they really given up on this place? Didn't they care about going back home, instead focusing all their resources on the Mystic Realm? However, he suddenly noticed something off; a group of nine cultists in high-quality robes that shot toward the incursion pillar with impressive speed.

He hadn't seen them before as far as he could tell, meaning they perhaps had been waiting for some opportunity to strike. Zac hesitated what to do as he saw their escape, but he felt he finally couldn't wait any longer as he saw the cultists take out nine massive fiery crystals. They looked a lot like the Nexus Hub itself, except for the weak fire-attuned energies they emitted. The cultists wasted no time before they started inserting them into a set of grooves in the open-aired temple that encircled the Incursion.

Were they summoning someone? Or something?

Nothing good would come from letting the leaders complete their ritual, and Zac shot forward in an instant, putting away the leaf midair as he soared toward the pillar.

A few of the cultists tried to impede his trajectory, some even sacrificing themselves by blowing up. But Zac was unstoppable as he slammed into the ground right next to the pillar. He immediately destroyed the closest fire crystal with a swing of his axe, simultaneously killing the priest who fiddled with it.

He quickly transformed [**Love's Bond**] into its shield form before the swing even finished its trajectory, expecting a massive eruption of flames to swallow him when the crystal cracked. However, nothing of the sort happened. A bunch of shards flew in all directions, accompanied by some fiery dust that spread out like a small cloud. Zac made sure not to inhale it even though he didn't sense any danger from the stuff.

However, a sense of unease grew as the remaining eight priests seemed to work on inscribing the crystals even faster. Zac pushed his speed to the limit, moving like a tornado in a circle around the incursion. The eight priests and their pillars were destroyed in short order, allowing Zac to finally breathe out in relief.

But the creeping sense of danger only increased rather than subsided, and Zac quickly jumped up on the roof of the temple to get a better vantage.

A second group of cultists he hadn't sensed at all until now had somehow emerged among the rubble, but none of them cared about Zac in the slightest. They instead knelt toward the mountain peak, or perhaps toward the rune that Zac had destroyed. Zac didn't understand what they were doing, but he couldn't help but get a sinking feeling.

This was all too shady, and he would rather retreat for a bit and reassess the situation than stay for whatever these guys had planned. He ignored the Nexus Hub that hovered just fifty meters away, afraid that touching it was the key to their trap. Zac instead took out his flying treasure once more. However, his eyes widened in alarm when he infused it with his mental command as the emerald leaf was utterly unresponsive.

It felt like he was standing on some random palm leaf snatched from the jungle rather than a treasure inscribed and empowered by some unknown master from a greater sector than Zecia. He tried swapping the crystals that were already provided as a power source, but it didn't improve the situation at all.

Zac could pretty much confirm that something was wrong now, and he immediately started running for his life. But he only managed to activate [**Loamwalker**] once, barely getting a hundred meters away from the Incursion toward the jungle, before the ground started heaving to the point that he was thrown off his feet and unable to regain his footing.

Some fear finally started to set in and he tried to scramble toward the comparable safety of the jungle. But an apocalyptic explosion erupted behind him, forcing him to look back. The whole sky had been replaced by fire and molten rock as the volcano exploded. Not erupted, but literally exploded.

Pieces of the volcano as large as skyscrapers flew through the air as though they were weightless, soaring toward the distant edges of the basin. Only the foot of the mountain remained, releasing an endless amount of lava. A massive shockwave slammed into him before he even had a chance to erect any defenses, and Zac coughed out a mouthful of blood as he felt some of his bones were broken.

If he was in such a bad shape this far away from the epicenter, then there was no need to talk about the cultists who had knelt in prayer. They were either ashes or meat paste by now, swallowed by the blast.

Zac didn't know whether he should feel lucky that the eruption had contained such force that no rocks were falling anywhere near the volcano, but he quickly understood that he had bigger problems as the rumbles beneath him just kept

increasing in intensity. Just the vibrations alone would probably have killed a weaker cultivator, and even Zac felt his wounds worsen by the second.

But even that wasn't the scariest thing going on right now. It was rather the three golden waves that slowly rose from within the lava, carried upward by a pillar of golden flames. An intense wave of divinity, far eclipsing that of the simple inscription on the wall, radiated from the enormous insignia, and Zac felt tears running down his face from just gazing at it. Looking at the three lines truly felt like gazing upon God himself.

If God was an entity of endless fury and destruction.

Zac's mind shook as his danger-sense screamed bloody murder. Just a minute ago he had felt like a god of slaughter as he dismantled the rune and half the town from the safety of his leaf, but he realized how valuable that feeling had been. He was not a god, he could barely be considered an ant compared to the real powers of the universe.

The golden insignia finally stabilized up in the sky, drowning the whole basin in its golden splendor. At least the rumblings had subsided somewhat, allowing Zac to get back on his feet. There was no hesitation in his mind as he activated [Loamwalker] to get the hell away from there.

However, he only managed to flee less than a hundred meters before a scorching pain enveloped him, prompting him to fall over once more. He shot out a series of fractal edges in each direction while his eyes wildly looked for the source of the threat, but he only cut through empty air. His harried mind scrambled to figure out what was going on, and he quickly figured out the reason for the pain.

It was that dust he had been covered in earlier, the innocuous substance that had been released from the crystals. A moment ago they felt like just some golden sand that had covered him as he destroyed the array crystals, but they weren't so innocuous any longer. They now radiated a restrictive force that made it look like he was on fire.

Even worse, the flames also formed an intangible bond that ran between his body and the temple behind him, like a leash made of energy. It connected him to the cloud of golden sand that was still spread around the broken crystals like a fetter. Or perhaps it was more apt to say that the light was connected to the Incursion itself, as he saw that the flames had merged with the energy pillar itself.

He had been tricked.

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**Chapter 525 - Sigil**

Zac finally understood why the cultists had acted so weirdly until now. A few of them had simply been sacrificial pawns for Zac to kill in hopes that it would make him lower his guard. The cultists utilized the fact that everyone thought of them as insane zealots with no regard for their lives. They were ruthless against others, but perhaps even more-so against themselves.

But the real method to deal with him was obviously not the meager defense in front of the main temple, and the inscription in the mountain wall was probably just a red herring as well. The real threat was brooding inside the lava itself, its presence obscured by the huge rune and the natural fire-attuned energies of the volcano itself.

That only left the issue of the nine flame crystals. Zac had immediately remembered the invasion of Port Atwood the other week when he saw them setting up their “array”. The invaders had set up a very similar constellation back then to summon the set of meteors. Nine clergymen set themselves ablaze in a circle around him, just like these ones planted the crystals in a circle around the incursion pillar.

Were the actions back on the island all a sacrifice to trick him into destroying those crystals?

The utter lack of powerful arrays had also made him lower his guard somewhat after he had destroyed everything that looked like a threat. But the golden insignia in the sky radiated a terrifying pressure, even eclipsing the force of Adriel’s blast that was powered by four array towers.

Figuring out how they had actually managed to create the massive avatar in the sky obviously wasn’t as important as getting the hell out of here though. He activated **[Cosmic Gaze]** to get a hint of how the burning fetters worked, and it was mostly fire-attuned as expected. However, there was also that other odd energy mixed withing; the energy of conviction.

The golden fetter seemed to be held together by the faith of these zealots, and Zac long knew their conviction was as strong as it could get. Zac growled with frustration as he tried cutting the bindings apart, but **[Verun’s Bite]** just flew straight through the flames without affecting it at all. Infusing the blade with his Dao Fragments didn’t make a lick of difference either, it was even more intangible than the ghosts he had fought until now.

He tried ignoring the pain and keep running away next, and he was soon screaming on top of his lungs as he stretched the flames to their limits. He was hoping to snap the fetter with brute force, but the pain quickly became too much to bear even for him, forcing him to move back toward the incursion pillar once more.

A bell suddenly echoed across the basin, a clear gong that seemed to reach the depths of his soul. It obviously came from the rune in the sky, like it was announcing the descent of the divine. A few cracks echoed out from his body and he coughed out another mouthful of blood, just in time to see a waterfall of fire fall out from the sky.

The flames came out of the insignia itself, and it felt like time itself slowed down as it slowly made its way toward the ground. Zac’s danger sense was once again screaming at him to get away, and one glance was enough to realize that the fire that was currently moving toward him was far more dangerous than normal flames.

It was once more that power of conviction that made the flames almost seem holy, and Zac started to understand what was going on.

The Zealots had probably prayed toward the rune on the volcano since they arrived, constantly reinforcing it with the power of their conviction. The rune in turn had taken that energy and infused the golden insignia that now hung in the sky. Who knew what the end-goal was of this thing was, if Zac had not shown up to ruin their plans.

Set the whole world on fire?

Knowing the cultists it wasn’t such a far-fetched idea. The body snatchers would capture the high-value corpses of Earth, after which the fanatics torched the whole planet, leaving no evidence or lingering threats behind.

Zac’s mind churned as he tried to figure out a way out of the situation, and he could eventually only come up with one solution. Space split apart above him as he ran toward the incursion, once more jumping on top of the roof closest to the pillar itself.

The wooden hand of **[Nature’s Punishment]** rose toward the sky, but Zac frowned when he felt the hand being rebuffed as it tried to ascend after a certain

height. The three lines hummed as it released a radiant light, and Zac found himself unable to place the skill above the insignia, like it was some sacrilege that went against the order of the heavens themselves.

It immediately dashed his idea of drowning the burning sigil in a deluge of water.

With his first plan ruined he could only move to his backup plan, and he instead activated the hand where it was. The enormous emerald fractal lit up in the sky, and a torrent of water started pouring out. However, the water didn't target the insignia itself, but rather the golden flames it spewed out. He could at least deal with the flames even if he couldn't take out the root cause just yet.

A massive explosion threw Zac off the roof again as the water of **[Nature's Punishment]** was instantly turned into steam the moment it came in contact with the holy flames. The same happened to the streams that missed the flames and instead fell on the lava below, but the reaction at least managed to slow the lava's advance toward his location.

Pain racked Zac's body, but he made sure to keep the skill going as he scrambled back on his feet, pushing **[Nature's Punishment]** to its limits as he infused it with the Fragment of the Bodhi. There was thankfully no lack of water with such an enormous lake nearby, and enough liquid to submerge a city block burst out of the fractal.

Zac breathed out in relief as he could quickly make out that the descending sea of golden flames had been stopped in its tracks, whittled down by the incessant outpouring of water. However, that didn't mean that he had won, but rather that he had entered a competition of endurance of which skill would run out of steam first.

If it was just a cultivator on the other side, then Zac would have been confident in outlasting them without breaking a sweat, but he quickly came to realize that he was dealing with something else entirely as the seconds passed. Sweat started streaming down his whole body from the heat and exertion, and he felt that he wouldn't be able to keep the skill going for much longer.

It wasn't an issue of Cosmic Energy, but simply that there was a limit to how long the skill could function. However, he could sense that the energy that the golden lines radiated had been expended by more than half, meaning it wasn't some infallible item that drew power from the heavens or something.

Only five seconds remained on **[Nature's Punishment]**, and he immediately made his choice as he pushed the golden hand to readjust itself somewhat. The emerald fractal that came with the skill was pretty much fixed after having been activated, but he could tilt it a little bit, which allowed him to change the direction of the stream of water.

He didn't try to catch a larger part of the wave of flames that kept raining down from the insignia, but rather the opposite. The water instead shot straight toward the incursion pillar and himself. Zac steadied himself as a wall of water slammed into him, completely drenching him as it tried to carry him away toward the jungle.

However, Zac quickly stomped his feet into the ground with enough force to lodge himself in the rock, while doing the same with a fractal blade from **[Chop]**. He wouldn't have loved anything more than being carried far from this place, but the water was unfortunately unable to douse the fiery bonds that kept him in place. The Incursion pillar rebuffed the water without any effort as well, and it looked like the pillar empowered the bond.

He was afraid that he would accidentally kill himself if he pushed himself too far, so he had to stay around. **[Nature's Punishment]** finally ended, and Zac saw that his efforts at least had allowed him to quell the threat of the magma flowing out from

the remains of the volcano. It had already cooled into odd layers of stone that formed a towering wall where the city once stood.

However, the insignia was still going strong, and Zac scrambled to figure out what to do next. The flames weren't especially fast, but they would still reach him in just a few seconds. Wasting no time he immediately rushed into the Incursion pillar itself. A strong rebounding force was emitted from the Nexus Hub, but he had no problem pushing through.

He quickly reached the center of the pillar and he swung his axe with all the force he could muster.

A golden shield that Zac recognized all too well appeared in front of his edge just as it was about to bite into the large crystal and Zac sighed when he realized that the System prevented him from destroying the crystal itself. He hoped he would be able to free himself from the burning bond that way, but it looked like it would be impossible. However, that didn't mean that there was no reaction to his attack as a prompt appeared in front of him.

**[Nexus Hub Capture Activated. Hold for 1 hour to conquer.]**

Zac quickly read the screen before he waved it away. It wouldn't help him against the incoming sea of flames, but it did sound like there wouldn't be any grace period for the Invaders if he completed the capture. How would they use his Nexus Hub to return home when they were enemies?

However, he first needed to survive the incoming flames, and he looked up with consternation. He eventually decided against unleashing **[Deforestation]** in hopes of destroying the rune, wanting to save it just in case. It was still possible that the Head Priest and his remaining generals were hiding in the vicinity somewhere, waiting for him to be weakened enough by the insignia before they struck a killing blow.

He needed to save his most powerful ace just in case.

The bronze flash would probably do the trick, but he had no way to get up there with his flying treasure being blocked out somehow. There was something else though. Zac sighed as he took out the rusty sword, and discordant wails immediately assaulted his ears.

Using the cursed sword so soon after activating it last time came with very real risks according to Catheya. A weapon like this fed on its victims, and it was evidenced by how he already heard the voices even before even unsheathing the weapon. You would normally use some restraining method on a weapon like this, or starve it out to weaken it before you used it again.

But Zac didn't have the luxury of waiting around as the golden insignia seemed more than capable of spewing out its unceasing flames for a while longer. His whole body was wracked with pain as he drew the blade, unleashing the half-moon toward the three lines in the sky. It steadily started to grow as it picked up speed, seemingly eager to attack the energy-rich rune in the sky.

A handful of tendrils immediately emerged from the weapon and latched onto Zac's arm as well, making it look like the sword was fusing with his body. A mysterious energy burrowed into his arm and headed straight for his head the next moment, effortlessly evading his attempts to block it out with **[Mental Fortress]**.

Extremely intrusive voices boomed in his mind, blocking out any coherent thought. Zac's eyes widened in fear as he saw more and more tendrils reaching out from the weapon, and his whole arm was covered in an instant. He wanted to stow away the weapon, but he knew he needed to hold on, as putting it away would cancel the attack in the sky.

However, a deep resounding heartbeat suddenly quelled the voices, and Zac felt like his heart turned into a black hole that swallowed the invading energies whole. More and more energy entered his hidden node, and more was even dragged out from the sword itself. Zac even sensed fear from the weapon just before the sword detached itself from his arm and turned inert.

The half-moon thankfully wasn't affected by the struggle on the ground as it effortlessly cut through the sea of flames in the sky, heading straight for the divine rune. It created a corridor free of fire for a brief second before the sea closed in on itself as it passed by. It seemed unable to actually absorb the flames, but the flames also seemed unable to deter its progression.

Finally, it reached its maximum size just as it slammed into the rune. There was no clear winner and no explosion of wild energies, only a stalemate that emitted a steadily increasing pressure. Zac knew things wouldn't end well no matter what the outcome was judging by the ominous buildup, and he quickly tried to activate one of his defensive treasures.

However, he quickly found that the restriction on the area didn't only apply to his flying leaf, but even his defensive talismans. **[Love's Bond]** seemed unable to activate its skills as well, though he could thankfully swap between its different forms.

An explosion finally rocked the area and the thick haze from the evaporated water was pushed away, exposing three golden lines and no silver half-moon. Even the cursed sword had been unable to take out the divine symbol it looked like. However, Zac soon noticed that the rune wasn't completely unscathed.

Not only had it lost its radiant luster, but there was even a small tear on one of the golden lines. The crack quickly spread, like a piece of ice that was slowly breaking apart. However, Zac didn't really feel any relief as his danger sense didn't calm down in the slightest. Looking up at the enormous rune made him feel like he was standing in front of a dam that was slowly bursting.

That rune had contained terrifying amounts of flames. What would happen when it finally broke apart?

He couldn't help but think back to Ogras' words of warning, of how the cultists always seemed to default to blowing everything up when it looked like they would fail. Miasma immediately started coursing through his body as his eyes and hair turned pitch-black. He couldn't flee and breaking the rune didn't seem to have helped all too much. He would need to endure the final blast, and that would require his other class.

Ogras and his big mouth.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 526 - Holy Fire**

Zac didn't have time to curse the demon for his foreshadowing as he felt something terrifying was coming. He immediately started setting up his layers of defenses, not holding anything back for potential enemies. Everything except him was long dead in the area, killed by either the explosion, the magma, or the concussive explosions who had rocked the whole core of the basin.

The cage of **[Profane Seal]** sprung up around him, forming an outer layer of protection. Zac normally used the skill as a means of caging his enemies, but it was just as good at defending from the outside. It was also one of the skills that hadn't worsened

in compatibility at all since gaining the Fetters of Desolation class. Between the chains and the entrapment, it looked like it was right up the new class's ally.

The cage encapsulated the Incursion as well even when he shrunk it to the smallest size possible, and Zac was both surprised and relieved to see that the energy-dense pillar didn't cause a clash with his skill. The pillar that almost blinded him with its intense fire-attuned energies shone straight through the fractal dome of his skill like it was just an illusion.

Zac had no idea how that worked, but he had no time to look into it as the flames were almost upon him.

A huge amount of Miasma left his body the next moment a hundred skeletons materialized. They didn't stay around inside the cage though, but they rather ran out as Zac opened the back gate of **[Profane Seal]** before closing it again. The skeletons didn't stop there, but they kept running into the jungle, only stopping hundreds of meters away when he couldn't control them any further away.

They weren't there to defend against the incoming flames, but rather act as damage substitutes. They would hopefully work as sentries as well in case there actually were cultists hiding in the jungle. He didn't share vision with the things, but he did have a vague sense of the life-force around them. He would also feel it if they were destroyed by something, giving him an early warning that way.

The skeletons barely made it out in time as the holy flames finally descended upon the cage. He was immediately inundated in not only a blazing heat, but also a pressure that he could feel on a spiritual level. But the shield held, though Zac knew that the golden flames were not the true threat. The real danger was the damaged insignia in the sky.

The enormous rune still hadn't completely cracked yet, but Zac could see between the fiery sky that it wasn't long for this world. There was a massive cut in the middle of it now, where the half-moon blade had struck it. Hairline cracks spread all across its surface as well, and an intense light radiated out from the cracks, proving there was still a lot of untamed energies trapped inside.

Zac still didn't feel safe after seeing the ominous portents in the sky, and the black armor spread out across his body as **[Love's Bond]** took its defensive form. He might not be able to activate **[Death's Embrace]** as things stood, but he could still use the shield-shaped coffin to summon **[Immutable Bulwark]**.

He also tried activating a few backup defensive talismans just in case, but they didn't work just like everything else. There was nothing else he could activate, so he finally started digging a hole into the ground, hoping to use the earth itself as an insulating layer against the flames. It had worked against Salvation, so he hoped it would work once more.

However, Zac only managed to rip a ten-meter hole before a terrifying crack in the sky released a tremendous pressure, almost destroying the outer cage in an instant. The massive gates and miasmatic towers were reduced to decrepit ruins, and the azure fractals had almost turned invisible from the flames. There was no more time, so he punched the ground one last time and jumped into the hole before he put his bulwark as a stopgap to block out the flames.

**[Profane Seal]** completely crumbled the next moment, just as a shocking aura was released above him. Zac couldn't see what was going on because of having burrowed down, but it almost felt like a celestial had descended upon the basin. A marvelous aura drenched the whole jungle, and Zac felt his mind going blank.

The Lord was calling him, so what was he doing underground? He needed to welcome His arrival and offer obeisance. Zac slowly got up to his feet, but his whole body suddenly froze as he was startled awake.

What the hell was that?

One more second and he would have deactivated his defensive shield and welcomed the holy flames from above. His mind had thankfully been hardened by constant life-and-death struggles and competing with the Splinter, allowing him to snap out of it before it was too late. More importantly, he still had **[Indomitable]** to fall back on. It was far stronger than **[Mental Fortress]**, and it had managed to rebuff the false thoughts after just a second, even though the skill was still middle proficiency.

It was just in time too, as the flames slammed into the bulwark the next second, immediately incinerating the shallow layers of dirt above.

The miasmic shield from **[Immutabe Bulwark]** was mostly opaque, but it still allowed him to somewhat see the fiery hellscape above. The flames were no longer golden, but rather replaced by a milky white. The holy aura in the flames was multiple times stronger than what he felt before, no doubt containing the essence of the rune in the sky.

His heartstrings tugged again as he saw the pristine flames, and part of him just wanted to open his arms and take it on. But he didn't completely lose himself this time after already having realized the threat of the flames. However, it did make him wonder. Were the zealots perhaps not quite as pious as advertised, but rather forcibly converted?

Zac's pitch-black eyes were illuminated by the flames as he thought of the possibilities. What if the Church of Everlasting Dao had formed some sort of ingenious cultivation system? They turned cultivators into zealots with the holy flames, and the zealots kept empowering the flames with their conviction. It formed a self-perpetuating source of power that could swallow everything in its surroundings.

Things quickly took a turn for the worse though, stopping Zac from entertaining any other stray thoughts. The flames steadily ate away at the floor itself, until he was standing in a deep crater, assaulted by flames from every direction.

His bulwark was able to rebuff the flames, but it couldn't cover him from all sides, so the flames finally reached his last line of defense, the black armor of **[Vanguard of Undeath]**. His whole body was awash with pain the next moment as the flames glommed onto him. Zac tried to at least keep the flames outside, but they were like burrowing parasites that found their way inside through the tiniest cracks and weaknesses in his defenses.

Sizzling sounds escaped from within his armor as he was getting cremated alive. He screamed on top of his lungs, but his cries were drowned out by the roaring flames. Rolling around on the ground did nothing, and the Bulwark had essentially become useless by this point. All he could see was white, and all that he could feel was agony.

Even his mind was assaulted by the insidious whispers of the holy flames, trying to make him stop resisting with the help of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** and **[Undying Legion]**. He was currently infusing the black armor with the Fragment of the Coffin, while his body itself fought the flames with the Fragment of the Bodhi. He also released a steady stream of miasma from his pores, which helped combat the flames as well.

He also got one surge of vitality after another as a handful of skeleton warriors crumbled every second or so. He felt that if he stopped anyone of these things he would actually die, so he could only keep going while ignoring the calls from within the fire. Zac quickly worked his way through the hundred-odd summons though, at which point he only was able to rely on himself.

Every second felt like an hour, but he finally felt like the flames started to weaken? Or was he just so badly burned that he couldn't really tell any longer? A deep thud suddenly shook the ground, and Zac glanced toward the source of the sound with bleary eyes, only to see a massive golden pillar stab into the ground just fifty meters away from him.

The sigil had finally broken down and was falling apart.

However, he didn't have time to celebrate as the surroundings suddenly started to darken, and he looked up in horror only to see an enormous golden pillar falling straight toward him. His legs didn't really listen to him, so Zac barely had time to resummon his bulwark before it slammed into him like a mountain. The pressure from the slam transferred into his body, and Zac once more felt the cracking of broken bones.

The thing was just way too heavy to throw off, and Zac was forced to activate **[Unholy Strike]** to just angle his bulwark and have it thump down next to him, causing a minor earthquake. A series of tremendous shockwaves followed, and the area was soon covered in the remnants of the broken sigil.

The fall of the insignia also meant the end of the white-hot flames, but the remnants of the sea of golden fire still covered the area. The golden flames only felt like a sunburn after having withstood the condensed version though, and Zac slowly made his way toward the Nexus Hub.

Without the sigil in the sky, the sea of golden flames had lost its source, and it died down soon after. However, there was one fire remaining; the fetters binding him to the Incursion Pillar. Zac was shocked to see that the fetter still held. Just what was that golden dust made of to be able to withstand just about everything and keep him in place?

However, the only capability of the odd flame was to prevent him from leaving, which was fine with Zac. He wasn't planning on going anywhere while the pillar was still active, and he instead sat down in the middle of the crater and popped a healing pill into his mouth.

Only when things had calmed down did he realize just how bad his state was. He had 9 broken bones and multiple wounded organs. Even worse, most of his body was covered in severe burns from the flames. If he had been a weaker human he would likely have died from the shock alone. Even with his massive Endurance and Vitality it still felt like his skin was on fire, and the salves in his possession were only limited in their efficacy.

His wretched state wasn't the only surprise though.

There was a lot of energy in his body, slowly swirling around his Hidden Node. Zac hadn't noticed earlier due to the pain, but it looked like his **[Void Heart]** had been busy while he withstood the flames, and a massive amount of power had accumulated. Even better, it looked like energy extracted with his hidden node stayed within his body longer without dissipating compared to the energy that came from kills.

It was good news though, as he didn't want to repeat the mistake from the Undead Incursion. What if he broke open his next node, only for the Head Priest to jump out of the woodwork once more? Then again, he had already done some research to avoid something like that happening again and he had actually learned a few tricks thanks to Triv.

The ghost had been utterly astounded to find out that Zac actually was a mortal, and he even insisted that a pureblood Draugr couldn't be one. It also made him a lot more adamant about having Zac "return" to the Empire Heartlands to seize his so-called birthright. Triv was sure that Zac would be able to cultivate as long as he found a proper Draugr master.

Zac wasn't so sure though, even if his undead side was of the noble race. He had a feeling that his utter lack of cultivation ability was related to his constitution, and not something a better master could solve.

But after the ghost had calmed down it actually taught Zac a pretty nifty trick. Being an energy-based creature Triv had a really marvelous control of his energy, and it taught Zac a simple method to use his own Miasma or Cosmic Energy to "trap" external energy.

Triv used it as a defensive measure, but it worked for Zac as well in preventing energy loss. It was far from fool-proof, but it did prolong the duration he could keep the energy he gained from kills by a large margin.

Cultivators could apparently just use their own cultivation manuals for a far superior result, some being able to store the energy for weeks if need be. Zac was nowhere near that, but he could at least keep 80% of any energy he gained for over an hour. It was enough for his purposes, as it would give him ample time to get to safety in case he wanted to try breaking open a node.

It was also enough to wait out the Nexus Hub this time, and the golden pillar finally winked out of existence, and Zac sighed in relief when his bindings disappeared as well.

During this whole time he had kept an eye out for any movement, but the area was utterly desolate. Neither [**Cosmic Gaze**] nor his augmented Draugr-vision had seen a lick of activity, essentially proving that the cultists had given up on this place.

With the Incursion being closed as well there was not much reason for the cultists to return either. Zac guessed they were either running toward the mystic realm or hiding in some desolate corner of Earth right now. With no threat appearing, Zac decided to try bursting open the node in his leg. He was in a pretty wretched state, but not to the point that he needed bed-rest.

He would need to rest up in either case after this fight, so he might as well take the opportunity to break open a node. That way he could heal everything together without wasting time. However, just as he was about to take control of the energy circling his heart a series of prompts appeared, making him stop in his tracks.

**[Congratulations. Integration Trial Succeeded. Calculating Grade.]**

**[Grade awarded: A. Contribution Rank: #1. Grade awarded increased to S.]**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!**

**Chapter 527 - The Next Step**

"Shit, why is it so hard to get one's hands on some tokens? Or some other way to activate that big-ass crystal inland?" Smaug muttered in annoyance as he paced back and forth in his home-prison in Port Atwood.

Who would have thought that he would be put under house arrest and tasked with coming up with money-making schemes by that little blue devil? He had just tried to get a better understanding of the resources available to his new boss, and this was the thanks he got?

"Ai, the heavens are truly jealous of talent. To think I would be turned prisoner because I wanted to help out," Smaug lamented as he paced back and forth.

“What are you talking about, prisoner? You can still walk around in this neighborhood without getting impaled by those Amazons,” Rima giggled. “And you wouldn’t be in this predicament if you hadn’t tried to infiltrate that shipyard. You knew that place was off-limits.”

“I had to take the shot, stupid. That place is extremely suspicious, even more so than the Repository,” Smaug snorted. “Those muscle-heads are busy now, and I need to get some things done before that man realizes how open-ended his orders were.”

That was the good point of Lord Atwood; he wasn’t a hands-on boss. He had told him to head to Port Atwood and listen to the little blue bastard. But it turned out that second-hand commands weren’t actually binding under his contract. He had pretended that the little asshole’s order to stay in the neighborhood was binding, but they were anything but.

He could leave anytime, as Lord Atwood only told him to go here and listen, not that he couldn’t leave.

“Don’t you have any decency?” Rima said with disdain. “Instead of thinking of ways of enriching yourself, you could actually do what was asked of you.”

“Would me having decency help Earth survive this shitstorm?” Smaug countered. “No, right? So I might as well prepare for the off-chance we survive, or more likely if things go south here. What about you? How goes it with the sister? Do they have a way off this cursed rock?”

“She’s never around,” Rima muttered. “And besides, I don’t want to get closer to MacKenzie for you, useless brother. She is the sister of Lord Atwood and a good friend of Ogras Azh’Rezak. She’s even close to that manly Demon General.”

“What would those three want with a useless brat?” Smaug snorted. “What do you bring to the table to those kinds of people?”

“Why would I need to be strong to become someone’s wife?” Rima said with a roll of her eyes.

“Don’t get too attached,” Smaug muttered. “This planet’s future is limited even if the great lord Atwood manages to deal with the most immediate mess. I’ve found out a few things. Even if we survive all this we’ll just turn into some backwater planet at the edge of the universe, a place where even the birds won’t shit.”

“This again,” Rima sighed.

“I am telling you. Our aim should be getting to some real human metropolis! There will be opportunities for advancement for me. And for you? Won’t there be real geniuses to marry? People with family trees millions of years old, and pockets as deep as the Mariana Trench,” Smaug said, his eyes glistening.

“Besides-“ Smaug continued, but he was stopped in his tracks by a series of prompts that appeared in front of him.

He had actually done it. That wooden block had taken out the cultists.

“You see!” Rima said with glee. “He really is a prince charming. He’s done more for this world than the rest of us combined. Perhaps he even has some time to settle down now. He’s been single for a while now.”

“That man has become addicted to becoming stronger already,” Smaug muttered absentmindedly as he closed the screen that told him his rating was a measly D-Grade. “He won’t be looking for romance anytime soon.”

Rima snorted in response, but Smaug wasn’t interested in having this debate once more. He was more interested in going through his licensed wares. He already knew that there were limitations to the items he could purchase because of the ongoing

invasions, and his eyes glimmered when he saw two of the latest additions that had appeared now that the war was over.

**[Goblin Honor - Temporarily ignore a contract erected by someone at Level 100 or below.]**

**[Stumpbugle Talisman - Teleport to Stumpbugle Headquarters for career opportunities!]**

Going to a place called “Stumpbugle” wasn’t really what he had in mind when he said he would strike out in a real metropolis, and he had no desire to meet the inventors of the weird treasures that were available for purchase. But it was also an undeniable fact that Earth was on the brink of destruction, even if they had dealt with the Incursion.

The weaker threat was gone, but what about that old monster who could appear at moment’s notice?

Those zombie bastards had clearly known how to block teleportation arrays, so a peak D-Grade cultivator was probably able to do the same with just a wave of his arm. What if the whole planet got jammed the moment he arrived? Wouldn’t that mean that he and Rima would be stuck here until they were turned into some sort of cultivation resource? Was he willing to bet everything on Zachary Atwood prevailing against those odds?

He wasn’t.

--

The vast cloud of dust in a forgotten corner outside the Zecia Sector shuddered as it started spinning and condensing. Only by coming close would one be able to realize that these weren’t particles of ice drifting about in space, but rather tens of millions of intricate machines lying dormant, soaking up the energies of the near-by irregularity.

The machines had soon congealed into a person, a woman freely floating about in the vast beyond. Her amber eyes opened for the first time in decades as she looked around with some confusion. It was too early. She immediately opened a screen to see what had dragged her out of the reverie.

Had something happened to the project?

However, he quickly learned she had been awoken due to her Talisman activating from scenario 18, and she sighed in relief. Tens of thousands of screens appeared in front of her, taking up thousands of square meters in front of her. All kinds of readings and snippets flittered across the screens with terrifying speed for a second before they dissolved to dust and returned to her body again.

“Hm? How curious. How was he able to evolve with his cursed constitution? Did we miss something back then?” Leandra muttered as she thoughtfully looked at the vast star in front of her. “Or is it another ploy by the System?”

In either case, it was good news. Her daughter should be safe with such a powerful protector now that the planet had withstood the Integration Trial. Her suggestions should remain in their depths, helping them stay alive even without her assistance. She really wanted to rush back, but she knew that she had to be careful. She was in no state of moving about.

A lot of sacrifices had been made to come this far, she couldn’t ruin the efforts of her ancestors by being hasty.

There was also the oddity of someone using one of her backdoor keys on a merchant’s vessel at the edge of integrated space. Had one of the children been sent on a mission by the cursed heavens? Such a quest was obviously not an accident, and

annoyance flared up in her heart at the thought of her flesh and blood being manipulated to turn against her by that damned broken AI.

A slight pressure in her forehead dragged her out of her thoughts, and she quickly activated defensive measures to evade the tracking attempt on her soul.

"They still haven't given up," Leandra muttered as she once more dissolved into motes that spread across space.

The last thing to dissolve was the two amber eyes, radiating an unshakeable conviction.

"There will be a reckoning one day. Those who moved against our family will all pay the price, even the heavens themselves."

--

"Do you have it?" A'Feris asked, not without some interest as far as Io could tell.

He was glad to see some fire within the eyes of his old friend. Io knew his own limits had long been reached, but A'Feris still had a small chance to go further. However, he was losing his momentum, the most dangerous thing to lose in cultivation apart from one's life.

Perhaps this Zac Piker was the key.

The more he gathered the more he felt like this little demon was just what A'Feris needed. The young axeman's penchant for drawing ire from both his contemporaries and the Boundless Heavens itself almost seemed unmatched.

"I have it here," Io said, and one scene after another appeared.

It showed the utter destruction of a grand mansion by a square, and a bloodied man walking out of the rubble, holding a head in his hand. A young demonling appeared next to him, and they fled to a teleported, harried by hundreds of attacks.

It showed a hazy outline of how the Tower of Eternity changed into one of the Primordial Steles, and how it infected the minds of the children gathered in front of it. Finally, it culminated in a heated battle where one stood against many but prevailed.

"The Stele of Conflict?" A'Feris snorted. "The Zecia sector will become hectic as the ripples of war spread out from this enclosed dimension. That thing is like a mindplague."

"Conflicts will engulf the sector, and heroes will emerge from the flames," Io nodded.

"Axe, sharpness heaviness. Corpse? No, putrefaction? Interesting," A'Feris muttered, his eyes glistening as he looked on. "And echoes of the Sukhavati? Greedy boy."

"It might look greedy, but what if it works out?" Io said. "He is clearly on his way to forming a path of supremacy. With some guidance--"

"It's not that easy to walk the path of Life and Death," A'Feris sighed with a shake of his head. "He is too discordant right now. He is grasping for everything, trying to encompass the universe. It is an extremely unstable and dangerous state. Me or someone else stepping in now would only impede his path. He needs to form his own understanding and be the one to make the sacrifices."

"So you're not taking him in, after all?" Io asked. "Such a rare seedling, and with your path..."

"I didn't say that," A'Feris smiled. "I just said that it is too early now. He seems to have a few interesting challenges ahead. Let him deal with them by himself. If he can emerge alive he might be able to create a workable path from the experience. It's not too late to join a proper force by that point and benefit from some structured guidance. Have any of the old bastards claimed him?"

“Not at the moment,” Io said. “Perhaps they are thinking in the same way.”

“Are you saying I’m becoming like the old geezers?” A’Feris snorted. “I’m still pretty young for someone at my stage, you know.”

Io smiled and shook his head before his eye turned back to the screen.

“He reminds me of you. I watched your struggle against the Foradine Covenant back on the Verokh Continent just like this. I hope he can become another pillar of our Sect some day in the future,” Io said with reminiscence in his eyes.

“I was a lot more dashing, no doubt,” A’Feris laughed. “But I agree. There is potential in him, and he’s a gamble worthy to take. Well, unless he goes and does something stupid like joining the unorthodox. He’s a progenitor, right? We’ll go pick him up after the shroud has been lifted. The quarantine should have been lifted by then. It was just an image of the Stele, after all, rather than the real thing.”

---

A sigh escaped from Uld’s lips as he kept infusing the altar with power. The fires danced in his eyes, but his gaze was locked on the unmoving form of Arkensau. Who knew that this bastard possessed something as valuable as a [Heaven’s Intervention]?

If not for that, then he would have been interring the body and preparing it for sale. But now he was stuck nurturing this idiot back to health instead, while the Monarch-Select ran rampant across the planet. And now he was stuck here on this desolate rock.

“Orders from above, for your eyes only,” Trovad said as his eyes turned to the altar. “Arrived just hours before the gate was closed. How is Inquisitor Arkensau?”

“With Heaven’s blessing, he will be fine within a week or two. The seed burns strong within him,” Uld said as he accepted the golden-inlaid crystal.

Uld touched the crystal with the sigil in his mind, and a mix of exhaustion and relief washed through him as the strict voice of Archbishop Vantes echoed in his mind.

*Be wary of the local called the Super Brother-Man. We believe him to have appeared in the Tower of Eternity recently, causing a storm and conquering the eighth floor. The Church has never feared other forces of this remote Sector, but caution is needed.*

*The Dimensional Seed is of utmost importance, far eclipsing the value of any bodies. This mission will replace all the original goals. Keep the inquisitors in check, leave no weaknesses. Acquire the Seed and lock yourselves away in the Mystic Realm. We will be able to find you after the shroud of the heavens has been lifted. Your reward for a completed mission will far eclipse the cost of a hundred years.*

*Failure will likewise come at a great cost.*

A wave of exhaustion buffeted his mind, but there was nothing Uld could do. The orders had been given so he could only comply.

“How did it go? Did the Monarch-Select fall?” Uld asked.

“Not even he should have survived the judgment,” Trovad said with conviction. “We will know for sure in a day. The glory of the heavens still lingers, blocking our sight, but the recordings should arrive shortly.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 528 - S-Grade**

“He did it!” Kenzie smiled, her clenched fists finally relaxing in her lap.

“It’s amazing,” Lyla said from the side. “It’s finally over. Maybe we can finally start living our lives again.”

“There are still some things that needs to be done though,” Kenzie smiled, though the smile felt a bit strained.

“Like what?” Lyla asked with confusion.

Lyla had stayed with Kenzie in her courtyard to help take her mind off the fact that Zac was risking his life against the cultists. She had instead asked far and wide about the various arrays and contraptions. It was a welcome distraction, and Kenzie had freely told her about the various arrays she was working on.

But all things must come to an end sooner or later. Her hesitation had already cost too much.

“Dealing with the traitors and the spies on the island, for example,” she said with a steady voice, her eyes boring into Lyla’s.

Kenzie had known for a while. She had known that Lyla was the one feeding intelligence back to the mainland through an ingenious array that was no doubt provided by the cultist infiltrators of the New World Government. It was because of her that so many had died, and she was the reason the cultists had learned of the entrance to the Mystic Realm.

Zac had saved her life, but she had returned the favor with malice, increasing the risk to him and everyone else in Port Atwood. Lyla had almost cut off their access to something their mother had left behind as well, which was unforgivable by itself.

Lyla only looked at her with incomprehension for a second until her form fell apart, her body replaced by a clay dummy. However, how could Kenzie not be prepared for something like this? She had seen Lyla use this very skill to survive multiple times during the Tutorial and their expeditions in the Dead Zone.

Her garden was like a fortress with layers and layers of arrays. They were originally meant to keep the area safe in case of a mishap with her experiments, but they worked just as well for trapping a level 36 cultivator. Not even her brother would be able to sense the slightest fluctuation even if he passed by right outside.

Lyla had learned to almost perfectly blend with the earth, but Kenzie had already managed to push her Seed of Loam to Peak Mastery. Together with Jeeves, it was effortless to pinpoint her location. Kenzie slightly circulated her Cosmic Energy, and an earth pillar rose from the ground, unearthing a horrified Lyla.

“Wait, they have my parents! I had no choice-” Lyla cried, but it was too late.

A Dao-empowered flame swallowed her whole, and no substitution or movement skill would save her from the Seed of Tinder. A shrill scream emerged from her throat, but it was almost instantly cut short by a wind-blade that decapitated her. The headless corpse was turned into ashes in less than a minute, and a wave of Kenzie’s hand spread the ashes in the garden.

Lyla had almost been as powerful as herself back during the Tutorial, but those days were long gone. She had stopped pushing herself since arriving at Port Atwood, spending most days not even cultivating at all. Killing her was completely effortless for Kenzie.

Some confusion and guilt appeared in Kenzie’s auburn eyes, but a red flash appeared in their depths and she gradually regained her composure.

“You’re right, I need to harden myself,” Kenzie sighed before she looked down at the scorched spot on the grass. “I’m sorry. But those who move against the family will have to pay the price.”

-----  
Zac's eyes lit up upon seeing the prompts. It looked very similar to when he had completed the Incursion Master quest, where he had gained the Dao Repository. He obviously wasn't surprised at being placed first in the contribution tally, but the grade was something new.

He had only heard of A-Grade before, and this was something even above that. Did that mean there were S-Grade cultivators as well? Zac had asked around about what the limit of cultivation was, but he had never got a real answer. The people of the Zecia sector didn't even know what the B-Grade entailed, let alone anything above that.

The next moment an even better prompt appeared.

**[Distributing Rewards]**

**[Additional Reward: Limited Title Slots +1. Frontrunner Title Permanence.]**

Zac whistled in surprise seeing the reward, or rather tried to whistle with his badly burnt lips. This was pretty huge. He had essentially received not one, but two additional Limited Title slots in one go. This was just what he needed to maintain his attribute lead against the elite cultivators of the sector.

He might not get double the attributes per level any longer, but having five Limited Title slots should allow him to stay ahead of even the greatest elites of the sector. Of course, that still required him to actually find some opportunities that provided a title.

The title permanence was a welcome surprise as well, but it made him think of something. Zac quickly tried to open the Ladder screen, only to find that nothing happened. Zac grimaced in annoyance when he realized the System had finished its Ladder experiment.

This could both be seen as good news and bad news. It was good news in the sense that no one beneath D-Rank would be able to find out his level any longer thanks to his bracer. Every single step he had taken until now had been monitored by millions of people, but now he was suddenly free. However, the change came with detriments as well.

He could no longer find any information about the Dominators either, though he didn't expect them to gain a bunch of levels out of nowhere. But more importantly, he wouldn't be able to keep tabs on his force and make sure everything was alright. Just opening the screen and looking at the familiar names during his tower climb had been a huge source of comfort, but he wouldn't be able to do so any longer while traveling the Zecia sector in the future.

There were life-monitoring treasures to buy that would provide a similar function, and Zac added it to the ever-growing list of things that Calrin needed to get him. But he also realized that the odds actually getting something useful from the Sky Gnome might have increased now that the incursions were gone and some restrictions were removed.

It was also somewhat of a relief that the title rewards didn't provide immediate attributes as he still wasn't sure how much his home-made Draugr Baths had increased his attribute cap. Zac quickly opened his title screen to be sure nothing had changed though.

**Name**

**Zachary Atwood**

**Level**

**81**

## Class

[E-Epic] Fetters of Desolation

## Race

[E] Draugr

## Alignment

[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord

## Titles

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Monarch-Select, Frontrunner, Apex Progenitor

## Limited Titles

Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th

## Dao

Fragment of the Axe - Middle, Fragment of the Coffin - Middle, Fragment of the Bodhi - Middle

## Core

[E] Duplicity

## Strength

2090 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 218%]

## Dexterity

992 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 187%]

## Endurance

2083 [Increase: 86%. Efficiency: 218%]

## Vitality

1375 [Increase: 76%. Efficiency: 218%]

## Intelligence

545 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 187%]

## Wisdom

911 [Increase: 70%. Efficiency: 187%]

## Luck

340 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]

## Free Points

0

## Nexus Coins

## [F] 5 919 187 601

Zac sighed in relief when he saw that his attributes were still the same, but he did notice a few differences after looking around through his screens. The first of all was the update of the titles, with Frontrunner having moved to the permanent bracket. But he had also gained a new title, which honestly wasn't too surprising.

**[Apex Progenitor: Pass the World Integration Trial with S Grade. Reward: Effect of Attributes +10%]**

It was a real top tier title, only being rivaled by his Tower Climb and Apex Hunter titles so far, giving a whopping 10% efficiency in every attribute. It had actually pushed him past 200% efficiency on his main attributes, meaning that he was more than twice as strong as his attributes indicated.

Efficiency was pretty much impossible to discern even with high-quality spying skills from what Zac had learned, so even if someone managed to glean his attributes they might only set themselves up for disaster. They would see Zac having 2000 Strength, only for him to burst out with the power of more than the double a second later.

He was also happy to see that he had finally taken some steps forward with his undead skills, with **[Indomitable]** reaching Late Proficiency, and both his ultimate skills having reached Middle Proficiency. He was still lagging behind compared to his human class, but it was a step in the right direction.

The fit of his skills, especially **[Undying Legion]** and **[Indomitable]** had worsened in compatibility since evolving, but they were still useful. They might turn into components of skill fusions for his new class in the future, but they would have to reach Peak Proficiency first for that to work.

There were also a lot of additions to his Town Shop, mainly defensive arrays that looked far more powerful than anything he had been able to purchase before. However, they were still limited by his power, with the strongest arrays being marked as "Early E-Grade". That didn't really come as a surprise though.

The system would never let people buy too powerful defenses, as that would drastically lessen the amount of conflict in the multiverse.

It was still a big upgrade to his weak Town Protection Array though, and Zac looked through the options for a few seconds until he suddenly froze in realization. The System called the Limited Title boost an additional reward. If that was the addition, then where were the original rewards?

The greed for loot quickly overcame the weariness in his body, and he scoured the whole crater for treasures. However, there was nothing apart from smoking-hot soil and an inert Nexus hub in the hole he found himself in. Glee was slowly replaced with confusion as he looked around. What was going on?

Was the reward once again related to his town? The phrasing of the prompts was extremely familiar to the way the System spoke when he received the Dao Repository, so Abby might have gotten the rewards back home. Last time the Stargazer held it back so that he would be able to choose where to place the reward, so there might be a similar situation waiting for him.

Zac immediately bought a Teleportation Array, but this time he didn't make it public. Zac rather kept it to himself like the array in his private area. If the teleporter was open a group of Valkyries and Demons would step through to this place a few minutes later, and Zac wasn't comfortable leaving them here in case the cultists returned.

He soon found himself back in his compound instead, somewhat relieved that there were no signs of his sister. It allowed him to hobble over to his courtyard and

close the arrays without causing any worry with his wretched appearance. There were no rewards in his home either, but he still held off on his urge to visit the Stargazer.

There was no way he wouldn't cause a panic if he entered the government building looking like a mix of a zombie and a rotisserie chicken, but more importantly, he still had a node to break open. He had been interrupted by the prompt just as he was about to break it open, and the rewards had allowed him to slow down and think clearly. There was no point in staying in a burning crater to open a node when he had free access to his home.

The accumulated energy in his chest was running a bit low because of the delay, so Zac ate one of his node-breaking pills while channeling the remains from the **[Void Heart]** to his leg. He also ate an anesthetic pill to block out the pain of his broken bones and burned skin. The pain wasn't to the point that he was immobilized, but he was afraid that it would mess with his concentration breaking open the node.

He only got something like 20% of the efficacy of the Node Breaking pill, but it was enough to tide him over along with the energies ripped from his cursed sword and the holy flames. A small explosion echoed out in the isolated courtyard after around ten minutes, and a splatter of black ichor stained the ground.

Zac suddenly remembered learning about a medical factoid before the integration, of how some women naturally forget the excruciating pain of childbirth. It was apparently an evolutionary measure so that the people wouldn't shy away from having more children. The reason for remembering such a random tidbit was obviously that he must have blocked out just how painful breaking open the last node was.

His pain-relief pill had worked wonders against the burns, but it was utterly incapable of dealing with the agony of getting his pathways blasted open. Waves of pain crashed into his mind, and he helplessly fell back on the ground, unable to move in the slightest. He ate another healing pill as he grabbed a Miasma Crystal in each hand, his eyes closed to block out the world.

Only an hour later was he able to get up again, but he had to admit that his state was a lot better than last time.

Recuperating instead of entering a life-and-death battle right after breaking open a node had not surprisingly helped him minimize the damage from the node-breaking. He would still need to redraw the section of the pathways around the Node, this time in his Draugr form. But he felt stable enough that he could get up again without falling unconscious like he did last time.

He soon left his courtyard, but he still didn't enter the town. He instead returned to the burnt-out crater he just came from, relieved to see that it was still void of cultists. He finally made the teleporter public as he gazed at the massive golden pillars that were deeply embedded in the ground. Just how had the zealots gotten their hands on this much gold?

And how much was it worth?

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**Chapter 529 - Adaptability**

The broken pieces of the enormous sigil still radiated some heat even after over an hour had passed, but it wasn't to the point that Zac felt it was dangerous any longer. He walked closer to it to see if it actually was just normal gold, and he finally realized

a pattern covered its surface. It almost looked like Damascus Steel but in gold and white, and where the white formed what looked like hazy patterns.

It clearly wasn't inscribed though, but it rather looked more like something that had naturally grown over time. However, the patterns didn't contain anywhere near the amount of meaning and power as the groves he had seen on the Stele during the vision in the Tower of Eternity. It almost felt like the patterns hadn't really finished forming just yet.

It made Zac unsure whether it actually was a normal metal that was in the process of being enhanced by the fire-attuned energies and prayer, or if it was some alloy the cultists were creating inside the volcano. Zac shook his head and instead made his way up the crater, feeling that it would have to be a mystery for someone else to solve. He had enough on his plate as it was.

His deathly gaze roved across the smoldering mountainside and the jungles for a couple of minutes, but he couldn't sense the slightest hint of life. Had every single cultist died after all? Not that it mattered too much, as there obviously hadn't been anyone of import at the base when he arrived. Just a skeleton crew that would set about the chain reaction that almost got him killed.

They were obviously ready to completely abandon the incursion.

Zac sighed as he understood the implication. He had hoped to be done with the zealots in one swift move with this final fight, at least dealing with the Head Priest and his bishops. But they were probably all still around, waiting to cause trouble at moment's notice. It was a bit of a shame there was not a single cultist to catch and interrogate, but they probably would rather blow themselves up than answer any questions.

Their actions were still a bit perplexing though. Why would they do something like this rather than just cutting their losses and returning home, just like the other invaders? Was the Mystic Realm really that important to them, or rather the Dimensional Artifact inside? It looked like they bet everything on that item and the fact that he wouldn't be able to hunt them down over the next century.

He would need to visit the Mystic Realm entrance to make sure, but Zac guessed that he would be met by a closed entrance impossible to open from outside. If he put himself in their shoes, their best course of action would be to hide inside the mystic Realm for a hundred years, at which point he would try to contact his superiors to pick them up.

Preferably while snatching the Dimensional Artifact.

A hundred years might be a long time to someone like himself, but to the elders of the Church of the Everlasting Dao it was nothing. Waiting a bit longer for the results would probably not matter all that much to them. Not everyone was strapped for time like The Great Redeemer. It meant that yet another old monster probably had set his sights on Earth and its resources.

He would either get the Dimensional Artifact or try to hunt them down, as the Church didn't feel like the kind of people who would drop something like this. However, Zac couldn't really muster any urgency from the realization, as it honestly didn't feel like it changed much by this point. There were already a bunch of old monsters bearing down on the planet, including his mother. What was one more?

Zac sighed as he sat down on the ground, his form once more turning back to human. A wave of pain radiated through his body as his body came alive, and he quickly ate another healing pill as he kept watch over the area. But there was not much to guard against as everything was completely burned and leveled.

The soothing energy of the Fragment of the Bodhi also spread through his body, helping out with restoring his tissue. However, there was stubborn energy hiding in the wounds, rabidly resisting both his pills and his Dao. It looked like some special energy had been infused into the blast, and he would have to slowly grind it down.

As he looked down at the crater he felt that the near-death experience had brought home an important lesson. There were all sorts of amazing treasures and arrays in the world, but nothing was impervious. Treasures could fail at any time, and he could only trust his own body in the end.

A buzz behind him told him that the teleporter had activated, and he turned over to see a vanguard group of demons carefully emerging inside the crater. Ilvere stood at the front, and he looked around with wide eyes before he spotted Zac sitting above. He quickly jumped up, and he gave a start when he saw Zac's wretched appearance.

"Don't you look like shit?" Ilvere laughed as he took out a large vat from his Cosmos Sack. "Something to drink? You look like you could need one. I've made it myself, with some help of that barkeep."

Zac wryly smiled as he took a swig from the Demonic homebrew, and he immediately became thankful that his gullet was reinforced by his high Endurance. The vile brew tasted like paint thinner, but it actually managed to give him a slight buzz. He wouldn't be surprised if a single mouthful would kill a normal human.

"What happened here? It looks like a natural disaster rather than a battlefield," the demon asked as he looked around at the destruction. "No bodies. They sacrificed themselves?"

"There was almost no one here," Zac sighed as he recounted what happened.

"So the lunatics are here to stay," Ilvere muttered with a grimace, echoing Zac's own thoughts. "I hoped we'd be done with them after their two invasions. Like fleas, these ones. Got to take them all out before they start to fester."

"Well, that's why I have you guys, right?" Zac snorted.

"Well, whatever. What do you want us to do?" Ilvere asked.

"Just the usual," Zac grunted as he got back on his feet. "Stay close to this area though. I think the valuable resource was the volcano, but I'm not sure if they broke it. What do you think about those golden things?"

Ilvere grunted in thought, before his massive weapon shot out with extreme momentum, slamming into one of the huge slabs of metals not far from where Zac sat. A deep gong echoed out across the area, and Ilvere even had to take a step back from the power inside the sound wave. Zac felt a bit impacted as well, but not to the point that he was hurt.

A small mark was left on the slab, but it didn't even look dented from the attack. The metal ball on the other hand looked like it had been put over a fire, radiating some heat that forced Ilvere to spin it in the air until it cooled down again.

"Won't probably be able to maintain its original function, but it's definitely good stuff. Perhaps we can reforge them into weapons and armor with flame attunement?" Ilvere muttered. "You have that mine in the underworld as well. If you can figure out a way to fuse the two resources you might even be able to make something valuable enough to even export through the blue one's Mercantile Licence."

Zac's eyes lit up at the prospect. He still hadn't been able to use Calrin's consortia for interplanetary trades so far, as the fees were too high to justify selling stuff like the ant carapace armors. But what if he could make a bunch of attuned

weaponry? Fire had always been a popular Dao and cultivation path due to its offensive nature.

An armor providing flame-resistant would be a huge asset against fire-based forces like the Church of Everlasting Dao or the flame golems of the Underworld, and flame-attuned weaponry would no doubt sell like hotcakes.

“Harvesting those things have the highest priority then. Don’t bother scouring the jungle. It’s full of beasts, and it would take the whole army to canvass it,” Zac said.

Zac gave it a thought and bought a set of defensive arrays as well for the area around his newly-acquired ruins. He usually didn’t bother with that in the beginning, but he didn’t want to risk the lives of his people in case some suicidal zealot was waiting for an opportunity in the vast jungle.

“Everyone returns together later, and everyone gets tested,” Zac added. “Both with Origin Array and the root.”

“Understood,” Ilvere agreed. “We’ll make sure not to bring any of those bastards back to the island.”

Zac nodded and stepped through the teleporter the next moment, appearing in the public teleportation station. He was surprised to find Joanna waiting there for him and she walked over with brisk steps.

“Welcome back. The Administrator is looking for you,” Joanna said with a smile. “You really did it. You actually saved Earth, like a real-life action hero.”

“I don’t think that action heroes look like this after winning,” Zac wryly smiled. “And there are still a lot of bad guys around.”

“You know, it’s okay to celebrate taking a step in the right direction,” Joanna said as she walked next to him. “If you only focus on what’s wrong you’ll always feel stressed out.”

“I know,” Zac smiled. “One step at a time. By the way, have Billy and Thea come here while I was gone?”

“Not to my knowledge?” Joanna said. “Is there something wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing,” Zac said with a shake of his head.

Zac had somewhat expected the two to claim their Inheritances by now, but perhaps they weren’t quite ready just yet. Then again, he had closed the incursion a bit faster than expected, taking less than a day to get the job done. They would probably come over within the week unless their reward for surviving the Integration allowed them to gain another boost before the trial.

Joanna followed him over toward the government building, and Zac heard she had gained a rating of C by the system, with most of the Valkyries having gained a D. C was apparently the highest of anyone in Port Atwood, though Joanna hadn’t asked his sister as she was busy with her experiments.

Most of the townspeople got an F or E, which didn’t surprise Zac seeing how the System was so biased in favor of the Elites. It also turned out that only those with C or higher gained rewards and a Title. Zac guessed that getting to live another day was the only gift those with worse ratings got.

However, the situation was a bit baffling to Zac.

“What do you think the System graded you on?” Zac asked with some confusion. “A rating of D seems pretty bad for how many Incursions you guys helped me close. Not even Thea has closed as many as you did.”

“I don’t think it’s just that,” Joanna said with a shake of her head. “It has only been an hour, but I’ve started to get a small understanding of the situation after asking

around. A part of the grade was definitely achievements, Dao, and Level, which isn't a surprise. But I also think a big part of it was adaptability."

"Adaptability?" Zac muttered.

"Ryan, for example, got a D grade like the Valkyries, even though he hasn't closed a single incursion. He did however quickly adapt after coming here, and now he's one of the most successful people on the island," Joanna said. "But both Ryan and us Valkyries didn't really excel in the beginning. We only got where we are because of you, so we didn't get too impressive grades."

Zac slowly nodded, feeling it made sense. The Incursions and the integration was a massive trial, and the System was probably only interested in helping those who were able to embrace their new reality and make the most of it. Besides, not only those like him or Thea was of value to the System. People like Smaug and Henry Marshall should probably have pretty decent ratings as well as they excelled in what they set out to do.

There was a palpable celebratory atmosphere in the town as the two walked toward the government building. People were out on the street with big smiles on their faces, and Zac was surprised to see that some had even raised the flag of Port Atwood on their storefronts or from their porches.

Zac had already hidden his identity with a hooded robe though, mostly because he was a bit embarrassed about his crispy appearance. Joanna wanted him to hold some sort of speech rouse to the citizens, but Zac was far too tired for something like that. He only wanted to get his rewards then rest up for a day or two.

They soon reached their destination, and Zac walked up to Abby's private floor in one of the wings after issuing a set of orders for Joanna to start preparing the Valkyries for the Mystic Realm. He entered after a knock and found Abby hovering in the middle of a bunch of screens. She closed them and turned toward him, and Zac was surprised to see that she had grown since last time.

The diameter of the floating eyeball must have increased by 20 to 30 percent, and her shimmering eye looked even more magical compared to before. It seemed like his Administrator had reached E-Grade or at least evolved her race.

Another new addition was a golem standing in the corner of the room, a massive construct of polished stone that reached almost three meters into the air. One of its arms was just a long spike, and the other formed a shield. It didn't move in the slightest when Zac entered, but Zac still felt a vague pressure from it, meaning it should probably have the combat strength of an Early E-Grade cultivator.

Had the Stargazer bought herself a bodyguard?

"It's been a while," Zac smiled as he sat down at a free seat.

"Well, you've been busy," Abby said as her massive eye turned toward him. "I'm guessing you're here about the reward?"

"So there is one, after all?" Zac said, his eyes lighting up in anticipation.

"Yes, two actually," Abby said.

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**Chapter 530 - Incentives for Exploration**

"There are two rewards? What are they?" Zac asked with anticipation.

“You could say one is for you and one is for Port Atwood. The first is a pretty interesting mobile array, called the **[Spatial Gate Array]**. It is a two-part array that has two functions, the first of which will allow you to teleport to Port Atwood from almost anywhere in the whole sector once every decade,” Abby said.

“What? Can’t I already do that as a world leader?” Zac asked with disappointment. “And without the wait time.”

“Well, it’s not quite that simple. Nexus Hubs requires upgrades. You might need to do multiple jumps to return if the hubs you use are too low-quality. Each jump is a risk of entering a hostile environment,” Abby said. “Besides, from what I’ve heard your identity has become a bit sensitive in your sector.”

“So?” Zac asked, still feeling a bit peeved.

“What if your identity gets exposed while traveling? The first thing that a City Lord would do is deactivating the teleportation arrays, trapping you in place,” Abby said. “Not much you can do about that apart from either taking over the town or fleeing to some other force in hopes of using their teleportation array.

“This array could help you circumvent this, making you far harder to pin down. You could be stuck on a desolate planet or in the void of space itself. As long as you’re not in a hidden realm you can just activate this treasure and get sent home as soon as you’ve infused enough energy,” Abby explained.

Zac whistled in understanding. It did indeed sound indeed convenient. It would allow him to venture out to improve himself with greater peace of mind. The cultists joining hands with the undead had reminded how exposed his people were while he wasn’t around. There was a limit of what one could do with the Town Shop against a powerful enemy, after all.

Once a decade was a very long cool-down, but it was enough in case of an emergency. Things usually moved pretty slowly in the multiverse. With people’s lifespans being in the millennia it was unlikely that Earth would be attacked multiple times within a decade when things had stabilized.

“It is an extremely convenient array and valuable lifeline for someone who is planning on traveling the multiverse. Any outlaw or wandering cultivator would kill for something like this. You would almost become as hard to trap as a Karmic or Spatial Cultivator,” Abby said. “The escape measure has various good functions as well, such as countermeasures to spatial lockdowns and tampering.”

“What about the other function?” Zac asked.

“It allows you to erect a temporary Teleportation Array lasting a few minutes, even out in the wilderness,” Abby said. “You need the materials for it though, and it has a downside. It’s expensive. Very expensive.”

“How expensive?” Zac asked with some worry.

“Five times the standard rate,” Abby said.

“Doesn’t that make it useless?” Zac blanched.

The reason that almost no one below the D-Grade would travel between worlds was the cost of teleportation. It wasn’t like weaker cultivators didn’t want to travel to Mystic Realms to gain titles and experience, but they simply couldn’t afford it. Just the fees alone could ruin even a wealthy scion.

Zac was extremely wealthy for a self-made cultivator at his level, but just the prospect of teleporting to the Allbright Empire or some of the other cultivation spots he had in mind was a source of some dread. Paying five times that price would put him in the poor house. It was like taking a helicopter to go buy groceries.

“It’s a bit extravagant, but it is a good option to have. It doesn’t have the cool-down like the escape function of the **[Spatial Gate Array]**, meaning you never need to worry about being stranded on some desolate planet,” Abby said.

“Is the escape function as expensive?” Zac asked.

“No, that function is free. You just need to set up a base array somewhere safe,” Abby explained.

Zac immediately decided he would put it in his cultivation cave, and had Abby make the arrangements. With the layers of arrays that place had become even more fortified than his compound, and he could empower the protections even further with the new arrays available in the store.

More importantly, only his sister, Abby, and Triv knew the exact location of that place, making the risk of sabotage lower. The **[Spatial Gate Array]** was pretty amazing all-in-all and something that he didn’t even know he needed until now.

Even if the instant escape function was used up he would still be able to construct a mobile Teleportation Array. It did mean that he would need to walk around with more Nexus Coins than he anticipated, but the Auction should take care of his lack of funds soon enough. Zac wondered what this thing could be worth, and he opened his Town Shop menu to see if it was available there.

“You don’t need to look. This isn’t something available in the Town Shop, no matter how much of the inventory you unlock. It only contains Base Arrays. In fact, you shouldn’t rely on those arrays too much. There are extremely effective Array Breakers readily available in the Multiverse for every single array in the shop,” the Stargazer snickered.

“What?” Zac exclaimed. “So they’re useless?”

“Well no. They might be useless against invasions of advanced enemies who have done their research about your defenses, but they work just fine against weaker foes and beasts. It’s not like anyone on Earth can get their hands on those kinds of siege tools right now,” Abby explained.

Zac sighed in relief, but he was still worried about the future. It felt like he was buying a door lock that everyone had a master key for. It wasn’t like forces like the Underworld Council and the New World Government were the enemies he was worried about, but rather the more advanced forces that might make their way to Earth in the future in search of his secrets and wealth.

That was years away though, and he would have ample time to construct individualized defensive arrays. Kenzie might even be able to adjust the store-bought ones so that they wouldn’t be so easy to break open with standardized solutions.

“Worrying me for nothing,” Zac snorted. “What about the second reward?”

“Nothing as exciting, but still something of use to you. It’s an upgradeable puppet army,” Abby said. “They can both defend your lands autonomously, or you can control them with an adept array master. Your sister could use them instead of those cursed items she seems to like.”

“How strong are they?” Zac asked.

“There are 1000 Soldiers, each equivalent to Early E-Grade, with 3 leaders at Middle E-Grade. They should be able to keep most forces of Earth at bay for the foreseeable future,” the stargazer explained. “I haven’t summoned them all yet as you need to pick a spawn Zone.”

“Is that one of them behind me?” Zac asked as he pointed at the unmoving golem standing in the corner.

“Just so. I took one out to make sure I understood the reward. But now that you mention it, an Administrator without any guards is highly irregular,” Abby said.

“Just keep it,” Zac snorted before he considered what he could do with an additional army. “Can I bring them to the Mystic Realm?”

Pure power wouldn't cut it in the Mystic Realm judging by what he'd heard so far. Half the battle would be exploring the research base to find the Dimensional Artifact, while securing your base from the other factions. That was an endeavor that was manpower intensive, and he would feel much better about sending a bunch of puppets into the depths of the Research Lab rather than the Valkyries and his soldiers.

“No, you can consider them a defensive structure. You can send them out by themselves, though they work best in squads under the three leaders,” Abby explained, dashing his hopes.

“How big an area can they guard autonomously?” Zac asked with some disappointment.

“An island of this size wouldn't be an issue,” Abby said without hesitation.

Zac asked a few more questions, until he understood the function of the puppet army properly. He eventually decided to keep two of the armies in Port Atwood while sending the last one to Mystic Island to protect against any further sabotage. He could change the composition in the future though, allowing him to protect the settlements that were more important to Port Atwood.

“You said they're upgradeable? How do I upgrade them?” Zac probed.

“You will have to ask the golems over at the shipyard. The System has connected the puppet army to them, which is good news for you. Any upgrade they do will be of a much higher quality than a standardized solution,” Abby said.

Zac's eyes lit up when he heard the Creators would be in charge of upgrading them. They might turn out pretty weird after Karunthel got his spider-hands on the puppets, but their offensive capabilities would probably be extremely impressive. He had to head over there later, in either case, to see about the possibilities of upgrading the shipyard.

“One item which will freely allow me to return to Earth, another that will allow me to protect the town while I'm gone? Do you think the System is sending me a message?” Zac said as a joke after instructing Abby where to set up the puppet armies, but he was surprised to see that the Stargazer agreed without hesitation.

“Of course it is,” Abby said as matter of course. “The System wants you to become stronger, but this planet is holding you back. The best route of you becoming a powerhouse is to spread your wings, so I wouldn't be surprised that the System calculated the most pertinent rewards to help you become stronger were those that allowed you to leave.”

Zac shrugged, not sure if he believed Abby's explanation or not, but the gifts were indeed exactly what he needed. The **[Spatial Gate Array]** was especially valuable, as it would allow himself and his companions to escape certain death in many situations, and it would be useful all the way until he reached C-Grade and started traveling beyond the Zecia Sector.

Since he was already there he asked the Stargazer to update him on the state of things, but he quickly felt himself being submerged in a sea of data he didn't understand. Abby quickly caught on and slowed down, and finally stopped narrating altogether.

“The day-to-day running of a force isn't something the leader bothers with. Are the elders of mighty Clans or Sects busying themselves each day with diplomatic issues

and crop yields? No, they are cultivating. You don't have a younger generation to deal with this for you, but you do have me and many other promising administrators," Abby said.

Zac knew that was true. The patriarch or sect leaders were never the most powerful people of a force, but rather something that could be considered middle management. They were powerful enough to command respect, but they only ran the day to day operations. The real decision-makers were the elders who either traveled the sector for opportunities or were secluded in cultivation in hopes of breaking through.

That wasn't to say that those positions were useless. The sect leader did have access to most of the resources of the force, and they were in a far better position to break through in the future. Most of the grand elders of a clan had probably been the clan leader for a couple of millennia once upon a time.

This was probably also why Abby was pushing for Zac to be such a hands-off boss. She had clearly evolved since they met last time, no doubt benefitting from having almost free reins when running his force. He would have to put in some checks and balances soon though, but some pilfering of public resources was pretty much bound to happen.

Of course, there were limits to everything.

"How are criminals dealt with today?" Zac asked out of the blue.

"Thrown out of your sphere of influence or killed, depending on the severity of their crime. You don't have any dungeon at the moment, though you might want to consider building one. They are usually an effective deterrent against criminals," Abby said. "Your army is keeping the law at the moment."

"Julia wants to set up a proper Law Enforcement Section for Port Atwood. What do you think about that?" Zac asked.

"Most sects and clans have some sort of Law Enforcement to keep the rabble in check," Abby said with a bob. "How they deal with transgressions vary wildly between forces. That girl seems capable enough, but she would need someone more powerful to help enforce the laws. The leader of the Law Enforcement Hall of a Sect is usually one of the strongest cultivators around. They have to be."

Zac nodded in agreement. Just Julia wouldn't be enough. His first choice would be Ilvere, but he was already in charge of the Army. But on further thought, Zac felt Janos might be a pretty decent choice. He didn't speak much, but he was as powerful as Ilvere while having a skillset extremely suited for incapacitating without killing.

He left the government building soon after and made his way back to his courtyard. The festivities in the town had only grown during his talk with Abby, but he was too tired to join in on the excitement. He found a drone mentioning that Kenzie had left for Mystic Island to work on the tunnel there. It was for the best with the cultists acting as they did.

The chance of him being able to steal one of their entrances felt slim at best, especially after the New World Government already had done so once. So he instead spent the next day in rest, working on restoring his body. The worst of his burns were healed by that point, making him look like a boiled lobster instead of a grilled chicken.

The wound from breaking open his node was healing nicely as well, though Zac had only just started redrawing his pathway. Zac guessed would need another week or so to return to 100%, but that didn't mean he needed to sit around in his courtyard. There were a lot of things he could do, some of which he had put off for too long already.

Zac somberly left his courtyard and walked over to the teleportation array. He took a deep breath before he stepped onto the array and he appeared at the top of a small hill covered in flowers a few seconds later. It was his first time coming to this specific island, the only prison of his archipelago.

The secluded island where Hannah and David lived.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 531 - Peace**

The island might be the only place where Zac held a captive, but it looked like a paradise rather than a dungeon. A vibrant array of colors spread across the hill as flowers covered almost every inch apart from a small path. It wasn't wildflowers though, but rather a meticulously arranged garden that stretched from the teleportation array down into a field below.

If that was all it wouldn't have been too surprising, as getting flowers to bloom was infinitely easier now that there was Cosmic Energy in the atmosphere. What actually surprised Zac was that the flowers seemed to contain a hint of the Dao, and together managed to form an elusive Dao Field.

Zac couldn't tell what it was as it was just a weak hint at the moment, but if given time it might grow into something impressive. He slowly walked along the path, spreading out his own Dao of the Bodhi to get a sense of what was going on.

"From what I'd heard about you I would have thought that your aura would turn my flowers into dust rather than fill them with happiness," a voice drifted over from a tree to the side, causing Zac's heart to lurch. "But your Dao almost feels like that of a farmer's. Or perhaps of a forest elf?"

Part of Zac's reaction was because he recognized the voice, but part of it was that Zac actually hadn't sensed David at all as he sat beneath the poplar at the edge of the forest. He had utterly blended in with the surroundings, causing Zac's senses to pretty much register him as another shrub or something.

Zac still felt some nervousness as memories of the meeting with David during his Tribulation flashed through his mind. However, it was a completely different David who sat beneath the tree and enjoyed the rays of sun that managed to make their way through the thick foliage.

He wasn't disfigured for one. He still had a bunch of scars, but they were only thin white lines on healthy sun-tanned skin, much like the ones Zac had before he evolved his Race to E-Grade. There was also not hatred and blame in his eyes, but rather an almost eerie tranquility.

Zac couldn't help but wonder just what had happened to the boisterous man during his months on this island. Or had the previously energetic personality already died from being captured by the cultist? Or perhaps it already happened during the Tutorial when Izzie died?

There was only one way to find out what went through his head, so Zac deactivated his Dao and walked over with a smile.

"It's called the Dao of the Bodhi, and it comes from the Seed of Trees and the Seed of Sanctuary," he explained, not hiding anything. "I actually have a class related to nature, though I focus more on fighting."

“That explains it,” David said as he handed Zac a fruit from a basket next to him. “Taste it, I grew these myself.”

Zac looked down at the fruit that looked like a red plum before took a bite, mostly out of courtesy. A sweet taste almost exploded in his mouth, making Zac wolf down the rest of the fruit in a second.

“This might be one of the most delicious things I’ve ever eaten,” Zac said with wide eyes, not exaggerating at all.

The fruit wasn’t quite as tasty as the Fruit of Ascension, but the plum wasn’t actually a spiritual fruit. It contained a weak hint of Cosmic Energy, but so did everything else in this day and age. The taste must have come from something else, like how it had been nurtured by David.

“It’s my first harvest,” David smiled as he handed Zac another one. “Months of work for 29 plums. The next harvest will be bigger though, and I believe the fruits will be even tastier.”

Zac ate the second one with a lot more reserve, but he actually stopped halfway through. It was nice sitting here like this under the rustling trees while gazing at the fields of flowers. But it was not why he came here.

“... I’m sorry,” Zac sighed. “I’m sorry about you getting captured because of me. I’m sorry about putting off visiting for so long.”

“You shouldn’t carry the blame for the deeds of others,” David said with a shake of his head. “And I know you have your hands full. We’re all just scraping by here in the apocalypse. At least now I’ve found my path, and I am at peace.”

“You know, I have a few islands that specializes in farming, and a spot on the main continent that has Spiritual Soil. You’re welcome to head over there if you want if you need seeds or just experiment with various ideas,” Zac offered.

“Perhaps I will one day. But I feel I still have a lot to gain by staying on this island. Besides, I don’t want to leave Hannah here all alone,” David smiled. “Both Izzie and Tyler passed away during the Tutorial, so there’s only the two of us still alive of the old gang. There’s no point in going back to Greenworth either. We have to stick together.”

Zac didn’t take offense that David didn’t include him in his list of ‘the gang’. He had just met Hannah a few months before the integration, whereas the four of them had been friends since the first grade. As for him not going back to Greenworth, it was no surprise.

Port Atwood had long since gotten a pretty good overview of who was alive and who was dead or missing around the world thanks to their cooperation with the Marshall Clan. It had already been confirmed that both of David’s parents had passed away during the first chaotic month, while his big brother and cousin had passed away in the very same Tutorial that Kenzie was part of.

There was nothing really connecting him to their old hometown any longer, just like how it was with Zac.

It was the same for most people of Port Atwood. With only a tenth of the population of Earth surviving the Integration most had lost their whole families. A few lucky ones had been able to help their households move to Port Atwood or another city under his control, but most were left alone in this new reality of theirs.

It was a cause of concern as quite a few people were suffering from depression and post-traumatic stress on the island. The few therapists on the island had their hands full, and there were all sorts of supports group for those who had trouble acclimatizing.

However, there was undeniably something about cultivation that changed you to your core. Perhaps it was the increase in Intelligence of Wisdom that made your mind stronger, or perhaps it was the effect of their ruthless reality, but a surprising number of people were able to bear the mental strain just fine. They kept moving forward while the people around them were dying left and right.

Zac himself was a prime example of that. Someone who had gone through so much bloodshed and near-death experiences over the past years should be a broken mess by now. But he honestly felt fine, apart from exhaustion that could be felt all the way to his core. Even the fact that his ex-girlfriend tried to murder him just a few short months ago barely registered on his mind.

“... How is she?” Zac asked.

“Not bad. Not great. She doesn’t like this island as much as I do. But I guess she agrees that it beats prison,” David said with a wry smile. “We... are dating.”

“That’s good,” Zac only nodded in response, not surprised in the slightest.

The two of them shared a deep history, and they had survived the Tutorial and everything else together. Besides, something was almost bound to happen with only two people marooned on an island with just the occasional visitor there to drop off supplies. It was either start dating or turn on each other.

“It’s her who planted these flowers around the array, though I made the pattern. I think she sees the arrays as the door to her cell, and she wanted to hide it in beauty.”

“Do you blame me for sending her here?” Zac asked.

“No,” David smiled as he looked across his fields. “She was under the influence of that infiltrator, but she was ultimately exploited because there was a character flaw to exploit. Luckily, you survived, or she would have been a real sinner of Earth.”

Zac sighed as he looked out across the flowers, not sure what to say next.

“Come, let me show you what I’ve done so far,” David finally said as he stood up, and Zac was relieved to see him walking with neither a limp nor needing some sort of cane as he did in the vision.

The two toured the fields and the pruned forest that David spent his days tending, mostly talking about things of lesser import. Zac described some of the races and odd things he had encountered during his visit to the Tower of Eternity, and David spoke about his life on the island and his insights into the various plants he cared for.

The longer they spent together, the more Zac felt that David reminded him of someone else; Abbot Everlasting Peace. Not in their manner of speech, but some sort of mental tranquility that made them one with their surroundings.

However, Zac didn’t feel that David had become one with the universe and taken the first step on the paths of Karma or Samsara, but rather that he had become one with nature. Zac was the one with a mid-tier Nature-aspected Dao Fragment, yet it felt like David was the one who was more in tune with the plants around them.

Zac even asked David about it, but he didn’t have any real answer. He only felt that it was a natural result of persistence, and being wholehearted in his desire to grow and connect with the plants. David said that he believed that everything had a soul, or at least the potential for birthing one, in this new reality of theirs.

There was an important truth in there, something that Zac felt might one day become extremely important in his own cultivation. The matter of sincerity toward the Dao, something that he felt that he was currently lacking a bit. He had made amazing gains to his understanding of the Dao over the past year, but he wouldn’t say that he was sincere in his interest.

He had worked so hard on the Daos in order to get stronger, rather than having a desire to delve deeper into the mysteries of the universe. He honestly didn't care all too much about trees or coffins, but rather the power the fragments represented.

But that might become a bottleneck that kept him back in the future. He was just scraping by, reliant on treasures and lucky opportunities to shore up his weakness. Zac felt he would need to find some sort of common ground with his Daos sooner or later, and he felt that taking a hint from David was an important first step.

He slowly his Dao Field once more, but he let energy naturally seep out of his body as he tried to connect with the fields around him. And he had to admit that David was onto something. It felt like many of the trees were living and the energy inside them responded to the touch of his Dao.

"You see," David said with a smile, somehow understanding what was going on.

Their stroll soon took them to a small hill by the sea some distance from the teleporter. On top of it stood a beautiful farmhouse surrounded by flowers. It almost looked like something out of a fairy tale, with the glistening sea and rustling plants creating an extremely soothing atmosphere.

However, Zac wasn't able to completely immerse himself in the beauty as his eyes were trained on something else; his former girlfriend who was currently tending to a small patch outside one of the windows of the house. She wore a simple dress that somewhat reminded Zac of the Amish, but there were lines of fractals lining the hem.

Zac guessed that it was something that his sister had sent over, as he doubted that the Demons would be so accommodating. Hannah looked up when she heard them approaching, a small smile on her face. However, the smile immediately froze on her face when she saw Zac standing next to David. Zac only looked back at her, surprised at how calm he felt inside.

The same couldn't be said for Hannah as she hurried back inside the building with her head hanging low. The door slammed shut, leaving the two of them outside. Zac was a bit surprised by the violent reaction, though he guessed she might be afraid that he was coming here for revenge.

"I'm sorry," David sighed. "I guess she's not ready to face you just yet."

"It's fine. We can talk another day," Zac said with a shake of his head. "Tell her that I don't carry any resentment for what happened."

It was true that Zac didn't mind not being able to talk things through with his ex. He had mostly come here for David rather than Hannah, as he was a victim while she was ultimately a perpetrator. Seeing that she looked fine was enough for him, as it allowed him to erase the image that had built up in his mind since the Heart Tribulation.

Zac was just about to leave, but David suddenly spoke up after some hesitation.

"Wait, before you go. Hannah wrote you this some time ago, but she never sent it out," he said as he took out a sealed envelope from his Cosmos Sack. "I think she would regret it if you just left like this though."

Zac accepted the letter, and a movement in the periphery caught his eye. It was Hannah who looked at them from the second story of the small house. Their eyes met once more before Hanna sighed and shook her head. She receded further into the room, while Zac turned toward the Teleportation Array without another word. He felt a sense of serenity, but also some lament as he walked through the fields, the beauty of the island barely registering in his mind.

Peace because he finally faced a fear that had been buried deep in his heart, and sadness because it felt like yet one more of his scant few connections to the past had been severed.

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## **Chapter 532 - Upgrading the Shipyard**

Zac looked down at the letter in his hand as he walked the last stretch toward the array, but he eventually put it away unopened and unread. He didn't want to ruin the state he was in right now, and he took one last look at the world David had built for himself and Hannah.

David had said something that stuck with him as they walked along the fields. He said that the world had become extremely terrifying, but it had also become far more beautiful. David had chosen to focus on the latter, which was what had turned this island to such an amazing place.

It was true. With the Dao unlocked the world had fundamentally changed, like a bleak tapestry having been given color and meaning. Wasn't the quest for meaning something that so many struggled with before the Integration? Searching for an understanding of the universe and what their place was.

Now it was actually possible.

Over the past year he had just run from one goal to another, desperately clawing himself forward in his pursuit of power. But that wasn't any way to live. He would eventually crash and burn if things continued this way, or he would at least end up with a shaky understanding of the world around him. It wasn't that he needed to ignore all the things that needed to be done, but he also needed to find some joy in his life.

This was the mindset he needed to remember, along with the sincerity he needed to nurture as he kept working on his Dao Fragments.

Zac took one last breath of the enticing mix of aromas before he activated the Teleportation Array. He also bought a comprehensive set of upgrades to the Arrays put in place by his sister. It would take decently strong E-Grade beast a lot of effort to break through the barriers, and Zac would be instantly warned anywhere on Earth.

He briefly considered adding some Farming Arrays to the island as well, but he eventually decided against it. David wasn't looking for efficiency or actually farming for profit. He was rather cultivating his heart and his mind through farming, and arrays wouldn't help with that. He left the fields as they were, not putting his thumb on the scale any further.

However, Zac didn't return to his compound but rather decided to tour his domain for a bit. Visiting Abby had reminded him how long it was since he had seen the day to day operations of his force, and now was as good a time as any to check things out.

He visited the farming islands first, but he was surprised to see that the scale actually hadn't increased over the past months. Zac asked a foreman what was going on, and learned that most of the herb production had been moved to either his own island or the large Spirit Soil Fields on the main continent.

The old farming island was mainly used for growing high-quality crops for the people of Port Atwood now, rather than Spiritual Herbs for cultivation.

It was a step in the right direction in Zac's mind, as it showed that people were not only thinking of surviving and getting stronger. People were no longer living day to day, and didn't just plant what would grow the fastest. They were rather growing rice

and all kinds of vegetables to improve their quality of life, while simultaneously providing them with greater profit.

He could see the same energy in the towns that were studded along the archipelago, though some of the verve no doubt came from the fact that the Incursions had finally been closed. A massive harbor had sprung in Refugee Harbor unbeknownst to him, and he could spot dozens of boats sailing out on the sea, likely to catch fish or search for valuable herbs underwater.

All kinds of shops had cropped up as well, real businesses started by people. Strong-looking warriors walked down the streets as well, seemingly returning from monster hunting ventures. Most of them carried the insignia of Port Atwood, meaning they were part of his army, whereas others looked like free cultivators.

Zac felt that it really wasn't a coincidence that humans littered the Multiverse. They were resilient creatures that could adapt so quickly to such a drastic change of their lives. Or perhaps that was a too generous a conclusion. With only around 10% of all humans remaining, one might rather say that those unable to adapt had long perished.

In either case, it felt extremely gratifying to walk through the bustling streets, his real identity hidden with **[Thousand Faces]**. He had already arranged a secondary set of credentials with Adran, a Port Atwood inspector which gave him blanket access without having to expose his true identity.

He soon continued from the local cluster of towns to the various alien towns he had snatched out of the hands of the invaders. However, he quickly realized that most of them were little more than outposts who would be hard pressed to do much more than act as scouts for any threats. He had multiple mines and fields standing empty, with no personnel there to extract the resources.

He needed more people. That was the biggest takeaway he got after making the rounds. Thankfully, he shouldn't be as hard-pressed to attract talents as when he had to sell himself with the help of Sap Trang in the market of New Washington. There should be millions of people willing to relocate to one of his towns.

He finally made a series of jumps that took him to the small outpost at the edge of the unhabituated continent. It had surprisingly grown to a proper town by now, and Zac saw quite a few molemen walking the streets. He found the local mayor, a human administrator who worked under Adran, to find out what was going on.

It turned out that Westbound Harbor had turned into a massive trade hub in the short time since it was established. It still wasn't possible to freely travel back and forth between the two continents as there were still the cultists roaming about. Of course, it was not solely a security issue, but also a financial one.

There were still massive untapped resources in the underworld that were almost worthless to its inhabitants, while they lacked some things that existed in abundance on Pangea. It would be foolish to not take advantage of this opportunity, so Port Atwood allowed people to travel here from the underworld to trade with their own merchants.

These merchants would then head over to the other continent, to unload the inventory before returning once more. It was exceedingly lucrative, but Zac snorted when he saw how nervous the Mayor started to become the more Zac asked about the situation. A short interrogation later had netted Zac a shocking 200 million Nexus Coins that the administrator had gathered through bribes and skimming Port Atwood's coffers.

It wasn't that much compared to the massive wealth Zac controlled at the moment, but it was still shocking how much one single person had managed to take for

himself in just a few months thanks to the lack of oversight. He really needed to set up a proper organization to take care of issues like this.

The mayor obviously couldn't stay on, so Zac released his aura in the government building, which immediately alerted the guards staying put. A squad of demons appeared a few seconds later, but they visibly relaxed when they saw it was Zac who had appeared rather than some dangerous threat.

"This guy has proven a bit greedy. Have someone new take over. Remind the next mayor about the value of moderation," Zac said to the guards, who nodded as he sneered at the despondent administrator.

Zac also asked the guards on duty about whether they had found anything of interest on the continent, but there were nothing at all for at least four days' travel inland. There were just endless dunes. However, initial estimations put the continent at least half the size of Pangea, which meant there were ample room for multiple climate zones.

Some day he would travel further inland assisted by his flying treasure, but not today. He had some breathing room before he needed to enter the Mystic Realm, but not to the point that he could map such a massive place. He instead returned to his courtyard before he started walking toward the Creator Shipyard.

This was one of the things Zac had looked forward to since getting the Iliex Shipyard as a reward, though upgrading the shipyard had gone down in priority somewhat since he got his hands on his flying treasure. But equipping his army with proper Flying Treasures would be a huge boon for his force in general, as long as he could stomach the price.

Zac soon arrived at the shipyard and headed straight into the Liaison's office. Rahm stood behind a reception, like he had been expecting Zac's arrival. Of course, knowing this particular Creator it was just as possible that he had simply stood there without moving for a couple of days.

"Lord Atwood. Congratulations on your evolution," Rahm said with his usual staid expression.

"Thank you," Zac smiled. "Is Foreman Karunthel here?"

"About time you came to visit," a rumbling voice snorted as Karunthel emerged from the depths of the building. "Didn't you evolve almost two weeks ago?"

"I'm sorry. There's just too much for me to do," Zac said with a wry smile. "You don't happen to have a clone technique that can allow me to get more stuff done?"

"Takes a certain aptitude to make the most of clones, and I'm not too sure you have that kind of aptitude, you little brat," Karunthel laughed, not seeming all that miffed about being forgotten.

"Well, it was just a joke," Zac said, though he couldn't help but feel a irritated about the low evaluation.

It really felt like he would have to work a bit on his image. Everyone seemed to think that he was just an unkillable brute swinging his axe around. Certainly, it was mostly true, but he still wanted to be known for more than just that.

"Are you here about upgrading our facilities, Lord Atwood?" Rahm asked, conveniently giving Zac an opening for the real reason he came.

"Yes, exactly," Zac nodded. "You said I could upgrade the shipyard after I evolved. Is the process automatic, or do I need to pay a price..?"

"Not so fast, kiddo. I am supposed to come up with some sort of quest for you before we can release the good items," Karunthel mused.

“We already have instruct-“ Rahm tried to interject, but he was silenced by a wave of one of Rahm’s legs.

“How about this. Being stuck on this desolate rock is causing delays to my experiments. I am lacking some materials that I cannot get my hands on here. Bring me what I require and we’ll process the upgrade for you,” the foreman decided.

“This is not-“

“This is not an unreasonable request indeed, *thank you Rahm*, I know,” Karunthel said as a dense aura spread out throughout the lobby.

Only then was Zac reminded that the spider golem in front of him was no doubt a D-Grade being, and not an early D-Grade warrior either. His aura was far beyond that of the Technocrat Captain that almost got him killed, and Zac could barely breathe in front the suffocating pressure. Rahm didn’t look affected at all though, keeping his neutral expressions.

However, he seemed to relent to the demands of his boss as he only sighed and took a step back.

“That’s better,” Karunthel smiled as the pressure disappeared. “Here, get me these things. It might be a bit challenging to gather them all, but I’ll add something extra as a reward.”

“Get you what?” Zac asked, but he soon understood what Karunthel was talking about as a quest prompt appeared in front of him.

**Materials for Karunthel (Unique, Limited): Acquire 100 Kilograms of [Urgarat Flakes], 1 kilogram of [Realm Locus], 1 living [Ferric Worldeater], 1 [Daemonic Manastone] Reward: Upgrade Iliex Shipyard to Early D-Grade. 1 Custom-Designed Early D-Grade Vessel. (0/4)**

Zac read through the quest, his mouth turning a bit upward as he felt like he had just gotten a standard fetch-quest from a MMO game. The problem was that he didn’t recognize a single one of the materials. The last two seemed to be pretty rare, as they only needed one of each. The demons might have some clues about the last one, but the third item seemed exceedingly troublesome.

“How am I supposed to catch something that eats worlds?” Zac asked with a grimace.

“They’re not as dangerous as it sounds,” Karunthel laughed. “Well, not the young ones, anyway.”

“Where can I get these things” Zac asked, hoping to get a running start on the quest.

“Sorry, can’t give any clues. Finding the items is half the challenge,” Karunthel said, his smile widening even further.

Zac couldn’t help but feel that the creator foreman was messing with him a bit, but there wasn’t much he could do about it. He would have to inquire with someone more knowledgeable, like Brazla or Calrin. It felt a bit difficult, However, Zac was more interested in the rewards right now.

“What’s this reward at the end?” Zac asked with anticipation.

“It’s a reward for completing the quest. We’ll be able to provide a flagship vessel for your force, and I’ll be in charge of it myself since you’re helping me out,” Karunthel explained. “I’ll build it based on your specifications.”

“D-Grade vessel. A Cosmic Vessel?” Zac said, and he couldn’t help but look up at the sky through a window.

“Don’t get your hopes up too high, brat,” the foreman snorted. “I only make good things, but it is still an Early D-Grade vessel. You will not be able to explore the

whole Sector in that thing, but you might be able to visit neighboring planets as long as they're not too far away.”

“What about the customization?” Zac asked.

“The reward has a set budget,” Rahm said. “It cannot excel at everything for the quoted price.”

“You could skimp out on the spatial arrays and focus only on offensive capabilities, turning it into a slow-moving mobile fortress. Or you could do the opposite, making a scout vessel that can reach further into the cosmos,” the foreman added. “Just figure out what you want to use the thing for, and I’ll whip up something nice.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 533 - Non-lethal Lethality**

A keening cry echoed out across the jungle as Zac swung his axe in one lightning-quick motion, his abyssal eyes keeping track of the streams of life inside the target. However, the massive boar didn’t fall apart into two gory slabs from the swing as one might expect, but it rather just seemed enraged.

A deep cut had appeared on its flank, and while it was freely bleeding down on the forest floor it was far from a grievous wound. With the high Vitality of an E-Grade beast the wound would soon enough heal by itself without any intervention.

“Kill through a non-lethal cut,” Zac muttered as he dodged the boar’s charge.

He had been walking around the jungles surrounding the former volcano over the past five days, fighting for a couple of hours while spending the rest on cultivation in his cave. He knew that any potential progress before the Mystic Realm closed its doors was limited, and he tried to make the most of it until Kenzie managed to crack open the tunnel.

The most obvious solution he could think of was gaining [**Blighted Cut**], a skill that would hopefully improve his offensive capabilities in his undead form. He needed a mainstay skill in the vein of [**Chop**], and this might just be it. Walking around in nature like this would also allow him to bond with nature for lack of a better word, trying to incorporate the lessons he learned from visiting David.

But completing the quest was proving more difficult than expected, though he was making decent inroads. The wound in the boar’s side had already turned into a sickly dark color, and the beast shook from the pain.

This effect solely came about from infusing his blade with the Fragment of the Coffin, as this was the only method he could think of to complete the quest. He had already tried killing an evolved beast the same way he killed Vul, the Barghest alpha, all those months ago. He had inflicted a shallow wound that blinded a panther before tricking it into impaling itself on a sharpened log that he had prepared.

He had technically killed it with a single non-lethal cut that time, but the System wasn’t impressed. That meant that his initial guess was more likely, that he needed to use his Dao to kill the beast. Considering his class the most likely suspect was obviously Fragment of the Coffin, and the boar was just the latest experiment.

The wound had already been inflicted, so he didn’t swing again. Zac strained his mind to connect to the wound instead, trying to impose his will upon it. It actually worked, and the wound kept getting worse instead of closing itself.

This was a method he had devised after discussing the Dao with his sister. He had already come to terms with the fact that his control over the Dao was pretty bad, and he probably wasn't going to form any Dao Arrays like those Catheya described anytime soon. But he had also realized that there were more ways to make the most of your mental energy than just using fine control.

Kenzie had told him of the various ways she used her Dao infusion when fighting. Jeeves had taught her various ways that she could maximize the efficiency of her Cosmic Energy and Dao, doing as much damage as possible for as low a cost as possible. For example, when she shot the fireballs that seemed to bounce from head to head between her targets, it wasn't the skill's work.

Her skill was just a normal fireball, as basic as they came, but it changed with the help of her Seed of Tinder. It only managed to bounce around like that because she controlled her Seed of Tinder to move toward the next target from a distance, and the skill kind of just followed along if she controlled things just right.

Zac never used the Dao like that when it came to **[Chop]** for example. He just crammed a bunch of Mental Energy into the fractal edge before he launched it at his enemies. But he understood now that he didn't actually need to disconnect his soul from the strike immediately, though it did free up his concentration for other things.

That was what he was doing now with the strike against the boar. He was trying to use the corrosive elements of the Fragment of the Coffin to worsen the condition of the beast, turning a non-lethal strike lethal. He urged his mental energies festering in the wound to spread toward its heart, to enter the bloodstream, to fight off the natural resistance of the animal. Anything that could kill it.

But he suddenly felt a pang in his mind, and the connection was broken. It was the natural resistance of an evolved being that booted the foreign intruder, and Zac knew that the wound would start to close if he didn't do anything.

The attempt was a failure, but Zac still didn't feel disappointed.

He had managed to hold the connection longer than his last attempt, and at a greater distance as well. He was quickly understanding that it wasn't really a matter of control or skill, but it was more akin to learning to use a limb you didn't know you had. A bit more and he would get there.

Then again, Zac understood that maintaining the Dao inside his enemy was only part of the requirements to complete the quest for **[Blighted Cut]**. There was also the issue of causing enough damage, which was as much an issue of understanding his Dao and his target as it was about maintaining its effectiveness.

His first attempt had simply been to keep the wound festering as long as possible in hopes that the beast would succumb that way. However, he quickly learned that maintaining a status quo wasn't enough, and it was a losing battle. The mental energy infused into his strike was only so strong, and it would be slowly whittled down by the natural defenses of his target.

So he couldn't just run out the clock, but he needed to proactively push his skill forward. This was where his own limitations came in, as he simply wasn't able to turn the Dao into fine strands that burrowed toward his intended targets like some sort of designer poison. He could only push it in the general direction, just like he pushed the massive clouds of energy forward during his Dao Discourse.

But Zac was surprised how big an impact this simple action had. The previously shallow cut had quickly turned into serious festering wounds that would ail the beasts even after his mental energy had been routed.

The boar roared in pain and anger as it charged Zac once more, but a chain shot out from his back and punched a large hole in its forehead. There was not much point

in practicing at the same target over and over, as the beasts quickly learned to resist his attempts.

But that was fine as there was no lack of beasts in the enormous forest, and Zac guessed that hundreds broke through to E-Grade every day right now. With the cultists gone and the defensive towers destroyed, the only threat to the beasts was the flock of birds from the mountains.

It felt like Earth in general was fast reaching a tipping point, where millions of peak F-Grade beasts finally broke the shackles of their inferior bloodlines and took the next step on the path of cultivation. The beasts had always been a step ahead of the cultivators since the integration, and the humans were fast approaching peak F-Grade as well.

That was great news for Zac, though killing level 76 beasts weren't all that beneficial for his cultivation either. However, it did provide him with a seemingly endless supply of targets to practice both his Dao and his control over **[Love's Bond]**.

Any Spirit Tool created by the **[Divine Investiture Array]** was supposed to be a perfect fit for his needs and something that would be able to follow him in his cultivation until the end. He needed to become better at using it, and not only relying on his axe.

Doing so would not only improve his overall strength, as using both his spirit tools at the same time wasn't a problem, but it might even give him a greater understanding of both his classes and his cultivation path.

It was probably the best he could do for Alea as well. Just hanging around his neck day after day wouldn't challenge her spirit. Spirit Tools grew and were refined through battle, and only through being used could they bring out their full potential.

The boar fell to the ground with a thud, but Zac didn't bother harvesting the meat since it was tainted by him. He only extracted the two tusks as they might be of use for the craftsmen on Port Atwood, before he shot out a chain that latched onto a tree in the distance. The beast was left where it was, its meat turning into a feast for the other beasts in the region.

The trees flashed past Zac with a dizzying blur as the chains pulled him forward with extreme momentum. He almost felt like a certain superhero as he flew through the forest toward the domain of the next E-Grade beast he had marked for target practice.

Using the chains as a mode of transportation was something he had already dabbled with since fighting the dragon, and he was quickly becoming more accustomed to it. With **[Love's Bond]** he could also use real and extremely sturdy chains rather than the flimsy spectral ones that the Cultist Bishop effortlessly had cut apart with his flames.

He still wasn't fast as when he walked with the help of **[Loamwalker]**, but it was still a huge improvement for his Draugr side, which was previously a slow-moving tank. It looked a bit embarrassing though, like he was being dragged around through the jungle like a ragdoll. Then again, he had long discarded any semblance of cultivator's dignity in favor of pragmatism, so this was nothing to him.

Zac kept working on his coordination and his strikes like this over the next two days, slowly making progress in how much damage he was causing with a 'non-lethal' strike. Better yet, he would no doubt be able to apply these insights to his other Daos and his other class in the future.

Most of his time was still spent in the Cultivation Cave though, sitting inside his Soul Strengthening Arrays while going over his insights. The array pretty much ran on

its own by now with how used Zac was getting to the feeling, and he could both ponder on the Dao and work on repairing his pathways while cycling his Mental Energy.

It was a bit like working while being severely sleep-deprived though since the array was siphoning his mental energy. He made quite a few mistakes and was forced to redraw the pathways many times, though it was still a lot more efficient to multitask than just sit around waiting for the array to finish.

Another interesting thing he had learned about the array was that he was actually making better progress when swapping his race in the middle. However, the benefits only appeared when he sat as a Draugr in the life-attuned side and as a human in the death-attuned.

It was like the stark contrasts helped reinforce the effect of the array, which resulted in a larger number of clashes and his soul getting strengthened and purified to a higher degree. One full cultivation procedure still took around 10 hours even when using E-Grade Crystals to power the array, but the improvement he saw while swapping his races was double a normal circulation.

That meant that he was almost three times as efficient compared to his first try, getting 28 hours' worth of cultivation done in just ten hours. There were probably even greater gains to be had in the future as well, though Zac guessed any future improvements wouldn't come quite as easily.

He had ordered a couple of D-Grade attuned crystals from the Sky Gnome to see the effect, but the cost of that was a bit extravagant even for him. It would have to provide a huge benefit to motivate spending over a hundred million Nexus Coins every day. For now, he made do with just E-Grade crystals as he was still mostly focusing on short-term benefits and upgrading his skills.

Zac was currently fighting some sort of mutated cat that was as big as a rhino. It looked extremely cute even with its size, with two enormous eyes that stared straight into his. The beast suddenly turned into a blur, and Zac barely had time to block a furious swipe toward his throat by using the flat side of his axe.

The beast unsurprisingly excelled at Dexterity, and Zac tried multiple times to inflict it with a wound without success. It was like trying to hit a cloud, where the cat was just a blur. It was almost as bad as when he fought Faceless #9 back in the tower, though the cat didn't have that man's lethality.

It wouldn't have been hard to kill the thing with the help of **[Deathwish]**, but that wasn't his goal. He instead activated **[Vanguard of Undeath]** and grew to a towering behemoth almost reaching four meters. The transformation added around half a meter to his height after reaching middle proficiency, while also increasing the thickness of the plating of his miasmic armor.

More importantly, it increased the power of his taunting effect, and the cat suddenly rammed straight into him by mistake when it tried to pass him by. Zac took the opportunity and delivered a shallow cut in its side, eliciting a pained yowl from the beast. It scrambled out of the way as Zac stood rooted to the ground, keeping his focus on the skill.

Zac instantly pushed the mental energy further into its body, like an army performing a blitz to attack its enemy unaware. The natural defenses of the beast were quickly roused, but Zac was like a steamroller as he pushed his energy toward its organs.

This was the one.

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### **Chapter 534 - Blighted Cut**

The enormous feline had become utterly enraged by Zac's attack, and it even seemed that the shallow wound had emboldened it, making it think that was the limit of Zac's capabilities. It shot forward over and over, its claws trying to rip through his armor. However, the cat couldn't get through the thick plating, allowing Zac to completely focus on his quest.

His abyssal eyes were trained at the nimble form, his eyes clearly seeing the vibrant life-force rousing in the beast's body to combat the virulence of his strike. It was like witnessing the clash between white blood cells and a virus with his own eyes. However, he was actually able to impact the battle with his mind.

A small headache throbbed in his head as he pushed his concentration to the max, and it look like a surge of death stormed toward the innards of the beast. The cat stumbled on the ground, thrashing in pain from the invasion. Zac felt adrenaline in his body spike, but he still kept his eyes peeled on the animal.

There was some hesitation in Zac's heart about subjecting such a stunning animal to such cruel treatment. However, Zac quickly pushed those discordant thoughts out of his mind as he knew that this thing was anything but a docile house-pet. He had seen carcasses of almost a hundred animals as at the edge of this thing's domain.

Their bodies had been utterly mutilated before they were left to rot. The cat seemed to enjoy hunting and torturing animals for sport, even when it didn't require food. This, along with the fact that it was at least level 85, was why Zac marked it for death the moment he would start trying to complete his quest in earnest.

Most of the kills until now had been for training, whereas Zac saved the beasts that met the requirements of his quest for when he felt he had made enough progress to try for the quest again. He found this animal three days ago, and he would immediately have executed it if it wasn't because he needed some more practice first.

However, the shocking cruelty that this cat had displayed toward its prey wasn't something unique for this specific E-grade beast, though it was a bit more excessive than most. Beasts seemed to grow more ruthless and aggressive as they evolved, with even herbivores gaining a thirst for blood.

Things on Earth would probably be a bit chaotic over the coming years. A second wave of bloodshed would assault Earth's settlements with aggressive beasts trying to take everyone out through starting beast tides like the ones that the System sometimes conjured as a quest. The forces who had survived until now thanks to not having any close-by Incursions to worry about would probably fall by the wayside, while powerful warriors would emerge from the surviving towns.

Things would calm down when D-Grade beast kings emerged, as they were intelligent enough to not mindlessly attack human settlements. They instead set up their kingdoms deep in unclaimed territories, where no humans would dare enter. Even better, they kept their subjects in check, lessening the number of beast tides.

Only at that point could Earth be considered to have been fully integrated; when the energy infusion of the planet was finished, and a balance between races, forces, and beasts had been reached.

But for now, there could be no peace with the animals. If Zac didn't take out this beast now, then it would probably target the people who moved to the town next to the volcano. It had already been determined that the volcano itself was a unique

natural treasure that produced something that calrin called an Earth-Fire, a spiritual flame that was extremely beneficial for craftsmen.

Blacksmiths in particular would be able to both increase the quality and quantity of their crafts with the help of the volcano, and it was no coincidence that the zealots nurtured the massive insignia inside the magma itself. If Zac could set up a bunch of smithies here then it was just a matter of time before someone like the Craftsman Brazla would emerge within his sphere of influence.

So all potential threats to this area had to die for the future of his force.

Zac pushed his energy more and more, though it felt just as frustrating as during the Dao Discourse. It was like he was trying to move the clouds with his bare hands, and it was slow and arduous work. However, the cat had entered a frenzy from the pain, discarding its survival instincts in favor of taking Zac down with it.

Sparks flew across the area as the beast slammed into his armor over and over, and trees toppled as the air itself was split apart from its attempts to tear him apart. Some puncture wounds even started to appear across Zac's body as the beast managed to bite through his sturdy armor, but Zac didn't care as he did everything in his power to boost the corruption.

Finally, he succeeded in what he had tried so many times before. The corrosive energy managed to take hold in the cat's heart, and its heartbeat rapidly started getting erratic before the whole organ ruptured. The beast yowled on top of its lungs from the pain before its survival instincts finally overrode its bloodlust.

It tried to flee into the jungle, but it had lost its coordination as many of its muscles had turned into a rotten mess by now. A deep thud echoed across the jungle before Zac felt a surge of cosmic energy. However, he wasn't happy with the result as the stupid thing had actually gored itself on the trunk of a tree it had felled earlier.

Zac quickly opened his quest screen and sighed in relief when he could confirm that the quest actually had been completed even with the abrupt end to the cat's life. He guessed the System passed him because the thing was just a walking corpse with its heart being ruined, and there was no way it would survive even a minute longer.

He wouldn't look in the mouth of a gift horse though, and Zac instead smiled with anticipation as a fractal appeared on his left forearm.

**[Blighted Cut]** actually took the exact same spot as **[Rapturous Divide]**, though the Skill fractal itself obviously looked completely different. He immediately activated it since he was in a perfect spot to try it out, and he was surprised to find that it was a toggled skill just like **[Deathwish]** or his mental defense skills.

A small but constant stream of energy entered the Skill Fractal, and he looked around to see what the skill did. He didn't feel stronger at all, and no avatar appeared to fight for him. But he soon heard a corrosive sizzling on the ground, and he found that his axe was slowly dripping a grey liquid that seemed to seep out of the weapon itself.

The scene made him worried for Verun, as the Tool Spirit had shown some apprehension to some of his skills before. However, there were no complaints from the spirit tool at all, meaning it wasn't hurt or uncomfortable. In fact, the same was true for when he used **[Vanguard of Undeath]**.

He had been forced to use another weapon before to conjure the massive black bardiche, but after Verun had swallowed the Dragon Core it had no problem to stomach the corrosive and deathly elements of his skills.

Eager to try the effect of the liquid Zac quickly walked over to the closest tree, and simply pushed the edge toward the bark. The sizzling sound of corrosion quickly emerged from the point of contact, but that was the least of what happened. Ashy-

grey tendrils spread across the tree with impressive speed, and it only took four seconds before the tree fell apart.

Only a minute later was the tree a rotten mess on the ground, with almost nothing remaining intact. Zac wasn't done there, and he transformed **[Love's Bond]** to its backpack form, and four chains emerged like snakes. Zac suddenly felt his miasmic consumption increasing by a large degree, and he wasn't surprised as he looked at his other spirit tool.

The whole coffin had gained a temporary upgrade, just like how Verun turned into a massive Bardiche. **[Love's Bond]** still looked like a coffin, but instead of being child-sized it turned into a massive box that reached almost three meters tall. It was a lot wider as well, and it completely blocked his whole back like a turtle shell.

Zac had already tried it out before, and he knew that a similar effect would happen when he used the weapon in its shield form. The difference wasn't as startling there though, as **[Love's Bond]** was able to adjust its size to match his increased stature by itself. It only gained another protective layer from **[Vanguard of Undeath]**.

The increase in miasmic consumption obviously didn't come about from this change though, but rather that he had activated **[Blighted Cut]**. Each of the chains was dripping with the corrosive liquid all along their length, though the links themselves weren't hurt in the slightest. Each of the chains already contained a hint of corruption, but even Zac felt some trepidation when he looked at the chains now.

Even he would probably be in some danger if an enemy came at him with this kind of set-up.

Just attacking a tree was obviously not enough to get a proper gauge of the limits of his new skill, and he spent the next hour like a god of death in the jungle. Anything he targeted was turned into a rotting goop before he moved on. It utterly ruined the bodies of the beasts, meaning Zac probably shouldn't use it when hunting for valuable bodyparts.

Zac had first thought he had gained a supercharged version of his Fragment of the Coffin, but he quickly learned that wasn't the case. He couldn't combine **[Blighted Cut]** with skills like **[Deathwish]**, **[Profane Seal]** or **[Winds of Decay]**, though it was fine together with **[Vanguard of Undeath]** and **[Unholy Strike]**.

The skill rather provided him with a way to deal real damage while skills like **[Deathwish]** and **[Profane Seal]** restrained his enemies.

As for the lethality of the skill, it went without mention. Nothing under E-Grade could withstand a single strike, even when he didn't empower the corrosion even further with the Fragment of the Coffin. A simple scrape when lashing out with **[Love's Bond]** was enough to condemn them to a bout of excruciating pain before they died.

The only animal that survived more than half a minute was the massive rhinoceros Zac was currently fighting, but that wasn't because of it having some sort of immunity to his skill. He had caught it with two chains of **[Love's Bond]**, keeping it in place. It had tried to run the moment he saw Zac, but it was currently utterly unable to move.

Zac had just attacked anything he came across until now, but he wanted to see the effect of the skill while just restraining an enemy. Zac quickly realized that the effect was clearly worse when he didn't draw blood. There was still a sizzling sound across the rhino's thick hide, but it didn't immediately turn into a pile of rotting meat. It meant that the skill acted more like a venom than an acid, which has an important distinction.

However, that wasn't the real surprise as Zac felt a startling feedback from the skill the moment the beast was caught. Zac immediately followed his instincts and

infused the skill with more Miasma, and his eyes widened when three blades of the corrosive liquid appeared out of nowhere around the rhino, each shooting into the beast from a different direction before it had a chance to react.

They each hit the animal simultaneously, and Zac gaped when he saw that the animal didn't even have time to cry out in pain before it had turned into a black pool of goop on the ground. The blades had not only cut the animal apart into six pieces, but it had infused every piece with a terrifying amount of poison.

The blades had appeared for less than a second before they were gone, and Zac barely had time to see them. However, he still had goosebumps on his arms from the terrifying aura they emitted. It felt like just a graze from those things could kill just about anything.

It was a truly sinister skill. Not only did it continuously inflict enemies with a shocking virulence, it even had some sort of execution that only worked when the target was trapped. Perhaps it was a hint of what the future held for his Fetters of Desolation class. Zac quickly looked inward at the skill fractal, and he wasn't surprised that the skill went on cooldown after activating the final strike. Not even the passive effect worked any longer, meaning Zac would have to be careful about using the execution preemptively in the future.

The skill itself wasn't as flashy as **[Rapturous Divide]**, but Zac was still very happy with the result. It was extremely lethal, which shored up one of his weaknesses in his current class. He was lacking in offense, which turned every match into a drawn-out slugfest. Between his coffin and his new skill, he would probably be able to take out E-Grade enemies even faster as a Draugr compared to as a human.

His human form was still superior to his Draugr side in large-scale combat though as he didn't have any way to properly attack large hordes with **[Blighted Cut]**. The situation was fine with him though, as he had always felt it a good idea to allow each class to have its own specialty apart from just being based on different elements.

Zac had finally reached his goal of completing his class quest, but he still didn't leave the jungle. He had spent the last ten days almost solely as a Draugr, but he had some things to do here in his human form as well. He had already felt that spending some time in this jungle as a Human might benefit some of his skills, and that idea had only become stronger after meeting David.

So Zac swapped over to his Edge of Arcadia class and started clearing out a perimeter around the volcano. However, he only had time to battle for less than 30 minutes before someone tried to contact him through his Communication Crystal.

"Are you free? Thea and Billy are here, they need your help," Joanna said through the crystal.

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**Chapter 535 - War Council**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**I understand that most people are flexing their Diamond Hands these days, but everyone needs something to do while holding. Jump over to my and read up to 49 chapters ahead! Don't jump onto the rocket without something to read!**

**"What? Are Thea and Billy okay?" Zac asked with worry.**

“They’re fine. They arrived a while ago, tried to enter the Inheritance. But the Tool Spirit is blocking them, and not even your sister couldn’t change its mind,” Joanna explained. “He’s also being a bit... like himself.”

Zac groaned and immediately took out his flying treasure, quickly returning to the volcano. Joanna waited for him there, and they teleported to his private courtyard as it was closest to the Towers of Myriad Dao. However, he barely had time to exit the teleportation house before he saw a massive form appear in front of the Dao Repository.

It was Billy, who must have evolved his skill. He was almost as tall as some of the smaller towers, reaching roughly 15 meters into the air. His club looked like something used to smash mountains, the skull on its end having a diameter of at least 5 meters. Worry gripped Zac’s heart as he activated [Loamwalker], leaving Joanna behind.

Had the Tool Spirit annoyed Billy to the point that he was gearing up to destroy the whole Dao Repository?

It wasn’t that he was worried about the repository itself. It was probably a peak D-Grade Spirit Tool, and nothing that Billy would be able to destroy no matter how much he wanted to. He was more worried about the retaliation from an insane Tool Spirit. There were D-Grade golems inside from what he had gathered, meant to be the challenge to open up the higher floors.

What if Brazla released them upon the town as punishment?

“HAHA BILLY WINS!” a massive roar echoed across half of Port Atwood as Billy jumped high into the air while stretching his weapon toward the sky.

Between the jump and the length of the club they reached a bit higher than the tallest towers, and the whole square shook when the giant landed again.

“Stupid golden ghost thinks he can be bigg-“

Billy didn’t get any further though before Brazla’s massive form appeared in full splendor above the Towers of Myriad Dao, accompanied by his signature golden radiance. The avatar was well over a hundred meters tall, and it looked down upon Billy and Port Atwood like a god standing in judgment.

“An ant dreaming of matching the sky,” a rumbling voice echoed out across the area, and Zac’s eyes widened when he saw that Brazla was about to blast Billy with one of his lightning bolts.

“WAIT!” Zac roared as he appeared in front of the towering giant. “Calm down. What is going on here?!”

Billy looked down with surprise, and he started to shrink again after throwing Brazla a glare.

“Golden boy said Billy and Thea was small, so Billy proved him wrong. He still needs a good thwonkin’,” the giant snorted.

Zac wryly smiled before he turned to Thea who had appeared close-by as well.

“You weren’t lying about the Tool Spirit,” she said, a few veins popping out on her forehead. “He makes Big Blue feel like a true gentleman.”

“I know,” Zac said with some resignation. “What’s the problem here?”

“These two talentless ants tried to enter the trial without adult supervision,” a haughty voice echoed out from the gates as the massive head in the sky disappeared.

The gates swung open the next moment, and Brazla along with an exasperated Kenzie walked out.

“I already told you Thea and Billy would come to take the trial, and you said that you didn’t care,” Zac sighed. “What’s changed?”

“That was before I saw what kind of wretched beings that you wanted to waste The Great Brazla’s gifts upon. Why don’t I just send two pigs into the inheritances that my creator so arduously gathered? The effect will be the same,” Brazla snorted as his back bent further and further back until the Tool Spirit was almost looking straight up into the sky.

Zac inwardly groaned when he saw that Brazla was in his most haughty mode today for some reason. He only took that insane power-pose when he started to refer to himself in third person and his annoyance factor maxed out. Zac knew he could probably force the thing to make way if he wanted, but he was afraid that Brazla would mess with the trial if he did something like that.

Simultaneously, he could feel killing intent leaking from Thea, and Billy’s brows were crunching together until they almost formed a unibrow.

“How can anyone enter the eyes of the Great Brazla?” Kenzie cajoled from the side. “We are just scraping by on this desolate rock, trying to glean a fraction of the wisdom from the Great Sage. Surely The Great Brazla wouldn’t hold back on this little bit of wisdom? I am sure my brother would improve your surroundings as a thank you for your magnanimity.”

The tool spirit froze, and he slowly returned to a normal standing position, his eyes slowly turning toward Zac.

“... What do you want me to build?” Zac said.

“The Great Brazla have noticed your little spectral servant scurrying about lately, moving trees and planting flowers. His efforts are barely passable, and this great sage will allow him to create a natural spirit gathering formation around this domicile,” Brazla said as though he was giving Zac a favor.

“You want a Spirit Gathering Array?” Zac said in confusion “Why?”

Brazla might act like a cultivator, but he couldn’t actually cultivate. Increasing the density of the Cosmic Energy in his surroundings wouldn’t help him in the slightest, and it would just make the direct area around the repository slightly worse as the energy had to come from somewhere. However, he immediately regretted his question when he saw the Tool Spirit gearing up for some insane tirade.

“Never mind. A Natural Spirit Array, right? I’ll have Triv set one up as soon as he returns from his mission,” Zac said. “So, they can enter now?”

“Fine, though The Great Brazla still feels that his gifts are wasted on these two. At least the little bird,” Brazla lamented. “The dumb brute seems to have found the resting place of his ancestor, so it might be a bit more apropos. Well, The Great Brazla is a gracious master and an even more gracious host. Enter, and witness a glimpse of greatness.”

“... Wow,” Thea just said as she passed through the gates, and Zac inwardly sighed when he saw she was still fuming.

“I’m sorry Billy,” Zac said to Billy who still blared at Brazla. “He is a bit mean, but you can be the bigger man here and let it go.”

“Mama always said to forgive those who don’t know better,” the giant said with a snort as he entered as well. “So Billy will forgive the stupid ghost.”

“You look better,” Kenzie commented from the side. “I heard from Ilvere you looked a bit-”

“Disgusting,” Brazla cut in. “You should understand it reflects poorly upon The Great Brazla if you walk around town looking like a burnt piece of dung. Have you no shame? At least you waited to heal up before you dared present yourself in front of me.”

“Well, if you unlocked the E-Grade skills I wouldn’t be such a wretched state after every battle,” Zac snorted.

“You’re welcome to try the trial if you’re tired of living,” Brazla said with disinterest as he conjured a mirror, blocking him from seeing Zac. “That’s better.”

Zac sighed and looked away. He really wanted to access the skills locked away in the repository, but he wasn’t ready. The trail to open up the second floor was to defeat at least one Half-Step D-Grade Golem, meaning someone at the same level as Anzonil, the Array Master he met during the Hunt.

If it was just a peak E-Grade Golem, then he would probably have tried his luck, as he was somewhat confident in taking it out as long as he went all out. However, the D-Grade was a quantitative leap that far surpassed that between F and E grade, and he didn’t want to burn his chances. He only had one shot on the trial, and if he failed then he would have to wait for one of his subjects to get the job done.

Certainly, a Half-Step D-Grade Golem was ultimately not a true D-Grade golem, but it should still be far more powerful than a peak E-Grade warrior. Zac was currently hoping to reach the point where he could challenge the trial before he left Earth to continue his cultivation so that he could arm himself with a few additional skills.

But for now, he would have to do with the things that were already unlocked.

Thea stood in the distance, gazing up at the enormous statue of the Blade Emperor. His face was obscured by a wide-brimmed hat, but the focus was still the massive blade that was stabbed into the ground in front of him. It radiated a terrifying sharpness, eclipsing the insights of his own Dao even though it was just a statue. Of course, the sharpness was hollow without true meaning, just like everything else in this place.

The Marshall Scion clearly wasn’t in any mood to stay here, as she flashed away after taking a few calming breaths.

“STUPID STATUE MAN! I’LL THWONK YOU THIS TI-” a roar suddenly echoed out through the hall.

Zac immediately turned toward the source only to see Billy flying toward the head of the statue depicting the Titan. However, Billy was thankfully swallowed by the Inheritance teleporter mid-flight before he could do any damage.

“What the hell...” Kenzie muttered from the side, and Zac couldn’t help but worry that he had made a mistake letting Billy enter that place.

“Can you see what’s going on inside their trials?” Zac asked as he turned back toward the Tool Spirit.

“Perhaps I do, perhaps I don’t. The heaven’s secrets are not so easily divulged,” Brazla said trying to adopt a mysterious air, but only came off as condescending.

“Well, can you tell me about the blade Emperor and the Titan? What kind of people were they?” Zac asked.

“The Titan was a dumb brute who kept causing trouble. He came to my master to have him forge a set of defensive treasures,” Brazla said. “The small mountain of muscles you brought should do just fine.”

Zac sighed in relief, as he felt like Billy and that guy would be two peas in a pod. Besides, someone like that would probably not have a convoluted trial. However, his relief only lasted as a weird smile spread across Brazla’s face.

“As for the Blademaster... A lunatic who married his sword,” Brazla snorted before he shot Zac a mocking glance. “Be careful you don’t end up like him. He was a friend of master and a talented swordsman, but he died a laughingstock and his wife was sold at an auction soon after.”

Zac coughed and didn't deign to comment on the Spirit Tool's snide remark, and he walked out before the Tool Spirit had time to make any more remarks about Alea.

Since Zac was back in Port Atwood he felt that he might as well head over to the Soul Strengthening Array for the day, waiting for the two to come out. He had spent the better part of a day inside, though their trials could take anything from a few hours to a few days. It was up to whatever the creator of the Inheritance had decided, and Brazla wasn't any help there.

However, Kenzie held him back before he had a chance to walk away.

"Wait, I was about to call you anyway," Kenzie said.

"What's wrong?" Zac asked as he stopped in his tracks.

"Nothing. We just got a message from Nonet before. They asked if you could join the Zhix War Council for a meeting tomorrow?" she asked.

"Of course. Are the jammers completed?" Zac asked.

"They're up and running since a few days ago," Kenzie nodded and took out the three black pillars. "Do you want to prepare the armies?"

"Have the elite squads get ready," Zac said after some thought. "We shouldn't need the whole army for these fights. We'll only target one hive at a time, and there's no lack of Zhix warriors who can make up the numbers."

Kenzie nodded in understanding as Zac put away the Jamming Arrays. He had almost forgotten about the matter of the Zhix due to his hectic schedule over the past weeks. But it looked like he had run of time to play around in the jungle. It was a bit of a shame, but he still had accomplished his main goal over there, and he could work on his skills in other places as well.

However, he didn't know how long he would be gone after joining the Zhix war chariot, so he needed to finish up with his other tasks here in Port Atwood first.

"Oh, and Calrin said he had found something you looked for," Kenzie added.

"Really? Already?" Zac said and he immediately changed his plans.

He had immediately visited Calrin about the Shipyard Upgrade quest after having talked with Karunthel a week ago, and things had looked a bit bleak at first outlook. Even the knowledgeable Sky Gnome had only heard of half of the required materials, and it was the two most common ones.

But had the little gnome suddenly come through for them and actually gathered the items ahead of schedule? It should either be that or he had finally unsealed and cleansed the hundreds of Cosmos Sacks Zac claimed after the battle outside the Tower of Eternity.

In either case, he was about to gain a windfall, and his steps got quicker and quicker as he walked toward the Thayer Consortia.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 49 chapters ahead) please check out my**

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**Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!**

**Chapter 536 - Sincerity**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**I understand that most people are flexing their Diamond Hands these days, but everyone needs something to do while holding. Jump over to my and read up to 50 chapters ahead! Don't jump onto the rocket without something to read!**

We have finally reached 50 chapters in early access, which is as good as it will ever get! To celebrate I'm running a deal with 0% off all subscriptions for the rest of the month!

What an asshole.

She knew that Zac had warned her of this Brazla, but she was still fuming after the encounter. However, she knew that part of the reason she got so angry was that the words of the Tool Spirit were getting to her a bit. The image she had nurtured of herself had been cracking over the past weeks.

Waking up in the tutorial had been horrifying, but also exhilarating. Her life had lacked any drive and goals before, with everything she could dream of readily handed to her. But she suddenly found herself at the edge of life and death, and she had *excelled*. The pixies had called her a once-a-millennia genius, and her performance compared to the other tutorial takers echoed that remark.

She even had the **[Apex Trainee]** title to prove it. Not a single human on Earth had performed better than she had. But was that enough?

Zachary Atwood had initially crushed her confidence with his monstrous power, but she had eventually come to terms with the fact that some people were just beyond comprehension. However, her genius' halo kept taking one hit after another as the months passed. There was inevitability who could only make her feel despair, then the undead, and finally the cultists.

She had pushed herself beyond her limits, but it wasn't enough.

Were the pixies just humoring her? Or was the title of a millennial genius on a god-forsaken planet just worthless? So hearing Brazla utterly disregard her like that had dug at those insecurities, and those insecurities had turned to anger. However, that anger was quickly exchanged with vigilance as she appeared in the Inheritance Trial.

Just what had happened here?

It looked like she had arrived at a compound where a battle just had taken place. She stood in a massive courtyard full of training equipment, but the hundreds of dead bodies were a clear indication that something had gone terribly wrong if this was just an exercise. The corpses were fresh, and the pools of blood still hadn't dried out. However, there were no sounds of fighting anywhere, meaning that the battle was over.

It had obviously been a one-sided slaughter as well, as every single corpse wore the same type of robes. It was likely a sword-sect judging by the weapons in their hands and the insignia covering their backs. She stood frozen for a couple of seconds until she grit her teeth and walked over to the closest corpse.

This was a test, and she couldn't show any weakness. Wasn't part of the reason she decided to undergo this trial early to shake off her weaknesses, both mental and physical, and regain her momentum? A little bit of carnage was nothing special any longer.

She turned over the corpse and inspected the wounds, and she could immediately confirm that she had been killed with one extremely precise cut. Half her throat and her jugular were cut, and an extremely sharp energy emanated from the wound. A stabbing pain prickled her eyes just looking at the wound, and she hurriedly looked away to avoid getting injured.

Suddenly a hidden killing intent assaulted her senses, and she didn't hesitate to shoot out **[Petalstorm]** preemptively. However, she only saw a flash of light as her weapon was intercepted and thrown back to her side.

“A hidden blade,” a tired voice drifted over. “Who are you? You are not a conjuration by my demons, but you are definitely not one of that bastard’s descendants either.”

Thea immediately understood who she was talking to, but she still didn’t dare to move over. That killing intent hadn’t been fake. However, she at least spotted the source of the voice, sitting with his back toward one of few still-standing sections of a building.

“I am Thea Marshall. I am not sure what has happened to the original creator of the Towers of Myriad Dao. It was awarded by the System to a friend of mine, and he gave me the opportunity to come here,” Thea said, not hiding anything.

“Towers of Myriad Dao,” the man snorted. “That’s Brazla alright. So that old goat croaked before he could sire any descendants. A shame, but that’s what you get when looking for love in the wrong places. No wonder that insufferable Tool Spirit has had the guts to break into my sanctum.”

Thea didn’t know how to respond to that, and the man seemed content to let the silence stretch out. She cursed her lacking conversational abilities, but the silence at least let her observe the cultivator in front of her. It was a humanoid male, but his skin had a yellowish tint while his eyes were amber with a thin slit, like those of an alligator.

His build was quite slender, but he was still felt extremely muscular. It almost looked like his forearms were covered in steel wires. However, her eyes couldn’t help but turn to the massive sword in his grip. Or it would perhaps be more apt to say that he cradled it like it was his only source of comfort, with both his legs and arms entwining the blade in an embrace.

Thea’s mouth opened and closed a few times, and she was unsure what would happen next. Zac hadn’t really explained what would happen inside, true to his laconic self. He just said that there would be a trial to pass, but it was up to the masters to design those trials.

“I am hoping to lear-“ Thea finally said, but she was cut off as the swordsman suddenly appeared three meters away from her, the massive sword in his hand.

“Live or die,” he simply said as he lazily swung his sword.

It looked like the Blade Emperor was barely putting any effort into the swing, but it felt like the whole universe was splitting apart to Thea as the sword approached. Her instincts were screaming at her to retreat, to activate her life-saving skill. However, a sense of stubbornness bloomed in her heart.

This was a test. She knew it. This was the kind of pressure that guy had endured over and over as he pushed forward, and conquering those obstacles was what had allowed him to push far beyond anyone else on Earth. She couldn’t keep dancing around, balancing progress with the burdens of her family.

She wouldn’t retreat any longer, she wanted to walk forward with confidence as well. She sent out a mental command, causing **[Petalstorm]** to immediately return to its original form, a slender rapier just over a meter long. She rarely used this form any longer due to the convenience of it splitting apart, but a bunch of miniature blades wouldn’t cut it here.

The blade-master didn’t use any skill in his swing, so she wouldn’t either. She instead infused her Daos and her conviction into the strike as she met blade with blade, putting it all on the line. It felt like she was trying to keep the whole universe at bay, and her arms were immediately covered with cuts.

But she held on, refusing to relent to the strike. She wouldn’t give in even if she was turned into ribbons.

“Rare Class... Tempest Blade...” the Blade Emperor muttered as he looked at her, not sharing her plight in the slightest. “Passable technique... Above Average Strength... Decent control of your Dao... However...”

The monumental pressure disappeared the next moment, and her own swing was simultaneously canceled. Thea’s hands were shaking from the experience, feeling that she had just narrowly escaped death. This was a true D-Grade powerhouse, completely different from anything she had encountered before.

Just a thoughtless swing contained the truth of the sword itself, making her Dao Braiding look like a child’s plaything. Her emotions were in turmoil as well by the Blade Emperor’s comments. Her confidence had soared after hearing one positive comment after another, but that ‘however’ had felt like a cold shower.

Was she just a nobody after all?

“Is there something wrong?” Thea asked, her heart beating furiously. “I am willing to learn and improve.”

This was the most powerful being she had met thus far, even if it was just a fragment of an old cultivator. Any insight he could provide would probably be worth more than a dozen battles or spending years in her library.

“Why did you come to me if you mess about with the elements? I am the Blade Emperor, not the Wind Emperor. My path is one of purity,” he said as his aura exploded, and Thea was forced a step back from the pressure. “What is your goal? Where does your heart lie?”

Her eyes widened as his aura towered toward the sky, but what really startled her was its shape. His aura was actually a perfect copy of his sword, though thousands of times larger. Could an aura actually take a shape like that? He was truly the Blade Emperor.

“I- I just want to become stronger. I wanted to hit faster, kill my enemies before they could kill me or my family. I want to become more powerful to stand at the peak. I don’t want to be a nobody,” Thea said, the words pouring out of her mouth as she bared her inner thoughts. “I attained the Seed of Gale during the Tutorial and incorporated it in my blade. Was that a mistake? I heard I could fuse it with my Seed of Sharpness into a speed-based Fragment of the Sword.”

The Blade Emperor didn’t immediately answer, but his eyes bore into hers. Even his pupils felt like two swords under his aura, but she shoved away any hesitation as she stared back with steely eyes.

“Well, you are passable I guess. You can call me Irei, and this is Silene,” he said as he caressed his sword, and the terrifying pressure disappeared the next moment.

“What? Just like that?” Thea said with wide eyes before she had time to correct herself. “I mean-“

She lost her train of thought mid-sentence though as she noticed that the surroundings had changed, the battlefield replaced with a run-down courtyard located deep in some mountain range.

“I didn’t leave many things in this inheritance, but the things I left all hold tremendous value,” The Blade Emperor said with a solemn expression.

Six blades rose out of the ground the next moment before they lined up in the air in front of her. Thea’s eyes lit up when she saw the exquisite weapons. Each of them emitted both spirituality and power that far eclipsed her **[Petalstorm]**.

They exuded quality, and when Thea prodded the weapons she even felt a sense of spirituality in every single one. She had already learned that her own weapon was barely of passable grade, with neither an attunement nor any spirituality. Its future

would be limited, and she had already started looking for ways to acquire something better.

This was exactly why she had chosen this Inheritance; the chance to gain a weapon that could stay with her as she took the next step on her path of cultivation.

“Children, come out,” Irei said, and Thea’s eyes widened when six projections emerged.

She couldn’t believe that every single one of the six weapons had such spirituality that their Tool Spirit could emerge, though they were just small hazy projections. She believed she had a decent understanding of Spirit Tools thanks to Big Blue, and these swords should only be Early E-Grade. It meant that their potential was even greater than she had anticipated.

However, she didn’t quite understand what Irei meant by children, as they looked nothing of the sort. For example, the largest sword, a massive two-hander that reeked of bloodlust, conjured what looked like a small devil. Another Tool Spirit looked like a feline predator that would probably turn into the apex predator in any forest it was placed in.

There was even one that just looked just like the sword itself, though its colors were inverted. She quickly realized that there was a correlation between the spirits and their weapons like they embodied the way the weapon was meant to be used. Her eyes moved back and forth between the six Spirit Tools, and she tried to understand which one was the best for her path.

“You can choose to leave here with one of my children, or you can choose to leave empty-handed. It is up to you,” Irei said as he looked at the hovering swords, and Thea couldn’t help but feel there was love in his eyes as he looked at each one of them.

She soon enough discarded three weapons that were clearly incompatible with her class and fighting style, and also the odd inverted Tool Spirit. Both of the two remaining ones looked quite strong, especially one that had a Tool Spirit that looked like a gemstone with a trapped lightning bolt. The other weapon looked a lot more nondescript.

It was a thin and slightly curved scimitar made from an elegant blue metal that would blend into the sky. Its tool spirit was a fluffy cloud, that continuously changed between a small thundercloud and an innocuous ball of cotton. The weapon didn’t look as intricate as the crystalline weapon, and the tool spirit was probably the least imposing one.

However, her eyes kept coming back to it, and she felt some sort of connection to it.

“You’ve chosen Aigale I see, or **[Storm’s Break]** as the original creator called it. It seems you understand yourself well enough, only Aigale and Naral to a lesser degree are suitable for you,” Irei said as the other weapons disappeared. “She is my eighty-fourth adopted child, and she gained incipient spirit after we witnessed a storm of such ferocity that a D-Grade force was killed to the last man. Aigale is meant to dance among the clouds, and strike without warning like a sudden thunderstorm.”

The other swords disappeared, and Thea eagerly grabbed the scimitar and cut a small wound on her hand to bind the Spirit Tool to herself. However, the moment she felt a sense of connection to **[Storm’s Break]** she also found herself trapped in a storm of extremely sharp energies. She immediately looked over at the Blade Emperor, but he only had eyes for his own weapon.

“I have fulfilled my bargain with that old bastard, but our business is yet not done. Seeing a woman with a fickle heart brings up some bad memories,” the Blade Emperor muttered as a terrifying killing intent started leaking from his body.

“Fickle heart?” Thea said, some anger blossoming in her heart even when she felt herself being under tremendous pressure from the sword energies around her. “I’ve never messed around with anyone’s feelings.”

“Not toward men. Toward your weapon, your true companion,” the Blade Emperor grunted with disdain. “What if you treat my daughter in the same manner as that little thing you are ready to discard? Wouldn’t she lead a miserable existence if that was the case?”

“What do you want me to do?!” Thea screamed as she was left with dozen deep gashes in just seconds.

She tried using her Dexterity to dodge the spiritual blades, but they were simply everywhere. Forcing her way out was impossible as well, as the intensity of the blades just increased as she tried to exit the sphere. She would perish long before getting out.

“Prove your sincerity toward the sword. That is the only way for a weakling like you to leave my Blade Domain,” the Blade Emperor said. “Become one with the sword or die. It is up to you.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 50 chapters ahead) please check out my**

**Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have a**

**Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!**

**Chapter 537 - Clues**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**Valentine’s Day is just around the corner, and I can only assume that you’re almost as single as me seeing as you’re reading DotF. Drown your sorrows with some extra chapters over at my ! Read up to 50 chapters ahead and gain access to the Lonely Hearts VIP Discord Channels (also known as the Early Access Discussion Channels)!**

**We have finally reached 50 chapters in early access, which is as good as it will ever get! To celebrate I’m running a deal with 0% off all subscriptions for the rest of the month!**

Zac couldn’t help but fantasize about whether the Sky Gnome had actually got his hands on one of the four materials required for the Shipyard Upgrade. If it actually was the case, then it would most likely be the first one, the **[Urgarat Flakes]**. It was a very rare form of metal, but it was not nearly as rare as the other things Karunthel asked for.

As to why the metal was so rare, it was because it was not a natural element you could find in a mine, but rather something produced when a certain stone beast evolved to D-Grade. The beast was called an **[Urgarat Crawler]**, and it was a creature that only lived on certain earth- or metal-attuned planets.

When it was ready to form its Beast Core and evolve to D-Grade it first created a thick cocoon from the materials it found in the ground. These materials were in turn transformed by the heavy Dao Fluctuations that were released from its evolution. One of the most common mutations was the **[Urgarat Flakes]**, an extremely sturdy alloy.

It was in other words something you could only stumble upon by chance. You might be able to keep the crawlers as domesticated animals, but the value of the materials didn’t make up for the cost of nurturing a beast all the way to the D-Grade, so no one wasted their time on such an unprofitable venture.

The Sky Gnome did find the second material, the **[Realm Locus]** in one of his large encyclopedias as well, though the information was limited. It was an organic gemstone that grew in places with a lot of spatial activity. That meant that they were mostly found inside mystic realms, and they contained a small amount of sealed space-time.

The gnome guessed that Karunthel wanted the gem in order to improve some spatial array for either a weapon or space flight. However, the supply for **[Realm Locus]** was even worse than that of **[Urgarat Flakes]**, and the demand was a lot higher as things with Spatial Attunement had a lot of uses. There were no Nexus Crystals attuned with the Dao of Space in the Zecia sector either.

Those crystals only appeared at C-Grade and above, and the **[Realm Locus]** was one of the few D-Grade materials that could act as a substitute. It was clearly inferior to the real material, but they did not have a lot of options out in a frontier Sector.

Things only got worse from there as Calrin couldn't make heads or tails about the last two materials, and they were forced to send an inquiry to an intelligence agency at the end. That could probably only mean that they were even harder to acquire.

The quest that had seemed easy enough to complete at a first glance had quickly turned into an arduous task, and the Sky Gnome had already indicated that Zac would most likely need to find some of the materials himself. That obviously couldn't be done on Earth, but rather required him to travel to places where there was a chance of the items appearing.

But now, just a week later, Calrin was already calling for him, and Zac couldn't help but getting his hopes up. There were just 4 materials he needed to find, after all, so getting just one was a huge step in the right direction. Of course, it was more likely that he had simply gotten the intelligence reports back than the materials themselves.

Zac still made his way to the commercial district as quickly as possible, but he couldn't help but stop and admire the massive transformation the consortia had undertaken since arriving at Earth. The huge compound had looked like a condemned city-block where not even beggars would stay before, but now domineering structures stood in front with opulent mansions hiding in the back.

There were also four shops now instead of one, each focusing on their respective wares.

The largest one sold armor and weaponry, most of it made by Port Atwood craftsmen themselves, and the second store contained miscellaneous tools for cultivators along with day-to-day items. There was everything from crude talismans to Cosmos Sacks to all sorts of tools required by non-combat classes.

The next store was natural treasures where you could buy herbs and pills, along with a limited supply of Nexus Crystals. The store also bought most sorts of herbs as well, and from what Zac heard they actually bought more than they sold. They also sold some foodstuffs in the store, though most foods were still sold in the open square by the farmers themselves.

The final store was the smallest one, but also the most exclusive. Only VIP clients of the consortia could enter, and it was the place with the most valuable items of every type. This was the store that Zac entered, and he was quickly shown to the highest floor by one of the clerks. Calrin appeared a minute later, sporting a dapper suit that no doubt was made from Spiritual Materials.

The somewhat impoverished image of the Sky Gnome was long gone, replaced by a man looking like a titan of industry. Of course, the effect was pretty limited with his diminutive size.

“Have you found one of the materials?” Zac asked without preamble.

“Alas, no,” Calrin sighed. “Though I believe I will receive word from the intelligence agency soon enough.”

“So why did you call me here?” Zac sighed as he sat down.

“You’ve put quite a few orders with me apart from the four materials, remember?” Calrin smiled as he took out a crystal. “I called you about this.”

Zac accepted the crystal with some confusion and infused it with some energy.

A long list of materials appeared, followed by an in-depth guide on how to create a powder that should be applied to one’s body.

“**[Bone-Forging Dust]**?” Zac read aloud with confusion before he looked up at the Sky Gnome. “What is this stuff?”

“It’s a race improvement formula, see how the materials differ from anything else you’ve seen?” Calrin explained.

Zac took a second look at the materials, and something suddenly dawned on him. Not a single one of the items was a herb. It was all bones from ferocious beasts, stones, or metals. It was extremely different from the medicinal baths that the people of Port Atwood were using, as those were almost exclusively using various herbs that they grew in the Spiritual Soil.

“It’s unfortunately not a recipe for the undead. Those things are just impossible to buy it seems,” Calrin sighed. “But I came across this recipe when I tried to come up with a solution for you. I believe your problems might occur because your dead body clashes with the life- and nature-attunement in the plants of a medicinal bath. But what if there’s nothing like that in the mixture?”

“So you think I won’t have the same reaction with this new recipe,” Zac nodded in understanding.

“Even better, you possessed more than half the materials after killing beasts in all four directions, including the most annoying component to get,” Calrin said before he produced a long shimmering horn. “And I have already acquired the rest.”

It was the **[Star Ox Horn]** that Zac had left with Calrin long ago in hopes of finding some use for it. Back then it was one of the most valuable things in his possession, but it had quickly been thrown aside for far actually precious treasures like the **[Pathfinder Oracle Eye]** and the **[Divine Investiture Array]**.

He had honestly forgotten about it, but it turned out it was doubly lucky he didn’t sell the opportunity to Average for a measly 1 Billion Nexus Coins. It also wasn’t too surprising that the horn was used for a recipe like this, as Calrin had already found out that the item was related to evolutions. Zac felt that the gnome’s idea was pretty feasible, and it was definitely worth trying.

The worst thing that could happen was that he slightly poisoned himself once more, but he was already used to that.

“You should know this, though. The only reason I managed to buy a full recipe on the cheap was that it is not too impressive. It is just one notch better than the dirt-cheap concoctions we are preparing for your army, but its cost is well over a hundredfold,” Calrin said. “And it is supposed to hurt pretty bad. So bad that it’s actually possible to gain a few points in Endurance from using it.”

“It’s worth some pain if I can get the benefits from it. As for cost, it shouldn’t matter either. How are we looking? Is everything unsealed and uncursed or whatever?” Zac asked.

He had waited a long time now to get a proper look at the small mountain of items he had absconded with after his massacre outside the Tower of Eternity. He had

done one preliminary check just before heading over to the Undead Incursion, but he had handed over the rest of the sacks that he and Ogras had collected to the Sky Gnomes later.

The demon probably still held on to some of the benefits he had siphoned off the various scions while Zac met with Catheya, but most of the loot was in the Cosmos Sacks and Spatial rings they had taken of the bodies of the victims. However, he worried about hidden threats such as karmic links or even booby traps, something that was apparently not too uncommon, so he had hired Calrin and his ilk to cleanse them.

Truthfully, utilizing karmic links weren't all that common in the multiverse, and it was more likely for a cultivator to plant a bomb as a final act of revenge on their killer. First of all, karmic links were easy to break, with even Zac being able to break the links of a D-Grade karmic cultivator. Stronger warriors could break, or at least obscure that kind of weak links even without the help of treasures.

Secondly, normal cultivators couldn't utilize a karmic link to hunt down someone on the other side of the sector. It would take someone with a deep understanding like Vordis A'Heliophos or his clan members to actually make use of them, or powerful forces ready to spend the money to hire a Karmic Cultivator.

Another issue apart from traps was the seals that covered a large number of the more valuable items, anti-theft devices that were put in place to disallow outsiders to steal the secrets of their clan.

"Almost all of the cultivation crystals containing manual and Skills are beyond our capabilities, but that is usually how it goes," Calrin said with a shake of his head. "They are always guarded the hardest. However, 17 of the manuals are public manuals that are commonly known in the multiverse, and those weren't sealed or were only using standard seals. The best of them is [Warrior's Heart]. It's an unattuned manual that can only take you to Peak E-Grade if you're lucky, but the bonus to combat power and recovery is impressive."

"It's meant for armies?" Zac asked, immediately understanding the use of the thing.

"Exactly. It's made for armies using traditional weaponry. I've heard that it is a simplification of a much better manual, but I don't know if that's true. In either case, it is very popular in the Zecia sector, and you've gathered four versions of it," the sky gnome said.

"Four versions of the same manual?" Zac asked with confusion.

"Some forces modify manuals to better suit their inheritance or what weapons they enjoy. Others manage to make some adjustments to increase the power output or recovery by some degree," Calrin explained. "You can classify a manual from being from Low Grade to Peak Grade. The original manual is a Mid E-Grade cultivation manual, but I'd say that one of the versions you got is almost High Grade. It must have belonged to a pretty powerful clan who exerted a lot of effort in improving it before."

"What do you recommend doing with manuals like that?" Zac asked.

"Sell the worse duplicates, keep one or two of the best ones for yourself," Calrin said. "You could either sell them through me or wait for the Auction you're planning on holding. I would say you stand to gain more by selling them here on Earth. There should be a lack of manuals of this kind on Earth, while they are ultimately very common in the multiverse. Besides, that way you would know what manuals your competition is cultivating."

"We'll add them to the Auction then," Zac agreed. "What about the rest?"

“It’s too much to go over one by one,” Calrin said with an avaricious glint in his eyes as he took out another crystal. “We created a tally for you. Incidentally, the cost of unsealing all these treasures landed at 1 Billion Nexus Coins.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 538 - Nepotism**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Billy looked around curiously, but he frowned when there was nothing but fog everywhere. Still, Billy remembered Zac’s words. This magic statue was dangerous. Of course, Billy was smart enough to understand that without Zac telling. The statue was able to grow in size so much that Billy could fit inside without problem, so how could it be normal?

Zac was just trying to help though, so Billy wouldn’t point out his friend’s silly mistake. Billy was a bit confused why the statue in Zac’s house made Billy so annoyed though. It was almost as handsome as Billy himself, so he should like it.

He couldn’t figure it out, so he just gripped **[Bonker]** even harder as he walked forward. Finally, there was a change in the fog as a smaller statue appeared, standing just a bit taller than Billy himself. Billy frowned at the sight, and something about this statue man was really annoying Billy as well. It felt like the statue was really asking for a beating.

“Welcome, descendant. I am Thrak, the Titan. Prove your worthi-“ a loud voice shouted out from the stone, but it did get any further before **[Bonker]** slammed into its head, utterly reducing the whole statue into rubble.

“Stupid stone, trying to talk like a person,” Billy said with a snort, anger smoldering in his chest.

Wait, why was Billy angry? Something about the talking stone had made Billy extremely annoyed, but he couldn’t remember why? Had Mama warned him of talking statues before? No, that wasn’t it. Billy looked down at the broken stone for a few seconds before he shrugged and kept walking.

If Mama hadn’t mentioned it, and he couldn’t remember, then it couldn’t be too important.

Still, the hidden space within the big statue started to annoy Billy. Zac had said that there would be a lot of good things inside, but there were just crazy stones and mist. He kept trying to remember Zac’s other ideas, but Billy had been busy looking at the big octopus when he talked. It was a lot bigger than the ones he had seen at the aquarium, and it even had more arms.

Mama said that a lot of people thought octopuses were really yummy, but Billy had never tasted it. He wondered what Big Blue tasted like. Billy bet it tasted real good since it had so many arms. He couldn’t help but drool a bit as he thought about it. Perhaps he should ask Thea if she could give Billy an arm? Big Blue already had so many.

An hour passed and Billy finally gave up on finding the treasure. Perhaps it was buried under the ground, but it was too hard to dig in, even for Billy. He took out a bed

from his Magic Pouch and lay down, and thunderous snores soon echoed across the inheritance site.

“You’re back,” Statue Man said.

“Ah! Billy remembers now!” Billy roared in anger. “You’re the one who sent the talking stone to trick me! You’re the one who stole Billy’s good things!”

He immediately ran toward the statue, and [Bonker] ripped through the air as it shot against Statue Man’s head. But [Bonker]’s bubbly skull was stopped by the shield, meaning that Billy wouldn’t be able to destroy Statue Man today either.

“Calm down. I haven’t done anything to steal your good things. In fact, I’ve been trying to give you good things for months now,” the statue said, like Billy didn’t know that Statue Man was a trickster.

But in this case, it seemed like it was telling the truth. Billy was smart, so he could tell when people were lying.

“Oh, it’s wasn’t you?” Billy said with confusion. “Why didn’t you say so, trying to confuse Billy. Stupid.”

“... Anyway,” Statue man sighed. “What’s going on? What talking stone? Why do I sense a familiar aura from where you are sleeping?”

Billy considered whether he should tell Statue Man or not, but he eventually decided he could use some help. Billy had been lost in the mist for too long, and he was starting to get bored. Perhaps the Statue Man could help him figure out how to dig for treasure in the hard ground. Or perhaps he was even friends with the other Statue Man.

“Billy’s friend had another Statue Man, and he let Billy go inside to look for treasures. But Billy couldn’t find any treasure anyway. Statues are all bad,” Billy said.

Statue Man was a bit stupid as usual, needing Billy to repeat himself multiple times before he understood what Billy was talking about. But he eventually understood.

“So you’re inside a trail created from a descendant of our clan? Small world, no wonder it felt familiar. The bloodline is weak and impure, but it has undergone a real awakening,” statue-man muttered. “This is good. I can only provide you with theory through this realm, but this half-blood child might be able to help you take the first steps with your bloodline,” the statue said.

“Billy has told you, Billy is human. Billy doesn’t need any blood either, Billy’s body is full of it,” Billy snorted.

“Nevermind then,” the Statue said. “But what about treasures? There is a lot of treasure outside, but you won’t be able to find it without help. So let me help you find some treasure, ok?”

“How?” Billy asked skeptically. “Billy knows you can’t get out. Billy won’t draw the thing outside to let you free.”

“How about this?” the Statue said. “This time when you wake up, you will remember me for one hour. If you shout ‘Statue man, help me!’ I’ll be able to come out and help you, but only for 10 seconds. Any more than that might hurt me and the place where you are.”

“How does Billy know you’re not lying?” Billy said skeptically.

“I swear on my mother that what I said just now was true,” the statue said solemnly.

“Good! Billy will trust you this time!” Billy said with a big smile.

However, Billy knew now that Statue Man was a liar. He never swore on his mama when it came to drawing that thing outside. Billy had actually considered drawing it before, but now he definitely wouldn’t. Some statues are just too stupid.

“But first, explain to me how the trial works,” the Statue said, drawing Billy out of his thoughts.

“Billy doesn’t know. Billy only saw a talking stone. It was annoying so it got thwoned,” Billy shrugged. “Then nothing happened.”

“The Inheritance Trial seems to have been pretty poorly crafted to allow such a situation to occur without any fallbacks,” the statue muttered. “Well, just call for me outside, and I’ll find the guy with the treasure for you.”

Billy woke up a bit later, and he actually remembered Statue Man this time, just like he said. However, he didn’t immediately call for him, but rather looked around for a while longer. Billy didn’t want to call that guy unless he had to. However, there really was just mist everywhere, and Billy finally gave up.

“STUPID STATUE MAN, COME HELP ME!” Billy roared, and a terrifying pressure spread out the next moment.

Billy’s eyes widened in shock as he looked for the threat. However, he was afraid that [Bonker] wouldn’t be able to help him right now. Not even that old spear guy during the hunt was as scary as this. He felt a bunch of bad feelings in his chest, just like those days he had to protect mama from papa when his mouth smelled funny.

Why had Billy cast the spell to let Statue Man out? Was it actually he who was the stupid one?

“*IN THE NAME OF THE EASTERN MOUNTAIN, HELP THIS CHILD*”, a thunderous voice suddenly echoed out across the area, causing the whole world to shake and most of the mist to disappear.

The terrifying pressure was gone the next moment, and Billy could breathe out in relief. Statue Man really didn’t lie this time and went back inside Billy’s dreams.

“Ah? The Eastern Mountain?” a startled voice answered from nowhere the next second, though Billy felt it was a lot weaker than the earlier voice.

Wait, what earlier voice?

Billy frowned with confusion, feeling like he had forgotten something again. Whatever, he had finally solved the riddle as the mist was going away, opening a tunnel to somewhere that shone with light. A wide smile spread across Billy’s face as he hurried along, and he could already see himself decked in treasure, looking rich enough to make even the golden ghost jealous.

No stupid trial could trick Billy for too long.

However, Billy stopped in his tracks with confusion when he realized he was standing on a cliff on top of a mountain. He quickly looked back, but the mist was gone, and the flat place he had walked around in for so long was no longer there. This really was a mysterious statue to hold a whole mountain and magic mist.

“Welcome,” a deep voice said, and Billy looked toward the source of the voice with vigilance, but he breathed out in relief when he saw that it wasn’t another stone, but a man that actually looked a lot like Billy himself.

“Hello! I am Billy. Do you have treasures to give out?” Billy said as he walked over with quick steps.

“I do,” the man grinned. “A lot of good ones. Are you really a descendant of Brazla? You look much more handsome than him. Almost as handsome as Thrak himself.”

“Brazla? Who is that?” Billy said with confusion. “Billy came here because Billy’s friend had a house full of large statues. Zac said that if Billy jumped into the Titan statue, then Billy would get a bunch of good things.”

“Haha, that greedy bastard kicked the bucket!” Thrak roared with laughter, and the whole mountain shook with his laughter. “That’s what you get for tricking Thrak!”

Billy didn't say anything and only looked at the muscular man with suspicion. He seemed a bit stupid, could he really have good treasure?

"Who was it that spoke earlier? Are you really someone from Eastern Mountain?" Thrak asked with almost burning eyes, and Billy started to feel a bit uncomfortable.

It was a bit troublesome to be the world's most handsome boy, even if it made him happy when mama complimented him.

"Ah? Why do you keep asking Billy weird stuff? Billy was lost in the mist, then Billy fell asleep. Suddenly I found you after I woke up," Billy shrugged as he took a step away.

"Interesting. I can still feel that aura on you though, so I definitely didn't dream," Thrak rumbled. "Well, whatever. I'll help like the great ancestor asked, but rules are rules. Do you want my treasures?"

Billy hurriedly nodded in agreement, his eyes scanning the mountain for good places to start digging.

"Only someone strong can get the treasures of Thrak. It's a rule. Prove you're strong by bashing that rock," Thrak said as he pointed next to Billy.

Billy looked over with confusion, and he saw that there was a round rock just twenty meters away. It was over ten meters tall too, and Billy didn't understand how he had missed it earlier.

"I just need to thwunk the stone?" Billy said skeptically. "Can Billy use **[Bonker]**?"

"Its name is Bonker?" Thrak laughed. "Good name!"

"It called itself something else, but it was stupid so Billy renamed it," Billy shrugged.

"Sure, you can use your club. Just turn that ball into small stones and I'll give you treasures," Thrak smiled.

Billy shrugged in confusion, but he still walked over to the stone. He had thwunked a lot bigger things than this stone, so it didn't really feel like a challenge to break it. He still took the mission seriously, so he walked over and swung at the stone with a lot of power and the impact caused a shockwave to spread out all around them.

However, the rock was completely fine.

"Tsk, you're pretty weak, huh?" the man said from behind, immediately igniting a fire in Billy's chest.

Billy glared back before he looked over at the stupid rock again, and this time he activated **[Disintegrator]**, which gave the club a huge destructive power. This was the skill Billy used to break apart that golden ship earlier. Surely it should work on a rock? But Billy even infused the Seed of Expansion in the strike.

The air around **[Bonker]** started shaking as popping sounds echoed out across the mountain, and Billy bashed the stone with everything he had. A huge explosion erupted, as the air around the stone was sucked into a ball the size of a marble before it exploded with the force of a missile. This eruption repeated six times, each explosion larger than the ones before, and even Billy was thrown away twenty meters from the shockwaves.

Six times was just one worse than Billy's record, and he victoriously looked up at his work. However, Billy's eyes almost popped out of their sockets when he saw that the rock didn't as much as move from the attack, and it only got a small mark where he hit. The ground around it was turned into sand like expected, but the ball was fine.

What kind of super stone was this?

Thrak didn't say anything this time, but Billy couldn't help but blush when he heard a snicker from the side. No holding back anymore. Billy got back up on his feet, and he grew one meter every step he took toward the stone. Power coursed through his veins, and he suddenly felt connected to the whole mountain beneath him.

He now realized what he had missed. The Dao of Expansion wasn't right. **[Bonker]** rose into the air, and it suddenly turned heavier as it was imbued with the Dao of Boulder, and Billy swung down with everything in his body as he activated another skill. The mountain shook, and the ball finally cracked.

"Good! Good seedling! I understand why the Eastern Mountain is interested in you!" Thrak roared from the side.

"So, will you give Billy treasures now?" Billy panted.

"Of course. But before that. How about you stay with Thrak for a few days and learn a thing or two?" the man smiled.

"What can you teach Billy? No offense, but you seem a bit stupid," Billy said skeptically.

"Haha I am stupid, but that doesn't matter because I am strong," Thrak laughed as he thumped his chest.

He suddenly started growing, and Billy's eyes widened when he saw Thrak using the same trick as himself. However, he was a bit different from Billy. Billy got golden hair when growing for some reason, but this guy's hair stayed brown. But he was a lot better at growing than Billy, and Billy gaped when the man became as big as the mountain they stood on.

What was this?! One fart from him and his town Billyville would be blown away.

"See? Pretty strong, right?" Thrak laughed, and his voice alone caused the whole mountain to shake.

Thrak shrunk again after flexing his muscles for a bit, and he was soon enough just a bit taller than Billy again.

"Now let Thrak teach you how to bash without getting bashed. It took Thrak a lot of effort to figure this out, so listen well."

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**Chapter 539 - Loot**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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"What? ONE BILLION for some unsealing?" Zac almost roared as some killing intent started leaking from his body.

"Most of it was the cost of materials. Unsealing is akin to array breaking, and we had to spend a lot to get the work done. Just the best version of **[Warrior's Heart]** cost us almost 45 Million to unseal, in addition to time and manpower spent. The whole process of unsealing this many treasures required half the clan to work arduously through the week, including our elders and children," Calrin said with a sorrowful visage.

“It was quite an ordeal, come look how gaunt the young ones have become from the stress,” Calrin said with a deep sigh, clearly getting ready to summon a bunch of gnome kids once more to tug at Zac’s heartstrings.

“Alright, alright,” Zac snorted. “No need to parade the children around again. One billion it is, but you better not have unsealed a bunch of garbage and expect me to pay.”

“Just a pittance for a man such as yourself,” Calrin said with a smile. “Don’t be too surprised when you hear this, but the total value of the treasures in the Cosmos Sack reached almost 100 Billion Nexus Coins.”

“So you took a flat 1% fee?” Zac said, the quoted value of his treasures quickly calming him down.

Zac had actually expected it to be a lot lower after seeing how little treasures there were in the mentalist’s Spatial Ring. People wouldn’t be bringing items meant for the E-Grade into the tower, but rather leave it with their clans, and F-grade items along with their equipment could only be so valuable.

However, he was happy to be wrong this time.

He had felt a bit like a pauper after **[Love’s Bond]** had swallowed most of his net worth, and much of the remainders were swallowed by **[Verun’s Bite]**. He still had a few billion Nexus Coins, but it no longer felt like a mountain of wealth, especially not after having visited the Base Town. The elites there could throw out over a Hundred Billion Nexus Coins without batting an eye, and all the peak treasures were far out of his price range.

“Indeed, where else can you get such a low fee for work of this nature? Only for friends and family,” Calrin said with righteousness.

Zac snorted when he saw the Sky Gnome’s expression, but he knew that Calrin was telling the truth. One percent wasn’t a very high fee for this kind of work. Identifying items cost 5% at the General Store that the System provided to all Town Lords, and they could only identify pretty common items. One percent to not only identify, but also tally and unseal was a great deal.

“Well, whatever,” Zac said as he turned his attention toward the crystal with the list of items.

A list materialized as he infused some energy into it, and his eyes widened as one line after another appeared, listing an untold number of treasures. The scions of the clans of the Zecia Sector had really come prepared when dealing with the tower.

“We’ve consolidated items of the same category into the same list item as there are simply too many of some items,” Calrin explained. “For example, both **[Second Wind Pill]** and **[Surging Vitality Pill]** are middle E-Grade healing pills, so they are both listed as such. And you have 2348 of those kinds of pills.”

Zac nodded in understanding, and he saw that the list clumped items together by category and grade. For example, there were 84 Low-Grade swords, and 12 Peak Grade swords among the weaponry. However, there were actually 643 High-Grade Swords, which obviously stood out compared to the other qualities.

“Why are there so many High-Grade Swords?” Zac asked with confusion. “Was someone carrying around hundreds of them?”

“Most of them are of the same make, unattuned shortswords with matching inscriptions. I am guessing that the previous owner was either planning on selling some weapons that their clan had produced, or was able to use the swords in some sort of weapon array,” Calrin said.

“Weapon array?” Zac asked with interest.

“A mix of a swordmaster and an array master. It is not too uncommon a path. Rather than just controlling one weapon, you would control hundreds of them like a swarm. Some C-Grade Monarchs command millions. You can even set up arrays to unleash powerful attacks or just overwhelm the enemies with numbers,” Calrin explained.

Zac’s nodded in understanding. He had encountered that sort of fighters before, it was just that he didn’t know the name for it. One of the Incursion Masters used flying needles to attack him from every imaginable angle. There was also the poison master at the start of the 8<sup>th</sup> floor who attacked with a flying swarm of daggers.

Even a few of the visions he had seen when reaching peak mastery of **[Axe Mastery]** had used sets of flying axes.

Of course, swords were just one type of weapons he had gathered, and Zac realized he had gotten almost ten thousand weapons from his trip to the Base Town, most of them Medium and High-quality E-Grade weapons. This was far more than he had anticipated as there were just a few hundred people he killed. He had picked up a couple of dozen weapons during his climb as well, but nothing that would explain this number.

These were all normal weapons forged with E-Grade materials, but they weren’t Spirit Tools. Calrin’s explanation seemed pretty likely, that some of these collections of gear were meant for resale. A lot of people used the Tower of Eternity as an opportunity to make money as it was a way to circumvent the fees to trade through the Mercantile System.

This was even further evidenced by the mountains of raw materials. There were over 50 thousand E-Grade Attuned crystals altogether, making up roughly a fifth of the total value of the loot. They had probably been brought from attuned worlds where there was a massive surplus of certain crystals, intended to trade for other ones that were more valuable back home.

It was the same with there being large stocks of over a hundred different materials and herbs, many of them extremely useful for Port Atwood. All of them were just peak F-Grade or E-Grade materials, but that was just what Port Atwood needed right now to successfully upgrade from an F-Grade force to a legitimate E-Grade force.

Finally, there were was the list of “big-ticket items” at the end, and Zac looked through them one by one.

There was first of all 92 Spirit Tools, though most of them were the bog-standard fare that might not even make it into an auction. At least a quarter of those who managed to get a ticket to the Tower of Eternity would already have gotten their hands on a Spirit Tool, and it was mostly the stronger people of the Base Town who had assaulted him at the end.

Of course, there were still a lot of people who might have the wealth or background to own a Spirit Tool but hadn’t found a fitting one. Ogras was a prime example of this, as his spear was just High-Quality E-Grade weapon without any spirituality.

However, there were some good Spirit Tools among those he had acquired too, and two of the Spirit Tools were actually marked as Peak Quality by Calrin. The Sky Gnome assigned two types of grades on each weapon; rank and quality. For example, one of the Peak Quality Spirit Tools was just Early E-Grade, whereas the other one was Peak Quality High E-Grade.

That still meant that they were both good enough to have been put at the last section of the Auctions that Zac attended, with the latter probably being something that would be saved for one of the bigger monthly auctions.

The quality assessment by the Sky Gnomes was a mix of attunement, craftsmanship, and upgrade potential. **[Verun's Bite]** would no doubt have been assessed as Low Quality when he got it, but Calrin said it was either High or Peak quality by now. He was unsure though, as Zac had taken an unorthodox path in upgrading it by feeding it a bunch of uncommon treasures.

Who knew what the stone he fed Verun was, and who knew what effect a bunch of Dragon blood and a Dragon Core would have? But it had definitely improved the weapon at a fundamental level, and not just evolved it to a higher grade. The bones that created the axehead looked completely different from how it did before, and its potential had probably shot through the roof.

Just the fact that Verun already had enough spirituality to actually leave the weapon and take form meant that reaching D-Grade would probably just require him finding the right set of materials. There shouldn't be any bottlenecks to mention.

Zac didn't really care about the lower quality Spirit Tools, and he guessed that some would be sold during the auction while others would enter the merit exchange. But the two Peak Quality Spirit Tools were essentially strategic resources that he wanted to assign himself. They were a bit troubling though, as he didn't have a clear candidate in mind.

The first one was a bestial claw, perhaps something that could be used by a pugilist. It actually came from one of the leaders of the attack, but he hadn't even taken it out during the fight as he was busy maintaining that Six Directions array or whatever it was called. It was a bit sad, the man got killed by the cursed blade's half-moon before he even had a chance to display his ultimate skills.

The highest-graded Spirit Tool was actually a cauldron, and according to Calrin it could both be used for alchemy and fighting. It was much higher in quality compared to the cauldron he had gifted to his sister, and it was likely the most valuable Spirit Tool on Port Atwood apart from **[Love's Bond]**.

His first idea was to give it to his sister as well, but he eventually decided against it. Kenzie had only shown a fleeting interest in alchemy, and it felt like a waste to give something this valuable away as though it was a toy. He would keep it for himself for now, and rent it out in case his force managed to nurture a talented Alchemist in the future.

That would bind him or her to his force, as a good cauldron was extremely important to progress in alchemy, just like a proper weapon was required to bring out your greatest potential in battle.

The origin of the cauldron was a bit baffling though. Zac's first assumption was that he had killed someone from the Zethaya clan, but he felt that he would have been informed some way or another if that was the case. But it didn't come from one of the five leaders of the assault either, but rather one of the nameless faces in the mob. Calrin had found the cauldron inside a normal Cosmos Sack along with over ten thousand pills of middling quality.

Calrin guessed that it was the defining treasure of a weaker or declining alchemy clan, and the elders had lent it to whoever had entered the Tower of Eternity. The scion would probably just use the cauldron to smash through the earlier floors of the tower before he focused on his alchemy and selling pills, but he had perhaps been caught up in the madness that his Projection elicited.

Zac had been shocked to hear from Ogras that the projection of the Stele had turned everyone almost mad, and it had somewhat lowered the anger he had felt over the incident. He remembered feeling extremely confused that a bunch of weaklings

dared to risk their lives fighting him even after he reached the 9th floor, but it turned out that the System had essentially shoved a berserker pill down everyone's throats.

Or perhaps it was the Stele itself. It was based on war or conflict, after all, and the power of its impartment might just have been too high. Perhaps all 9th-floor apparitions had that kind of effect.

In either case, Spirit Toos were obviously not the only high-value items in the Cosmos Sacks. There was one item on the list that was a natural treasure similar to the **[Evolution Fruit]** he got from Yrial, though it was a shimmering liquid stored in a large crystal vial. Zac was a bit tempted to drink it himself, but he felt it was a bit unnecessary.

It probably wouldn't work on his Draugr side judging by its name, **[Water of Exuberance]**, and it felt like a waste to use on his human side as well. His human side had almost reached D-Grade Race already thanks to the **[Evolution Fruit]**, and he could just complete the final step by taking normal medicinal baths.

It would better serve someone on his force, perhaps Sap Trang now that his odds of evolving seemed to have improved.

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**Chapter 540 - Attunement**

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There were also over a dozen peak quality talismans that were a mix of defensive and offensive among the most valuable treasures, but Zac immediately realized that their craftsmanship paled compared to the ones he had looted from the mentalist. They would still work as back-ups to his somewhat depleted reserves, and he could give out a few more to his core fighters.

But he wasn't personally very interested in talismans of that tier any longer, feeling that his recent attribute gain had made him outgrow these items to a certain degree. After all, a peak E-Grade talisman contained roughly the power of an average peak E-Grade warrior, and he was nearing that point as is.

There were a few items he was extremely keen on keeping for himself though.

The first of them was a consumable talisman as well, called **[Zephyr's Charge]**. It was a peak-grade speed imbue ment treasure if he understood the explanation correctly, and it would essentially give him wings and increase his speed for a few minutes. It would be perfect in case he needed to flee or run down a fleeing enemy, especially in his Draugr form that lacked dependable mobility options.

The second was a handful of **[Spatial Displacement Talismans]**, a treasure that would instantaneously move him to a random spot within a kilometer. It was an amazing treasure to escape certain doom scenarios, provided that space wasn't locked down. For example, if he had a treasure like this when the Hayner Clan Patriarch tried to drop a meteor on his head, then he wouldn't have to leave the floor so early. He could just have teleported out of the hole and hunted down that treasure.

Finally, there was something called a **[Blood Nucleus]**, a rare treasure related to bloodline awakenings. It was the most valuable item of them all, and Calrin had priced it at 20 Billion Nexus Coins. That might not seem like a terrifying amount after having possessed something like the **[Divine Investiture Array]**, but it was still something that Zac would never have been able to afford if he tried to purchase it during an auction.

He figured that the **[Blood Nucleus]** would go perfect together with the marrow he got for himself from the previous quest. The only reason he didn't cram both of them down his throat right now was that he needed some sort of understanding of his supposed bloodline before trying to wake it up.

There were many items that Zac didn't recognize either, but judging by the value that Calrin had assigned they were rare treasures that warriors most likely had brought to the Base Town to sell. These kinds of treasures weren't immediately valuable to Zac, but that didn't mean that they would sell them for Nexus Coins.

Almost all forces in the multiverse were constantly operating under a lack of resources, and there were always thousands of plans or undertakings on hold due to missing certain ingredients. Top forces like the Dravorak Dynasty might not struggle like this due to their power and vast connections, but Zac had already encountered the problem of lacking materials from the Creator quest.

There were a million ways he could gain more Nexus Coins, so selling precious resources instead of holding onto them for a rainy day was just stupid. This was unfortunately how most forces reasoned, which only worsened the availability of rare items.

Calrin also provided his recommendations of what to keep, what to save for the Auction, what to put in the merit exchange, and so on. Zac mostly went with the Sky Gnome's arrangements, apart from making some minor adjustments.

It wasn't that the Sky Gnome suddenly had turned a new leaf and become a decent and honest merchant, but he had kept his greed under check since Zac returned from the Tower of Eternity. Part of it was probably because of Zac's amazing performance, while part of it was that he knew he was on thin ice after the trouble the ring he gifted Zac caused.

Zac felt like he had just won the lottery as he left the Thayer Consortia, even though there was only one "supreme" treasure like the **[Blood Nucleus]**. Calrin's estimate was around 100 billion, but that was going by Zecia sector prices. They believed they could make even more as long as they were smart about what items to put on the auction for the native forces.

The elites of Earth were flush with cash at the moment, and they needed to exploit that.

Every force was hunting the hundreds of millions of Zombies for everything they were worth at the moment, wanting to capitalize on this one-time opportunity. The undead were like headless chickens with the Lich King dying, and they had essentially turned into walking bags of wealth to the cultivators of Earth, just like how it was during the beginning of the integration.

Not only did people gain clean-up quests by the System, but the zombies gave a good amount of both Cosmic Energy and Nexus Coins. Add to that the Miasma Cores that formed in the elite zombies' heads, and it was so lucrative that people were still forgoing sleep even two weeks later. Even the Underworld Council only undertook a cursory search for Enigma who was still missing while they focused on enriching themselves.

At the same time, there was almost nothing for the Earthlings to spend their money on. The general stores provided by the System only sold bare essentials and the lowest grades of weaponry, and there weren't a lot of other options for them. Starlight, the Ishiate elite, apparently possessed a limited Mercantile License and had some wares to sell, but his influence was limited thanks to pushback from Calrin and the Marshall Clan who were aiming to set up their own business empire.

The Marshalls themselves had kept a low profile until now, perhaps partly because they already knew about his auction. Zac had mentioned it to Thea, who no doubt had informed her grandfather as well. Perhaps they were ready to roll out their businesses already but held themselves back out of respect to him.

Either case it was good for Zac, as it meant that people were more likely to spend their hard-earned money in Port Atwood. He could almost see the mountain of wealth in front of his eyes as he teleported back to his cultivation cave.

When he arrived in the hidden cave he looked over at the array that looked similar to the Teleportation Array, though the inscriptions were a lot denser. It was the "homing point" of the **[Spatial Gate Array]**, the location where he would arrive in case he was forced to use the escape function.

The other part was a thin bracelet that was hidden beneath the sturdy bracer he got from Greatest. He kept the bracer on at all times, and he figured it might be able to hide the **[Spatial Gate Array]** from any discerning eyes. It seemed to be one of the most valuable things in his possession, though not quite at the level of things like the **[Pathfinder Eye]** or the **[Divine Investiture Array]**.

Then again, it was hard to put a price on survival. There was simply no supply of an item like the **[Spatial Array Gate]** in the Zecia sector, though there were a lot of other escape measures around. For example, there was the skill that Thea possessed, and whatever the Head Priest used to turn into a stream of flames that allowed him to escape the Dead Zone. There were even the weaker teleportation talismans he had gained just now.

"My lord, welcome back," A voice drifted out from the rocks themselves as Triv emerged.

"It's been a while. I was almost starting to fear that you had managed to escape your contract," Zac said with a small smile. "Did you find anything interesting?"

The ghost had been gone for over a week as Zac sent it on a mission after it finished helping Kenzie setting up the cultivation caves. The ghost was a non-combat class, but his incorporeal form also made him a qualified scout by default. So Zac sent the ghost out to explore the depths of his island, to see if there was anything interesting or valuable in the vicinity of the root of the Nexus Vein.

"Even if I managed to break the Contract of Servitude I would still surely stay with the young master," Triv hurriedly exclaimed, eliciting a snort from Zac.

But honestly, it wasn't impossible that the ghost was telling the truth. Just like Calrin hugged onto his legs because of the potential he represented, so could Triv. A completely purebred Draugr of an ancient bloodline was unheard of in a remote sector like Zecia. The few Draugr clans around were apparently just mixed-blood clans that would just barely be considered Draugr by Heartland Standards.

Following Zac was Triv's ticket to the Empire Heartlands in the future, as Triv was still certain that Zac would end up there sooner or later. And Zac probably would, provided that he ever reached C-Grade or higher. By that time Earth should already be safe, and the Zecia sector wouldn't be able to provide him with a proper environment.

Triv had mentioned a common saying during one of his campaigns to recruit Zac to the dark side. He said that there were four requirements to cultivation: Wealth,

Companionship, Method, and Environment. Not one could be lacking if one wanted to reach the peak.

Wealth was the most important, and that went double for someone like Zac who was just a mortal. To cultivate was to burn money, and it only got exponentially worse. In the beginning he could cultivate and gain levels with just a couple of Nexus Crystals who were barely worth anything, but now he was contemplating buying Attuned D-Grade crystals for hundreds of millions just for some advancements to his soul. And it would only get worse from here on out.

Second was companionship, but it didn't refer to girlfriends or even Dao Companions. It meant that no one could reach the peak alone. You needed a master to teach you, friends you could trust your back to, a support system that could take care of things that were distracting you from your cultivation.

Method was partly referring to a cultivation manual, but it also incorporated things such as Inheritances, Heritages, Dao Impartments, and even hunting grounds. Some insights would have to come from within, but there was no need to reinvent the wheel at every turn. Taking advantage of the wisdom and knowledge of others would allow you to make faster progress without any detriment.

Finally was Environment, and this requirement was why Triv believed Zac would end up in the Empire Heartlands sooner or later. It wasn't without reason that B-Grade powerhouses never appeared in the Zecia sector. It simply didn't allow it. No crops would grow if the soil was barren. He needed to go to the more prosperous sectors of the Multiverse if he wanted to progress further after a certain stage.

In fact, moving as soon as possible was the optimal choice from a cultivation standpoint. Earth was just a desolate rock by most standards, and staying here would no doubt delay his cultivation speed.

"It is quite odd," Triv said, dragging Zac back to the present. "There are some Divine Crystals growing close to the source of the Nexus Vein. This can happen spontaneously, but it is far more likely on life or nature-aspected planets. When the world becomes attuned so does most of the neutral Veins."

"So the World Core's upgrade was gaining an attunement after all?" Zac said with excitement.

This was something that had stumped him and everyone else over the past two weeks. The world was supposed to have upgraded its core because he had defeated the Undead Incursion. There even was that pulse that spread across the whole planet. However, after the pulse there was no follow-up at all.

The density of energy was pretty much the same as before, still slowly climbing as the world continued its gradual integration. No new Nexus Veins or treasures were sprouting up from the ground either, and no attuned energies could be found. Most had simply assumed that it would take more time for the world to adapt to the reward, but it looked like the clues were finally starting to appear.

"Well, that's the thing. I also sensed weak hints of Miasma close to the vein," Triv said with hesitation. "Though I don't believe the vein is turning death attuned."

"What? Did you do something?" Zac said with a frown.

"I swear on the Empire, I didn't do anything! It could be an effect of the realignment array being shut off at the last minute. Either that, or..." the ghost said, drifting off at the end.

"Or what?" Zac asked.

"Or the planet has gained a multi-attunement," Triv said.

“You mean the planet might both have life and death attunements?” Zac said, his eyes lighting up.

Wouldn't that mean that the planet was turning into a cultivation haven for himself?

“I wouldn't be so quick to celebrate if that was the case,” Triv sighed. “It might not be a good thing.”

Zac couldn't stop himself from audibly groaning when he saw the scrunched-up visage of the ghost. What now?

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 541 - Dust and Bones**

“How can a planet having multiple attunements not be good? It sounds extremely good,” Zac asked with a frown.

“In some cases, certainly. Worlds with Wood and Water attunements are supremely valuable among Herbalists, for example. One such planet might be worth as much as 1000 normal worlds of the same grade as they can grow unique plants that require both attunements to thrive. However, such planets appearing is thanks to the two elements harmonizing well with each other,” Triv explained.

Zac immediately understood what the ghost was driving at. Was the World Core going to explode from the clashing elements of life and death? Attunements didn't get much more mismatched than life and death. They were each other's opposites, and they would constantly clash. His own cultivation chamber was proof of that.

“So what would happen with such a world?” Zac asked with some trepidation. “Will the World Core be in trouble?”

“I have never heard of a life and death planet before,” Triv admitted. “I don't think there's not much use for one, with young master being the exception. The Empire wouldn't want their planets tainted with life, and death-attunement would make large sections unsuitable for the living. Perhaps it would be able to birth unique treasures, but that's beyond my knowledge.”

“So what is the worst-case scenario?” Zac sighed.

“The World Core might crumble from the opposing attunements, which would turn the planet into a desolate rock void of energy. Or it could cause the whole planet to completely fall apart,” Triv said.

Zac closed his eyes, a wave of exhaustion hitting him almost like a sledgehammer. Was there yet another thing for him to worry about now? There was already enough on his plate, and now he had to prevent the planet from going up in smokes on top of everything else?

“It might not happen,” Triv quickly said when he saw Zac's reaction. “I am not an expert on the subject, but there are multiple outcomes. Sometimes one attunement can overpower the other, and turn into a single-attunement planet. It is also possible that the planet finds some sort of equilibrium, turning it into an extremely rare existence in the cosmos. In fact, I believe this is the most likely scenario.”

“Why? What did you find?” Zac asked eagerly, like a man gripping hold of a lifebuoy.

Zac would take any clue that indicated that the world wasn't actually ending.

“Well, didn’t young master mention that the World Core upgrade was part of a quest reward that encompassed the whole planet? It would make no sense that the System would provide a detriment as a reward,” Triv said.

Zac’s quickly nodded in agreement. It was true. The System was pretty annoying, and its gifts often felt a bit backhanded. Being stuck with annoying Tool Spirits like Brazla and Big Blue was ample proof of that. However, they were undeniably rewards. It made no sense that the system would leave the world worse off than before as a reward.

However, it didn’t hurt to make sure.

“Is there anything I can do to decrease the risk of anything bad happening?” Zac sighed.

“Our Empire can easily realign a planet as you know, and many living forces possess similar capabilities. Perhaps there are some arrays to stabilize the process of giving a planet attunement?” Triv ventured, but he didn’t seem very sure. “In either case, with the speed things are progressing it will probably take decades before the attunement is finished, so we have ample time to prepare. There are only small hints right next to the nexus Vein, I might even have seen things incorrectly.”

“Well, that’s good I guess. Wait, your first instinct was that the planet would blow up because of the dual attunement? What about me? Am I in any danger?” Zac asked.

“I honestly don’t know how young master is still alive,” the ghost coughed. “Life and death shouldn’t intermingle. It is one of the most basic rules of the Undead Empire. But at the same time, everything is possible. I am just a poor ghost, my understanding of the truths of the heavens are shallow at best.”

“Have you ever heard of undead cultivating life attuned classes or Daos?” Zac asked.

“No, never. It is almost impossible. Our affinities with those types of Daos are essentially non-existent. Why would you spend centuries on attaining a life-aspected Dao Seed when you can gain a death aspected one in a few months?” the ghost said, looking disgusted at the mere thought.

However, the ghost shuddered the next second, meaning that this line of questioning wasn’t permitted by the restrictions engraved on its soul, so Zac could only drop it.

“Well, I guess I will have to figure things out myself,” Zac sighed before he produced the body refining recipe he just got from Calrin. “Do you think this will work on me?”

The ghost scanned the guide, his eyes widening in incredulity.

“It looks like something you would use on a beast companion to refine its constitution?” it hesitantly said. “I’m not sure. It might work? I don’t see anything that would directly clash with you at least. But a pureblood Draugr using some sort of beast powder... The heavens will weep.”

“I’m sure the heavens will be fine,” Zac snorted as he handed the ghost the materials required for the dust. “I’ll go cultivate for a bit. Are you able to prepare the **[Bone-Forging Dust]**?”

“Certainly, young master,” the ghost said as he took the Cosmos Sack. “The process is quite similar to grinding the materials used for making incense sticks, and I have ample experience in this regard. There will not be any issues.”

Zac nodded in thanks and the ghost disappeared into the wall the next moment.

It was quite an impressive skill the specter had, being able to freely pass through walls. He could even bring inanimate objects with him, making him an excellent scout or assassin. It sort of felt like a bit of a waste for such a special existence to become a butler.

Unfortunately, its abilities didn't work with the living, which ruined Zac's idea to have the ghost taking him to the depths of the Mystic Realm, ignoring all the barriers and walls. He couldn't send Triv by himself either, as that was a death sentence for a non-combat class.

Zac walked into his cultivation cave and immediately started up the Soul Strengthening array. His mind was slowly drained and he let his thoughts drift for a bit. Between grinding his skill and going over the list of treasures his mind was a bit exhausted, and he was too tired to ponder on the Dao while cultivating his soul.

He even dozed off a bit and was only awakened when the revolution finished and he felt a surge of Mental Energy entering his mind. Every time he completed a revolution he couldn't help but marvel at his soul. It wasn't really growing all that much bigger from the revolutions, but it felt like his soul was getting polished each time.

More importantly, it also seemed like the revolutions helped deal with the Splinter to some regard. He never felt the surges of murderousness like he did before any longer, even though the Splinter had regained a decent amount of its strength by now. It was still restrained by the Shard, but it wasn't in a completely half-dead state any longer.

The two remnants were still interlocked and unmoving inside the improved cage, but the amount of cleansed energies that was seeping out was gradually increasing without him feeling any negative effects from it. His mind had gained a few boosts during the climb, but it couldn't completely explain his balanced state of mind.

The small improvements that came from the array couldn't be the reason for his tranquil state either. His soul was definitely a bit stronger, but Soul Strengthening was a slow grind and not something that gave instant results. It was more likely that the spiritual dialysis also helped with the hidden corruption from the Splinter, either by design or by chance.

If that was true it was a huge boon, though it also meant that skipping cultivation sessions would harm his mental state.

Zac finished up the session after ten hours as usual before he walked over to the inner cave that housed the **[Seed of Undeath]**. He found his ghost butler cultivating by silently hovering in the air, and there was a supersized pestle by its side. Inside was a silvery compound, no doubt the **[Bone-Forging Dust]** the ghost had prepared for him.

"Young master, it is all done according to the specifications," the ghost said as it woke up. "There should be enough for 8 to 10 applications."

Zac nodded in understanding, though he felt a bit disappointed. The powder had roughly the same effect as the medicinal baths according to Calrin, and ten medicinal baths on the road to D-Grade would just scratch the surface. It should be able to increase his attribute limits by a few hundred points though, which was the most pressing matter.

"And the pain," the ghost hesitantly added.

"I know," Zac said as he sat down and disrobed. "Not much of a choice right now. Help me apply it."

The ghost nodded and a stream of the silvery powder rose from the pitch-black mortar, controlled by the ghost's miasmatic tendrils.

Zac sat motionless for over a minute, waiting with a mix of fear and anticipation for the dust to start working. However, he started to worry about the dust not working after all, which would mean that he had wasted over 300 million Nexus Coins. However, his fears soon abated as he started to feel some warmth covering his whole body.

“It seems to be working,” Zac said with excitement to Triv who waited upon him to the side, but the smile on his face quickly turned crooked as the warmth turned to pain.

First, it just felt like an itch he couldn’t scratch, but that was just the appetizer. It seemed as though the powder was slowly getting absorbed through the skin, and the pain just kept getting worse as more and more of the powder entered his pores. The itch turned into a stabbing pain after ten minutes, and after another ten minutes he felt almost like he was on fire.

The slowly mounting degree of agony was torture by itself, as Zac still didn’t know where the limits lay. There were no timeframes indicated in the crystal either, meaning he had no idea how long the torment would last. He could only try to keep his mind stabilized and bear with it, while not even using his Daos to counteract the powder.

Doing so would no doubt counteract the effect, and it would be the same if his **[Void Heart]** activated. However, even he couldn’t stop himself from shuddering as the pain suddenly spiked to a level he previously thought was impossible.

“My lord, are you okay?” Triv worriedly asked.

“Ow... My bones,” Zac spat through grit teeth as veins danced all across his body.

He didn’t trust himself to open his mouth again, afraid that he would start screaming on top of his lungs. The powder had just entered his bones, and it felt like some sort of parasite was gnawing at him, slowly breaking down his body from the inside. It was beyond painful, and it almost made him look back at the ordeal with the cultists with longing.

Zac quickly realized what the powder was doing. It was continuously breaking down his body parts, especially his bones, before forcibly mending them, each time leaving them slightly stronger. It was a bit like his Soul Strengthening Array which utilized the clashes between life and death to strengthen his soul, though the powder was far more crude and brutal.

“All the powder has entered your body by now,” the ghost suddenly said. “Young master just needs to bear it a bit longer.”

Zac stiffly nodded, no longer able to speak. He didn’t know how long he sat in the death-attuned sanctum until the pain finally abated, and he took a deep ragged breath even though there actually wasn’t any need for oxygen in his current form. He slowly put on his robes once more, but his hands didn’t really listen to his commands.

“Let me, young master,” the ghost said and hurriedly dressed Zac.

“Thank you,” Zac said with a hoarse voice. “How long did this take?”

“Around forty minutes,” Triv said.

“Forty minutes?!” Zac exclaimed, his voice cracking. “It felt like days.”

Zac shakily threw a healing pill into his mouth, though he knew that he wasn’t really hurt. The soothing stream of energy that spread through his boy helped him stabilize himself a bit at least, but he still needed over 30 minutes before he felt ready to stand up.

“What do young master want to do with the rest of the powder?” Triv asked.

“I’ll take it,” Zac sighed.

“If I may, if you just-”

“Enough,” Zac said, not in any mood to hear about how great the Undead Empire was and how this all was unnecessary. “When can I use this next time?”

“Three days,” the ghost sighed. “Your body will need to rest and recuperate for three days.”

“Fine,” Zac nodded. “By the way, ready yourself for war. You will need to come with me and activate the Jamming Arrays, perhaps as soon as today. I could do it but I don’t want to expose my identity.”

“I would have loved to, but I can’t,” Triv said, clearly relieved. “Those arrays can’t be activated by just anyone. There are restrictions in place.”

“We’ve removed them,” Zac said. “Anyone wielding miasma can activate them now.”

“What?! Impossible!” the ghost said with shock. “There’s no way we would leave such a weakness that it could be used against us... Hm?”

“You figured it out?” Zac snorted. “It might be impossible for the living to take control of those things, but it’s not like the protections against other undead are as strong. But don’t worry. You just need to activate the array then hide while we do the fighting.”

“It’s my pleasure to assist,” the ghost said, clearly void of any sort of pleasure.

“Oh, and that insane Tool Spirit at my Dao Repository wants a natural spirit gathering array because he thinks he’s a cultivator, can you start thinking about how such a thing would look? It needs to be pretty too, or he’ll probably start shooting lightning bolts at people,” Zac added.

“Naturally,” Triv nodded. “Anything else?”

“No, that’s it,” Zac said as he left. “Pretty calm day for Port Atwood.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 542 - Crusade**

Zac returned to his compound and just visited his sister for a bite before turning in for the night. Neither Billy nor Thea had returned from their trials just yet according to Kenzie, which hopefully was a good thing. It might mean they managed to get opportunities similar to himself, where he got an additional trial that increased the time that the trial took.

Ogras’ Inheritance had passed quicker, only taking him a few hours. The demon hadn’t divulged everything that happened, it did seem like his haul wasn’t all too impressive apart from the weird creature he was bonded with. Zac guessed his encounter was similar to Zac’s if he only defeated the golem and simply got some contribution points to shop for.

The harrowing experience of using the **[Bone-Forging Dust]** left him utterly unable to find the tranquility to ponder on the Dao, especially not with his bones still throbbing painfully. His mind was far too muddled to go over any plans for the war with the Zhix traitors as well, so he just fell on top of his bed and entered a dreamless slumber.

He woke up the next day expecting to be met with a wave of pain, but he was surprised to notice that he felt fine. In fact, better than fine. The pain was completely washed away, and his body felt like he just had spent the last hour stretching and

limbering up. He didn't know if it was thanks to his high Vitality or if it was just how the powder worked, but he felt a lot lighter as he walked toward the teleporter.

He had already gotten all the pertinent details yesterday from Kenzie, and his destination had appeared on his Teleportation Screen.

Zac cracked his neck before he stepped into the teleporter, ready to withstand an assault at moment's notice. He was expected by the Zhix War Council, but you never knew what that meant. There might be a hundred Anointed on the other side of the teleporter waiting to welcome him with their massive fists for all he knew.

Or even worse, a banquet full of all the disgusting things Ibtep had tried to feed him before.

He appeared in a dark cave the next moment, with ten Zhix warriors standing guard. Two of them shot toward him without hesitation, their short spears aiming for his vitals the moment he materialized. Zac didn't panic at all, and simply materialized the crude club he had used against the Zhix before.

Two hollow bonks later and the two attacking warriors lay sprawled out at the ground at the other side of the room.

"Strength to your hive," Zac said. "I am Zachary Atwood. I am expected."

The still-standing Zhix didn't answer with anything but a bow, and two of them stepped off and led him through an intricate series of tunnels, ignoring their unconscious brethren. Zac looked at the surroundings with interest, as this was the first time he had actually been inside a Zhix hive. He had always meant to revisit his local Hive to meet with Nonet, but there was always some fire or another he had to put out.

Zac had always pictured something a bit like a mix of an Ayr Hive and the town caves he had visited, but he realized he had severely underestimated the love for architecture among the Zhix. It would be fairer to compare the Zhix Hive with a dwarven subterranean city. There was extraordinary attention to detail, no matter whether you looked at the intricately tiled floor or the engraved patterns adorning the walls.

Unfortunately, it seemed like he was walking in a restricted part of the complex structure as he saw almost no Zhix warriors while they proceeded deeper into the hive, and there were no buildings or rooms to give an insight into how they lived their day-to-day. It was clear they walked further into the earth though, into the heart of the hive.

It only took them a few minutes to reach their goal though, a large chamber with no point of interest apart from a massive set of doors. In front of it, a familiar figure stood waiting, and Zac walked over with a smile. Zac looked at Ibtep with interest, feeling that the past months had transformed him from a harmless oddball to a warrior emitting a solid aura. Zac could still discern the inquisitive light in his eyes though, the thing that somewhat set him apart from most other insectoids.

The two hadn't actually seen each other since they split ways at Marshall Manor. Ibtep had been in one long deployment against the undead hordes, both working as a liaison due to his knowledge of humans, and as a scout. Zac had felt a bit bad that this guy wasn't there to join in the opportunity of the Dao Funnel, but it felt like he had improved tremendously even without it.

"Greetings, Lord Atwood," Ibtep said with a bow, almost topping over due to the weight of the massive backpack that he still carried around. "Care for a snack? They are quite delicious, and they can calm a warrior's mind, readying you for combat."

He produced a small jar the next moment, and Zac blanched when he saw it contained a few extraordinarily fatty larvae. It looked like some of the Zhix's odd customs remained, and it made him worry about what came next.

“No thank you,” Zac said with a somewhat forced smile. “It’s good to see you’re okay. How is Nonet?”

“Nonet has fought valiantly for Hive Kundevi and Port Atwood, and our Hive can now join the council,” Ibtep said with pride before he slightly deflated again. “Of course, Lord Atwood might be a part of that reason.”

“Are the others already here?” Zac asked.

“Yes, they are waiting on the other side of this door. I cannot follow inside, it is not my place,” Ibtep explained.

Zac nodded as he looked up at the massive gates once more. They reached over ten meters into the air and were covered in a painstakingly detailed mural that depicted various battles. It was a vivid reminder that the Zhix wasn’t just a barbaric tribe of insectoids, but an ancient society with thousands of years of history.

“Your people actually managed to open these things before the integration?” Zac asked as he looked up at the enormous doors.

“Just the greatest of the Anointed,” Ibtep said with a shake of his head. “Normal warriors would never be able to step through these gates. It requires both renown and enough power to actually open the doors.”

Zac only smiled as he put his hands against the doors and pushed. There was some resistance, but they soundlessly opened and let him inside. However, he was still inwardly shocked when he realized just how much power was required to open these things. There was no way that anyone beneath level 40 or 50 would be able to open these doors, proving just how powerful the Zhix Anointed were even before the integration.

However, it was ultimately not a challenge for an E-Grade warrior, and Zac effortlessly entered the inner chambers where over thirty Anointed stood around a table, with another ten normal Zhix warriors standing by at the side. The smaller Zhix obviously weren’t as powerful as the hulking spiritual leaders of their race, but Zac could immediately sense that every single one of them was quite strong. He wouldn’t be surprised if they all were between level 65 and 75.

The group of Anointed turned toward him as he entered, silently gazing down at him like giants looking down at a small critter. Zac wryly smiled and wondered how this was how it felt to be a Sky Gnome. Zac was about to greet the group, but he inwardly groaned when he felt the aura of one of the largest Anointed blast across the chamber as he started walking toward him.

It looked like Zhix traditions were still going strong.

Zac couldn’t help but ask himself if there was any limit to how big these guys could grow. Normal Zhix were slightly shorter than male humans on average, with weaker anointed like Nonet reaching a bit over three meters. Herat, the Anointed he met during the hunt was another half-meter taller than that, but he was far from the largest one in this place.

There were three anointed in particular that towered above the others, each of them well over four meters tall. The largest one was probably approaching five meters. Zac barely reached their thighs, like a young child next to their parents. And it was one of these three behemoths that had decided to test his mettle as he flashed forward and swung a huge fist toward his chest.

It felt like the fist grew to the size of a mountain, but Zac realized it was just an illusion brought on by the massive killing intent carried within. This hulking Anointed had no doubt been steeped in battle the past months to accumulate such a terrifying aura. However, the fist was still as large as his whole torso, and Zac was afraid he’d shoot out like a bullet when he got hit.

The fist accompanied by that dense aura was pretty intimidating, but Zac was no slouch either. A boundless killing intent spread throughout the whole chamber, almost turning into a palpable haze from how thick it was. A few of the attendants even fell down on their knees before they forced themselves back on their feet with embarrassment.

Zac didn't care about the normal Zhix though, but he instead readied his body to receive the strike. He stomped down into the ground to lodge himself in place as he leaned forward. He could only pray that his bones were completely healed from using the **[Bone-Forging Dust]** yesterday, as this would probably hurt. At least it couldn't be too bad as his danger sense barely acted up.

A deep clap of thunder echoed out across the hall as the Zhix's massive fist slammed into Zac's chest. Even digging his legs into the solid stone tiles wasn't enough, and Zac was pushed back over twenty meters from the furious momentum. It felt like someone had swung a wrecking ball into him and Zac actually had to stop himself from grunting in pain.

The Zhix warrior clearly had almost 8 or 900 Strength, and it also had a dexterity that was almost on par, increasing the speed and destructiveness of the strike. There was even a hint of a high-tiered Dao Seed in the fist, but Zac knew he hadn't actually infused his strike. This was just a normal attack to test his might.

He looked with surprise at the towering Anointed. Had they found a way to move forward and evolve? From what Zac understood the rite of Anointment came at a cost, cutting off their path of advancement. But these were not attributes that a normal F-Grade warrior should have, at least not without a huge number of special opportunities that he doubted that the Anointed would possess.

"You are wondering how I could bring forth such strength, human Warmaster?" the massive Zhix laughed, its booming voice causing ripples in the air. "I have entered the crusade. I will fight for another year or so, then I will join the ancestors. This will be the final War, and my final gift to my Hive."

Zac's eyes widened in understanding, once more shocked at the conviction these people carried. He didn't know the specifics, but it seemed as though the Anointed knew of some technique traded their lifespan for power. It didn't seem to be directly burning life-force though, as Zac had seen that enough times to recognize the unique aura it radiated.

"So I guess it's time for me to reciprocate?" Zac said as he fully unleashed his aura.

The whole cave shuddered, and it only got worse as Zac started moving toward the enormous insectoid.

"Wait, Warmaster," the Anointed hurriedly said as he took a step back. "If there is one thing we have learned over the past year is that our hives cannot only rely on the old teachings to survive. We must also adapt and move forward. There is no need for you to carry on with that archaic tradition, let us instead talk about the looming threat."

The other Anointed hurriedly nodded as well, immediately launching into a discussion while pointedly looking away from Zac and his rapidly dwindling momentum. Zac speechlessly looked on with his fist still in the air.

*So I just ate your fist for nothing?* Zac thought as he looked at the shameless Zhix with mixed feelings.

"I am Rhubat. Strength to your hive. Nonet said you might be able to provide a tactic that would expedite our crusade?" the shameless Zhix said.

"Is this room secure?" Zac asked with a sigh, finally dropping the subject.

“Everyone who has not yet entered the crusade, leave this room,” Rhubat said without hesitation, and a small group of Anointed along with the group of normal Zhix warriors left the chambers.

However, almost all the Anointed stayed, including Nonet who stood to the side, looking almost like a child next to some of its larger colleagues. However, Zac noted that Nonet must have grown by something like 30 centimeters since he had seen the hive leader last time.

“You too?” Zac asked with a frown as he looked over in Nonet’s direction.

“The Anointed exist to serve the Hives. The crusade is our highest order. This is the final crusade, after which the Zhix will be eradicated or have no need for the Anointed any longer. Our era is coming to an end,” Nonet said, and the other Anointed nodded in agreement.

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**Chapter 543 - Battleplans**

Zac sighed when he heard Nonet’s declaration, but he could understand the sentiment. The Anointed were terrifyingly powerful beings who could act as spiritual leaders and protectors of the Zhix, but that could only continue for so long. The world would soon pass them by as they were stuck at the F-Grade. A random warrior would be able to kill them with a simple swing in a decade or two.

Such a transference in power would undoubtedly affect their positions as leaders as well, especially as their purpose of existence would fade into memory with the fall of the Dominators. They rather wanted to go out on their own terms, fulfilling the mission they had carried for over a thousand years.

“What about Hive Kundevi?” Zac asked.

“We have made arrangements for our elders and strongest warriors to take over after we’ve fulfilled our purpose,” another Zhix explained, and one Anointed after another added a snippet of information.

Zac listened to their explanation, and it sounded like the Zhix would set up governance with two major pillars; the clergy and the army. One would provide spiritual guidance and be in charge of running the non-combat side of things, while the Army would nurture the next generation of warriors and protect the hives.

The true elites would still be interred into some sort of templar order, making sure there was a balance in power between the two factions.

As for their reproduction, it turned out that Anointed weren’t actually needed for that. From how lbtep explained it back then it sounded like the anointed were like hive queens that made it possible for Zhix eggs to be fertilized, but it wasn’t the whole story. They were simply the ‘alphas’ of the hive, but the alpha didn’t necessarily need to be Anointed.

It had always simply been like that until now as they were so much more powerful than anyone else in the hives.

“We hope you will be able to watch over the children in the future. This new world is hectic and confusing, but you humans seem quite able to adapt,” Nonet added after the group had explained the future path of the Zhix.

Zac finally understood why the large Zhix had taken the time to explain things in such detail. They would be gone in a year, and he was the greatest threat to their population apart from the Dominators. He could definitely eradicate the Zhix if he put his mind to it.

“I’ll do my best,” Zac said with a nod, and after some thought added some more reassurance. “I believe my force has become so successful because I welcomed people from all the races. It has allowed me to advance much further than other factions. I will make sure that none of the races will get pushed out in the future as we’re stronger together.”

Of course, both Zac and the Zhix understood that promise was provided that no one stepped out of line. Zac didn’t really have an active interest in the governance of the new planet, but he definitely wasn’t some sort of pacifist. He wouldn’t make making examples out of some factions if people started causing trouble for him.

“That’s all we ask,” Rhubat said.

With that out of the way they immediately dove into discussing the details of the crusade. Zac immediately took out one of the Jammers from his cosmos sack and briefly explained how it worked. He was a bit fuzzy on the limitations of the array though to give himself some leeway. He didn’t believe anyone here was a traitor, but better safe than sorry.

“My army can set out at any time,” Zac said. “And I am sure the Human Council would join if I ask as well. We just need to leave some to keep whittling down the zombies.”

“Thank you, but there is no need. It is the Zhix who have brought this threat onto this world, so it will fall onto the Zhix to solve it,” another one of the three enormous Anointed said with a shake of its head. “It is better your kind deal with the remaining unliving before they spread across the planet like the corruption they are.”

“With your ability to stop the traitors from fleeing, there will be no need for massive armies,” another Anointed added. “Just enough to take out one hive at a time. An army assisted by a coalition of us Anointed will be more than enough.”

“Fine,” Zac slowly nodded.

Zac was honestly somewhat relieved that his army wouldn’t have to get their hands dirtied once again. The war was a good opportunity for them to gain battle experience against a strong opponent that wasn’t braindead like the zombies, but it would definitely lead to casualties. The Zhix were more like the demons than humans in one regard.

Their culture was steeped in battle, and the integration only added to their power. And there were a lot of them. His army had many elites, but there were too few of them, and the Zhix warfare doctrine was essentially based around taking down more powerful warriors by grinding them down with a ceaseless wave of violence.

“But I still need to come with. The items that can block out teleporters and communication must be activated by the unliving, so I need to bring my undead servant,” Zac said, and added a short explanation after seeing the odd stares. “I captured it from the Incursion for information.”

Zac also felt that he needed to be present in case the real Dominators showed up. That way he might be able to avoid a wholesale slaughter of his allies. Zac might not be fully confident in killing them without sounding them out first, but he was confident in both being able to slow them down and getting away in one piece.

After all, there would be a need for manpower in the Mystic Realm, and this group of Anointed might be the best allies he could get his hands on. They were as

powerful as early E-Grade warriors and they had ample combat experience. Bringing these guys would help him even out the odds against the other factions.

Besides, Zac guessed that they would have to enter the Mystic Realm anyway if they wanted to finish their crusade. Void's Disciple had no doubt already brought in some hives to help him look for the dimensional treasure. He couldn't do everything himself. And there were only so many Hives that this group could ambush before the Dominators realized something was wrong.

"That is fine. We need the assistance of humans for another matter," the Rhubat added. "Teleportation. Our hives were not placed too close together in this new world, and many hives have been destroyed already from the war. If we would use our own network then we would have to spend months on foot."

The enormous table lit up the next moment, and Zac's eyes widened when he saw it was a surprisingly detailed map of Pangea. There were a lot of indistinct sections, including most of the unmapped zones on his own tablet. But a lot of it was properly filled in with what seemed to be even greater detail than the maps produced by the Marshal Clan.

"This is something Vanexis was gifted by the System," Rhubat said, nodding to the other 5-meter Anointed who had spoken earlier, as he took out a small metal ball from his Cosmos Sack. "As long as a warrior travels with a ball like this in their possession, then everything around them will be recorded and added to the map. We have thousands of these balls."

Zac whistled with surprise as he looked down at the map again. The Zhix had truly been busy going by how much distance they had covered to map out these places.

"There are 28 Hives we have marked," Rhubat said. "All of them are within two hours' travel."

"Only twenty-eight hives?" Zac asked with surprise.

Twenty-eight cities were nothing to the human population, even after the integration, so it sounded like a really low number if the Zhix had actually defected to the Dominators.

"Don't underestimate these hives. The Dominators have gathered their subjects into massive hives far eclipsing any structures from our old world. Their numbers are almost on par with our hundreds of remaining hives," Vanexis rumbled. "Each of them holds over a hundred thousand warriors along with millions of normal Zhix."

Zac nodded in understanding when he heard the explanation, and he tried to understand the motivation for the Dominators to concentrate their followers like this. Was it just out of convenience, or did it have to do with karma? Was the effect of faith more pronounced when one's followers gathered together, rather than having them spread across the planet?

It was undeniably how cults worked, where groups of people secluded themselves from the rest of the world. This closed system shut out any dissenting voices, which lead to a deeper and deeper indoctrination.

"We will need the help of another human force for this," Zac said as he looked at the map. "I don't have access to that many teleporters."

"Do you still have multiple factions within your race? We thought the human towns were all under you?" Rhubat asked with confusion. "I have seen the strength of the other human elites. How can they challenge your rule?"

Zac didn't understand the question at first, but it turned out that the Zhix had already changed their structure so that there were only two forces among their race;

The Council of the Anointed and The Dominators. All Anointed-run hives were accessible for all the Zhix, whereas they were obviously shut out from their enemies' teleporters.

It was extremely different from Humans who not only had a handful of major factions like Port Atwood and New World Government, but also dozens of mid-sized forces, though most of the mid-sized forces were kind of under the umbrella of the Marshall Clan by now. There were even hundreds, perhaps thousands, of towns that weren't really aligned with any of the forces, but rather free bases that had survived some way or another.

"I have been busy throwing out all the invaders of our planet until now," Zac said before he wryly smiled. "I guess humans are a bit more individualistic as well. We didn't really get along before the integration either. I probably won't meddle with the human forces unless necessary. But I can fetch a guide to open the portals for us without a problem."

The group went over the detail for some time, but the idea was quite simple. Zac would enter a human-controlled town ahead of the army together with a squadron of Zhix scouts, and they would rush to the Hive and get ready to activate the jammers. The army would enter after a short interval, and Zac would activate the jammers the moment the last of the Zhix army had passed through the teleporter.

Activating the jammer before the army had actually arrived at the Hive might warn the traitor Zhix, but they were afraid that the elites would immediately flee through the teleporter the moment they spotted an incoming army. The elites might still try to flee by foot, but the scouts would hopefully be able to spot them this way.

As for the battle itself, it sounded straightforward enough. The Anointed would act as wall breakers and crush all resistance, while the normal Zhix warriors would back them up. In case one of the Dominators showed up, they would take them down even if they had to sacrifice tens of thousands of lives.

"How long do you need to prepare, Warmaster?" Rhubat finally asked, surprising Zac a bit.

"I only need to pick up my ghost and a guide," Zac said after some thought. "It's dependent on how quickly you can gather your armies."

"The armies and the other Anointed are standing ready. Our movements are no doubt being watched, so we need to move quickly from this point on. We want to take out as many of these hives as possible before they adapt," Rhubat said as killing intent started to leak from its body. "If we can take down five of the Hives before the rest gather, then we are confident in emerging victorious even if Void's Disciple shows up."

"Remember, not even the humans can know where we are going," Nonet added.

"I know," Zac nodded.

It was already known that there were humans co-operating with the Dominators, and they would have to move randomly to avoid getting exposed and ambushed. There was no point in messing around, so Zac soon exited the secluded chambers. Ibtap was still waiting for him outside, and the scout joined him as they returned to Port Atwood.

However, Zac didn't even have time to call the ghost before he sensed strong fluctuations over at the Dao Repository.

"Wait here," Zac groaned in exasperation as he rushed over.

Thankfully it turned out that it wasn't Brazla who was causing trouble. The square outside the Repository was completely tranquil, and neither lightning bolts nor a massive face was hovering above it. The fluctuations only grew in power though, and Zac felt they came from inside the towers themselves.

Zac quickly entered the Towers of Myriad Dao, and he quickly spotted the source of the commotion; the statue of the Blade Emperor.

“The girl is coming out,” Brazla said as he descended from a golden cloud floating around in the ceiling.

“Did she pass?” Zac asked as his eyes returned to the statue.

“She did, if barely,” the Tool Spirit snorted as he turned two disdainful eyes toward the array in the same direction. “Though I’m not so sure she will have the guts to take on the following challenge in the E-Grade.”

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**Chapter 544 - Intent**

Zac looked over at the Tool Spirit with surprise. This time Brazla was dressed like a scholar, and he held a golden abacus in his hands instead of some sort of oversized weaponry. There was also a sense of calmness in his eyes like he had transcended the mortal plane or was beyond mundane worries.

Of course, it was just Brazla playing the part, but it was far comparable to the domineering and arrogant persona he had when pretending to be a cultivator. In fact, Kenzie had already told him that Brazla was usually easier to deal with when he was dressed as a non-combat class. If you saw him wielding some sort of weaponry you were usually better off throwing out a few compliments and trying again tomorrow.

Thea appeared the next moment, and Zac’s eyes widened in shock when he saw her appearance. Brazla wasn’t kidding around when he said that Thea had barely passed. She was unconscious and she looked beyond wretched. Her clothes were in tatters and her whole body was completely drenched in blood. Just a few stripes of her hair remained, hanging in clumps held together by coagulated blood.

The only thing that looked completely intact was a blue sword that hummed with power. It was gripped in Thea’s right hand with such force that her knuckles were white. Zac wondered if this was the invisible weapon she usually wielded, or if it was something she had gained inside the Inheritance.

This was not the time to worry about the details though, and Zac unhesitatingly rushed over as he took out one of his better healing pills. However, his mind actually screamed of danger the moment he reached her side.

“Wai-“ Zac shouted as he jumped backward, but it was too late as an extremely sharp energy shot out of one of her wounds and flew toward him, cutting open a shallow wound on his right arm.

He had been utterly incapable of stopping that attack, and his usually impervious skin was cut like butter. If Zac reacted any slower he might actually have lost his arm. The odd energy thankfully didn’t try again but rather returned and entered Thea’s body once more, causing a small shudder.

Zac barely felt any pain at all from the small cut, but a burning pain bloomed a second later. He looked down at the wound with surprise, and he found that it was an extremely clean wound, even exceeding the sharpness of the cuts he formed with **[Rapturous Divide]**. Was this the power of the Fragment of the Sword, or was this something else entirely?

Because that small energy didn’t simply feel like a Dao.

“Such profound Dao Intent,” Brazla muttered. “That strand of consciousness has actually made progress on his path.”

“The Blade Emperor did this?” Zac asked. “And what is Dao Intent?”

“That girl is not adept enough in the Dao to form such a pure strand of Sword Intent. It can only come from Irei. It’s really a shame,” Brazla said, unfortunately ignoring the second question.

Only then did Thea wake up, and she looked around with some confusion before she realized where she was.

“Hey, catch this,” Zac said before throwing the pill to Thea who immediately swallowed it before she once again closed her eyes to focus on her recuperation. Zac sighed in relief when he saw Thea was fine before turned back to the Tool Spirit. “What’s a shame?”

“Irei,” Brazla said as he looked up at the statue. “He was destined to become a C-Grade Monarch, but he fell to his demons in the end. Do you know why the Blade Emperor is the only one who left a complete heritage in addition to an Inheritance?”

“Because he was a friend of your creator?” Zac asked, not hesitating to take advantage of the fact that Brazla was in one of his rare sharing moods today.

“True, but that’s not the reason. It’s here because of his obsession with the sword and creating a family. He adopted one Sword Child after another after marrying his main weapon, and he poured obscene amounts of wealth into them to awaken their spirits. When he ran out of money he turned to my master, who helped him evolve the Swords in return for the Heritage,” Brazla said. “If he had used even a third of all that wealth on himself he would have broken past his bottleneck without a doubt. He is the second most talented person of the seven.”

“So what happened?” Zac asked.

“Mental disorder brought by betrayal. It turned into a heart demon that was the source of his obsession with gathering swords,” Brazla said with a shake of his head. “Remember his fate well. You mundane beings are not meant to grasp at heaven’s secrets. To cultivate is to go against the heavens, and it is not done without shedding your humanity. As the millennia pass you will come to realize that you don’t recognize the person that stares back at you through the mirror any longer.”

Thea opened her eyes and listened to Brazla with a serious expression, and Zac felt a sense of heaviness as well. It was true. How could someone keep their humanity as the eons passed and almost every one they had ever known had long turned to dust? The reasons for struggling to become more powerful might no longer matter, and you were suddenly just a walking nuclear weapon devoid of purpose.

“Thankfully The Great Brazla is not limited by such trifles, as he is endless and eternal,” Brazla said as he drifted away with a snort.

“Are you okay?” Zac asked, shaking off Brazla’s ominous portents.

“I’ll be fine. I haven’t completely absorbed the sword energies. Did the Tool Spirit Call it Sword Intent just now? And where is Billy?” Thea croaked.

“Billy is still inside,” Zac said before looking at Thea with interest. “He called it both a Dao Intent and a Sword Intent. Are you able to share how it’s created?”

That small amount of energy had been extremely powerful, and Zac was hoping to form something similar for himself. After all, if there was Sword Intent, then there should surely be Axe Intent as well. If he could add that power to his strikes, then he would probably be able to fight one tier stronger enemies without breaking a sweat.

“It seems to be something that comes after a Dao Field,” Thea hesitantly said as she started smearing her vast number of scars with some ointment. “The Blade Emperor

was able to materialize real objects with it. He trapped me in a cage of Dao Intent Swords, and I had to use my own Dao Field to get out. I'm not sure if it's even possible to create naturally in my rank. You might be able to do it."

"So how do you still have the energy?" Zac asked before he remembered how rude it was to pry into other's cultivation secrets. "Sorry, it's fine if you don't want to tell."

"It's okay. I was imparted with a small amount of Sword Intent to guide me on the path of the sword. I think I might be able to use it sort of like a mother dough for my own strikes too, as long as I don't overuse it," Thea said after some thought. "We could spar a bit if you want."

"It sounds like a good idea, but it would have to wait. The war against the dominators is starting right now," Zac sighed.

"I'll come along," she said as she got up and started walking toward the exit, though her steps were shaky.

"Are you crazy?" Zac said. "You're covered in wounds, go rest. We do need someone from the Marshalls to take us around, but I'll grab one of your cousins."

"No, I'm going. I'm not staying behind any longer," Thea said with her determination. "I'm moving forward as well."

"You... Fine," Zac sighed. "Our job is only ancillary anyway. I won't fight either, I'll just help with the jammers. This is the Zhix' war, and they don't want us to step in unless absolutely necessary."

"Fine," Thea said as she wobbled out of the Dao Repository.

"Are you really...?" Zac couldn't help but interject again, but he was quickly shut up by another glare.

Zac was about to call Triv as well, but he actually appeared from between two bushes and shot toward them.

"My lord," Triv said, but his greeting turned into a scream as Thea unhesitatingly drew her blade in one fluid motion aimed at slaughter. "Ai!"

"He's my butler," Zac shouted in alarm, and he barely had time to block the swing with Verun, narrowly preventing Triv from getting cut in two.

Normally a sword swing wouldn't matter to a ghost, but Zac sensed a shadow of that terrifyingly sharp energy inside the weapon. He still wasn't completely clear how it was made, but it would definitely be able to harm the ghost since it was related to the Dao.

"I'm sorry," Thea said as she sheathed her weapon before she gave Zac an odd look. "You have a ghost butler?"

"This is why young master shouldn't consort with the living. Violent and lowly creatures," Triv sighed as he made some distance from Thea.

"Triv is quite knowledgeable about all kinds of things, and he helps me sorting out the day-to-day," Zac shrugged.

Zac hesitated for a bit before he also told Thea about Triv's early findings.

"A life and death planet," Thea slowly said before she sighed. "This will be a detriment to most of us."

"Well, as I said, it's not sure it will come to happen," Zac said as he scratched his chin, feeling a bit guilty.

There was no way it was a coincidence that the planet got such a weird attunement. Zac was the main contributor to the quest, dealing with the lich king, the elite army, and two and a half of the generals himself. The planet probably got its

attunements to match his, as the System wanted to gift him a suitable cultivation environment. The fact that it screwed over the rest of the planet wasn't something that the elitist System would care about.

"It might not be too bad for normal humans either. A lot of people lived quite well at the edge of the Dead Zone, living outside and hunting inside. As long as we can concentrate the attunements to certain spots we can maintain that sort of balance," Zac added after a bit, trying to find some positives in the situation. "And both life and death are powerful attunements. Powerful healers and black mages might emerge from Earth in the future."

Undead might not be able to deal with life-attunements, but Humans didn't have the same limitations. Having a high affinity to Death was extremely unlikely, but people could still go down that path without too much going against them. Assassins, Necromancers, Black Mages. A death-attuned planet would help nurture all those kinds of powerful existences.

"That might be true. Even if half the world will turn into a Dead Zone there will still be plenty of room to live on," Thea slowly nodded as she walked toward the teleporter. "Well, that's an issue for later. Let's go."

"You might want to change clothes first," Zac coughed, which drew a snicker from Triv as well.

Only then did Thea look down at the rags she wore over her bloodied body, and her hand moved up to her almost-bald head. She stiffly nodded without a word and Zac hurriedly led her to his sister's mansion where she could shower and change.

She only emerged 30 minutes later, but the transformation was almost shocking. Her hair had been regrown and her clothes changed, but the sword scars remained all over her body, angry red lines that seemed to refuse to disappear. Zac's wound was actually in a similar state, though he felt it would close a few hours.

That still was a pretty long time for an errant spurt of energy, just a fragment of whatever Thea carried inside her body. Zac could actually sense that very same power in her eyes as well as her piercing blue eyes had gained an undeniable sharpness to them. The only thing that he couldn't ascertain was whether that energy was something beneficial or yet another risky venture like his own Remnants.

The trio soon returned to the teleporter where Ibtep still was waiting, and Zac turned to the ghost.

"You better enter your house for now. We'll be traveling with the Zhix for a while. The Anointed seem to really hate the undead."

"Those things," Triv muttered with a mix of disgust and incredulity, clearly understanding who Zac was talking about. "Not natural."

"A being wrought from purest corruption shouldn't talk of what is natural," Ibtep said with a snort as it gave the ghost an askance look.

Triv didn't respond, and only flew into the pagoda in Zac's sleeve and disappeared. The trio activated the teleporter the next moment and found themselves surrounded by dozens of Anointed who stood ready. The teleporter they appeared in was another one than the array he entered through last time.

They were in an unfathomably large underground chamber, and Zac spotted a vast army behind the towering priests. There were hundreds of thousands of Zhix standing ready and armed to their teeth, every one of them radiating palpable killing intent. The whole chamber felt like a pressure cooker from the accumulated aura, and it felt claustrophobic even though it was over twenty meters to the ceiling.

“We’re ready to go,” Zac said after making sure he wouldn’t get sucker-punched again. “Where do you want to teleport first?”

“We want to take out the first Hives as quickly as possible, which will hopefully help us trap more of them before they devise some sort of retaliation,” Rhubat said as he turned to Thea who was clearly affected by the extremely dense killing intent. “Please take us to the town called Lübeck, pathfinder.”

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**Chapter 545 - War Machine**

“I’m no-“ Thea was about to interject, but she just shrugged and accepted her new title in the end.

Zac only smiled wryly as he stepped into the teleporter with Thea, the squad of ten Zhix scouts and lbtep following close behind.

It looked like the town didn’t get a lot of visitors as the guards reeled with shock when their group stepped out of the teleporter. The reclusive Marshall Scion wasn’t immediately recognized, but the small German town exploded with activity when the guards realized who they were.

The mayor, a shockingly rotund middle-aged lady, came rushing over with such momentum that she almost only looked like a spherical blur.

“Our armies are passing through here,” Thea said without preamble when the breathless mayor appeared. “More Zhix will come. A lot more. Tell your people to stand down. And close the gates to make sure our presence isn’t leaked.”

Zac nodded when he saw the Mayor give a rapid series of orders into a walkie-talkie without hesitation. Bringing a big shot like Thea rather than some random guide was already proving to be the right choice. He needed to hold up his part of the bargain though, so he turned to the group of scouts who all seemed fully focused on the mission.

“We’ll go on ahead,” Zac said as he took out his leaf. “Can you stay here and make sure there’s no trouble?”

“Sure,” Thea nodded. “I’ll catch up with the army.”

The group of scouts stepped onto the leaf after some explaining, and the group of 12 shot out toward the enemy hive. They stayed close to the ground to avoid getting spotted, though Zhix surveillance was seldom not performed aboveground. They rather built scouting chutes designed to catch the vibrations from the surface, sending the signals back to the hives as an early warning.

It only took them thirty minutes to reach their destination, a dense crop of forest on the opposite side of the hive. Zac figured that the array of Lübeck should be unaffected when activating the Jammer at this position, though the thing hadn’t been through enough testing to ascertain its exact limits. This would be a learning experience for him as well.

The leaf stopped just above the ground and the group of scouts nodded at Zac before they spread out through the forest, soundlessly moving between the trees like ghosts. Only lbtep stayed behind in case he was needed to communicate with the Zhix army. Zac stepped down from the flying treasure as well and took out a concealment array disk to avoid getting spotted.

He took out the Jamming array next, while also prodding the sigil in his mind that connected him to his butler. The small pagoda floated out from his sleeve a second later, after which the ghost appeared.

“My lord,” Triv said with a bow as he looked around.

“Convenient,” Ibtep muttered from the side, its eyes trained at the small pagoda. “Is it the same magic as that of the Ayr Hive in your base? If the Zhix could use this sort of magic on our hives...”

“I’m not sure,” Zac said. “I think only ghosts can live in this pagoda. But the Ayr Hive might be possible to mimic? Not sure how much use it would be though.”

“Imagine, one Zhix could carry a whole hive in its pocket, tens of thousands of warriors pouring out when attacked,” Ibtep muttered.

“I think it would be a bit uncomfortable to stay in someone’s pocket all day. Imagine the shaking,” Zac countered, which made Ibtep nod thoughtfully.

“This item is not made for the living,” Triv said as it shot Ibtep a cool glance. “There are many ways to create portable worlds though, but all of them are beyond your means.”

“Some further thinking is required on this matter,” Ibtep only murmured, his eyes clearly spinning with ideas.

Zac shrugged and turned back toward the Jamming Array. The thing was pretty much idiot-proof thanks to his sister, so he only needed to place it down on the ground and insert Fifty E-Grade Miasma Crystals. He started to get to work, and Triv couldn’t help but float over and look at the jammer with interest.

The preparations were soon finished, and Zac performed a cursory inspection before he sent a message to Thea to start calling over the Zhix. His job was essentially done by now, and he only needed to make sure no one messed with the jammer.

“The modifications are crude, but they can’t hide the amazing ideas they were built upon. To think that it would be possible to rework the array this way. The person who did this is definitely a genius,” Triv muttered before it turned to Zac. “It’s your sister, isn’t it? She is a unique talent when it comes to understanding and modifying energy paths.”

Zac thought for a second before he nodded in affirmation. It wasn’t like it was a big secret, especially not after Kenzie had helped Triv create his cultivation cave.

“You might want to consider sending her to one of the powerful Craftsman Sects in the Sector,” the ghost said. “It comes with some restrictions, but she will get proper guidance and she can return home as a resident Array Master after having reached a certain level.”

“Why would a sect be generous enough to train people before letting them go?” Zac asked with skepticism. “That would be like watering someone else’s fields.”

“They take a tax. If your sister returns to your force, you will have to pay a fee based on her attainments, part of which would go to the sect as remuneration for the training,” Triv said. “It is mostly just academies and craftsmen sects that do things this way though. Joining a combat-focused sect is generally a more permanent decision.”

“Pay a fee? For life?” Zac asked with a frown.

“No, until enough benefits have been provided,” Triv said. “She can also work off that debt herself as a roaming cultivator or by staying inside the sect.”

“So you essentially become an indentured worker until you can free yourself?” Zac sighed. “Doesn’t sound like a good place to send Kenzie.”

“It might sound harsh, but such are the rules of the universe. No one will go out of their way and share their arduously accumulated heritage for no return. Just working

off the debt over a few centuries isn't too bad as it will also help you improve on your craft, and there is no lack of applicants to such places. The best ones require both great connections and heaven-sent talents," Triv said.

Kenzie's future was something Zac had thought about, but it was ultimately up to her what path she wanted to take. She would need to find some environment that suited her unique gifts, and Zac knew that place wasn't by his side. He needed mountains of enemies to cut his way through in order to progress, but she seemed far more suited to orthodox cultivation.

Jeeves could help her improve both her class and her skills, and she also made tremendous progress by just cultivating inside his cultivation cave. She might be able to make huge gains if she entered some of those ancient places and gobbled up and improved all the great manuals and skills for herself. Just the thought made him both a bit excited and jealous.

"What about me?" Zac asked. "Isn't there some good opportunities for me like that as well?"

"Well... Perhaps," Triv said hesitantly. "Young Master might be better off joining an army or a mercenary band and fight at the borders."

The borders in this case were referring to the space outside the properly integrated space. The Zecia sector was huge, and it turned out that less than 3% could actually be considered part of some force's domain. Most star systems might officially be within the domain of an Empire or Sect, but there was no way that they had the man-power or resources to keep a presence at the more remote zones.

The planet he was sent to for his Hegemony quest was a prime example of that situation. The planet was integrated and part of the Allbright Empire, but it was so weak and declined that the System only provided the barest of functions. Most unclaimed territories were just a bunch of junk planets with low potential, but millions of clans, sects, and mercenary groups traveled those zones to find riches.

There was always some treasure hiding among the mountain of trash. You never knew when you might find an unclaimed Mystic Realm, precious remnants, or valuable treasure.

There were also the even more chaotic danger zones, such as the massive area full of Spatial Anomalies close to the Allbright Empire. There were no doubt far more opportunities there compared to the unclaimed areas, but there were also far more dangers. Only the craziest mercenaries decided to risk their lives in such a place, contending not only with the pirates and unorthodox forces, but with the fickleness of space itself.

Zac still hadn't decided on his future course of action, but he instinctively felt unwilling to join a mercenary band or some army like Average. First of all, there was the risk of someone higher up in the organization becoming interested in digging out his secrets. But there was also the simple fact that Zac enjoyed his freedom.

His life had become a lot worse by most metrics since the integration, but one big plus was the huge degree of freedom he enjoyed.

"They're all through," Thea said through the crystal, waking Zac up from his dreams of the future.

"Do it," Zac nodded at Triv, and the ghost infused its miasma into the Jammer.

The Array immediately hummed into life, and Zac felt a weak pulse spreading out from where they stood. However, the wave immediately turned invisible after less than ten meters, and Zac knew there was no way the Zhix would be able to find the source. He jumped up to sit on the branch of one of the taller trees and it gave him a secluded vantage of the hive far in the distance.

Now it was up to the Zhix to deal with the rest.

-----  
Nonet walked at the forefront of the army, the warriors of Hive Kundevi following close behind. The chaos in the human settlement caused by their appearance had been cause for some amusement, but it couldn't shake the sense of heaviness that gripped the heart of the army. It wasn't natural. Using corruption to fight other Zhix because of their use of corruption.

Of course, the situation wasn't as simple as that, but that was still how it felt among some of the army. There were no doubt still many Zhix inside the enemy hives who believed in the old precepts as well, but it couldn't be helped. The corruption needed to be cleansed once and for all, and no roots of evil left behind.

"Get ready," Rhubat rumbled from his position at the vanguard, and Nonet looked up and saw the hive in the distance.

The walls were lined with soldiers standing in wait, but Nonet only needed a single glance to realize that the defenders were both outnumbered and lacking in power. This wouldn't be a battle, but a slaughter. A few warriors of Hive Kundevi seemed to have reached the same conclusion, as some struggle appeared on their faces.

"Remember the cause, remember the precepts," Nonet said with a heavy tone, and the warriors shook themselves free from any stray thoughts.

There were no negotiation and no posturing. Rhubat started increasing his steps as they came closer to the hive, and the Anointed lit up with corruption as the vast army behind them started running to keep up with their leaders.

Hundreds of Punishment Spears, each of them dozens of meters long, appeared in the sky, all of them shuddering with unbridled killing intent. A rumbling roar was finally unleashed from the hundreds of thousands of warriors that covered the vast plains, and the air shook as a red cloud spread across the area.

The haze was made from the congealed killing intent of the army, and it smoothly entered the fractal spears, empowering them with conviction. The Punishment Spears sucked in more and more, and the first group of attacks finally soared toward the hive as Rhubat, Vanexis, and Raha each launched their spears forward with a mental command.

Their power was far beyond that of the other Anointed, and they were able to carry the will of the Zhix with far greater grace than Nonet could ever dream of. The whole mountain vibrated as the spears soared toward the standing army, but a massive shield sprung up to block them out. It looked like someone had stolen a piece of the night sky, a vast cosmos that enclosed the whole mountain that held the Dominator Hive.

It was them. It was the undeniable mark of the Dominators, the proof of their corruption. Only they had the ability to drown the world in night like this. However, the scene didn't deter the Crusaders in the slightest. It only bolstered the conviction, and dozens of spears shot into the shield the next moment as the Anointed poured everything they had into the projectiles.

They all carried the momentum the Zhix had accumulated for millennia, the will to break free of the chains of the Dominators.

The shield barely managed to hold against the attacks, but they weren't done there. A ten-meter insignia depicting the seal of Hive Kundevi appeared behind Nonet, and similar scenes played out all across the front of the army. The seal shone down at Nonet, causing its frame to grow another meter as the Regalia of the Crusade covered its frame.

The power of the Anointment coursed through Nonet's veins, and all hesitation and worries were burnt out of its mind. The future didn't matter any longer. Only the Crusade mattered. Nonet's feet turned to a blur as the leader shot toward the galactic shield, its ceremonial dagger already glowing with radiant luster.

A terrifying shockwave spread out as Nonet slammed into the wall, and small cracks spread out from where the dagger hit the barrier. The other Anointed had done the same, and the earth shook as one massive attack after another was launched. The shield finally couldn't take it any longer, and the night-sky dissipated like it had just been a dream.

Nonet didn't need to give a signal on what to do next. The warriors of Hive Kundevi followed close behind as Nonet made its move. A squad of traitors was butchered with one swing of Nonet's dagger, and the Kundevi Warriors made short work of the survivors. There were a lot of traitors still outside, but Nonet didn't focus on that as it pushed itself into the cramped entrance in front of it. Nonet had a mission to perform, and there would be others to deal with the warriors on the slopes.

The furious war machine of the Zhix was had once again awoken to face the threat of the Dominators, and not a single soul would be spared.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 546 - Massacre**

Zac looked on with both awe and horror at the carnage that was taking place in the distance. The Anointed were simply terrifying when working together, and Zac doubted that any local faction apart from his own would be able to survive their assault. He suddenly felt a presence to his side though, and he looked over to a neighboring tree as he drew his axe.

"Hey," Thea said as she landed.

"Was I that easy to spot?" Zac grimaced as he put [Verun's Bite] away.

"Well, I knew the jammer would be placed in this area, and that you would spectate. It was only a matter of time," Thea said as she turned back to the battlefield. "It's a massacre."

There were no two ways about it. The Zhix Crusaders were obviously not interested in taking prisoners or holding any trials to find the true culprits. Everyone in the hive received the same treatment; a swift death.

Only ten minutes had passed since the battle started but less than 1% of the defending warriors remained. They were fighting desperately to prolong the inevitable, and Zac knew they fought for their honor, to prove their strength to their ancestors before they joined their ranks in the afterlife.

"A lot of them seems to have entered the hive, killing the civilians as well," Thea added after a brief pause.

"I know," Zac nodded.

"You could stop them. They would back down if you demanded it," she said.

"I think you underestimate the importance the Zhix put on this war. It's the very core of their society. Me telling them to stop would probably just give them two targets to fight rather than one," Zac said, and he added after some hesitation. "But I have no intention of finding out."

“How are we any different than our enemies if we go down this path?” Thea said as she turned to Zac.

There was no anger simmering in her eyes, nor was there reproach. There was only an almost disturbing tranquility.

“Who’s to say we’re any different?” Zac sighed. “We’re just rival factions fighting in the mud. They must die so that we can live. We’re not the good guys, and they aren’t really the bad guys. At least not most of them. We just have opposing interests.”

“Hmm,” Thea only said, not commenting any further.

The silence stretched on, and Zac felt more and more suffocated as he looked at the increasingly silent mountain in the distance. Should he do something? Millions of lives would be extinguished just so that he could be sure that no karmic threats were lurking on Earth. How could he be so calm while enabling a genocide?

“Someone’s running,” Thea suddenly said, and Zac saw what she was talking about.

A hidden door had appeared just a few hundred meters away from their location, and a group of Zhix was hurrying out through it. It looked to be mostly elders and clergymen, but they were guarded by a squad of elites. It was probably the leaders of the hive, the mouthpieces of the true Dominators. They were the true target, at least for Zac, and if these people managed to fled then the crusade would lose most of its meaning.

The hidden exit was extremely far from the Hive itself, and there was no way that their actions could be spotted by the Anointed. The squad of scouts wouldn’t be able to stop these guys either, even if they put their lives on the line.

“I’ll deal with it,” Zac said and immediately flashed away, each step taking him dozens of meters through the forest.

He appeared in front of the group of Zhix just a few seconds later, prompting the group to stop in their tracks. They first looked horrified upon being intercepted, but they soon breathed out in relief when they saw it wasn’t an Anointed waiting for him, but rather a human.

“A human?!” one of the elders exclaimed as he took two steps forward. “Did your government send you? Hurry, help us get away from here. Our master is Void Disciple, and we have a working cooperation with your kind. You will be rich-“

The old Zhix didn’t get any further. His body froze for an instant before it fell apart as blood spurted in every direction. A blue wave spread out the next moment, reaping the lives of more than half of the remaining escapees. Only those lucky enough to stand far away survived the attack that seemingly came out of nowhere.

It was Thea who had arrived as well, weaving a tapestry of death all around her. A few of the guards shot toward her with reckless abandon, releasing a terrifying killing intent. They all seemed to have the same class as well, some sort of earthen warrior. Stones grew to cover their whole bodies, and they quickly grew into 3-meter golems with sharp spikes for arms.

Was this perhaps something devised to counter the towering Anointed?

Carrying around a ton of rock on their bodies did nothing to slow them down, and they tried to stab Thea from every direction. However, their rocky exterior was like paper in front of her, and each swing of her new weapon reaped a life. She weaved through the insectoids like a dancer, each of her strikes both beautiful and deadly.

Zac first felt her swordsmanship felt a bit ostentatious, but he soon realized there was meaning behind every movement. Just slightly repositioning her shoulder or

lifting her weapon a few degrees caused changes in the battlefield as the warriors instinctively responded. It was like she was a puppeteer who magically created openings in her opponents to deliver instant death.

The battle was over in less than thirty seconds, with Zac only killing two unlucky fellows who ran straight at him in their attempts to flee from Thea. The Marshall scion had done the rest, and her breath wasn't even labored even though Zac knew she wasn't in perfect condition at the moment. She looked over at Zac with a small smile, before she shook her head and walked over.

"I've told you already, stupid. You're not alone in wanting to protect Earth," she said as she swung her sword in the air, causing all blood on it to fly off its edge. "You don't have to carry this burden alone."

Two Zhix scouts appeared the next moment ready for battle, but they froze when they saw the carnage. Zac briefly explained the situation, and one of them set off to fetch a regiment that could explore the escape tunnel. Zac and Thea walked back to the spot where the jammer was placed, and they found Triv nervously flitting back and forth until he spotted Zac.

The war was still raging, but there were no more breakouts it seemed. Zac wordlessly watched as the last of the insurgent Zhix fell, his mind repeating Thea's words over and over. It helped him with his confusion a bit, but it was impossible to completely shrug off the weight of sin he had amassed today.

The four just needed to wait for another 20 minutes before one of the scouts returned to their hiding spot.

"It is done, Warmaster. You can release the lock," the scout said. "The Anointed asked for you."

"We'll be there in a minute," Zac nodded as he started to take out the Miasma Crystals from the array as Triv returned to his pagoda.

The group flew over to the fallen hive a second later, and they were shocked by the sight even if they had witnessed everything from a distance. It looked like the lone mountain was crying as streams of blood covered its slopes. The smell was even worse, and Thea visibly paled before she bent over and puked.

Even Zac felt nauseated by the intense stench of death as he landed the leaf. There were thankfully almost no corpses around though, but an enormous pyre was already burning some distance from the hive. Between the small mountain of corpses and how the world had been painted in blood, it really felt like they had entered the depths of hell.

Zac once more felt his conviction waver as he looked around. It felt like this whole mountain had become cursed from what had transpired. Ominous energies swirled around the mountain, visible only to his **[Cosmic Gaze]**. This was something that couldn't be created by a normal war as far as he could tell, but rather a mass genocide of an entire population.

"Warmaster," a bloodied Rhubat said as he walked over. "The purification is complete. The next target awaits."

"Alright," Zac sighed, forcibly pushing down all the confusion and hesitation. "Where to?"

"Come with us first," Rhubat said as he activated the teleporter and walked inside.

At least 90% of the Anointed followed Rhubat, but only a small part of the ordinary soldiers entered as well. It was around ten thousand normal warriors, all of

them emitting a bloody aura. Zac guessed it was the captains and sergeants of the army, and he soon followed inside as well with Thea and Ibtep.

They found themselves in another subterranean chamber the next moment, and Zac's eyes widened when there was yet another identical army already waiting. Its size was even larger than the last one, probably approaching half a million warriors.

"We hope to be able to strike at least three hives before they realize what's going on," Rhubat said. "After that, we will join our forces as we expect them to do the same. The next town is Gothenburg."

Zac nodded in understanding and turned to Thea who activated the Teleporter once more.

The same scene repeated itself as the vanguard stepped through the teleporter. Thea stayed behind as Zac set off with the advance scouts, and he looked around with marvel as they flew across the desolate landscape.

Roughly a year had passed since the integration, which meant that summer should be approaching once more. However, you wouldn't get that feeling at all in the northern reaches of Pangea where the Scandinavian Cultivators had banded together and formed Asgard, an independent force allied to the Marshall Clan.

It was Zac's first time this far out on the reaches of the massive continent. He had generally traveled within the heartlands where most humans and incursions ended up, or to the southeast where the Dead Zone was located. This area didn't look like the old Scandinavia though, but it would be more apt to say they had appeared on the Arctic Circle.

Thick layers of ice and snow had turned the world white, but that actually didn't mean that it was lifeless. He saw towering trees braving the extreme weather, seemingly unbothered by the permafrost. A massive pack of wolves consisting of thousands of hunters passed by beneath them as well, proving there was ample prey available as well.

It was the magical effect of Cosmic Energy. Zac guessed the temperature was minus 30 degrees or so, but he only felt a bit chilly in his normal robes. It would have to become a lot colder than this for him to be affected at all, so it was no wonder that beasts could deal with it just fine. There were probably a lot of humans who succumbed to the harsh environment at the beginning of the integration though.

They soon found their spot close to the hive and set up the Jamming array hidden by a mountain of ice. The same scene of carnage repeated itself an hour later. The snow-covered Hive had turned completely red as the merciless Zhix army slaughtered all the citizens of the Hive. Zac started to feel numb to the carnage, but he still felt hollow inside as he gazed at the puddles of blood that had turned to ice all over the mountain.

The slaughter continued from there, but something suddenly changed when the army arrived at the fifth hive. This time a full million Zhix marched across the wasteland, and Zac felt horrified at the amount of Nexus Coins the Zhix had spent to move around the armies like this. A war of this scale was probably only possible thanks to the wealth that the Zhix had gained from fighting the zombies over the past months.

The last four assaults were essentially one-sided slaughters, but it looked like the Dominators were finally responding in kind. There was barely any free ground around the insurgent hive as hundreds of thousands of warriors stood at the ready.

There were also massive towers that had been erected at the perimeter, seemingly a last-minute purchase from the Town Shop. They all radiated power, and Zac knew that there would be noticeable casualties to push past that line of defense.

He even asked if they wanted him to act as a wall-breaker, but the Zhix War Council actually rejected it.

He could only shake his head in bemusement as he looked on, but he was relieved to see that the Zhix weren't completely incapable of resisting the fiery barrages that the towers launched. Those enormous seals that the Anointed summoned seemed to be a natural War Array of some kind, and the Zhix warriors infused it with power to create a sturdy shield that protected them from attacks coming from above.

However, the Array Towers was only the first counter that the defenders had prepared for them.

Hidden pathways suddenly opened up behind the Anointed army and warriors flooded out of them. The War Council suddenly found themselves pincerred as they dealt with the barriers and Array Towers to the Front, and an all-out assault from the rear. Worse yet, almost all of the Anointed were at the other side of the army acting as a vanguard, so the elite Zhix among the Dominators faced little resistance as they pushed into the rearguard.

Worry gripped Zac's heart as he looked at the scene, and he decisively started walking toward the army with a ruthless gleam. He had happily stayed out of the war until now as some sort of coping mechanism, but he couldn't allow this to go on. Their losses would be too big if he didn't turn things around.

"Are you really doing this? After standing back so long?" Thea asked from behind, and Zac only nodded in response.

However, he only managed to take a few steps before his mind screamed of danger. He immediately tried to flash away, but he was shocked to find himself rooted in place as the whole world rapidly slowed to a crawl. One possibility immediately entered his mind.

Had the true Dominators finally made their appearance?

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**Chapter 547 - Monster**

Zac's danger sense was screaming for him to watch out, but he didn't need a sixth sense to realize that he was in trouble. He immediately activated [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] while the emerald leaves of [**Nature's Barrier**] exploded out from his body, covering him from every direction.

The spectral forest rose around him as well, but Zac's worries only intensified when he saw that the trees and leaves of his two skills were quickly stopped in their tracks as well. The leaves just froze in the air, utterly incapable of intercepting any attacks. He tried to look around in search of a threat, but he found himself stuck in position as well, no longer able to move at all.

The war was still raging in the distance though, proving that time hadn't really stopped. It seemed that the effect only reached 30 meters or so judging by the movement of the grass on the ground. It was an extremely uncomfortable experience to somehow be out of sync with the world around him. It felt a bit like when the world froze as the Chaos Pattern emerged during the tower, but he also got a similar feeling like when the Karmic Cultivator of the Hayner Clan tried to control his movements.

However, he could at least be certain that it wasn't the System who was messing with him. A large hooded being had appeared in the sky, reaching over twenty meters

into the air. Zac tried to discern its features, but it actually looked like it didn't have a face. In place of facial features, there was just a swirling void.

It held some weird brass contraption that seemed to contain the mysteries of the universe itself, and it felt like it was this item that was rooting him in place. Zac couldn't be sure, but he believed that the skill both contained a hint of both Space and Karma. Zac guessed that it was the avatar of some sort of ultimate technique, and going by the types of energies there was one clear suspect; The Dominators.

Zac was quickly proven right when he finally spotted the source of the restraints, an unassuming Zhix wearing the standard combat regalia of the Zhix War Council Army. However, instead of the short spears or daggers that the Zhix favored, he was instead wielding a pitch-black spear of full length that hummed with power.

The reason Zac knew this spear-wielding Zhix was his attacker was simple; he couldn't sense the warrior's aura. It was just like when he first met Inevitability, it was almost like there was no one standing in front of him. However, the Zhix warrior was very much alive, and he stepped into the locked zone and started making his way toward Zac.

Zac strained to rip himself free, but he couldn't even begin amassing any power in his limbs. It felt like he was trying to overturn the fundamental laws of the universe by moving, he glanced at the Zhix with some incredulity. How was he this strong? The strength of this restraining skill meant two things.

First of all, he could pretty much be sure that he was dealing with Harbinger, the last of the three elite Dominators. He had already met the other two, and the presumed Dominators beneath the three leaders were over 15 levels behind. There was no way someone at level 85 would be able to unleash a force of this magnitude.

Secondly, the Dominator was likely burning his life-force to deal with him. Zac knew that the Dominators were strong, but there shouldn't be such a disparity that he couldn't even lift his fingers in response. There was also a familiar aura on him, reminding him of that old warrior among the Berum Resistance who sacrificed his life to let them assault the Nenotheop mountain.

Messing with life-force wasn't something that people could do willy-nilly. First of all, you generally needed some sort of Berserker skill to tap into the core of your being. Using such a thing was essential to sacrifice 800 warriors to kill 1000. It wasn't a tap you could turn on and off, but something that had a large risk of killing or crippling your cultivation. Zac knew he was an exception of sorts with how the Shard worked.

Harbinger was going a step further, putting everything on the line.

However, Zac didn't feel hopeless as there were no doubt limitations to a skill or treasure as powerful as this. As expected, not only did Harbinger have some problems pushing through the spatial lock himself, but the Avatar was slowly dissipating in the sky.

A quick calculation proved that Zac would get skewered before the lock dissipated though, and he frantically looked for a solution. A glance toward Thea showed that she was trapped as well, but she was thankfully at the edge of the sphere. There was no way that Harbinger would have time to target them both as he could only move at a slow walk.

The Cosmic Energy felt like syrup in his body, and Zac wasn't really able to rotate it with the momentum needed to activate his skills. However, he had actually already activated two of them, and Zac gave a command to the divine tree stalwartly standing behind him.

The ceremonial band on the tree trunk snapped, and a shield started to form around him. However, just the edges had time to materialize before it was frozen as

well, essentially looking like a hollow ring completely incapable of defending anyone. Zac wanted to swear when he saw the scene, but he was unable to form the words.

A defensive talisman fizzled the next moment as well, proving that the restrictions didn't only apply to his skills.

Harbinger seemed to have expected the failures, and a small smile crept up across his face as he closed in on Zac. His spear moved in slow-motion, but it slowly angled itself to begin a mighty jab aimed straight at his throat. The Dominator was going for an instant kill.

Real worry finally started to grip Zac's heart as one back-up plan after another had failed. He had initially believed that he would always be able to flee with the help of his newly acquired escape talismans, but he wasn't so sure any longer after seeing how nothing seemed to work inside this field.

However, a shudder in his mind suddenly made his eyes light up. Most things were frozen in place, but there were exceptions. No matter what rules or Dao that were the basis for Harbingers skills, how could they trump the concepts of Creation and Oblivion. The two remnants were completely unaffected inside their prison, and the mysterious energies that had infiltrated his soul moved about as usual as well.

Wasn't this a perfect occasion to try out something he had been holding on to up till now?

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Thea hovered frozen in the air, filled with a sense of impotence as she saw Zac in the same predicament. The terrifying Zhix pushed through the sealed space as though it was wading through water, and it was almost upon Zac. Its spear was already moving toward Zac's throat, and the weapon gained a stronger and stronger radiance.

The air around the weapon was cracking and splitting apart, which was very telling of its power. The Zhix was putting it all on the line with that one strike. Thea could even sense they were empowered by an offensive Dao Fragment, and she wasn't confident that even Zac's terrifying constitution would be able to withstand the attack.

She tried to figure out some way to help him out, just long enough for this seal to break, but she was coming up empty-handed. Her skills simply wouldn't activate, and she wasn't able to reach down toward her Cosmos Sack to take out any treasures. She felt her eyes were burning as she saw the spearpoint inching ever closer, passing straight beneath the incipient emerald shield that failed to properly form.

However, a shocking aura suddenly slammed into the core of her being and she looked with shock and horror at Zac. He looked the same as before, but Thea felt that she was gazing upon a natural calamity rather than a fellow cultivator. His eyes turned into metallic orbs as black runes slowly appeared across his face, seemingly creating a tattoo pathway that led down toward his shoulders.

The runes looked simple enough, but they still contained a primordial power, something that Thea hadn't even encountered when dealing with Irei or his terrifying sword intent. Just what had Zac gotten himself mixed up in to have something so terrifying appearing on his body?

Unfortunately, it didn't seem as though the Zhix was deterred by Zac's outburst of power, but rather the opposite. Its mouth curved upward in a ruthless smile and its until now subdued aura exploded outward, hitting Thea like a sledgehammer. How was this assassin so powerful? The aura was far stronger than that of Inevitability back during the hunt!

Was it actually Void's Disciple, the leader of the Dominators?

Or was Inevitability perhaps actually limited somehow inside the hunt, making that chain-wielding lunatic unable to put forth its full potential. It didn't matter right now though as the spear was cutting through space itself as it finally reached Zac's throat.

However, no blood was actually drawn as the mysterious runes already covered much of Zac's throat, and it seemed able to resist the sharp point of the pitch-black daggers. The Zhix didn't seem surprised, and a shimmering fractal halo made from inscrutable runes lit up behind him like he was a saint that had suddenly reached enlightenment.

The whole area was drowned in a shimmering dark-blue luster, and the spear gained newfound momentum as it was flooded with some sort of powerful energy. It allowed the spear to push even further into Zac's skin as it seemed to infuse the dagger itself with some mysterious power. Zac's defenses couldn't stop the weapon and the weapon finally started sliding into his throat. There were no groans of pain or gouts of blood, but Thea knew that was only because space was still frozen.

Despair flooded Thea's heart as she saw Zac's throat slowly being ripped open, the sickening sound of the spear digging deeper was the only thing she could hear in this frozen zone. Was this really it? Was this how the savior of Earth would fall? Was the defense of his mysterious tattoos really not enough to save him?

A terrifying change suddenly took place as Zac finally exploded out with power. It was like that terrifying aura from before was congealed, and she looked on with incredulity as Zac's arms suddenly shot forward with impossible speed as a sphere of unadulterated power emerged from his hands.

It felt like Thea's brain stopped working as she looked at the brownish sphere. It was as big as a football but it somehow felt as massive as a sun. Even odder, it felt like her memory and impressions were continuously being destroyed and renewed as she looked at it, making it impossible for her to form an opinion on what that thing was actually made from. It was Dao but it wasn't Dao. It was Cosmic Energy but it wasn't Cosmic Energy.

One thing was for sure though; it wasn't restrained by the spatial cage they found themselves in, and it flew straight toward the chest of the Dominator. The Zhix saw the sphere shooting toward his body, but it completely ignored it and instead pushed its weapon even harder, seemingly fine with both of them going down to the underworld together.

But even that powerful Zhix couldn't have anticipated the scene that took place next.

There was no explosion and no shockwave as the ball hit the chest of the assassin, just an instantaneous expansion followed by utter annihilation. Thea couldn't see exactly how big the attack was, as there literally wasn't anything to see, but she could still sense what *didn't* exist. It felt like space and time had simply been removed from existence where the sphere exploded, and not even a vacuum remained.

The spatial lock was broken as the massive avatar in the sky fell apart, and the ground beneath Thea cracked as she shot away as quickly as her legs could move her. It wasn't a conscious decision, but a primal fear of whatever Zac had unleashed. To get too close was to die, where one's soul wouldn't even be able to remain. Only after running for hundreds of meters did she manage to stop herself, but her heart wouldn't stop beating like a drum.

Only then did Thea see what had happened to the Zhix. Its torso and most of its legs were simply gone, leaving not as much as a scrap behind. Most of its arms had been annihilated as well, only hanging on to its neck by a thin ribbon of flesh. She knew there

was no coming back from that, especially as she could sense a hint of that aura of annihilation in its remaining body parts as well.

Zac looked the same as before apart from the running blood that stained his chest red. The spear was still embedded in his throat, but he ripped it out without a care in the world. Thea's horror increased even further when the wound closed on itself with speed visible to the eyes, and there was only one thought in her head when she saw those terrifying lifeless eyes of his.

*Monster.*

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 548 - Wrath**

A wave of pain spread across Zac's body, shocking him awake from his trance-like state. He still felt under the influence of his skill though as the world was drowned in a metallic luster. He took a steadying breath as he looked around, and he finally spotted the remains of Harbinger.

However, Zac's brows rose when he realized that he actually hadn't gained any Cosmic Energy so far, and he pushed his exhausted body to walk over to the Zhix assassin. He was full of vigilance that it might release a final desperate attack, but he quickly realized that Harbinger was in no position to do so.

Cracks spread across the insectoid's remaining body parts before they crumbled to dust like his body was made from burnt-out wood rather than flesh and blood. There was also no energy remaining in its body according to **[Cosmic Gaze]**. The fact that the Zhix was still living was a miracle. There was no way that it would have the power to attack in this state.

"You sacrificed most of your life-force to keep me trapped so long. Even if you succeeded you wouldn't live much longer," Zac said with a hoarse voice. "All this for some insane cultivator that happened to visit your world thousands of years ago?"

"I... don't care... about him," the crumbling head actually managed to say with a whisper. "All... for... father."

Harbinger died the next moment, and Zac felt a tremendous surge of Cosmic Energy entering his body. This was by far the greatest amount of energy he had ever gained from a single kill, with the possible exception of the Dragon. However, he was both level capped and unconscious that time around, so it didn't really count.

Cracking open the next node shouldn't be an issue with this much energy, even if he barely had worked on it so far. However, Zac wasn't as interested in a single node compared to the other things that were going on in his body, so he just trapped the energy before moving on.

This was the first time he had activated his **[Cyclic Strike]** to summon a bronze flash since his battle with the dragon, and he was a bit shocked how well things went, all things considered. There was no need to maim himself and almost no difficulty at all to summon the bronze flash, and he somehow even managed to shoot it out of his hands.

It really seemed that the forcibly redrawn pathways on his shoulders did exactly what he had hoped.

However, even if the result was good there were undeniably some problems with how things went. First of all, he quickly lost control over the remnants' energies and

he ended up using everything instead of just a portion. His soul was completely drained of the energy that had been slowly siphoned off the Splinter and it would probably take weeks before he could even launch a weaker bronze flash.

He had also completely blacked out there for a second when the infused energies passed a certain threshold. He had felt a sharp stab in his soul and only woke up after he had finished the attack. However, he had not only launched the strike but even healed himself with help of the Shard of Creation while unconscious, and there were fragmented memories of his actions.

Perhaps it would be more apt to say that he had entered some sort of auto-pilot or trance-like state, but it made him wonder if it was actually himself or the Remnants that was behind the wheel. In any case, it proved that he needed to keep grinding at the Soul Strengthening Array. He had been able to use his mind to slow down the flow of energy a little bit when activating **[Cyclic Strike]**, proving he might be able to freely control it in the future.

“Are... you okay?” a hesitant voice asked from the side, dragging Zac out of his thoughts.

Zac looked over, only to feel a searing pain on his shoulder. A couple of hairline cracks had appeared out of nowhere just as some sort of fractal pathway disappeared, looking just like the ones that consumed the remains of Harbinger. Fear surged in Zac’s chest, but he slowly calmed down when he realized that it didn’t seem as though the cracks would spread any further.

Was this a side-effect from unleashing a bronze flash of this magnitude? Was his body perhaps unable to bear the Dao of Oblivion, even if it was just a shadow of a corner of that high-tiered Dao?

In fact, his attack couldn’t really be called a flash any longer. It was a proper sphere of unadulterated destruction. It had disintegrated everything within a one-meter diameter. That was enough to pretty much kill any humanoid of normal size. Better yet, Zac doubted that there were too many things on Earth that could block those kinds of scary energies.

Space itself broke apart and was destroyed, how was some defensive talisman going to protect against that?

“I’m fine,” Zac eventually answered, though that wasn’t entirely true.

The cracks on his shoulders wasn’t the only thing ailing him. Zac felt weak all over, like he hadn’t only overtaxed his mind but also his body. He still had an ample amount of Cosmic Energy remaining, but his mental energy was almost drained clean.

“What... Was that?” Thea eventually asked as she kept her distance from Zac. “My mind has never screamed of danger like that before, not even when I was on the brink of dying. And I wasn’t even the target.”

“I guess you could say it was pure annihilation,” Zac sighed. “Don’t think about it too much. It involves some things that I can’t talk about. Just consider it one of my hidden cards.”

“Some card,” Thea muttered as she looked down at the tragic remains of Harbinger.

Harbinger’s face had cracked in two and collapsed into its skull, making it seem as though the head was just a broken sculpture. Zac sighed as he looked at the odd scene. Some card indeed. Only he knew there were still too many issues to resolve before it could really be called a hidden card though.

Apart from his lacking control, there was one more fundamental weakness to his Annihilation Sphere; it took too long to charge up. Who would let Zac stand still for a

few seconds while he radiated that terrifying aura? He got lucky with Harbinger since he was willing to die to complete his strike, but most people didn't have that conviction.

They would either strike him from a distance or run for their lives if they encountered an attack imbued with oblivion. They wouldn't be trapped in a spatial lock like Thea or Harbinger. That meant he needed to learn how to create an opening so that he could get a chance to shoot out the blast without obstruction or interruption.

"Annihilation... Even its Cosmos Sack is gone," Thea muttered from the side.

Zac swore in surprise and hurried over to the corpse, no longer caring about the long-term implications of his situation.

It was true. There was simply nothing left between the insectoid's lower thighs and shoulders. Not even a scrap remained, meaning anything Harbinger carried on its belt or back was gone.

"Well, shit."

"OPEN IT!" Inevitability screamed as the air around her wailed from her unbridled bloodlust.

"We can't, Lady Inevitability! There's a—" an elder cried, but it didn't get any further before it was turned to meat paste from a lashing.

Over one hundred corpses were already strewn around her, but it did nothing to stymie the fury that was building in her chest. She had hoped to unleash it on her brother's killer, but these people were useless. She couldn't hold it in any longer, and she released a roar filled with her fury and madness.

The whole chamber quaked and cracks spread along the walls, but Inevitability didn't care as she let the anger consume her. It rose with wave after wave until she barely remembered her name, it was all made inconsequential by the fiery wrath. Crackling sounds echoed out in the subterranean chamber as her skin ruptured and fell apart, but a new layer had already grown beneath it.

It was different from before. The skin was harder yet flexible, and there were streaks of red hidden right beneath the surface. Inevitability's remaining sliver of sanity knew it was a good thing, and she kept delving deeper and deeper into her madness as her power skyrocketed.

She felt she was filled with boundless power, and dozens of chains appeared around her, wildly flailing about in a mad dance of exuberance. Harbinger was almost completely forgotten as she drank the sweet nectar of strength.

Some of the already damaged walls couldn't take it any longer and collapsed and screams echoed out across the hive. However, the screams ended as abruptly as they came as the chains seemed to have a life of their own. They shot forward like a pack of frenzied beasts the moment they found something living.

Of course, it was Inevitability that was giving free rein to her bloodlust. It felt like a bottomless abyss, but each kill filled it a little bit. The moment the abyss had turned into a sea of blood she would be made whole.

"Enough."

The calm voice was like a bucket of cold water that ripped Inevitability back to reality. She found herself standing in the middle of the ruins of her Hive, over ten layers turned to rubble. Thousands of corpses and hacked-off body parts were strewn across the area, and a putrid stench made her nose curl.

What bad luck that she had damaged the air vents as well.

But most importantly she saw that the Teleportation Array had just activated, and Void's Disciple had emerged. He was clearly furious, but he still seemed distracted by something as his gaze was trained on her.

"This is unexpected," Void's Disciple said as he looked her up and down, and Inevitability felt her heartbeat speed up.

But the gaze of her father-husband wasn't enough to make her forget what had happened just now.

"They killed him," Inevitability said with grit teeth. "How could those abominations accomplish something like that?! We need to rip them to pieces."

"Your brother should have been able to kill at least a few dozen Anointed before safely escaping. His survivability is even higher than yours," Void's Disciple slowly said with his brows furrowed. "Something must have gone wrong. Did he encounter the remaining zealots or the Super Brother-Man?"

He raised his hand the next moment and a screen of light appeared, showing a grainy image of a human whose face covered in weird markings. In front of him were just a head and a pitch-black spear. The man standing above her brother's remains looked a bit different, but how couldn't Inevitability recognize that cursed man?

"It's him! The human! I'LL KILL HIM!" Inevitability screamed as the red streaks across her body lit up.

"We might have a chance if we hurry," Void's Disciple muttered as his body exploded with power.

The Teleportation Array lit up the next moment, but it flickered ominously. Void's Disciple kept infusing more and more power, but he was suddenly pushed back by a spatial storm and a couple of shallow wounds appeared on his face.

"Is it my fault? Did I damage it?" Inevitability asked with worry.

"No. I am unable to force my way through the disturbance," Void's Disciple grunted. "I have just touched the edge of the Dao of Space, it is not enough."

A killing intent that could easily match her own exploded out the next moment as Void's Disciple roared in fury and frustration, his face twisted into a mask of madness and murder. Inevitability's eyes lit up at the sight. This was the true face of Void's Disciple, and she was now the only one to have seen that visage and lived to tell the tale.

Void's Disciple punched down at the Teleportation Array the next moment, and it actually cracked.

Inevitability's eyes widened even further as she knew just how sturdy the things provided by the System were. She had attacked the Teleportation Arrays multiple times before out of boredom and curiosity, but she had not even been able to leave a mark.

The second stage of Void Disciple's **[Void Crusher]** was unleashed the next moment as thousands of spatial rifts shot out across the area. They dug into the earth or passed straight through a few of the lucky survivors, cutting anything into pieces until they formed a spherical pattern hundreds of meters wide.

"It looks like the Heavens doesn't want to provide today," Void's Disciple sighed, his face once more turning expressionless. "But we will have our chance inside the Mystic Realm. Harbinger's death at least came with some good. Your anger reached a high enough level to awaken your implanted bloodline."

"Is that what this is?" Inevitability blurted as she looked down at her hands, a ruthless grin spreading across her face.

This was exactly what she needed to exact her revenge.

“You need to enter the machine once more. That way you will be able to stabilize it and stop your body from rejecting it,” Void’s Disciple nodded.

Inevitability blanched when she thought back to that contraption that had tortured her in the darkness for weeks, but she knew better than to argue with her master. He might have outwardly calmed down, but she knew better than anyone that the fires were still burning beneath the surface. To question him now was to ask for death.

“Let’s go,” Void’s Disciple said as he ripped open a tunnel in space. “This place will not last much longer.”

The two stepped through the mid-range gate, leaving the wounded where they were. However, they only needed to suffer for a few seconds before the remaining spatial rifts congealed into a singular point.

The next moment the whole Hive imploded, leaving nothing but a perfectly spherical crater behind.

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**Chapter 549 - Adcarkas**

Harbinger’s Cosmos Sack was gone, its contents probably lost in some unreachable spatial fold, but there was at least something for him to loot; the pitch-black spear that was lying in the grass, its shaft still in the grip of the Dominator. It was definitely valuable, probably a High-Quality Spirit Tool judging by the spirituality it emitted.

Zac lifted it and looked it over for a few seconds, but he couldn’t figure out what it was made of. It was extremely hard and looked like some sort of stone, but it was pliable like a spear made from wood or metal. He was able to bend it almost 180 degrees when he exerted himself, and it sprung back to its original form the moment he let go.

It was a bit regretful, but it definitely looked like something that was a perfect fit for Ogras.

He didn’t begrudge the demon from finally getting his hands on a Spirit Tool. A boost in Ogras’ combat strength was a direct benefit for Port Atwood. But Zac had been the one to almost get himself killed this time, yet he gained nothing, not even some trinkets. Perhaps he could squeeze some of the valuables out of the demon’s paws in exchange for the weapon later.

“Warmaster, are you safe?” a rumbling voice suddenly echoed out as Rhubat came rushing, closely followed by a score of massive Anointed and hundreds of elite warriors. “We sensed a massive spike in corruption and realized something was happening here.”

Only then did Zac remember the ongoing war, but he breathed in relief when he saw that things weren’t as bad as he had feared. The Anointed had spread out and reinforced the rear, and the frontlines were stable enough to allow a contingent to freely head over to his location.

Larger numbers weren’t enough to turn the tides when the opponents were lifeforce-burning Anointed.

“We got ambushed,” Zac said as he pointed at the head on the ground. “I think it’s Harbinger, but I can’t tell for sure.”

“It was truly one of the three!” another of the Anointed exclaimed. “The head releases such waves of corruption even in death.”

“This is Karath... It’s really them,” Rhubat sighed as the giant knelt down to inspect the remains. “I met this one before the integration. To think such a promising scholar was hiding a secret like this. This must mean that Void’s Disciple is Adcarkas after all, the Sage of the Grand Basin.”

Zac’s brows rose in interest. It sounded like the Dominators were actually some sort of important people even before the Integration. Their ability to mask their powers must have been shocking to be able to walk among the Zhix with their corruption-spotting antennae. He wanted to know more about their history, but there were more pressing matters at the moment.

“So, what’s our next move?” Zac asked. “It seems that the enemies have realized what we’re doing here.”

“Four hives were cleansed before this, and enough warriors to fill three more will be purified in this battle,” Rhubat slowly said. “The numbers are now in our favor. We will try to keep going and take out more Hives, but we expect the remaining heretics to have adapted by now. Our warriors need rest as well, so we will pause for reconnaissance after this battle.”

“Good,” Zac nodded with some relief. “I need to rest a bit as well. How long do you need?”

He had a huge amount of energy sloshing around his body at the moment, and he didn’t want to waste it.

“Ten hours,” Rhubat said after some thought before he turned toward Thea. “We’d like to keep the Pathfinder though in order to send out the scouts.”

“That’s fine with me,” Thea nodded.

The Anointed returned to the war after seeing that everything was fine, but they still stayed close-by so that they could come to Zac’s aid at moment’s notice. Zac himself was about to sit down and rest up, but he suddenly saw an azure stream of light shooting straight toward him. He wasn’t worried as he saw the magical light though, but rather amused.

It was Triv who was using some sort of movement skill to return to him and the Jammer.

“Young master, you are safe,” the ghost said with relief as it congealed into a proper form.

“Just where did you go earlier?” Zac snorted. “I couldn’t find you anywhere.”

“I, ah... repositioned myself a bit. I did not want to become a burden during the Young Master’s fight. That aura you released...” the ghost hesitantly said.

“Well, thank you for your assistance,” Zac snorted, not seeing any reason to divulge the origins of his Annihilation Sphere. The lack of information might help keep the ghost in check even better. “I need to keep the energy inside my body for another hour while they finish up the battle. Look after the Jammer for me.”

He didn’t dare break open the node right away in case one of the other Dominators would show up so he could only focus on retaining the energy until he could go back to Port Atwood. The battle thankfully didn’t last that long though, and Zac hurried toward the Teleportation Array of the fallen Hive after just 40 minutes.

The deaths after this battle were staggering even compared to the previous ones, and Zac sighed when he heard that over 100 000 of their own had fallen over the last hour. It was still a great victory on paper considering how many enemies they faced, and a testament to how a small group of elites like the Anointed could keep fatalities

down. But their losses were still large enough to populate a small town, making it hard to celebrate the win.

Zac soon appeared in his compound, and he found Joanna sitting in meditation just outside. She woke up when she sensed the fluctuations from the array and immediately turned to Zac.

"I wasn't able to contact you, but Billy's returned as well," Joanna said with an odd face.

"Did he pass the trial?" Zac asked.

"I... don't know," Joanna said after some hesitation. "But I think so?"

"What's going on? Where is he?" Zac asked with a frown.

"He's just outside the Dao Repository. He's been sleeping for 14 hours straight," Joanna said. "He isn't deeply wounded, but it looks like someone has been using him as a punching bag. He fell asleep the moment he emerged from the Inheritance, and Brazla immediately threw him out because of the snores. I tried to move him but he almost bashed my head in without waking up."

Zac's gazed at the Valkyrie with confusion before he flashed over to the Dao Repository once more. It didn't take a lot of effort to find where the giant was lying as it sounded like someone was performing large-scale logging in his forest.

Billy was lying sprawled on his back just outside the tiled square of the Dao Repository, and Zac couldn't help but laugh when he saw Billy's face. It was completely swollen to the point that it looked like he just had an allergic reaction. However, the fact that his face also was almost purple from layers of bruises that looked like meaty fists indicated he had been repeatedly punched.

It seemed that the titan's trial was a lot more straightforward than his own or Thea's.

Zac guessed that Billy's nose was broken as well as it was completely congested which caused the terrifying snore, and he shook his head as he prodded him from some distance with the help of his club.

"NO MORE!" Billy screamed as he shot up to his feet.

The giant wildly looked around for a few seconds with heaving breaths until he realized what was going on.

"Ah- It's you. Billy thought he was still stuck with the crazy one," Billy sighed in relief as he sat down.

"How did it go?" Zac smiled as he took out an ointment. "Your face is a bit swollen. This will help."

"Stupid crazy Titan said he wanted to teach Billy self-defense. But it only ended with Billy being punched in the face over and over," Billy sighed. "But Billy is a lot better at defending now! Come, hit Billy."

"Uh, okay," Zac said before he immediately moved forward, his club ripped through the air as he swung it toward Billy's chin with a decent amount of strength.

However, Billy's massive muscles suddenly tightened to the point that they looked like steel wires, and the hulking man turned to a blur the next instant. Zac's mind suddenly screamed of danger as the grotesque skull on Billy's club was bearing down on him with shocking speed.

The ground cracked all around Zac as he pushed himself back, narrowly avoiding the smash. He looked with surprise at the giant, feeling he was over twice as fast as before. Billy had neither excelled at defense nor speed before, making him an extremely lopsided meathead. However, one of those weaknesses had been shored up during the inheritance it looked like.

But it seemed to be his speed rather than endurance that had been improved, so Zac didn't understand what Billy meant by self-defense.

"I thought you said that the Titan taught you how to protect yourself?" Zac asked with some confusion.

"Crazy man said that the best way to not get hit is to kill everyone before they can hit you," Billy sagely said.

"Hard to argue with that logic," Joanna snorted from the side.

"Crazy man taught Billy a good skill that makes Billy quicker the stronger he gets. But it is very tiring," Billy sighed as he gulped down a couple of huge mouthfuls of water.

Zac believed he understood what Billy was talking about. It was either some sort of rare skill that increased Billy's Dexterity based on his Strength, or perhaps a movement skill that was based on Strength rather than Dexterity as was the norm.

"I have to go," Zac sighed. "What are you doing next Billy?"

"Billy is going to Billyville," Billy said after some thought. "Billy is tired and has not been home for a long time."

"That sounds good," Zac said and added after some thought. "Thea and I are going away in a few weeks. To a special place like the hunt. We don't know how long we will be gone. Do you want to come as well?"

"Why are you going there?" Billy asked curiously.

"Find treasure and beat up bad guys," Zac smiled.

"Haha, you always do that. You need a hobby. But Billy will come help you," Billy grinned as he started walking away, heading toward the town.

Zac nodded at Joanna who followed him to make sure he got home rather than kidnapped by some group of lovestruck demons. He was left alone in his private forest, and he entered his courtyard to finally absorb the massive amount of Cosmic Energy surging through his body.

However, he didn't immediately push the energy into his body, but he rather swapped over to his Draugr-form first. He figured that if one of his pathways was going to be destroyed, then it might as well be the pathways in his undead form. His human pathways wouldn't be harmed this way as they would be stored in his specialty core.

This allowed him to keep using his Human form while recuperating while only bearing some of the detriments of node-breaking. He would still be weakened due to the shock to the system, but he would be able to use Cosmic Energy without getting a backlash like in the Dead Zone.

The process went quite smoothly, if you could consider a part of your body literally blowing up smooth. The energy from taking out the Dominator was easily able to crack open his eighth node, even though that node alone required about as much energy as the first three nodes combined. The energy was even enough to provide his Fetters of Desolation class with a level and set the foundation for his ninth node, meaning he was now level 83 in his Undead form while his human side was still 82.

The next node was in an unfortunate spot though. It was just between his right elbow and his bicep, making it a very precarious spot. He had already learned to somewhat decrease the degree to which he maimed himself with every node opening, but he needed to be careful now. His arms were pretty damn muscular compared to before the integration, but they were still far thinner compared to his legs.

One mishap and he might find himself in the same situation as Ogras, with only a stub for an arm. He wouldn't be able to grow it back before reaching D-Grade at the earliest unless he managed to get his hands on a treasure with the same effect.

However, Ogras had searched high and low for such a thing in the Base Town without any success, so items with that sort of effect seemed as rare as soul-mending treasures.

He needed to keep improving the process of node-opening with every level he gained. Pretty much all the nodes during early E-Grade were located in his extremities, but he would move onto more precarious placements in middle E-Grade. In late E-Grade, the nodes would all be located around his head and heart, and even cultivators could die from a single mistake at that point, let alone mortals.

A wave of exhaustion gripped him after the upgrade was complete, and he fell into a deep slumber as the Fragment of the Bodhi worked on both his node-related wound and the weird cracks that had appeared on his shoulders and neck.

Zac woke up only seven hours later, and he frowned when he saw that the tears from unleashing the Annihilation Sphere hadn't healed at all. They didn't really seem to cause any more problems than some random scars, but Zac knew it was important that he slowly healed the wounds. These kinds of injuries were a big problem to cultivators.

High-concept wounds from battles or overextending yourself was like spiritual sequela, and it could cause problems to one's future cultivation if left unchecked. What if some remnants of Oblivion hiding in his shoulders suddenly exploded when he opened a near-by node in the future? He might die then and there.

Zac's body was still feeling wrung out even after resting for such a long time, and something seemed to have changed at the war front while he was out. Nonet and Ibtep had actually appeared in Port Atwood as he was inspecting his body, and they were quickly ushered to his compound.

"What's going on?" Zac asked when he saw the two Zhix. "I thought I was supposed to meet up with you in two hours?"

"There is no need. A challenge has been issued and a final battle will take place in ten days," Nonet simply said.

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**Chapter 550 - Swamp**

"Ten days?" Zac frowned. "Why don't we just keep going?"

The New World Government's deadline for entering the Mystic Realm was inching closer, and he definitely couldn't get caught outside when the hidden world closed its doors. Besides, wanted to be over with this bloody matter as quickly as possible.

"Our scouts returned a few hours ago. The hives are emptied, except one that is utterly destroyed. Only the weak have been left behind, just like during a migration. The number of remaining Zhix is still in the millions, but we cannot locate them. A letter of challenge was issued just an hour ago though. For the future of the Zhix," Ibtep explained.

Zac asked a bit more and he learned that the challenge was something that occasionally happened before their integration. It was essentially an all-out war between two forces that competed for resources. The survivor would claim the hive and its land, and the losers would either be killed or assimilated.

This time there would be no assimilation if the council won though, only death awaited those who chose to follow the Dominators.

“So it’s one all-out war. Do you think the Dominators will be there?” Zac asked.

“It is hard to say,” Nonet said with a shake of its enormous head. “No Zhix would stay behind when the challenge is issued. However, the Dominators are Zhix, yet they are not. They might not care about the precepts and enter this hidden world you have mentioned. They might even try something before then.”

Zac nodded with a frown. Retaliation from the Dominators was something he had been worrying about since slaying Harbinger. He knew all-too-well just how crazy Inevitability was, and he wouldn’t put it past her to go slaughter everyone in his outpost. He had been half-expecting a notification in his communication crystal while cultivating, but he had thankfully been uninterrupted the whole time.

He didn’t know why, but it looked like his people were safe for now though. Void’s Disciple seemed quite capable to move about across Pangea freely, and he should have attacked one of his towns by now if he had decided to act. He still decided to pull back more of his forces to the island and his private continent just in case.

The two Zhix left a few minutes later, leaving Zac to ponder his next move. The break was honestly a relief to Zac, as he was not completely ready to meet another one of the Dominators. Fighting both of them simultaneously felt extremely risky as well, especially while Ogras was still in seclusion. The pause would give him some time to prepare his next move.

There was no way for him to prepare another Annihilation Sphere even if the battle was delayed another ten days though. The Splinter simply didn’t produce enough energy for that. He would have to use some other means to deal with them instead.

The delay also threw about his plans a bit, as he needed to prepare himself for the Mystic Realm as well. He wanted to enter the Mystic Realm within two weeks if possible, as that would still give him some time to maneuver even if his sister proved unable to force open the broken pathway.

Zac hadn’t heard any updates from his sister for a while, and he couldn’t sit around any longer. He walked over to his own array and teleported over to Mystic Island. He needed to see how things were going.

It was quite some time since Zac was here last, but not much had changed. The base camp was a bit desolate though, as most of the normal staff was stuck on the other side of the spatial tunnel. Now it was mostly demons and Valkyries staying here to protect Kenzie and a few scientists. A large number of the Sentry Golems were probably off wandering the island as well, making sure no one tried sneaking up on the camp.

“Oh, you’re here?” Kenzie said with surprise as Zac entered her workshop. “Is the war over?”

“It’s on hold for ten days,” Zac smiled as he looked around. “How’re things going here?”

“It’s slow,” Kenzie sighed. “The tunnel is still a mess, that bomb the zealots set up really did a number on space itself. The turbulence got better a lot faster in the beginning, but it has been slowing down lately. I’m not sure it will clear up before the deadline you set.”

The deadline Zac set was ten days before the government. Part of it was simply a precaution, but there was another important reason for the haste.

The other forces were frantically searching the Mystic Realm at this very moment and he was already pretty far behind. He couldn’t just enter the last minute and expect everything to go his way. He definitely had a hidden ace with his familiar connection to the Mystic Realm along with his sister and Jeeves, but he wouldn’t take anything for granted.

In a perfect world, he would already have started to explore the mysterious research base, but he wasn't ready to risk it all by trying to sneak into the New World Government's entrance. Seizing it was even riskier as there were probably spies from both the cultists and the Dominators ready to blow up the spatial tunnel at moment's notice.

"Can you crack it open early?" Zac asked.

"We can give it a try, but if we fail it will make things a lot worse," Kenzie said. "If we wait another week or two our chances will be better."

Zac slowly thought it over, before he nodded in agreement.

"I want to try it in twelve days, after the battle is dealt with." Zac eventually decided. "If things fall apart I'll just have to try my luck by sneaking inside some other way."

"You know you can just talk with the government officials, right?" Kenzie said.

"If they were ready to work together they would have contacted us long ago," Zac said with a shake of his head. "They've had ample chances to extend an olive branch since I closed the last Incursion. Even before then."

"Fine," Kenzie shrugged. "But remember to not kill a bunch of people willy-nilly."

"I know," Zac agreed.

Not killing weaklings was an unwritten rule of the multiverse, and something Zac had to start taking note of now that he was on a higher grade than the rest of Earth. It was widely considered extremely vile to wantonly slaughtering the weak, almost like killing innocent puppies. Of course, if that was the only problem the blood-drenched cultivators of the multiverse wouldn't have cared.

But there were a lot of signs pointing toward the fact that killing substantially weaker people went against the will of the Heavens and that it affected one's karma negatively, almost like giving you a hidden debuff to your Luck. It wasn't something that was visible on your status screen, but through how the universe treated you.

After all, F-grade cultivators weren't useful to the System, but they represented seeds of potential. The System wouldn't care if a bunch of warriors killed each other in a war, as that might result in a few powerhouses emerging, but the mighty slaughtering substantially weaker people was another matter altogether.

The strong didn't get stronger, and a lot of potential was snuffed out as the weak got culled. It was wasting resources, and essentially working against the System. A few people dying here and there didn't really matter, but if you went too far you would draw the ire of the System, and it would start treating you like an enemy of the heavens like the Technocrats.

There were even rumors of powerful cultivators that were actively hunted by the system for their actions, who were forced to hide from the eyes of the Heavens. That wasn't something that had any relation to a small corner like the Zecia sector though, as you needed to be much more powerful for something like that to happen according to Triv.

"I'll be going away for a couple of days," Zac eventually said. "I need to keep improving as much as possible before we enter, so I have decided to head to one of the uncharted sectors of Pangea. It's the swamp."

"Really? The swamp?" Kenzie said with a scrunched-up nose. "That place seems pretty disgusting."

“There’s a lot of putrefaction and death in the swamp from what I understand,” Zac said. “It might provide me with some sort of inspiration. Or there might be a lot of valuable plants.”

It was the latter that was the biggest reason for Zac deciding to go. The integration of a new world led to the appearance of a bunch of valuable resources, like the Amanita and the Tree of Ascension. There were no doubt more that had appeared, but most had probably already been snatched up by the people around the world.

If there were any remaining natural treasures of that grade on earth, then they were probably hidden in the unexplored pockets. The swamp seemed particularly dangerous, and Zac believed that no one should have properly explored its inner areas. Finding some valuable treasure was his last chance at gaining another power up before heading into the Mystic Realm, and he could probably burst open another node while looking around.

It was a risky move considering that Void’s Disciple might show up with a vengeance at moment’s notice, but he had the **[Spatial Gate Array]** now. He could set an array up in ten minutes, and his town just had to defend that long for him to return. Ten minutes should definitely be doable even against Void’s Disciple with the comprehensive upgrades to the defensive Arrays of Port Atwood.

The value of a World Capital had quickly shown itself in the number of good things available in the Town Shop, and Abby and Adran had been busy squeezing as much benefit as possible out of the available arrays and fortifications.

Zac immediately turned thoughts to action as he teleported to the array closest to the swamp, leaving just a small squad of Valkyries to act as a relay in case they needed to reach him through his Communication Crystal. He actually owned a town just on the edge of the swamp, a small base that was formerly one of the incursions he had closed. It had belonged to a humanoid race that somewhat reminded Zac of the Zhix, though they looked a lot more like humans.

It was most likely one of the demi-human races of the multiverse. Humans were just too prolific, after all, and they had proven very compatible for procreation with most humanoid species. They were like blank canvases, and there were very few humanoids that didn’t have a little bit of human in their genome.

What was human and what wasn’t had already become blurred, but people essentially went by the race in the status screen, which was dictated by the dominant heritage. This was rarely the human side, especially not when matched against powerful races.

The ones who had controlled this former Incursion were likely the result of a mix of some insectoid race and humans a long time ago, which might have been why they were placed so close to a swamp. It made Zac’s life a lot easier anyway, as he didn’t have to utilize the Marshall Clan for transportation this time, exposing his plans while doing so.

He was soon flying atop his treasure above the marsh, looking down with interest. After hearing the description of the place he had first thought this might be where the Everglades ended up, but he soon realized that that wasn’t exactly the case.

Zac was no botanical expert, but there were just too many unfamiliar trees and plants in the ground below for this to be a piece of Florida. At best it might have combined the wetlands with some marshes and tropical forests of the other planets, most likely the Ishiate world as it seemed to have been just one massive forest.

It had created a unique ecosystem with a forest floor that was mostly submerged like a mangrove system. However, there were smatterings of solid land with some regularity, though not quite to the point that you could freely walk on the ground.

However, the infusion of Cosmic Energy to the marshlands had helped the trees explode in size, which included their branches and roots. It had formed vast systems of bridges running along the rivers, and Zac saw one beast after another running along their length from tree to tree.

He just needed to travel above the marshland for a few minutes to realize the place was teeming with various species, just like the primordial jungle where he had spent a lot of time after dealing with the cultists. However, if the atmosphere over by the volcano was a boisterous cacophony, then this place held a subdued silence, with animal calls only occasionally breaking through the silence.

The whole area felt like it was full of adventure and mystery, and Zac wondered if this was how the explorers of old felt when they traveled along the rivers of Mississippi or through the virgin jungles of Africa. Of course, he had the added safety net of being able to fly away, and a superhuman constitution that would protect him from most insect bites and poisons.

The place provided Zac with a sense of adventure, but more importantly it provided him with solace. The bloody scenes over the past days had left him with a feeling of heaviness that reached deep into his soul, and this was an opportunity for him to not only regain a sense of balance but even work on his skills.

Of course, if he could find some treasure while doing so, all the better.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 551 - Connectedness**

The atmosphere of this unusual forest was fascinating, but the ambient energy was even more interesting. Zac was currently flying toward the center of the marshland at a leisurely pace that pretty much matched a speed that he would be able to keep on land as well. He hadn't noticed anything weird in the beginning, but he could now confirm that the energy density had increased a bit since he entered this place.

With this pace it would only take him two days at the most to reach the core, but Zac eventually decided to land on top of a massive root that had grown over ten meters wide. The waters quickly turned chaotic as a group of oversized salamanders swam toward him, but they quickly fled for their lives when Zac unleashed a bit of his aura.

He took a deep breath, surprised that the smell was fresh and earthy rather than the expected foul odor of brackish water. Zac started walking along the roots toward the depths of the marshland, occasionally jumping up to instead use a bridge made from branches, following a somewhat meandering path.

Of course, he could always jump between trees in a straight line instead of using such a slow method of travel, but that would destroy the whole purpose why he landed. He wanted to get a feel of the forest, to walk on top of the trees as he followed the natural paths formed by nature itself.

Zac had initially planned on using the primordial jungle as a means to evolving his nature-aspected skills. But large sections of the jungle were utterly ruined because of the battle against the cultists, or rather their emblem, and he had mainly tried to focus on gaining Blighted Cut during that week of recuperation. It had prevented him from working on his other class as much as he wanted.

But now was a perfect opportunity. It was just him and a boundless wilderness that had never been tread by man from the looks of things. Zac kept emitting some of his latent killing intent, which essentially worked as not only a bug-repellant but also a deterrent for any of the stronger beasts lurking in the depths of the wide rivers.

He occasionally stopped and sensed the various trees and gargantuan flowers in his path, trying to understand their role and path to survival in this place. The world of cultivation was a cut-throat place, but nature had always been just as competitive even before the Integration. Everything needed a method to survive, along with the ability to adapt now that the atmosphere was chock-full of magic.

Some of the more massive trees simply dominated their domain with size alone, stealing the sunlight for themselves. Other trees formed symbiotic relationships with other plants defending them in return for somewhere to grow. It wasn't all too different compared to before the integration, honestly, though it did feel like evolution was sped up by a huge degree.

Then again, there were quite a few new oddities that didn't exist before. He had been attacked no less than twenty times by the plantlife itself after having just traveled for two hours. One tree moved its branches with surprising speed in an effort to spear him on a sharp point. Others tried to entangle him with their roots.

He had actually let one do it to see what would happen, and he was slowly dragged underwater where he could see a bunch of rotting beast carcasses provide nutrients to the tree. Some plants had even formed hunting teams with the beasts. A huge flower had suddenly released a bunch of pollen in his face, and Zac immediately felt some restrictions on his movement.

Not more than ten seconds passed before a swarm of mosquitoes appeared, hoping to bleed him dry while he was incapacitated. The pollen was only immobilizing, so the two groups had teamed up where the mosquitoes got the blood while the plant got the corpse.

It was both horrifying and extremely intriguing to see the hundreds of paths to survival, and Zac felt something click into place after walking along for half a day. He was delighted to see that **[Forester's Constitution]** finally reached peak mastery. The upgrade had boosted his attribute bonus to 15% as expected.

But more importantly, he felt a sense of connectedness with the nature around him.

It wasn't like when he was using **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** and he essentially became omniscient within his conjured forest, but rather an innate sixth sense about the forest itself. It was like an inborn intuition had been implanted into his subconscious. He tried to make sense of the feeling, but he only found a use for it ten minutes later when he felt something attracted him from within a dense bush.

Zac decided to follow the hunch, and he pushed his way inside, his massive Endurance enough to avoid getting cut into ribbons by the extremely sharp barbs. He had expected the interior of the bush to be pretty dark, but there was actually a source of light inside; a small set of stalks that gave off a gentle green light.

He immediately understood that this was some sort of Spiritual Herb hiding within the thorny bush, and his eyes lit up when he realized the use of Peak Mastery of the skill. His hunch had actually led him to a hidden treasure that he never would have spotted before. He had essentially turned into a truffle-seeking pig that could find the hidden treasures of the forest.

It wasn't exactly that he could sense treasures though, but rather that he had been given an instinctive understanding of the forests. He just felt that the brambles

looked like a place that could contain some good things, and this feeling was in turn boosted by his massive pool of Luck.

Zac also noticed that his honed instincts worked with dangers as well within a few minutes. He somehow had a far better understanding of what parts of the rivers would hold aggressive beasts or which types of foliage could hide something lying in wait. This part of the skill wasn't as useful to someone like him who already had his danger sense, but it would probably have been a huge boon for a normal cultivator who spent a lot of time in the forests.

Staying alive was the most important thing on the path of cultivation, after all.

The best thing was that the skill was passive too, meaning he could freely make use of his upgraded instincts without any ramifications. It allowed him to pick up one Spiritual Root after another as he walked through the marshes, each of them giving off impressive spiritual energy. However, he quickly realized that good herbs weren't like weeds, growing everywhere.

Less than a tenth of the spots his instincts told him about was actually home to something interesting, the rest were simply empty. However, he actually didn't need to dig or inspect every single one. As long as he got close enough he would get a sense from his Luck as well, and he tried to understand this Treasure Sense just as well as he understood his Danger Sense.

This sense wasn't something new. He could always tell whether something he found in a Cosmos Sack was useless or something valuable by instinct, just like he could somewhat get a sense of the quality of Spiritual Tools. Part of it came from sensing the aura of the items, but part of it was simply instincts brought by his Luck. However, this sense hadn't really proven too useful while actually searching for treasures until now.

Zac soon concluded that his Luck was quite precise as long as he got within 7 meters or so. He could tell there was something there with some certainty at such close proximity. The actual range was a bit odd though, but he guessed that he might have been given 1 meter of detection range per effective 100 Luck.

Sometimes he could get a vague hint even further away than that though, but it was to the point that Zac had a hard time discerning whether it was just his "gut" telling him something that might be completely fabricated, or if it was actually some supernatural phenomenon helping him out. In either case, it wasn't something he could put too much faith in.

A Treasure Sense of seven meters wasn't bad, but it wasn't life-changing either. It allowed him to pick up the occasional baubles that were strewn along his way, but it was a far cry from the examples Ogras had listed before. He didn't get any strong urge to suddenly make a turn only to find a divine treasure a few kilometers away or anything magical like that.

But it was far superior to what the general cultivator could enjoy. The forest didn't look like it was full of treasures to the untrained eye, but **[Forester's Constitution]** had opened Zac up to the truth. His Luck then helped him make the best of the knowledge, which turned him into a moneymaking machine compared to most adventurers.

The number of plants Zac harvested as he explored was nothing compared to the vast fields his people grew back at Verdant Hills, but farmed Spirit Plants and wild ones couldn't be compared with each other. It was mainly weaker plants that could be freely farmed, whereas the more valuable ones resisted domestication.

There was also the issue of energy consumption. Most of the high-quality plants required quite a bit of energy, making it impossible to grow them in larger numbers. They needed a territory of their own, just like many beasts did. So a lot of spiritual

roots and plants did not have a constant supply, which massively increased their value in case they were needed for popular pill recipes.

That was one of the main fields of research for most Alchemy clans too. Any clan that managed to improve a recipe by changing a wild-grown plant with a farmed one stood to gain a massive amount of wealth. They could undercut the market while still maintaining massive profit margins thanks to using cheaper resources.

Zac had no idea if the roots, grasses, and flowers he picked up were anything valuable in high demand, but he still took a detour every time he sensed something in the vicinity. It wasn't like he was strapped for cash, but it went against every fiber in his body to leave money lying on the floor. He also wanted to nurture his instincts this way.

And who knew, some of the plants might be really effective in improving his Draugr-race. He was willing to do almost anything to swap out that terrifying dust to something less painful to use.

Constantly harvesting the low-grade Spiritual Plants gave him some insights as well. Spiritual Plants were essentially the equivalent of plants that had started on the path of cultivation, and it felt like exploring them helped him gain insight into his own nature-aspected Dao Fragment. He felt it might be even more conducive to his cultivation to travel through forests like this rather than sitting in his cultivation cave.

Zac kept going deeper and deeper into the massive swamp over the following day, and his newfound intuition helped him avoid a lot of trouble. However, the energy in the atmosphere kept increasing, and the beasts both grew more numerous and more powerful. Most of them were just late or peak F-Grade though, with E-Grade animals being very rare.

He would probably have to reach the core before he got an opportunity to see the real kings of the marshes.

Zac finally decided to stop for the day after having taken out a group of humongous E-grade crocodiles, each of them more than twenty meters long. It felt like going up against prehistoric dinosaurs when fighting them, but they were still ultimately just early E-Grade. Just a minute was needed to take out the whole pack, and he suddenly had 8 more carcasses in his Cosmos Sack.

The stench of blood filled the air as the river ran red, so Zac quickly moved some distance away. The crocodiles should be the local hegemony of this small section of the river, but the other animals could probably figure out that the blood meant there might be an opportunity for a sneak attack or even free food.

He soon found an enormous tree with a hollow large enough that he could rest for the day, perhaps the former resting place of some mutated squirrel. Zac blocked out the entrance with one of his spare tower shields before he sat down and calmed his mind. The reason he moved away from the battle wasn't that he was worried that he would become embroiled in another battle, but it was rather that he didn't want a bunch of beasts interrupting him while redrawing his pathways.

He quickly changed to his Draugr form and once more started performing the arduous task.

The physical wound from breaking open the Node was pretty much healed, though he had barely begun fixing the pathways. He estimated that his undead form was weakened roughly 30% or so, and even his human side wasn't in top shape even though he looked fine on paper.

Zac guessed that the broken pathways in his inactive form counted like some sort of hidden wound even when he fought as a human, though the effect was limited. In either case, it meant he needed to work quickly so that the pathways were fixed before

the war in 8 days. He might need everything in his arsenal in case the remaining two showed up.

He kept working on the pathways for a few hours before he swapped back to his human form, at which point he simply closed his eyes and tried to sense the nature around him. He would normally have wanted to practice his Soul Strengthening Manual as well, but it was impossible while on the move. Setting up a teleportation array through his **[Spatial Gate Array]** was technically possible, but they were temporary one-time consumables, so he wouldn't be able to return.

Going without the arrays for a few days wasn't a problem though, and it freed up a lot of time to focus on other things, such as his Dao. It almost felt like the whole swamp was one enormous entity, and he tried to find some inspiration for the Fragment of the Bodhi by connecting to it. He spent the rest of the night in that sort of reverie before he once more set out at the break of dawn.

Today he would explore the core of the wetlands.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 552 - River**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

Small notice. A few readers have provided helpful typo corrections over past two years, even though I haven't always been the best at keeping up with correcting them.

However, now there's a new function on RR that allows you to properly mark typos, and for me to easily fix them. So if you like to do the job of an Editor without getting paid, now's never been a better time for it!

EDIT: Sorry, turned the feature off again. I had really misunderstood how the new feature worked.

Zac had spent close to two days in the marshes already, and he would definitely reach what could be considered the core zone today. Of course, that wasn't saying much as the core of such a massive forest was large enough that he could wander around for weeks without seeing the same tree twice.

As for what Zac considered the core area, it was where Cosmic Energy was the densest. The Nexus Vein covered his whole island and then some back home, and he guessed it was a similar situation here in the forest. The core Zone was equivalent to Port Atwood, and this was where the strongest beasts would reside, along with the most valuable herbs and minerals.

His hunch was quickly proven right over the following hours as the number of E-Grade beasts he encountered kept increasing. He even spotted a massive swarm of E-Grade hornets far in the distance, each one of them as large as a labrador. Even Zac felt a bit intimidated by the swarm, so he actually chose to hide inside the river to not draw their attention.

Beasts were weaker than cultivators in general, but they made up for it in numbers. He wasn't in any mood to be besieged by thousands of murderous hornets for no real return. Even if he emerged victoriously it would still be a pitched battle, and the risk didn't weigh up for the rewards. There was no point in messing with a swarm like that unless they were guarding some great treasure.

He did fight the occasional E-Grade beast though, mostly overgrown bugs or river-creatures. There was a large number of alien amphibians that looked like predatory catfish. Their maws were wide enough to swallow Zac in one bite, and there were over five rows of jagged teeth hiding within. They even had short stubby legs like salamanders, and they could break into a surprisingly quick sprint on the ground.

Zac fought and harvested intermittently as he scoped the core zone, and his Cosmos Sack was gradually filling up with valuables. He didn't recognize the herbs he was picking at all, but each beast carcass was worth between 10 000 and 100 000 Nexus Coins depending on species and level.

The bountiful harvest went on for a few hours until there was a startling change in the atmosphere; it had become quiet.

The sounds of nature had always been a bit subdued in this swamp, but it had suddenly become completely silent after Zac passed an unseen threshold. He had never encountered this before, but it could only mean a few things. There were no beasts here, meaning they either had all been killed or scared away by something. Zac immediately started to look around for clues, but there wasn't much to go by.

This section of the wetlands looked pretty much the same as the rest, with the exception that the river he was following along was a bit wider than the rest. It was over five kilometers across, which would have allowed it to compete with massive rivers like the Amazon River before the Integration. Now it was just a tributary from some much larger source of water.

Zac's first instinct was to avoid this place just like the hornets earlier, but he eventually chose to stay. He was here for training and treasures, after all, and this felt like a place that could provide both. He kept going along the shoreline, but he concealed as much of his aura as he could. However, he only walked a few hundred meters before there was a change in his body.

His cells had all woken up and were screaming at him that there was something delicious nearby. This wasn't something coming from his recently upgraded [**Forester's Constitution**], but rather the general feelings of desire that great treasures like the Fruit of Ascension elicited. Zac immediately started to look for any special energy signatures with [**Cosmic Gaze**], though not without some hesitation.

There was something odd about the feeling, though he couldn't exactly place it.

It quickly became apparent that the treasure could be found on a small island in the middle of the river. There was a constant swirl of haze surrounding it though, making it impossible for Zac to guess what was going on inside. He could only see the edges of the island sticking out, but he could at least make some deductions of what kind of situation might be waiting for him over there.

The island just had a diameter of 100 meters or so, so the valuable item shouldn't be something huge like a Crystal Mine. It was also unlikely that there was some sort of hive with a huge number of beasts like a hornet hive or an ant's nest waiting on the other side of the fog. The island was too small, so there could either be just one big guy guarding the treasure, or a pack of medium-sized beasts.

As for the treasure, it was probably some sort of plant with a powerful energy signature.

However, Zac didn't immediately rush over to take the item. There was a constant buzz in the back of his head, alerting him of danger. It wasn't an acute sense of dread, but rather a pervasive sense of wrongness. He couldn't make heads or tails about the feeling, but he knew to take extra precautions.

Perhaps the feeling was simply because his subconscious believed a life and death struggle waited for him on the island. The most powerful animals always erected

their lairs next to valuable herbs as the aura the treasures released could help refine their bloodlines. There was no way that this island wasn't occupied since Zac's cells were screaming at him to eat whatever was hiding within the mists.

With the sheer amount of hidden cards and advantages he had stacked up over the past year, Zac didn't feel all too worried about whatever was waiting for him though. He was confident in dealing with pretty much anything Earth was able to throw at him this early into the integration. However, Zac still wanted to deal with this situation like a normal cultivator.

He needed to come up with a plan that would allow him to minimize the danger. He wouldn't always stay on Earth where there were no real surprises. Cultivation on Earth was too orderly as everyone began at the same time, and it provided him a false sense of security that wouldn't hold up out in the multiverse. Even the Mystic Realm would contain unknown dangers that could threaten his life by all accounts.

He needed to learn to do things the right way, or he would sooner or later be killed because he encountered something that couldn't be solved by swinging his axe extra hard.

His class and Dao thankfully enabled Zac to blend in with the surroundings, allowing him to spy on the island from his vantage hidden in a tree crown by the shore. However, Zac frowned when there was no change even after four hours. The mists didn't dissipate, and there were never any sounds that came from the island. No beast ever left the moat to hunt either, leaving Zac wondering if he was just being paranoid.

Was there actually no beast living there?

There was only so much time he had to spare, and he eventually decided to just go for it. He figured that he could either swap to his Draugr form and walk along the bottom of the river, or use his leaf as a boat. He eventually decided to move upstream a bit before he placed the leaf on the river. He infused himself with the Fragment of the Bodhi and simply allowed his flying treasure to drift toward the island like a normal piece of debris.

Zac didn't move in the slightest and **[Verun's Bite]** was already in his hand in case of an ambush, but he drifted through the haze without issue until his flying treasure hit land. He immediately disembarked and stowed away the treasure before he looked around the island with some confusion and desire. He had smelt an extremely enticing aroma since he entered the fog, and he couldn't wait to snatch whatever was the source.

The haze was actually not that thick on the island, one quick scan confirmed that there were no guarding beasts around. Not that they could fit with the tree that grew from the center of the island. The tree wasn't overly tall, just reaching twenty meters into the sky. However, it was shockingly wide, its trunk taking up the better part of the whole island.

Even the massive redwoods back then couldn't compete with this weird monstrosity in terms of girth.

However, Zac wasn't interested in the tree trunk, but rather the bulbous branches that spread out at its crown. There were only 6 branches in total on the whole tree, and each of them looked like a shrub with an enormous flower growing on it. It was no doubt these flowers who were the source of the smell, and Zac could sense how most of the energy gathered by the tree was infused into these six treasures.

The fact that there were no beasts around only made Zac more apprehensive as he stayed on the edge of the island though. It was a bit disconcerting that he couldn't find the source of danger or wrongness, but he also couldn't just stand around doing

nothing. He had already made his move, and delaying would just increase the danger he was in.

His spirit tool necklace transformed, and a chain shot out from his back and snaked around one of the stubby branches, and Zac shot toward it as he dragged himself up. The sudden movement was just in time as five sharp spikes punched through the ground and stabbed his previous location with enough force to make the air crackle. Zac immediately looked back and saw that it was a group of roots, but they receded beneath the ground after they missed.

The scene wasn't very surprising to Zac. If there were no beast guardian around in this place, then it was most likely that the tree itself was a dangerous predator. And since there were no branches on this fatty tree, then it most likely had nimble roots to deal with its prey. A trunk of this width should be able to grow a massive root system, after all.

Zac wasted no time as he didn't believe for a second that this probing attack was all the tree could muster, considering that the whole area was cleansed of animals. He moved to cut off the closest flower, but a weird shield actually appeared around it. Zac grunted in annoyance as he swung his axe down at the emerald barrier, and the collision made the whole tree shudder.

The shaking didn't subside, though, and Zac's eyes widened when the whole river exploded as thousands of roots, each one hundreds of meters long, rose into the sky. Zac had expected more roots to be waiting, but not to the point that the sky itself was almost blocked out. He hurriedly launched a barrage of strikes at the stalk connecting the flower to the branch, and the shield finally cracked.

But there was just enough time to harvest the one flower before his mind screamed of danger for real. Hundreds of roots shot toward him with a speed and agility that far surpassed any other plant he had encountered thus far, and he barely managed to dodge the strikes by moving over to the top of the trunk with **[Loamwalker]**.

The roots actually emitted a powerful killing intent as they froze in the air. However, they only wiggled in the air for a second before the tree seemed to have located him once more. Zac immediately flashed toward the next flower as he cut apart roots by the scores, but his eyes suddenly widened in alarm.

Two chains slammed into the top of the massive trunk the next moment, dragging Zac right back where he came from.

It was just in time as well as the flower released what looked like a plume of pollen that created a yellow haze that lingered just for an instant before it started spreading through the air. Zac thankfully evaded most of it, but some of it definitely made its way to him. A huge surge of desire and killing intent welled up in his heart, and his breaths started to become ragged as he looked at the remaining flowers.

His hunch had been right; that pollen was definitely not normal.

The other four flowers quickly followed suit and released their own clouds of pollen, and Zac was soon surrounded from all sides as he kept dancing back and forth while cutting off any incoming roots. He was only buying time though as the roots regrew within seconds and rejoined the battle.

However, there was nothing else he could do until those clouds of pollen dissipated enough for him to snatch the flowers. He was already in a bad state from just taking a whiff, and he might actually go insane if he stayed inside the clouds too long. It was a very weird feeling as two conflicting impulses fought inside his mind. One of the voices was telling him to stay away as the increasingly large cloud of pollen was dangerous, while the other was screaming at him to jump into the cloud and push his face into the flower.

Was the thing a lure?

Roars suddenly echoed out across the area, as though in direct response to his hunch. Zac also saw a large number of Cosmic Energy clusters moving closer with the help of **[Cosmic Gaze]**, which probably meant that hundreds of beasts were pushing toward his location with their utmost speed. The quickest animals were all in E-Grade, and the strongest ones actually managed to push through the forest of deadly roots to arrive at the small island.

The area had been void of life just a minute ago, but it suddenly looked as though a beast tide was forming all around him, madly fighting against the countless roots in the river. Something was clearly wrong with the animals though as many of them were frothing at the mouth as their eyes shone with madness.

They cared for nothing except their desire to reach the island. The water had already turned red, but the island had similarly grown to twice its original size thanks to the hundreds of snaking roots that had been cut or ripped off by Zac and the beasts. This was definitely the tree's doing.

It was orchestrating a bloodbath.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 553 - Roots**

The chaotic scene made Zac's eyes widen with shock, but he quickly found his bearings as he started to prepare. A spectral forest rose up on the small island, using the fallen roots as soil. He also summoned the unique blade of **[Chop]** and had it circle around him, which helped tremendously in dealing with the incessant attacks from roots.

The fat tree seemed infuriated that a bunch of other plants had sprung up in its private domain and the water churned as even more roots rose to rip them apart. But how could normal roots destroy an incorporeal forest? They harmlessly passed straight through, which only angered the tree further. It was the drugged beasts that were forced to take the brunt of the tree's wrath in the end though as Zac was proving a tough nut to crack.

A slight vibration in the air was all the warning Zac got before he was suddenly attacked by a small bird who flashed past him with such speed that it might as well have been a beam of light. Not even the additional sight afforded him by **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** was enough to avoid the strike. A small wound appeared on his right arm, but the small beast was thankfully not powerful enough to cause any more damage than that.

However, it seemed as though the bloodthirsty little swallow wasn't done there, and it veered in a wide arc around the tree before it shot toward him once more.

The emerald leaves of **[Nature's Barrier]** appeared to create a nigh-impenetrable wall against the assailant, but it was like a blur completely unfettered by gravity or its own momentum as it made seemingly impossible turns around the leaves and roots alike. Another bloody line was cut open on Zac's cheek, and he swore in annoyance when the autonomous fractal edge missed the bird for the second time.

The bird gave up on the kill after it realized Zac was barely affected at all. It instead shot toward one of the five remaining flowers, but Zac's eyes widened when

swallow suddenly just up and exploded just as it landed on the pistil. Was it the pollen or something else?

Zac was unsure what to do in either case. He wanted to loot the flowers without destroying the tree as that would allow him to come back for more treasures in the future. But it looked extremely dangerous to get close. Zac eventually decided to test things out a bit and he threw one of his beast carcasses at the closest branch.

The massive beast shot forward like a wrecking ball and ripped through multiple layers of roots that tried to stop its advance. It only got within a few meters of the flower before three extremely powerful roots appeared though. They were pitch-black compared to the others who were dark brown, and it looked like naturally formed fractals covered their length.

These were the real killing weapons of the tree.

The special roots effortlessly intercepted the carcass that weighed well over a tonne, and it was gored and flung away in an instant. However, Zac noted that the body didn't show any inclination to explode, meaning that the pollen probably only worked on living creatures. He tested things further and shot a few fractal blades at the special roots, but his eyes widened when he couldn't even cut them apart when he imbued **[Chop]** with Fragment of the Axe.

The three roots disappeared the next moment as they blended in with the thousands of normal roots, but Zac wouldn't be tricked now that he knew they existed. It might be hard to spot them with his normal sight, but the roots were almost lit up like beacons to his **[Cosmic Gaze]**. The normal roots contained a respectable amount of Nature-aspected energy, but the three killing roots contained some sort of intense fiery power as well.

The vision of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** also allowed him to keep track of the three roots, and it almost seemed as though the roots were observing him from the distance. However, danger screamed in his mind the next moment as one of the three shot straight toward him. The leaves of **[Nature's Barrier]** superimposed to create an extremely thick layer of protection, and Zac activated the first defensive charge of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** for good measure.

A rippling shockwave spread out the next moment as the root slammed into his defenses with the force of a runaway train. Scores of roots around Zac were ripped apart from the chaotic swirls of energies, and his own defenses didn't fare much better. Over a dozen layers of leaves were ripped apart, and the emerald shield cracked as well.

The shield managed to absorb most of the remaining momentum from the strike, but Zac was still hurled hundreds of meters away from the impact. He groaned in pain from the punch as he fell into the river, but his brows furrowed when he saw a dark-brown sticky substance covered his chest where the root hit him. Only then did he somewhat realize that the tip of the root had been covered in some unknown compound.

Were the special roots venomous like actual snakes?

Thankfully his defenses were powerful enough to prevent the root from drawing blood, which barely prevented Zac from being injected with this unknown liquid. He was filled with both dread and marvel as he looked at the three roots that acted just like beasts. It was amazing that a plant could evolve to such a degree in one short year. Or was this perhaps something that the System had rather planted here as a hidden opportunity?

In either case, it wasn't enough to deter him, and he swam back toward the island, slaughtering any beast that tried to get in his way. It was time to bring out the

big guns. He didn't want to use his hidden cards for this fight, but that didn't mean that he couldn't even use his skills. A massive woodcutter's axe appeared the next moment as Zac ran back toward the tree on top of floating carcasses.

Activating [**Deforestation**] was essentially effortless by now, and an extremely sharp wave of destruction rippled out the next moment.

Hundreds of roots were cut off and destroyed by that one swing, which once more exposed the bulbous tree within. The three special roots survived though, which didn't really surprise Zac. But cleaning out the normal roots had fulfilled the purpose of the Axe of Felling, and Zac quickly threw out a fat stack of papers the moment he set his foot on the real part of the island.

The whole river shook and a conflagration consumed the tree crown a second later, with a plume of flames rising over fifty meters into the air. The explosions came from a stack of over a hundred low-tiered fire talismans he activated as one, and it was Zac's best idea to disperse the barely visible pollen that had spread all over the area.

He figured that the flames would be able to clear out the toxin in the air, but he was worried that his Infernal Axe would not only destroy the pollen but even the tree itself. A bunch of low-tiered talismans shouldn't be able to harm a tree with this strong vitality though, making them a better tool for this purpose. And if the tree was destroyed by something like this, it couldn't have been anything precious anyway.

Nothing ventured nothing gained. That was what passed through his mind as Zac swallowed a handful of soul-soothing and general antidote pills. He shot toward the closest flower the next moment, and he could breathe out in relief when he didn't sense anything odd even after appearing right in front of it. Either the dangers of the pollen had been dealt with, or his body was simply strong enough to withstand it.

A few furious swings later a second flower had entered his Cosmos Sack, and he was already moving toward the next. The Axe of Felling had contained a large amount of his Fragment of the Axe, and he could still feel how it still was impacting the roots he cut earlier. The surging vitality of the tree tried to forcibly regrow the roots, but Zac was actively resisting using his latest insights into Dao Control. His head hurt, but he refused to let his mental energy be dispersed.

It gave him enough breathing room to continue with his harvest. However, he only managed to pluck the third flower before a weird scene took place. The three special roots actually assaulted the remaining flowers themselves, stabbing straight into their cores before they absorbed the flower's essence. Only a second passed before the flowers looked withered like they had been left to dry in the sun for weeks.

*Cannibalism?* Zac thought with wide eyes, and his eyes only got even wider when the roots suddenly doubled in size as their auras exploded with ferocity. He barely had time to think before he was slammed with a force that even exceeded that of the massive Anointed, but Zac wasn't even allowed to be thrown away in peace before he was attacked again.

The three roots had gained a massive spike in power from absorbing the three flowers, but the tree itself looked a bit wan. The normal roots didn't bother him any longer either, but they rather went after the huge number of beasts and dragged them underwater. It looked like it desperately needed some nourishment after losing all six of its treasures in one go.

But Zac was in no state to worry about the tree's situation as he was being harried by those three roots. He had already gotten his hands on the treasure so there was no point in staying here, but the three roots refused to let him leave. They were even a lot faster than he was since they grew in size, and he could just saunter away.

His axe was a blur as he desperately countered the barrage of strikes, but he rapidly gained one wound after another even with his still active **[Nature's Barrier]** picking up some of the slack. This couldn't go on. His Endurance and Vitality was monstrous for an E-Grade human, but how could it compare to that of a tree monster? It thankfully lacked the power to unleash a killing blow, but it was still a hassle to deal with.

It was a shame, but Zac saw no recourse but to launch the second strike of **[Deforestation]**, Infernal Axe, and hope that he didn't accidentally burn up his treasure tree.

The second defensive charge of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** provided enough time to activate the second swing, and a furious wave of cutting flames spread out across the river. It contained the fury of mother nature itself, and the attack incinerated everything from island to shore. Even the special roots were unable to resist the fiery wrath of Zac's ultimate skill, and they slunk away before they were ripped apart like everything else.

Zac saw his opportunity and flashed away, barely avoiding a large spurt of that odd liquid the roots were covered in. That final gout of venom had actually come from the tree trunk itself like it had opened a valve to shoot out a beam of poison at him. But Zac had already taken out his flying treasure at that point, and he was much too quick to be caught by now.

He found himself on the shore a second later and he became one with the forest the next moment. Zac was certain he could feel the fury of that bloodthirsty tree in the distance, but Zac didn't care as he moved further away. The fight wasn't really finished, but there was no point to kill the goose that lay the golden eggs.

Three flowers were reabsorbed by the tree itself, but getting at least half of them was decent enough. Better yet, he had managed to do so without permanently harming the tree and without using any of his cheats. Zac marked down the spot on his private map before he moved on, looking for other opportunities in the core region of the Swamps.

Zac found a lot of precious herbs, but he also found himself in a constant struggle. He was actually assaulted by the hornets twice over the following day, and Zac finally couldn't take it any longer. He spent half a day looking for their hive before he mounted an assault on the small mountain. After thirty minutes of all-out carnage did he find himself in the depths of the hive.

There was a shocking monstrosity in the heart of the cave, a queen whose only job was to birth more soldiers. But it seemed as though the queen was unable to defend herself apart from a mental attack that couldn't harm Zac in the slightest. It reminded him of the queen he fought during the undead level at the tower, though this hornet queen was a lot less evolved for war.

It allowed him to completely ignore the beast and ransack the place for treasures, but the only thing he found was lots of extremely energy-dense honey. Hornets shouldn't actually be producing honey as far as Zac knew, but perhaps these things were rather bees that had mutated into predators from the Integration. In either case, the stuff was chock-full of Cosmic Energy, especially the Royal Jelly he found next to the queen.

It contained far more energy than even E-Grade Nexus Crystals, and Zac actually gained a level in his human form just from eating a fifth of the Royal Jelly. It pushed him to level 83 in his human shape as well, catching up to his Draugr side. He quickly put the ten free points into Dexterity, just like he had with all other free points in the E-Grade, before he moved on.

But he didn't find another real treasure like the fatty tree and its flowers even after spending a total of six days in the vast forests. He still felt like the past week was well spent as he made a lot of progress on his meditation, while even upgrading one of his skills. He had even gotten a better understanding of his Luck and how to make the most of it. But it was time to head home.

Zac eventually found a secluded cave and erected a teleportation array. It was a bit wasteful to burn almost 100 million Nexus Coins on a single-use array, but he didn't want to waste a whole day flying back to the settlement at the edge of the Swamp. There were no messages waiting for him when returning, so he immediately headed over to Calrin's place to get an estimate on his gains.

"You're back," Calrin said with curiosity as Zac sat down on a chair in the private meeting room of the Thayer Consortia. "Did you find anything interesting?"

"You tell me," Zac said as he took out one of the enormous flowers.

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**Chapter 554 - Life, Death, War**

"My body is telling me that this should be good stuff, but its pollen also seemed pretty deadly," Zac said as he placed the flower on the merchant's inspection table.

"The energies condensed in the pistil are both strong and peculiar, but I don't recognize this species," the Sky Gnome said as he looked at the natural treasure with interest. "It should be something good though. How did you find it?"

"It grew on a tree," Zac said as he described his encounter in the swamp.

"This reminds me of something," Calrin muttered as he took out one of his massive tomes.

A short moment later a page depicting a similar tree to the one on the island appeared.

"It's a [**Rageroot Oak**], a plant that can match your Tree of Ascension in rarity. It's lucky you didn't actually cut it down. Its trunk contains a sap that might even be able to drive you mad," Calrin read. "The sap and pollen are both valuable and can be continuously extracted. The flowers can take decades to form though."

Zac felt some cold sweat running down the back when he saw the description. He remembered how something had dripped from those special roots, it turned out to be sap meant to turn him into a madman.

"What's it good for though? Berserk pills?" Zac asked, not too enthused.

Power never came for free, no matter if you were talking about War Arrays or Berserking Pills. War Arrays would always force you to travel with weaker subordinates, each one of them a weak link. As for Berserking Pills, they generally had pretty gruesome side-effects. The stronger the effect the worse the drawback would be.

"The pollen can be made into a potent beast lure which can be useful in all sorts of situations. You can both use it for yourself in case you need to refine yourself through battle, or you can use it to unleash a beast tide on your enemies. The sap is indeed a popular ingredient in Berserking Pills that allows warriors to unleash their potential during a battle," Calrin explained.

"And the flower itself? It should be the greatest treasure," Zac said.

“There is a core in the center of the flower,” Calrin said. “It’s a natural treasure that works as a Berserking Pill as well.”

“That’s it?” Zac asked with disappointment.

“Don’t underestimate those cores. It will allow an E-Grade warrior to increase their power by one step, and it will not have any major side-effects, just extreme exhaustion afterward. These two combined make it extremely rare and valuable. A pill that gives such a massive boost would carry severe long-term side-effects, or might even lead to death,” Calrin explained.

Zac finally realized that he really had picked up something good this time. He had researched this matter for a bit after getting his hands on the Cyborg Corpse, which could be considered the epitome of a Berserking transformation. One step didn’t refer to level, but stages of cultivation, meaning an Early E-Grade warrior would be able to exhibit the power of a Middle E-Grade warrior with the help of these flowers.

That was almost a doubling in power, and to be able to get such a boost without lasting detriments was amazing. The cyborg might have gone all the way from early E-Grade to Half-step D-Grade, but that also cut the Technocrat’s lifespan down to less than a minute. These flower cores might save his life in the future, turning the tides in a tough battle.

“I also have some wild herbs here as well, see if there’s anything valuable,” Zac added as he threw over a Cosmos Sack.

There, unfortunately, wasn’t anything too impressive, but his six-day haul was still worth over 300 million nexus coins. That was only the immediate value of the herbs he found thanks to **[Forester’s Constitution]**, and not including the mountains of E-Grade carcasses that he had amassed in his Cosmos Sack.

It wasn’t a huge sum for him any longer, but it proved how profitable even normal exploration could be. You needed both the skills to find the plants and the strength to survive the environment though, which disqualified pretty much everyone on Earth apart from a select few. Besides, he had the advantage of being the first explorer, and future generations probably wouldn’t be able to collect such a haul.

But it made him excited for the future. This was the gain from a random forest on his planet. How much wealth could one stand to profit by exploring a newly emerged Mystic Realm in the future, a world that was not only untouched but possibly held extremely rare or even previously unseen herbs?

Zac walked out of the consortia with a sense of excitement, but he didn’t get far before he sensed a powerful presence close-by.

“Hey,” a voice said, and Zac looked over at the shadows with surprise.

“It’s you?” Zac asked. “How do you keep finding me like this?”

“I just need to ask around. It’s not like you’re very circumspect,” Ogras snorted.

“Well, is it done?” Zac asked.

“It’s done,” Ogras nodded as he stepped out into the light, and Zac could feel that the aura of the Demon was a lot more condensed compared to before.

“What level are you now?” Zac asked with curiosity, as it was obvious the demon had gained a substantial amount of Attributes.

“Eighty-three,” Ogras shrugged, his mouth curving slightly upward. “A decent early push.”

“Eighty-three? What the f-,” Zac swore. “How have you already caught up to me? I had to fight multiple life-and-death battles to get here.”

“Node-opening pills work as intended on me since I’m not a primordial beast,” Ogras snorted. “You racked up a premature resistance by eating them by the handful.”

“Well, it’s good that you’re out,” Zac said. “I killed one of the Dominators while you broke through. I can use some back-up soon.”

“Oh? Which one?” Ogras said with surprise. “I thought they had already decided to follow the same strategy as the zealots.”

Zac quickly recapped what had taken place while Ogras was in secluded cultivation.

“Well, it’s good that one of them is dealt with, though it does make me worry a bit that there has been no response. Makes me think they are up to something,” Ogras grunted. “Got anything useful from its body?”

“No, I accidentally broke his Cosmos Sack,” Zac explained with a grimace. “I’ve saved the remains to cleanse of karmic ties later, but I want all three of them first. Oh, but I did get this.”

Zac took out the pitch-black spear the next moment and threw it over to Ogras. The demon caught it effortlessly even though it weighed hundreds of kilos, and the weapon turned to a blur as Ogras started stabbing it into the air.

“It contains some material and insight related to Space,” Ogras muttered with excitement. “It can even enter the shadows! I just need to find a decent Blacksmith to infuse some more shadow-related materials and it will be perfect for me! Are you giving this to me?”

“Sure, but you’ll have to find some way to pay me back later,” Zac smiled. “We both know how valuable this spear is. Some offhanded advice won’t cut it.”

“Fine, I’ll figure something out,” Ogras shrugged as he dripped his blood on the weapon. “Such a good thing.”

“Get ready for the war in three days,” Zac said as he started walking toward the closest teleporter. “We might have to deal with the other two Dominators there.”

“I’ll head out for a day or two to get used to my improved strength,” Ogras said. “But I will arrange things.”

Zac chose to stay behind in Port Atwood while the Demon went away to hone himself through combat, spending his time either in his Soul Strengthening Array or pondering on the Dao. His most recent trips had given him a lot of insights, especially into the Fragment of the Bodhi, and he wanted to incorporate those snippets into his understanding of the Dao as quickly as possible. It wasn’t enough to actually evolve any of the Fragments, but it was a step in the right direction.

The days flew by and the morning of the Challenge quickly arrived. Zac hadn’t even left his Cultivation Cave during the three days, but he had gotten occasional reports from Triv. The ghost had availed himself as a sort of filter to save Zac’s time. Crystals full of reports were sent to his compound daily by Abby and others, and Triv sifted through them to categorize them by importance and urgency.

Of course, the most crucial reports were sealed so that only Zac could see them.

This time Zac didn’t set out to war with just Triv, but there was a whole squad waiting for him. Both Ogras and his two remaining generals were there, as was Joanna with a defensive squad of shield-bearing Valkyries and Emily. Triv was already resting inside his pagoda as well, ready to erect the jammers once final time.

Only his sister was missing from this group of core combatants of Port Atwood, with her being busy dealing with the Mystic Realm. Things were thankfully looking up over at Mystic Island, and Kenzie had indicated that there shouldn’t be any problems with attempting a re-opening in a few days.

“You know why we’re here,” Zac simply said as he looked around. “We’re not going to participate in the war itself. Our only job is to deal with the real threat; the

Dominators. There should still be two karmic connections that can lead that man to Earth, but if we manage to destroy them we'll be safe for a century."

"What if the insectoids want to deal with those guys by themselves?" Ilvere asked.

"Ignore them," Zac eventually said after giving it some thought. "This is a matter of survival for our planet. Taking out the Dominators takes precedence over anything else. I'll just apologize to the Anointed afterward if it comes to that."

The group nodded in understanding, each of them already well aware of their respective roles. Zac would be the main combatant and Ogras would be back-up, with the rest of the group offering assistance in different ways. Thea would take the same role as Ogras as well if she decided to join them this time as well.

Zac didn't feel safe with letting anyone else directly fight the Dominators, and he was only confident in those two thanks to their ability to escape if needed. Harbinger had both proven his power and conviction in the previous battle, and he was afraid that even elites like Billy would just find themselves to be cannon fodder in front of their strength.

The group set out just a few minutes later, and they appeared at an array at the foot of a mountain this time. Zac could sense a terrifying aura though, and a breathtaking scene met his eyes when he turned his head.

Millions of Zhix stood armed and ready, an army many times larger than what he had witnessed so far. Not only that, one look was enough to tell that they hadn't thrown in random people to bolster the ranks. Each and every one was a hardened warrior who had seen battle before. The scene made him sigh with awe but also disappointment.

With an army like this in existence, why did he have to close all those Incursions himself? It was living proof that the thing that made newly integrated planets fail mostly lack of coordination and sacrificial will. The Zhix could have taken out a large number of Incursions themselves, but they had been paralyzed by their complex relationship with Cosmic Energy.

"Warmaster, you are here," Rhubat nodded as it walked over. "You brought more people this time?"

"We will stay to the side as promised. I just want to take precautions in case the other two appear today," Zac explained.

The Grand Anointed slowly nodded in understanding, which Zac also took as a tacit agreement that his people could fight the Dominators in case they showed up.

There wasn't else for them to do, and they set out just a few minutes later. Thea had already appeared before his group did, and it looked like the Anointed already had made their plans and preparations before this.

The vast army traveled for over 6 hours until they reached a secluded basin nestled in between towering mountains. There were no known human settlements within hours according to Thea, which was one of the reasons this location was picked. Another reason was probably that the basin stretched far into the horizon, allowing it to accommodate two massive armies.

Zac didn't have to wait long for them to spot their enemies. An endless black snake was moving toward them from the distance, emerging from a canyon on the other side of the basin. The people in his group frowned when they saw that the enemy army was at least 30% larger than their own, but Zac wasn't as worried.

These people hadn't witnessed the power of the Anointed who had entered the Crusade.

Their group found a small mountain not far from their own backlines. It rose about 200 meters above the ground, which allowed them to be close enough to witness the action without risking being suddenly dragged into it.

“Activate the jammer,” Zac finally said when the two armies had lined up with a kilometer’s distance, and Triv adroitly activated the black pillar.

There was a subdued silence in the millions of Zhix stood ready for war, the War Council was betting everything to secure the future of their race. The Dominators had been a shadow in the collective mind of the Zhix for millennia, and this was their final chance to fulfill the wish of their ancestors to completely cleanse it.

Conversely, if they failed the Zhix would fall. The dominators would seize control, which would be a short hegemony that would last until The Great Redeemer got here to cull the planet.

“So we just stand here?” Ogras muttered with a lazy expression.

“This is the struggle of the Zhix, our presence will only muddy the waters,” Thea said from the side, only sparing the demon a glance before turning back toward the battlefield.

The stalemate only lasted for around ten minutes, before a prolonged note was released from a horn somewhere. The call released the floodgates, and the two armies started rushing toward each other. There were no deft stratagems or tactics employed, but rather just brutal fervor as the armies clashed.

The warriors didn’t even seem to utilize their classes or skills, but rather just infused their bodies and traditional weapons with Cosmic Energy. It was a bit like Zac before he figured out how his pathways worked, where he just pushed around the energy in his body to improve his power.

Was this a tacit agreement between the two sides? An oath to deal with their conflict following the ancient precepts?

The armies weren’t thick, the rows only having a depth of a hundred warriors or so, but the war stretched all the way to the horizon. There were hundreds of thousands of simultaneous clashes, and even the sky was affected by the collective outburst of killing intent and Cosmic Energy. The whole sky glowed in red as the Zhix fought tooth and nail everything they had, and Zac started to enter a mystic state as he looked on from the mountain top.

“This...!” Zac whispered, his eyes widening.

The others on the mountain looked at him with confusion, but he was no longer in any state to think about that as his aura exploded around him, forcing everyone to move away. His aura wasn’t calm or condensed though, but rather a chaotic mess of energies that tried to devour everything around them.

“Death,” he muttered next and order was imposed upon the chaos.

A massive sphere of darkness had been created, and the deathly energies inside it swirled in a vortex much like how his nodes looked. The enormous sphere took up almost half his vision, and perhaps by accident it covered most of the enemy army. Zac didn’t know if others could see what he saw, but it didn’t matter. His mind was full of pictures flashing by, superimposing themselves over the gory bloodbath beneath him.

People died by the scores every second, and each death seemed to resonate with him. The two opposing armies were like two opposite energies clashing, and something new would be born from the struggle.

“Life,” Zac whispered in a trance, and his aura was split in two.

The growing sphere of death was pushed aside, forced to share space with a vibrant ball of life. Inside it was a power-generating vortex as well, but it flowed in the

opposite direction of the sphere of death. The two spheres brought order to the chaos, but they each struggled for dominance.

The space between the two turned into a delimiting line of constant conflict, perfectly mirroring the war of the Zhix. And just like something new would be born out of this carnage, so was something brewing in his own aura. The thing he had been searching for since he started to look for a truth of his own.

“War,” Zac growled, and the world finally clicked in place.

Blood fell like rain under a crimson sky, and a Path was born.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 555 - Trinity**

Zac’s robes fluttered as his massive aura caused sharp winds to blanket the mountain peak. However, he wasn’t in any state to notice the tumultuous state of the mountain he was sitting on. His full attention was split between the magical scene in the air that held the conceptualization of his path, and the all-out struggle below that resonated with him.

The two spheres seemed to hold the powers to both destroy the world and recreate it, but they were still bound and manipulated by the third force in the middle. If the two spheres were represented by the two armies below, then the war itself represented a third force that drew the two opposites toward each other, changing their energies through conflict.

Most of Zac’s waking hours over the past months had gone into trying to understand the various moving components that comprised his unique situation, when he wasn’t putting out fires left and right. On the most fundamental level, there were his two classes and their corresponding Daos, but that was just one aspect of his cultivation path.

There were also his weaponry and skills, and even Port Atwood. Yrial and his guidance was also an important factor, and his master’s own path had been the reason that Zac so arduously tried to form a cycle of Life and Death until giving up during the Tower of Eternity. There was also the issue of the two remnants in his head, and the powerful bloodline he suspected himself to have.

Not everything needed to necessarily be part of some sort of cultivation masterplan, but the more the better. The more factors behind his success he managed to integrate into his path, the better and sturdier it would become. That would become even more important if he actually managed to take the step into Dual Arcane classes in the future.

Moving forward from that point on would be far more complicated, putting huge requirements on one’s foundation. Certainly, no piddling E-Grade warriors would be able to fathom a perfected path, but if there contradictions and mistakes were too large, then he might not be able to fix them further down the path.

The problem was that there had been a fundamental barrier to his improvements all this while; deciphering how all his unique points fit together. There was undeniably a theme of Life and Death, but he hadn’t really figured out how to fuse that with his axe-work just yet. **[Rapturous Divide]** and **[Blighted Cut]** was a move in the right direction, but gaining scheduled skills couldn’t be considered understanding one’s

cultivation path. He was still making isolated improvements without thinking of the whole, which was starting to become dangerous.

But that finally started to change.

He had completely lost any sense of time or his surroundings on the mountain by this point as his whole being was consumed by his epiphany. The Dao always felt elusive and intangible, but it was so clear to him at this moment. It felt like one breath right now was as effective as hours of silent meditation. He suddenly understood everything with unprecedented clarity. Where he currently was, and where he needed to go.

Zac realized that he had looked at it all wrong until now. He had thought of his cultivation path as one of duality, where life and death were the main components. He had two races and two classes and even two remnants to match them. However, there were also triplets in the mix.

He had three sets of Daos, each distinct and unique, and he could produce three different 'Sparks' from the remnants based on his Daos. However, he had been stuck in a mental trap even after discarding a cyclic path and the original purpose of **[Cyclic Strike]**. He had still seen his future path as one of duality, even if it wasn't one of skill and balance but rather force.

But Life and Death weren't the concepts that defined him or his rise after the Integration. It was his struggle.

His path was not one of Cyclic Dominance that used skilled control to seamlessly switch between states and concepts, and neither was it one of Harmonic Equilibrium. His path was one of struggle, where the flames of war would open the path of Life and Death. His path was one of a Defiant Struggle that would pave a bloody path all the way toward the peak.

One year ago, Zac had been stranded in the middle of nowhere with nothing but a hatchet in his hand. Now he was one of the most powerful people in the younger generation in the whole sector, and his name was known across whole galaxies. Was this thanks to his deep insight into Life and Death? Of course not.

The air screamed as **[Verun's Bite]** appeared in his hand, its blackish edge casting a deathly gleam. Zac's eyes turned down to the axe, the weapon which had followed him since the beast waves. His weapon had been a constant through his struggles, but yet it had been relegated to become some sort of delivery-method for his "more advanced" concepts.

But that was completely backward.

His weapon wasn't just a replaceable component, it was the catalyst to everything. Without it, his path was dead in the water, just like the two remnants in his mind who were stuck at an impasse that would only end when one of the two was defeated.

Zac's eyes flashed as he remembered the Stele and the vision it brought. The ancient plaque carried the essence of a primordial concept as it soared through space in search of new generals. It pushed the idea that without struggle there would be nothing. A universe could be born, only to never flourish. It would remain lifeless and slowly die to entropy over the countless eons if there was no catalyst for change and improvement.

It wasn't a duality he was looking to create, but a trinity with the axe in the center. The axe contained his struggle, his determination, and his undying will, and those things could even influence life and death itself as long as he became powerful enough. It would be the catalyst, the seed for change.

In the case of the sparks, 'War' also represented his personal control. He had seen how things went once already when he excluded his Fragment of the Axe to create

the Chaos Pattern. He had immediately lost control and conjured the System itself. He was just a cog rather than someone in control, and it was almost a miracle that he was still alive after doing something so foolhardy.

If his current ideas were correct, then the Fragment of the Axe was crucial when touching upon Creation and Oblivion. It was the fragment he was the most skilled with, and it was outside the purview of the two remnants. It was truly his, and he could use this fact to draw in the opposing powers of both his two other Daos or the Remnants, and from there push their struggle to suit his goals by being the general in charge of the war.

That was why the Fragment of the Axe had been needed to create useable sparks. If you took that part out of the equation, you only had Oblivion and Creation to create Chaos, and those two were still exclusively the Heaven's Domain. He was only borrowing a small and simplified corner of the vast power of Oblivion and Creation through the remnants, and there was no point in making it the core of his cultivation path.

That small insight made him realize something else. Was the ultimate spark perhaps not the combination of his Fragment of the Bodhi and Fragment of the Coffin, but rather a combination of all three of his Daos? Was that the key to activating both the Remnants at the same time? He had essentially become a vessel for the System the last time, but things might be different in the future if he managed to impose his will with the help of his Axe Dao.

Of course, he wasn't ready to test that any time soon. First of all, creating a spark with both remnants and his Fragment of the Axe would require him to somehow modify [**Cyclic Strike**] to allow three simultaneous streams of energy. Besides, he didn't dare something like that before his soul was much stronger.

It still wasn't certain that Zac would need to evolve his Fragment of the Axe into a Branch of War in the future to accommodate his most recent insights. He knew too little about those Daos. Of course, he knew too little about that powerful Dao, so taking that specific decision this early was pointless.

Besides, it wasn't like everything needed to revolve around the remnants. They contained mysterious and incredible power, but the dangers were there to match. For now, he just needed to survive them. Controlling them would come later. Whether they would be truly integrated into his classes or remain as foreign objects that could be used to unleash ultimate strikes was still impossible to decide.

Who knew, as long as he followed this road he might one day become powerful enough to control both Creation and Oblivion by himself without the need of any remnants at all. At that time he might be able to absorb them, or at least discard them as they would be useless by that point.

Because at that point he would become an actual wielder of Creation and Oblivion, perhaps even able to conjure Primordial Chaos.

A sense of danger suddenly cut through his thoughts as the skies themselves rumbled in anger. Zac was forcibly snapped out of his reverie and finally regained the sense of his surroundings, prompting him to look around in confusion. The sky was still colored crimson from one of the suns setting, aptly matching the still ongoing carnage below.

However, there were mountains of Zhix corpses by this point, making Zac realize hours might have passed in his special state. There was no one around him either, and Zac saw that the others in his elite group sat a few hundred meters away from him conversing with low voices or spectating the battle. None of them seemed to have heard the thunder crashing into his ears just now though, as they didn't even glance toward the sky.

The fact that no one else seemed to have heard the thunder didn't relieve him, but it rather filled him with dread. He was pretty much a demi-god by old-world standards, there was no way he was hearing things wrong.

A flash of lightning stretched across the whole sky the next moment. It was massive, drawing a line as thick as the smaller sun across the stratosphere. It looked to be extremely far off as well, which only magnified just how much lightning that arc contained. It might spear straight through the planet if it landed instead of just passing by Earth through the horizon.

Zac's eyes were wide as he witnessed the spectacle, and even the furious battle down below was utterly forgotten. The bolt looked absolutely terrifying, but it was also extraordinarily beautiful. It felt like they were condensed from the purest Dao, and Zac felt that limitless insights were just out of his reach.

If he could only absorb a little bit...

However, Zac immediately cursed his stray thoughts. An extremely small tendril suddenly appeared just a few thousand meters above him. It looked like a purple piece of string, but Zac didn't hesitate to start running away from his people even if they were hundreds of meters apart. His mind was screaming with horror, and it was not just his Danger Sense.

That purple lightning was far less mysterious and a lot more terrifying when it was bearing down on you. It felt like that seemingly insignificant tendril contained the wrath of the Heavens themselves, and just the thought of getting struck by that thing filled him with horror. His first instinct was that it was the System sending lightning at him a second time, but something told him that might not be the case.

The bolt looked completely different compared to the lightning that the System conjured in the Tower of Eternity when he summoned the Chaos Pattern. For one, it was purple instead of blue and gold. Secondly, Zac had been able to sense a sort of presence that time, but now the feeling was completely different.

Before it had felt like a vast and indifferent being had looked down at him from high above, but he couldn't sense a being this time. It was rather like the Dao itself tried to kill him as he sensed a boundless, but inanimate, fury and killing intent in the bolt. It made him think that it might be less of a tribulation to withstand and more of an assassination attempt to survive.

It was futile. Zac was pushing [Loamwalker] to the limit, but it looked as though the tendril was affixed to the space right above his location no matter how far he moved. It snaked its way down with deceptive speed, and Zac barely had time to sit down and erect all his available layers of defenses.

However, some things were the same as during the Tribulation. His skills, talismans, and even Daos seemed utterly incapable of impeding the bolt. The shields cracked and even his soul received a backlash as the thunderbolt struck straight between his eyebrows.

What followed next was a pain even greater than when he jumped into the Cosmic Pond.

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**Chapter 556 - Heaven's Mandate**

Pain and pressure threatened to tear Zac's body apart in an instant as it swelled to uncomfortable proportions. However, Zac wasn't the same person as back when he was flooded by Cosmic Water, and he forced himself to remain conscious as he looked for solutions.

Another thing that differed from similar situations was that Zac wasn't exactly being filled up with a terrifying amount of Cosmic Energy as he was in the Cosmic Water or when forming his Duplicity Core in the Dead Zone. Whatever the purple bolt of lightning was made of seemed to be something different.

It would be more apt to call it a messy mix of countless different Daos.

Zac was almost delirious from pain, but he strove to actively combat the lightning bolt as well by utilizing his newest method of controlling his mental energy. Directly defending hadn't worked, so he instead tried to push it out of his body with Fragment of the Bodhi mental energy, essentially doing the opposite of when he completed the quest for **[Blighted Cut]**. However, the mysterious lightning bolt was completely unmoved by Zac's efforts.

The odd and messy heterogeneity that Zac had never encountered before made it extremely hard to combat. His Daos were effective against some parts of the bolt but almost seemed to be making things worse on other parts. He was quickly reduced to passively enduring the lightning as he ground it down by exhausting his mental energy. However, it wasn't enough.

There was simply too much energy inside that bolt. And it was not only that, there were hints of high-tiered concepts beyond Zac's current understanding hidden in the chaotic mix, making it even more precarious to carry it around in his body. Even the remnants seemed subdued in its presence, something he only had witnessed once before, trying to appear inconspicuous rather than railing against its prison due to the chaos.

Zac popped one pill after another into his mouth as he tried one thing after another to weather the storm, and the others had realized something was wrong by now. They rushed closer, but they didn't get too close after Zac arduously shook his head at them. They wouldn't be able to help him this time, but he was starting to despair as the bolt seemed to have no intention to relent in its efforts to rip his body apart. Bloody cracks had spread all over his body already, and a similar situation could be seen in his soul.

But a deep heartbeat suddenly echoed out across the area as **[Void Heart]** thumped.

Nothing Zac had done until now could even be considered a temporary relief against the bolt, but there was actually a change in the lightning that coursed through his body after his Hidden Node activated. Better yet, it didn't seem to be on an isolated part of his body either. The whole bolt was frozen after the first heartbeat. However, Zac also felt a sharp pain in his heart, seemingly a backlash from messing with the purple lightning. It looked like even his omnivorous Hidden Node had problems dealing with this.

The **[Void Heart]** didn't give up after just one try though and another beat, this one even heavier, made his whole body vibrate. This time the foreign lightning didn't just stop, but the Hidden Node actually managed to rip off a small piece of the purple energy in the bolt before it swallowed it whole.

The stabbing pain that followed almost made him black out.

Zac started to worry for real as blood seeped down his mouth. He had only absorbed a few percent of the energy, but the backlash felt almost as dangerous as the lightning itself. He would be dead long before the Node had absorbed it all and Zac still

hadn't found any way for him to control it. Zac was elated that something finally worked, but he was also worried about the implications.

He was pretty sure that this bolt was some sort of Tribulation brought forth by the system. The timing was too spot-on, and what else would be able to conjure that endless bolt in the sky? Perhaps the tribulation came from forming a proper path, or perhaps there was something else behind its emergence.

In either case, it was something that should be sent by the System. It felt extremely risky to try and steal that energy for himself, especially as the pain after the second beat almost knocked him unconscious. What if the System got angry and retaliated?

A third beat and another piece of the bolt was sucked into the vortex in his heart, disappearing into some unknown space of the **[Void Heart]**, and Zac was lying on the ground by this point. The rampaging energies lost their energy once again, freezing in place all over his body. It was extremely lucky as well, as the backlash this time actually did knock him out, though only for a few seconds.

Zac realized he had fallen down on the ground at some time, but he was too tired and in too much pain to sit up. He could only lay sprawled on the ground, panting and fearing for what would come next. Not a scrap of energy had been released back from the Hidden Node either, which was odd by itself.

The Node instead started shaking more and more violently until Zac puked out a huge stream of blood that shot down the mountain and turned into a red mist. It was the trapped purple lightning that had actually managed to escape from his node, damaging it a bit while doing so. It did seem a bit changed though, like he had spit it up mid-digestion.

A fourth beat echoed out but it looked like the purple bolt had enough of Zac's weird bloodline. It actually reabsorbed the regurgitated lightning and fled out of his pores, its tendrils seemingly destroying everything in his surroundings out of frustration. It created a magical scene where the whole mountain was illuminated in purple, and this time it looked as though the lightning was visible by everyone.

The bolt in the sky disappeared the next moment after emitting a final burst of fury and murderousness. Zac looked like he had just lost ten battles in a row, but the lightning didn't get away completely unscathed either. The Hidden Node had actually managed to reabsorb a small part of the escaped energy before it left his body.

Zac weakly opened his eyes to see the group staying some distance away, seemingly afraid to approach without his go-ahead.

"Are you okay? What can we do?" Joanna shouted with worry in her eyes.

"It's over, it should be fine now," Zac said with a weak voice, but everyone on the mountain could easily hear it as even the weakest among them were late F-Grade warriors by now.

The Valkyries and Triv immediately rushed over while Ogras and Thea maintained the distance as they vigilantly looked at the surroundings. Zac snorted as he knew that the demon was simply afraid of getting hit by some surprise lightning. The Valkyries immediately started to clean his wounds as they erected a series of arrays around him, hiding Zac's wretched state from any prying eyes.

The ghost flitted around as it seemed to be observing the air around Zac. It only took a few seconds before Triv's eyes widened as its head snapped toward Zac who was still unable to get on his feet. It had clearly gleaned something from the remnant energy that had melded with the air and disappeared.

“This is Heavenly Lightning! Ancient Tribulation!” Triv said with horror in its eyes as it flew away from Zac once more. “What did you do to draw the wrath of the heavens?!”

The Valkyries already looked utterly baffled as they looked at Zac’s pathetic state and that only intensified when they heard Triv’s words.

“Just meditating,” Zac said with a frown, his whole body feeling like it had been incinerated. “Why did I suddenly get blasted by another Tribulation?”

The ghost seemed to be hesitating about something, its eyes darting toward the Valkyries who were still inside the arrays.

“I have to rest a bit,” Zac simply said. “Wake me up if something changes.”

Zac spent over an hour in an almost fugue state where he completely focused on recuperation. He finally dared to move and circulate his energy a bit, and he was relieved to realize that his body wasn’t as grievously wounded as he had feared. There were a huge number of both internal and external wounds, but that wasn’t a problem to Zac.

The situation was similar with his soul, but it was thankfully far from fragmenting. His state more resembled having overextended himself in battle, which would be a lot quicker to recover from. Of course, there was always a risk that hidden threats were lurking in his body waiting to explode.

“Thank you for your help. Give me and Triv a moment please,” Zac said with an exhausted voice as he opened his eyes. “No one comes in.”

Joanna nodded and handed him a bottle of water before they exited the layers of arrays. However, they didn’t go far, simply choosing to erect a perimeter around him.

“You know something,” Zac evenly said.

“I... Ah...” The ghost said before its voice echoed out in Zac’s mind.

*It’s the punishment of the Heavens, the result of embarking on the Boundless Path,* Triv’s voice said.

“WHAT?!” Zac exclaimed with shock before he quickly erected a sealing array and dragged the ghost inside. “When did I do something like that? Explain yourself.”

“It is just what I heard,” Triv said. “I might be wrong!”

“Just tell me what you know,” Zac exhorted.

“Before the System, all cultivation went against the Heavens. It was to steal the essence of the Dao to attain immortality. But the universe wouldn’t give in just like that, and it would send tribulation down on the cultivators,” Triv sighed. “This all changed with the arrival of the System.

“Cultivation no longer goes against the Heavens; it is now Heaven’s mandate. The only tribulations now are the trials that the System has envisioned to weed out the weak and train the strong. It is completely different from how it was before when the Heavens tried to smite those who stole its lifeblood.”

“What does this have to do with me?” Zac asked with a sinking feeling.

“It seems Young Master has gained an insight that is either moving in an unrecognized direction or is outside the Heaven’s Mandate altogether. You need to adjust your path to once more enter Heaven’s Path.”

Zac didn’t understand what the ghost was talking about. How had he entered the Boundless Path? However, he suddenly remembered something. The last thing he had thought of before the lightning appeared was to personally take charge of Creation, Oblivion, and the Primordial Chaos itself. He only now realized how ballooned his ego

was at that moment. This was something that not even the greatest masters of the universe could control from what he had gathered.

More importantly; if he really took control of the Dao of Chaos he would probably become one of the strongest beings in the universe, perhaps even superior to the previous Apostates. Was this what the system meant by 'Beware the Terminus'? Did it think he was fomenting an insurrection when creating his cultivation path?

It was a bit odd though, there shouldn't be any lack of people dreaming of seizing control of the Dao itself and become the master of the multiverse. In fact, should be one of the most common goals among elite cultivators. Was the System really zapping people left and right for having ambition? It seemed completely contrary to its purpose. Or was there some other reason that the System actually felt threatened and took action? Something unique about him?

In either case, the ghost's words came at a really bad time. The vision he had seen during his epiphany earlier had already turned muddled and indistinct in his mind, but he still remembered how vast it was and how it encompassed his path of cultivation perfectly. How could he just part with it like that? He felt that he would never reach his full potential if he walked away from this.

"And if I don't change my path?" Zac asked with reluctance.

"The further you walk down this path the greater the suppression of the Heavens. Not only will you be forced to withstand the true tribulations of the Heavens, the ones aimed at murder rather than training, but the even System will turn its back from you. I doubt the System would care about an E-Grade or even D-Grade warrior, but if you go too far you might find yourself unable to freely walk in integrated space," Triv said fearfully. "However..."

"However what?" Zac asked with exhaustion.

He had somewhat understood where Triv was going with his explanation from the very beginning, but he had let them prattle on as he gathered his own thoughts. He truly didn't know what he should do even if the ghost was right. There was still a burning reluctance in his chest as he thought about giving up just as he began, but was it worth it to keep struggling?

He was not out to overthrow the Heavens or anything. He mainly wanted to get stronger so that he could protect those close to him. He had started to enjoy becoming stronger while uncovering the secrets of the universe, but it wasn't the main reason he pushed himself so hard. He would still be an elite even if he gave up on his envisioned path of cultivation, wasn't that enough?

"However, every single one of the Apostates walked the Boundless Path," Triv eventually said. "As did the Primo."

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**Chapter 557 - Retaliation**

The ghost was racked with pain after divulging information about the Primo, meaning Triv had once again been punished for breaking the laws branded onto its soul. It even turned mostly transparent this time, meaning that it might have been hurt pretty bad. Zac quickly threw a soul mending pill he got from the Undead Kingdom into its incorporeal body as he considered the implications of what Triv said.

Who would have thought that the big-shots who had affected the Multiverse as a whole all stepped onto the Boundless Path? Perhaps that was even the only way to reach the greatest heights. He remembered his short conversation with the mysterious man who had married Be'Zi who had spoken about the broken peaks of the System.

That wasn't to say that the System was useless though. It had drastically increased the average power of the elites of the multiverse, and it had pushed the boundaries of what was possible. The Apostates were ultimately extreme outliers and not an indicator of the general situation of the average cultivator on the Boundless Path.

It did feel a bit like walking the Boundless Path was the way of the elite from what Triv said, but he wasn't sure if it was for him. After all, most people seemed more than happy to stay in Heaven's Path, and it was still possible to reach C-Grade and even greater heights.

Setting the issue of his path aside, there were some things that the Ghost had said that he didn't quite understand.

"Are the System and the 'Heavens' not the same thing?" Zac asked. "How can the 'Heavens' send Tribulations at me even if that's not how the System operates?"

"That is beyond me, perhaps beyond everyone in this sector. They are one but also separate, that's all I've heard on the matter. Digging too deep into taboo subjects like this is fraught with dangers as well. Heaven's secrets are not so easily divulged," Triv said as he looked up at the sky with some fear.

"That lightning bolt was extremely frightening. There is no way that normal cultivators would survive more than a second or two. How can whole factions possibly follow this path?" Zac asked next, hoping to find some sort of solution in case the lightning returned.

"I'm no expert on methods of unorthodox cultivation," Triv reiterated. "Though my impression was that both the F-Grade and E-Grades were safe from true Tribulations."

"Guess I'm one lucky turkey then," Zac snorted, but he suddenly thought of something and opened his title screen.

### **[Terminus - Gaze upon the Terminus.]**

It was the first time in a long while he had looked at this odd title that neither appeared in his status screen nor provided any attributes. But Zac guessed that this actually might be the key as to why the Heavens reacted to the creation of his path. If others thoughts about the Primordial Chaos and the Terminus it was just wishful thinking and not something that the Heavens needed to waste its energy on.

But he had not only seen it, but he still lived to tell the tale. Perhaps this made him a real threat in the Heavens' eyes.

"That said," Triv added, though he seemed pretty reluctant at the idea of Zac continuing down this path. "I would guess that they either have methods to hide from or weaken the Tribulation. You would probably have to visit unorthodox space to find out any real details. Taboo subjects are not freely spread in integrated space to avoid any repercussions."

Zac kept talking with the ghost for a while, but it really didn't know much about the subject. As for formalizing a path, it knew even less. It was the same with Ogras and the others. For one, creating a real cultivation path was something that a lot of weaker factions didn't have any organized intelligence on. They just muddled along, often focusing on lower-rarity cultivation to improve their odds.

He still didn't feel he really had a full handle on the situation with his cultivation, but he felt he should just stay the course for the time being.

The thing that muddied the waters was the opposing signals from the System. It seemed to want him to go down this path for some reason, but it also warned him of the 'Terminus'. Was this the name of the real Heavens perhaps? When the System told him to "beware the Terminus", was it perhaps warning him that the Pre-System Heavens would try to stop him?

Zac eventually sighed and shook his head, deciding to focus on the present instead of worrying about these far-off things.

Hopefully, his previous experience was just a result of him wanting to take control of Chaos itself. If that was the case he might be fine as long as he didn't become too greedy. He could simply focus on just Life, Death, and Struggle like he originally planned when pondering his path during the epiphany.

He deactivated the layers of defenses around him after letting Triv clean him up. The ghost had a skill called **[Twilight Scrub]** for this very purpose, true to his class. It was a convenient mix of a shower and a wash that just looked like a dense cloud, but it was unfortunately made for the unliving. The azure haze that cleansed his body of both blood and grime felt like a touch of death itself. It wasn't harmful though, so Zac didn't waste time changing into his Draugr form just to clean up.

The group outside breathed out in relief when they saw that Zac was really fine, at least outwardly.

"What the hell happened to you earlier?" Ogras asked with exasperation. "First you blast your aura at full power, then you sit around with the expression of a simpleton for hours until you suddenly start running like a maniac. And *what* was that lightning?! I've never seen anything like it."

Zac was exhausted, but seeing the demon so frazzled that he started prattling off did improve his mood a bit. It also looked like he didn't recognize the purple lightning as Triv did, once more proving the advantage of being part of a greater force. Then again, it might just be because Triv was a spirit being who was extremely sensitive to energies as his body was made from it.

"Nothing much, I just had an epiphany," Zac shrugged, the corner of his mouth tugging slightly upward.

"What's with that smirk?" Ogras muttered, looking like he had swallowed a fly after hearing that Zac had taken yet another step forward.

Teasing aside, Zac still didn't really know if he had actually gained anything from his encounter apart from solidifying his path. The Hidden Node still hadn't spat out the energy it managed to reabsorb, and Zac started to think that the **[Void Heart]** kept that Tribulation Lightning for itself. That might not be the worst thing though, as it hopefully meant that the node would become stronger.

Zac also asked some questions about what had transpired while he was unconscious or mid-enlightenment, but the others hadn't really gained anything from witnessing the struggle below. They also hadn't shared his vision of the two massive spheres splitting the basin in two, and the vortex of struggle in the middle. Zac was relieved to hear it was for his eyes only, as that vision could be considered a core cultivation secret of his, almost on the level of his mutated Duplicity Core.

The shocking lightning field that blasted out from his body earlier had apparently given pause to the bloodshed below, but the war had immediately picked up its pace again as he focused on recuperation. Thankfully it looked like the Dominators really wasn't around. If they were, then they would definitely have attacked him at his moment of weakness.

He looked down at the battlefield once more. This time he didn't see the scene as a representation of his cultivation path, but just as the gruesome war that it was. Hours had passed by this point, and the battle had reached its high point.

Over 90% of both sides were actively engaged in battle, with neither side retaining any spare combatants. The last 10% Zhix were roving elite squads that shored up any weaknesses that appeared in the frontlines, or who mounted assaults aimed at taking out leaders or Anointed. And it had worked with things being so chaotic.

It looked like a quarter of the Anointed had fallen by this point, and more joined their ranks by the minutes. They resembled proud lions that were finally harried to death by a vast pack of hyenas. Massive swathes of destruction surrounded every fallen Anointed, and it took hundreds of strikes to finally bring one of the behemoths down.

Of course, the fall of a spiritual leader only led to further slaughter as the hive soldiers of the fallen Anointed turned insane in their desire for revenge.

The number of combatants was almost uncountable, but the ferocity of the war was also unmatched. Zac and his group once more found their spirits subdued by the bloodshed. Only a lunatic would be able to witness this much death without batting an eye. Even Triv looked downcast as he gazed upon the scene below, though his reasons were different than the rest.

"So many children... What a waste. Young master, why not..." Triv whispered by his side.

"I'm not going to raise an army of Zhix undead," Zac said without hesitation. "You've seen it. They cremate their fallen. I neither want nor need an army like this."

This wasn't the first time the ghost had brought forth the point of saving the bodies of his enemies to create undead followers. Zac had staunchly refused until now, though he inwardly wasn't as confident. There were a lot of bodies of his fallen enemies stored in Cosmos Sacks. They had the potential to create a group of elites that might be able to rival all the geniuses in his force.

But the time wasn't right.

Triv had actually provided a large-scale array that would slowly infuse Miasma into bodies. The field of corpses he appeared on during the climb was one such Array of Awakening as Triv called. The problem was that anyone who was resurrected through that array would automatically be part of the Undead Empire. That's why Triv didn't even get a backlash from providing it. The Undead Empire was more than happy to let others raise more subjects for them.

Perhaps he could revisit the issue if the planet really gained a Life-Death attunement though, and after he had visited Twilight Harbor and gathered intelligence on how unattached undead factions functioned.

Besides, he didn't have the resources to nurture unliving elites at the moment. He did have the **[Corpsebloom Mantra]** he looted from Mhal along with a few more random manuals and skills, but he was never able to unlock the manuals of the Lich King. Even if he managed to awaken a group of undead right now, he would just be wasting their potential.

The war raged on for a few more hours before there were just a few pockets of traitors on one side, with the Zhix War Council having more than enough steam to crush the last resistance in minutes.

Bloodied and ruthless Anointed pushed forward, their ceremonial knives continuously giving the last rites to those led astray, and finally there was just deafening silence as the victors stood over the fallen. Zac looked down at the carnage with mixed emotions until he sighed and stood up. All-in-all they had stayed in this

basin for around 8 hours, and Zac was eager to leave this cursed place and its intense stench of blood.

“Looks like it’s over,” Zac said as he turned to Triv. “You can turn off the jammer.”

However, Zac got a sinking feeling when his Communication crystal started vibrating just a few seconds after the black pillar stopped humming.

“Lord Atwood, settlements are under attack!”

Zac inwardly swore as his group gathered around him, looks of worry adorning their faces.

“Attacked? Who? Where?” Zac asked with anger. “Is it Port Atwood again?”

“No, it’s thankfully just settlements on the mainland. We’ve first lost contact with Site 27 less than an hour after you activated the Jammer. Four hours later Bastion disappeared, and just now Site 2,” the voice said on the other side of the crystal.

“Where are you?” Zac asked next, recognizing the owner to be one Sarah, one of the newer Valkyries. “How are you able to contact me?”

“We set out toward your location from the closest town when we lost contact with you. We’ve left relays to keep us updated. But we were unable to enter the mountain range where you are staying, so we could only warn you now. I’m sorry,” Sarah sighed.

“That’s okay. Are you able to get back by yourselves?” Zac asked. “I might need to move quickly.”

“No problem. We’ll be back in Port Atwood in a few hours,” Sarah said without worry.

Zac sighed in relief as he muttered the list of towns with confusion. Those three settlements were nowhere near each other. Site 2 was the provisional name of one of the first Incursions he closed; the time he saved the Ishiate towns from the rockmen. Bastion was the location of another Incursion, but it was given that name as there were large numbers of humans actually living there.

The controlling faction there had been one of the better ones, all things considered, killing few natives and ‘only’ enslaving them to gain a workforce. Finally, Site 27 was one of the last Incursions, one he didn’t actually fight against. It was one of the forces who gave up soon after Zac closed the Undead Incursion, leaving a ghost-town between two secluded peaks behind.

Still, Zac couldn’t completely understand why those three had been targeted. They were on different parts of Pangea, and they weren’t of critical importance to him at all. None of them were all that easy to access, making it impossible they were random strikes. Either three forces would have to coordinate their efforts or a group that moved extremely quickly between the towns. Judging by the fact they were attacked in sequence, it was more likely it was the latter.

Was it Void’s Disciple?

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 558 - Showdown**

Zac had been dreading a response from Void’s Disciple since killing Harbinger, and this might be his opening move. He felt doubly thankful that he had already sent

most people back to Port Atwood in case of attack, minimizing loss of life. However, there were still Skeleton Crews stationed at every spot to keep operations going and there had probably been losses.

“Did anyone manage to return from those places?” Zac asked with a sigh.

“Unfortunately, no,” the answer came. “There were roughly 20 people stationed in each of those locations to maintain basic operations.”

Zac and the others kept asking things through the Crystal, but Sarah didn’t know much. They didn’t dare to roll out the army as all leaders of Port Atwood were currently away, so they could only look on with dismay as one settlement after another had disappeared from the screen. They had tried to send out a few squads to random settlements to look around, but they had all come back empty-handed.

Various thoughts swirled through Zac’s head, but he eventually made his decision. He needed to get going, even if he had to pay the price to erect another teleportation array with his **[Spatial Transfer Array]**. But there was no point in rushing. He wasn’t able to reach the three lost settlements in short order anyway, and immediately heading there might allow even more of his towns to be attacked behind his back.

The problem was that he didn’t know where this mystery attacker would strike next.

“Anyone who can figure out why these three places were targeted?” Zac asked with a frown.

The Valkyries shook their heads, and Ogras didn’t speak up either.

“Metals,” Ilvere suddenly said, drawing the gazes of the others.

“What?” Zac asked.

“You know, I’ve been in charge of taking stock of the bases you’ve conquered. All three of those places you mentioned have Spiritual Metal deposits of pretty high quality. That’s the only thing I can think of,” the general said.

“Metals,” Zac repeated thoughtfully. “But there shouldn’t have been too much extracted, and it either left with the invaders or has been transferred to Port Atwood. I had already sent everyone back as well. It’s not like they can extract the whole place in minutes or even hours.”

“Either they want to stop you from extracting things as well, perhaps preventing us from properly preparing for the Mystic Realm,” Ogras slowly said. “The mines might be ruined. Or they are looking for an exotic piece of metal that might be found somewhere in their depths.”

Zac nodded with a frown. Just like Nexus Crystal mines sometimes could produce Attuned Crystals or higher-grade ones, so could metal deposit contains small amounts of extremely valuable materials. It was on his radar to scan all his reserves for such items, but he sorely lacked the manpower for such a task.

He hadn’t even fully mapped out his own Crystal Mine as its tunnels stretched kilometer after kilometer below ground, seemingly neverending pathways that kept turning and branching. He still only had an inkling of what all his conquered towns could provide.

The problem was how quickly things had transpired. It should take a few hours to reach those places from any other settlement even if you had some good movement method, and from there you would have to enter the depths to extract that precious ore. Zac would have needed almost a whole day to travel to those three locations, even if he only gave himself an hour per mine and used the Flying Treasure.

“Do we have other places that fit the description?” he asked.

“There’s just the one,” Ilvere slowly said. “Site 16.”

Zac immediately remembered the place he was referring to. It was the incursion with the birdmen, that one placed on top of a mountain.

“Good. If the last town was lost just a few minutes ago, then we have a few hours if things will progress as before,” Zac muttered. “Traveling to that place will take time even if it’s Void’s Disciple. Stay here, I need to speak to the Zhix.”

The other nodded and Zac descended the mountain, walking straight toward the battlefield a hundred meters per step. The war was over, but a subdued silence stretched across the whole basin. Groups of warriors walked across the fields to retrieve the fallen, but most simply sat down, many with tears streaming down their cheeks.

Those worst off were actually the Anointed, all of them sitting in prayer, tear-streaked blood covering their faces. Even the three great Anointed hadn’t walked out of the war unscathed, and Vanexis had even lost a hand. It went to show how massive groups of weaker cultivators could take out much stronger opponents if they were willing to sacrifice enough lives.

He found Rhubat sitting at the center of the army, and he was relieved to see a bloodied but living Nonet not far away. He had lost track of Nonet during his epiphany, but it appeared that Hive Kundevi thankfully was not one of the Hives targeted by the elite executioner squads.

“Congratulations on your victory,” Zac said as he turned back to Rhubat. “I’m sorry to interrupt, something urgent has come up.”

“This is not a victory, Warmaster,” Rhubat sighed, its enormous face a mask of pain and sorrow. “There are no victors today. We’ve lost half our children this day, yet the war is not over.”

“That is why I’ve come. I won’t be able to stay with you on the way back. Someone has attacked three of my settlements while you fought, it seems the person can move extremely quickly,” Zac said. “I need to go before more of my towns are destroyed.”

“Do you suspect the Dominators?” Rhubat said, and the other Anointed in the vicinity perked up from their desolate states.

“I do,” Zac said. “Void seems to have some method to move about somewhat freely.”

“What are you planning?”

“If it’s really Void I’m thinking we should launch an ambush. We need to hit hard and quick because he’s so slippery,” Zac said. “We have located the next place we believe he’ll target, I’m heading there now.”

“Good, agreed. Vanexis and Raja will oversee the rites,” Rhubat said as the giant got to its feet. “Six councilors will come with me. Any more will likely just be a hindrance this time. Our old methods will not work in this scenario.”

A few of the largest Zhix roused themselves and got to their feet with solemn expressions, joining Zac as they returned up the mountain. Zac wasted no time before he found a hidden cave large enough to house his group plus the Anointed. He erected an illusion array at the door before a pile of materials emerged from his cosmos sack.

His hands turned to a blur next as a crude but functional teleportation array was erected in minutes.

“How is this possible?” Thea muttered with incomprehension as she looked down at the newly created array. “There’s no town for hours. Can you actually create arrays like this?”

“No. At least not that I know of. I was given this ability as a reward when the final incursion was closed,” Zac shrugged. “Perhaps the System knew I would be running around all over. There are some limitations though. Only I can activate it and it is only usable once.”

Zac didn't explain the other details of his array though, letting them form their own hypotheses. He didn't even need to take out the bracelet hidden beneath his bracer for his [**Spatial Gate Array**] to work. He just needed to infuse it with Cosmic Energy and a connection was formed between the bracelet and the array. Zac's best guess was that the bracelet contained some sort of spatial energy, and it infused it into Zac's previously dead array to give it enough power to work just once.

It was intentional that he did things this way. This meant that both the Zhix and the Marshall Clan would know that he could plop down an array at any time, anywhere. Such an ability was pretty scary and would make his force almost unassailable.

Port Atwood and these forces had a harmonious cooperation right now, and this display would hopefully help quash any contrary thoughts while he was off cultivating or looking for resources in the future.

“Can you place one inside the Mystic Realm later?” Thea suddenly asked. “In case we need to send out things or people.”

“Teleportation arrays doesn't work inside Mystic Realms,” Ogras said with a lazy expression. “At least not conventional ones. Something about a different sort of space. Now, let's go before the next Site disappears from the Teleportation Array.”

Zac nodded and the group flashed over, appearing in Site 16 a moment later. Their appearance caused some confusion among the stationed troops, and the confusion only increased when Joanna ordered them back to Port Atwood immediately.

After conferring with the Zhix for a bit they quickly learned that if it really was Void's Disciple that was attacking them, then he should come from the south. An enemy hive was in that direction, and it was one of the closest settlements as well. The problem was whether they should set out from the town, or just sit around here while waiting for someone to show up.

In the end only Zac, Ogras, the Anointed, and Janos stayed. They would form a squad that would patrol the area toward the north. The rest were sent back as well as there simply wasn't enough room on the flying leaf. He was able to increase and decrease its size to some degree, but the Anointed would be still be packed like sardines. It was clearly not a tool to transport armies, but rather a private treasure for a wealthy scion.

Thea wasn't all too happy about the arrangement, but Zac felt that Janos might be better to bring. They had a lot of fire-power between himself and the others, but Janos provided something unique. If he could trap or at least weaken the Dominators with illusions his value would be extremely high in the battle.

The group flew back and forth at the foot of the mountain, looking for any sign of invaders. However, three hours passed without anything to show for it. Honestly, that was fine by Zac. Only 7 hours had passed since he was sapped by that terrifying Tribulation lightning, and the longer that things dragged on, the more he would be able to recuperate. Certainly, he was in good enough a state to fight, but he wasn't in peak condition.

“Over there,” Rhubat suddenly said as it pointed toward the forest. “An odd corruption suddenly appeared in that direction. It might be worth investigating.”

Zac nodded and changed course, knowing already that the Zhix were able to sense Cosmic Energy to a far greater degree than humans. A few seconds later he understood what the Anointed was talking about as his [**Cosmic Gaze**] picked up

something odd as well. A small spatial disturbance had appeared in the middle of a secluded glade, and it was steadily growing.

Zac landed right in front of it, and he quickly summoned Triv from his pagoda.

“Hide some distance away from here,” Zac said as he took out the jammer. “Activate it the moment someone appears.”

The ghost nodded and stowed away the jammer, immediately flying into the dense bushes and disappearing from sight.

The Anointed murmured in a mix of shock and disgust when they saw Triv, but they didn't comment on it as their focus was all on the anomaly. They only needed to wait for ten more seconds before the gate rapidly changed, forming a proper portal, and Zac couldn't help his heartbeat speeding up when he saw a familiar figure emerging the next second.

“It's you after all,” Zac said with a frown as he mentally prepared for one of the toughest battles of his life.

Shocking energies started to radiate from the bodies of the Anointed as well, and they glared at the much smaller Zhix that had appeared with seething hatred in their eyes.

“Betrayer, it turns the deeds of your kin wasn't even for yourselves in the end? We hear your kin betrayed the Zhix for an outsider? Why? Power? Power is available for everyone. There is no need to go so far” Rhubat rumbled as a dense killing intent blanketed the field. “You were the Great Sage. You were supposed to help the Zhix move forward, not destroy us.”

“And perhaps I would have if the Integration waited for a few generations,” Void's Disciple said with a hollow smile before he shot a dark look at Zac. “You killed my son.”

“Death is unavoidable in war. Is that why you attacked some random settlements?” Zac retorted.

“Just releasing some tension before the real battle,” Void's disciple said as a savage grin spread across his face.

Zac had seen a glimpse of that madness once before, and he quickly activated **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** and **[Nature's Barrier]**.

“Don't worry. There will be a reckoning, but not today,” Void's disciple laughed as his face returned to its original form. “You know where our fates will clash. Only one faction will gain the Dimensional Seed.”

*'Dimensional Seed? That's the name of the treasure?'* Zac thought, but he still kept his face neutral.

“That is not up to you betrayer,” Rhubat rumbled, and the auras of the seven Anointed exploded out with enough power to even make the nearby trees sway.

Their lifeforce shone like radiant beacons as crude patterns lit up across their bodies. Zac's eyes widened at the sight, guessing that this was the true form of the Crusade. But if they would die in a year just from being in their normal state, how long would they be able to fight like this? And would they even be able to return?

“You lunatics have really entered the Crusade, and you have even learned some new tricks since you embraced the truth of Cosmic Energy. However, it is still just a lamentable corruption of a true path,” Void's Disciple said with a shake of his head, and Zac was almost certain he could see some pity in his eyes. “No matter.”

“*It's active,*” Triv whispered in his mind, meaning that the jammer was activated.

Zac inwardly nodded. This was an opportunity of sorts. An opportunity to see how Void Disciple's mysterious skills worked, and what they could do to restrain them. He had personally seen Void's Disciple open tears in space twice now, simply disappearing or appearing where he wanted. Such a skill was even more annoying to deal with than his own **[Spatial Gate Array]**. A lot of people had thought long and hard to combat such a skill, and the first idea that was brought forward was the jammer.

It worked on Teleportation Arrays, so why not on normal teleportation?

Four balls actually flew out of Void's Disciple's own shadow the next moment, and each of them exploded and caused intense spatial distortions. Zac recognized the items at a glance as he had used that kind of offensive treasure before. They were not **[Void Balls]**, but rather the same sort of spatial disruption balls he used to block arrays in the Underworld.

Ogras had launched the first blow against the Dominator, and the rest were quick on the uptake. Zac's aura exploded outward as well as determination shone in his eyes. **[Verun's Bite]** was already in his hand and the Spirit Tool keened with bloodlust.

It was time to see whether he or Void's Disciple was the strongest warrior of Earth.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 559 - Void**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Hiring, or perhaps it was more accurate to say capturing, Smaug had proven extremely beneficial since Calrin was still unable to procure these types of offensive treasures, let alone more powerful ones like **[Void Balls]**. Void's Disciple frowned and seemed to prepare something to deal with the twisting air around him, but he suddenly got a blank look on his face as Janos fell down on his knees.

The illusionist had actually managed to trap the Dominator in an illusion or something similar, but the power gap between the two was just too great. The effect broke in less than a breath's time, and blood flowed out of Janos' ears and nose from the backlash. Zac frowned when he saw it as he quickly could make some guesses from the way things played out.

Void's Disciple didn't completely block the strike, which meant that he didn't have a top-tier mental protection treasure or skill. For example, Janos was able to break through **[Mental Fortress]** on his human side, but not **[Indomitable]** when Zac was a Draugr. But the fact that the Dominator was able to almost instantly break out of the mental trap meant that he likely had both a lot of Wisdom and an extremely strong mentality.

Then again, the latter was expected considering his identity. Void's Disciple's very existence had been taboo most of his life, yet he had not only taken two disciples, but he had even made a name for himself in Zhix society. He had walked among his enemies for decades, not rousing any suspicion even though everyone was on the lookout for the slightest hint of corruption.

Such a feat shouldn't be possible without an extremely sturdy psyche.

However, Janos' attempt did slow Void's Disciple down long enough for the spatial chaos to envelop him completely before blending into the air and disappearing, which hopefully meant that the Dominator had been a bit restricted. But Zac also didn't dare to put all his hopes on these offensive treasures. They were essentially array breakers that targeted Teleportation Arrays, and there was no telling just how effective they were against a spatial warrior.

Of course, Zac and the Anointed weren't just sitting around either, and a probing fractal blade was already flying toward the Dominator as **[Love's Bond]** had moved to his back. Two chains soundlessly slithered down his back and into the underbrush as they stealthily made their way toward the Zhix as well, while the seven Anointed were directly rushing toward Void's Disciple without any regard for their safety.

The Dominator didn't seem phased by the situation at all though. Their assault mostly seemed to infuriate Void's Disciple, and his visage once more turned into that of a frenzied murderer before it smoothed out again. However, Zac could still see the murder in his eyes as the Dominator stared back at him. A terrifying aura spread out, but he didn't lash out like some sort of berserker. He instead blocked Zac's Axe-infused fractal blade with just the palm of his left hand, and the edge actually shattered without even managing to draw blood.

Zac's eyes widened at the sight, unable to comprehend how he could avoid getting injured at all. The basic skill **[Chop]** couldn't really keep up with the latest improvements of **[Verun's Bite]**, but it still had a terrifying cutting power between the Fragment of the Axe and the skill itself. Even Zac would receive a deep cut if he hit himself with such a swing.

Just how sturdy was this guy?

The movements of Void's Disciple were short and concise, and he gave Zac the impression of a Martial Arts-master who wasted no movement when delivering his strikes. Almost at the same time as he blocked Zac's attack, a parchment scroll appeared in his other hand, and he unfurled it toward the two closest Anointed. Zac first thought it was a huge talisman, but it was oddly enough just painted black from top to bottom without any inscriptions or fractals at all.

However, a mysterious energy radiated from within the darkness. It was completely different from the darkness Zac conjured with **[Rapturous Divide]** though, and Zac felt he was looking up at the night sky for some reason. His danger sense woke up by the scene too even if he wasn't the target, and he immediately got a bad feeling.

"Watch out!" Zac shouted, but it was too late.

The two had Anointed seemed to sense the threat as well, but they showed no indication of backing down as the darkness of the scroll rippled forward until a star-studded barrier appeared right in front of them. It was like Void's Disciple had summoned a piece of the cosmos itself, and Zac could see both stars and nebulae in the depths of that wall.

A shockingly explosive power streamed into the ceremonial knives they each held, and they actually exploded into metallic shards that shot everywhere. However, a set of new golden energy blades had taken their place, and Zac shuddered when he felt the extremely condensed belief gathered within. It was just like the rune that the cultists had nurtured, only with a different flavor.

Each of them struck at the wall as the runes of their arms lit up, meaning the two were holding nothing back in their desire to break the first line of defenses and opening a path for their allies. But Zac still hadn't expected what happened next as the two actually fell into darkness and disappeared. The night-sky receded back into the

scroll in an instant and the next moment both the two Anointed and the darkness was gone.

Zac's eyes were wide in shock. He had seen over a hundred types of defensive barriers during his battles, everything from his emerald leaves to celestial deities appearing to block his strikes. They all worked essentially the same way though, but this was something else entirely. Had Void's Disciple actually created a portal to space? However, that should be impossible, at least from what they had gathered.

Information on the Dao of Space was limited in the Zecia sector, but they had managed to make some deductions from what they managed to find out. First of all, there was no Fragment of Space, meaning that Void's Disciple should be controlling some related subordinate fragment rather than the real thing. Just like Zac was currently in control of the Fragment of the Coffin rather than the Fragment of Death.

Secondly, there should be limits on distance. Zac could only move 100 meters with [Loamwalker], and Ogras a few times that distance if he pushed himself with his shadow warp skill. Void's Disciple was able to move a lot further through his portal skill, but it shouldn't be strong to the point that he could open a gate to outer space. An E-Grade warrior simply didn't have the Cosmic Energy needed to create such a long-distance portal.

You would need at least a D-Grade Hegemon's Cultivator Core to sustain that kind of massive drain.

"It's not teleportation. That scroll is some sort of trapping treasure," Ogras muttered with a frown from the side. "We might be able to get them back out again if we snatch it."

Zac's eyes immediately turned to the scroll in the man's hand, also feeling that it was the most logical conclusion. The Dominator thankfully didn't activate the scroll again, but rather just punched out toward his next target. It was another one of the Anointed, and it roared in defiance as its whole body lit up, conjuring an enormous lance of fire that shot straight toward the much smaller Zhix.

The first looked like a simple training punch, but the air twisted and contracted as some invisible force pushed outward, shattering the beam of flames in instant before slamming into the gargantuan Zhix. Crushing sounds echoed out as the Anointed was shot backward, and Zac didn't know whether the warrior was alive or dead as it flew into the distance.

Rhubat roared in anger when it saw the exchange, and Zac almost fell off his feet when the giant stomped down on the ground with terrifying force. Trees were uprooted and thrown aside for over a hundred meters in each direction as the ground heaved. But Zac quickly realized that the stomp wasn't just an outburst of fury as he saw dense brownish energies appear in the oddly symmetrical cracks around Rhubat's foot.

It was clearly some sort of Earth-attuned Dao, and a Fragment at that. It looked like height wasn't the only way that Rhubat excelled if it had managed to reach such an accomplishment without either visiting the Tower of Eternity or partaking in opening the Dao Funnel.

Something shot out of the ground where the attuned energies were the densest the next moment, and it had such speed that even Zac only could see a blur as it hurtled toward the Dominator. Void's Disciple seemed ready though, and what looked like a fisherman's net made from black silk appeared in his hands as he stretched it in front of him. A multicolored shimmer enveloped him the next moment, making Zac realize it was some sort of defensive treasure.

The projectile hit the net, and Zac subconsciously held his breath in anticipation to see if the greatest Anointed was enough to harm the most powerful Dominator. Zac could immediately sense that Rhubat's attack held a force many times greater than what Ilvere could produce with his Dao of Momentum, even when using **[Cyclic Strike]** to push his force even further. Not only that, but Zac could also sense that the attack contained a terrifying amount of belief, far greater than what the two energy knives earlier contained.

The air itself seemed to cry before it exploded the instant the net and the projectile collided, but the black threads of the net actually held against the attack. The force in Rhubat's attack had been strong enough to rip apart the air as it shot out of the ground, but it looked like Void's Disciple managed to trap the projectile in one go, forcing it to a stop just a few centimeters away from his chest.

Only then did Zac see what the projectile actually was. It was a perfectly spherical stone that was absolutely covered in extremely dense fractals. It actually reminded Zac of his own Duplicity core, though this stone was brownish grey. It had a diameter of around 30 centimeters but the impression Zac got from it was that it was as heavy as a mountain. As for whether it was a skill or some sort of treasure, Zac actually had no idea.

It was instilled with a terrifying amount of energy, yet Void's Disciple had somehow managed to block it with the net. But it was not without effort as he had been forced to take two steps back. Zac also noticed a minute tremor in his left hand, proving that he wasn't some invincible monster. The strike might not have been enough to harm him, but it had given a hint to the limits of his strength.

However, Rhubat was actually not done as the energies inside the ball increased exponentially for an instant before it exploded in a terrifying eruption of stone splinters. Almost all of them shot toward Void's Disciple as though they were guided by the huge amount of faith within, but a few flew in Zac's direction as well. His arm turned to a blur as he blocked the three incoming shards with his axe, each of them looking like a 10-centimeter stone nail, and he was shocked at how much force they contained.

Even Zac felt some pain in his wrist after forcibly blocking the three strikes, which was all he needed to know about the power of the seemingly unassuming needles. Massive craters exploded all over the area, and a few sturdy tree trunks were turned to dust in an instant as the nails shot straight through them with the force of a rocket before continuing to wreak even more havoc upon the forest.

Zac was finally hopeful that something had worked against the immensely powerful Dominator. Even he had felt some pressure from three needles, but Void's Disciple had been drowned in over 50 of them at point-blank range while he was clearly the target of the zealous faith-based energy within. The situation was completely obfuscated by the chaotic energies in the air and the massive dust clouds, but Zac's brows furrowed when a wave of danger once more perked up in his mind.

A storm of emerald leaves infused with the Fragment of the Bodhi covered their whole side as Zac also activated **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**. Rhubat reacted almost as quickly as he knelt down and pushed both his hands against the ground, erecting ten sturdy walls that were covered in motifs of warriors holding different types of shields.

Zac only felt a shudder in the air as his mind screamed, and space split apart the next second. The consecutive walls fell apart like butter, and a terrifying slash almost bisected Rhubat while another councilor lost his legs. The dust and chaotic energies that had blocked Zac's sight was blown away as well, exposing a still-standing Void's Disciple within.

Over a dozen spikes were embedded in his small frame, and his face was covered in blood as he stood panting over twenty meters from his original position. Judging by the deep gouges in the ground he had been unable to contain the strike and had been pushed backward. However, Zac frowned when he sensed that his aura was just as strong and stable as before. As for that invisible cut, it seemed to have been launched by a small, unassuming dagger in his hand. The attack had contained shocking power, but Zac knew it wouldn't impact the Dominator much.

Only a few seconds had passed since Ogras threw the spatial disruption spheres, but over half of the Anointed were already taken out of commission. They had already agreed that the group of Anointed launch the first strike if it really was the Dominators they were up against, but it didn't have the desired effect. They had hoped to at least wound him and make him expose some of his hidden cards.

Or at least anger him to the point that he was less likely to escape in case things turned dire.

But it didn't really feel like Void's Disciple was going all out at all, but rather toying with the far larger targets. The chaos in space seemed to have barely affected him either, as both his offensive and defensive means seemed to carry a hint of space inside. He needed to do something before the Anointed were all killed, but he was still waiting for the right opportunity to burst out one massive strike aimed to kill.

And that opportunity presented itself the next moment as the two chains had finally made their way to their target.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 560 - Pressure**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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The two chains of **[Love's Bond]** had finally reached their target. However, Void's Disciple, or rather Adcarkas, only snorted as he swung his dagger at the two metallic snakes approaching him. Another invisible attack shot out, and an extremely deep scar appeared in the ground. The cut was laser-sharp, but it exploded as it had created some sort of vacuum, causing dust and stones to shoot in all directions.

The power in the strike was shocking even when the Zhix clearly wasn't going all out, and Zac knew that most weapons would be ruined by such an attack. Then again, **[Love's Bond]** was no normal weapon. Not even Void's Disciple should be able to comprehend the value of the coffin on Zac's back, what kind of unique treasures and materials went into its creation.

White scars appeared on the two chains where Adcarkas struck, but they didn't even crack from the swing. Void's Disciple eyes widened in surprise, as this was the first time in the battle things didn't go exactly his way. The Zhix reacted instantaneously though as he tried to move away, but the two chains gained a burst of speed allowing one to catch his ankle before he got away.

This was exactly what Zac had been waiting for, and huge amounts of his corrosive Dao flooded the two chains as he stomped down into the ground, flashing forward with **[Loamwalker]**.

He didn't actually think that the Dao Fragment would be able to harm the Dominator, but Zac hoped that it would restrict him like it did with Ogras when he tried to meld with the shadows. Even if that didn't work, they were still physically bound to each other. He didn't have access to **[Profane Seal]** in his current form, but this wasn't a bad substitute. There would be no escape, only a brutal melee; just what Zac excelled at.

But Zac had also seen just how powerful Void was, and more surprisingly, just how many treasures he possessed. Something unexpected could happen in a drawn-out fight, so he needed to go hard from the start. Exposing all his ultimate cards this early would spell disaster if he failed, but he knew that he needed to use some of his aces in this fight.

A storm was kicked up as Zac appeared right in front of Void's Disciple, and both himself and his Tool Spirit were radiating a mesmerizing glow. He had activated not only the second rune on his axe, but also **[Hatchetman's Rage]** to push his power to the next level. Doing so essentially put a timer on the fight, but he didn't expect the battle to last very long with the intensity it had until now.

"So you found your courage after all. I might not be allowed to kill you, but I can make you suffer," the dominator said as fury burned in his eyes, and he turned into a blur the next moment as his dagger shot straight toward Zac's kidneys.

Zac quickly pivoted while simultaneously swinging down his axe and **[Verun's Bite]** fell in a vertical swoop toward Adcarkas. Zac also activated **[True Strike]**, trying to split the Dominator's attention by making him think someone was attacking him from behind, but the Dominator just snorted in derision at the ploy as he continued his stab. The chains of **[Love's Bond]** also make Void's Disciple's lose his balance, but it was as though Zac was trying to move a mountain with the chain while Void's Disciple stood unmoving like a towering tree.

The dagger barely missed Zac's body, but he still felt a searing pain as a deep wound still opened up somehow, and blood streamed down his left leg. Just dodging that dagger wasn't enough, it had to be covered in some invisible energy. Zac was unfortunately completely incapable of spotting it though. Was it because **[Cosmic Gaze]** was still stuck at Early Proficiency? No matter how much he strained his eyes he hadn't been able to see the attunement of any of the skills Void's Disciple used, only the destruction they caused.

But Zac suddenly felt a pop as the strain on his eyes lessened, and hazy energies appeared around Void's Disciple the next moment. Zac felt a surge of confidence as he realized that his ocular skill had actually evolved mid-battle. Had he finally found the key to upgrading this skill; spotting invisible energies?

Improving his sight against someone who relied on invisible skills was huge, and it would hopefully allow Zac to gain an advantage. For example, just a first look at his enemy had exposed that the small dagger the Dominator held in his hand was just a decoy. There was also an invisible weapon that was attached to his fist, and Zac suspected that this was the real weapon Void's Disciple relied on.

Zac could only see a translucent outline, but it would appear that the weapon was some sort of bladed glove or a claw, something that a pugilist would use. Two edges stretched out on both sides of his arm, starting halfway down his forearm and ending fifteen centimeters in front of his fist where they joined together into a rounded edge.

It was no wonder he had been cut even if he dodged the knife, as he had been well within reach of the much larger hidden blade. Zac couldn't see how the edge was attached to Void's Disciple's arm at all, making him believe that it might be an energy weapon like the fractal edges of his **[Chop]**.

The wound in Zac's gut was deep, but with his berserking skill active he barely registered it. The pain rather fueled his killing intent, and he growled in fury as he continued his own swing, trying to cut Void's Disciple in two. The Dominator's free hand rose to meet the blade, and Zac finally noticed that something was up with it.

There was a thin film covering the palm, and Zac barely could discern some sort of runes covering it. It turned out that it wasn't just his palm that had been able to block his **[Chop]**, but there was some sort of defensive layer that Zac had been unable to spot until now. Adcarkas was trying to block Zac's attack the same way as before, probably thinking it would damage Zac's morale if his attacks were diverted by a simple palm.

However, a physical swing by a boosted Zac and a fractal edge were two completely different concepts.

A terrifying force slammed into the barely discernible barrier, and any remaining complacency in Void Disciple's face was gone as cracks echoed out from his arm as bones broke. Zac's eyes lit up when he saw the scene, as this had been his goal all along. If he activated something like **[Deforestation]** or **[Raputous Divide]**, then the Dominator would respond in kind. But Void's Disciple was clearly arrogant, using the bare minimum to fend off the assaults thus far, like it was an indignity for him to use proper skills against weaklings.

Zac was hoping to bank on this haughtiness to deliver a devastating blow with the help of the three superimposed boosts of his Dao and two berserking skills. But the Zhix reacted instantaneously and moved his body in a mysterious fashion, and Zac felt the force in his strike being slowly exhausted as the Dominator pushed his hands in a spiral while slowly bending further and further down toward the ground.

"Stellar Convergence," Adcarkas growled as his purple eyes stared into Zac's, and a miniature spiral galaxy had sprung up around them the next moment.

It spread over a hundred meters around the two, and Zac could sense a shocking amount of destructive power in every single one of the stars. The others hurriedly scrambled out of the way, but Zac was caught in the heart of the galaxy, with Void's Disciple being the black hole. Zac frowned at the situation and thought to take a step back to regroup, but his mind immediately screamed of danger.

Zac quickly understood that he would have to withstand the power inside the stars if he wanted to back away, and even he would be bloodied and battered if the hundreds of lights went off simultaneously. He could only push forward, but that was his desire anyway. It seemed as though Void was trying to steal or somehow convert the force in Zac's swing, but he would still be grievously wounded if Zac managed to cut through the defenses before he was done.

It was essentially a race, so he grit his teeth as he tried to break the odd defense that Adcarkas' spinning hands continuously conjured. He could already see that the initial collision had caused fault-lines to appear all over the Dominator's hand on top of the broken bones, and Zac felt that just a little more would be needed to break through. Besides, the stalemate also gave him a chance to maneuver **[Love's Bond]**, and the Dominator now had a fetter binding each of his limbs.

A pitch-black beam suddenly shot past straight next to Zac's leg, expertly avoiding the rotating stars all around him. It unerringly flew toward the Dominator's throat as he dealt with Zac's strike. It was Ogras who had already turned into his

ultimate form, but he actually had a second set of wings this time. As he pointed his newly acquired spear at the Zhix. He looked like a god of darkness, and multiple beams shot at weak spots of the zhix in short order.

A bloody gash appeared on the Zhix's throat, but it was unfortunately not enough. Ogras' shadowlance simply wasn't strong enough to fatally wound someone like Void's Disciple in one go. However, Ogras was like a mobile turret, continuously shooting out more and more lances as Zac and Void's Disciple were locked in a stalemate where Zac couldn't retreat nor managed to push forward.

His arms were already shaking with strain, but the odd technique that the Zhix was doing kept dissipating the impact, forcing Zac to instill more and more energy into the strike to keep going. Of course, it was just a swing that utilized his physical power and Dao rather than any skills, so Zac could keep going for a good while longer.

Ten shallow gashes appeared in an instant all across the dominator's body thanks to the demon's efforts, most of them centered at weak spots. The other Anointed seemed to be preparing something similar, but it finally looked like Adcarkas had enough as a necklace cracked. A dome that locked everyone except Zac outside appeared in an instant, locking him, Adcarkas, and his swirling galaxy inside.

"Break it!" Zac heard Ogras roar from outside, but the voice was muted like he was extremely far away.

The Anointed had backed off when Rhubat was wounded, but their hulking bodies moved toward the glimmering barrier without hesitation. The runes on their body lit up as they punched on the barrier, seemingly delighted that there was finally something they could do to assist Zac.

Unfortunately, Zac's brief break in his attention to see what was going on proved to be a fatal mistake as a tremendous force surge within the Dominator's body. The palm blocking Zac's swing suddenly disappeared, and Zac couldn't help but lose his balance as he had been pushing with everything he had.

The Dominator had managed slightly twist himself while diffusing Zac's swing, and with Zac's lapse of concentration he had swiveled to the point that his body wasn't even in the trajectory of the swing any longer. The Blade of **[Verun's Bite]** harmlessly ripped apart the air right next to him, only cutting off a small piece of Void Disciple's robes.

Zac knew he was in trouble, and the shield of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** immediately covered him as the emerald leaves completely ensconced him. He was even considering activating the first skill of **[Love's Bond]** to survive, but doing so would force him to transform the Spirit Tool to its shield form, which would free Void's Disciple of his four fetters.

He eventually decided to bet the house on him being able to withstand Void Disciple's attack, at which point he would counter.

Void's Disciple was shockingly fast, and he had somehow transferred the force of Zac's downward swing into a rotating momentum that turned into a mighty roundhouse kick aimed at Zac's side. The kick immediately broke the shield and Zac was thrown away, the pain even cutting through the haze of **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

However, while the kick was mighty, it wasn't the real problem.

A series of explosions rocked Zac the next moment as one star after another in the galaxy exploded, each one of them containing the force of an early E-Grade Warriors' full-powered attack. Zac desperately conjured more and more emerald leaves as they were disintegrated, and the spectral forest of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** disintegrated before he even landed as all the defensive charges were used up.

But he survived. A few of his ribs were definitely broken and Zac looked like a bloodied corpse, but he was still alive and in fighting condition. The kick had thrown him straight through the galaxy until he hit the barrier from inside, and a coruscating series of explosions had detonated all the stars on this side of the galaxy.

The skill dissipated the next moment, leaving just Zac, Void's Disciple, and the four chains that connected them inside the dome.

Zac spat a mouthful of blood onto the ground, and he shot the Zhix a murderous look as the Cosmic Energy in his body surged. Space split apart the next moment as the massive wooden hand appeared above the dome, but that wasn't it. Zac himself was already rushing back toward Void's Disciple as a fractal blade grew out from his axe, its gleaming edge quickly turning golden.

Void's Disciple laughed as his body transformed. He only grew a head taller, but his body turned pitch black while his eyes became burning suns. His muscles grew in size as well, and he radiated a shocking pressure that made Zac think of the Cyborg. Void's Disciple seemed to have a class that mixed the concepts of space and pugilism, and this ought to be his true fighting form.

It looked like the Dominator was finally ready to show his real cards, but it remained to see whether they were greater than the combined force of both **[Nature's Punishment]** and **[Rapturous Divide]**.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 561 - Liar**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Void's Disciple emitted a terrifying aura in his changed form, and Zac couldn't help but consider taking one of his newly acquired **[Rageroot Oak Seeds]** to push his power even further. However, he quickly decided against it and refocused on his two attacks.

The seeds belonged to the same category as **[Hatchetman's Rage]**, both being berserking methods. Using multiple such means at the same was the height of foolhardiness as the gain was far from multiplicative, while the dangers were exponential. He was somewhat confident that his uniquely sturdy body would allow him to survive using both at the same time, but that wasn't the only issue. He might even become weaker than his normal strength if the two rampant powers clashed.

That would put the whole group at risk, and the backlash might be so terrifying that he wouldn't be able to use his full power for months. After all, it was important to remember that while his longevity increased as he cultivated, so did the time required for recuperation. It wasn't unheard of for cultivators to enter seclusion for millennia in order to slowly deal with particularly nasty afflictions.

As he saw it, the item was better left for his Draugr side that lacked such abilities on its own. Of course, there was also the issue of secrecy to consider. He didn't want

to reveal cards like the seed or his second class unless he felt confident in taking out Adcarkas, and it still felt like he was peeling away one layer of another of his enemy.

His current combo wasn't far from his peak strength though, and he was ready to make this one count. The enormous fractal appeared in the sky as the wooden hand was placed right above Void's Disciple, the pressure caused the Dominator to sink a few centimeters into the ground. However, his back was still ramrod straight, and he didn't try to extricate himself from either the chains or the pressure of **[Nature's Punishment]**.

He seemed perfectly confident in being able to rebuff whatever Zac could bring fort.

A small branch immediately started to descend from the fractal, as it didn't feel that any of the other punishments would have a particular advantage against the Zhix. The Mountain would have a similar crushing effect, but it didn't benefit from his Fragment of the Bodhi nearly as much as the tree did.

However, the whole area was covered in darkness before the sapling had time to grow into a towering tree. It wasn't Void's Disciple who was conjuring a counter though, but rather Ogras who had drenched the whole area in shadows. A storm of attacks slammed into the Dominator's barrier the next moment as thousands of shadow spears rose out of the shade. The spears didn't contain a large amount of power on their own, but they were innumerable.

Ogras himself was enshrouded in extremely dense power, and he dove from the sky with shocking speed, his spear stabbing straight into the shield with enough force to cause the whole thing to wobble. It wasn't enough to completely break it, but his efforts should no doubt have pushed the barrier a lot closer to running out of steam as it didn't have a source of energy.

Rhubat and his brethren had summoned their enormous sigils as well, and they slammed into the shield from different directions to overtax the defensive shield. The sigils were a lot smaller now that they weren't powered by the combined energy Zhix Armies, but they were still nothing to scoff at as they were powered by lifeforce instead.

The shield shook and heaved, but Zac was shocked to see that it somehow managed to stay intact. Adcarkas' amulet must have been a real peak defensive treasure to withstand such punishment, almost rivaling the ones Zac had lifted from the mentalist's pouch.

Zac still believed it should be a peak E-Grade talisman at best though, even if Void Disciple wasn't restricted like people were in the Tower of Eternity. The reason was simple; activating even a low-quality D-Grade talisman was as taxing as throwing out over a hundred E-Grade talismans. Even Zac would be completely drained of Cosmic Energy before it was half-activated.

So it was with some confidence he instructed the branch to stab straight into the ceiling of the dome, and the barrier actually popped like a soap bubble. The desperate attacks of the others had exhausted the barrier enough to pave the way for Zac, and he intended to make the most of it.

The four chains grew taut as Zac tried to restrict the Zhix as much as possible, but the Dominator still managed to point his left hand toward the sky with a savage grin. Three small vortices appeared behind him the next moment, all of them hovering behind his head like a halo. They didn't look like galaxies though, but rather whirlpools with the core being a bottomless darkness like a black hole.

One of them flew up to Adcarkas' fist, and the vortex grew to over fifty meters diameter in an instant. Zac frowned when a black pillar rose out of it the next moment,

rising toward the rapidly growing branch that kept gaining momentum as it pushed downward.

What were the odds that his nemesis had such a similar skill as his own?

The massive pillar collided with the tip of the blooming tree branch, and the clouds in the sky were pushed away from the tremendous shockwave. It was like space itself cried as the two strikes tried to destroy the other, but it looked like neither Void's Disciple nor Zac could claim an advantage. Zac didn't bother about that though as he rushed forward, and he was in front of the Dominator the next moment, both of them shrouded from the sun by the pillar above.

This close Zac actually made a new discovery. It wasn't a black pillar that Void's Disciple had summoned, but it was actually a massive finger over a hundred meters long. Even more shocking, not even the whole thing had emerged, making Zac wonder just how huge the being to whom the finger belonged was. But the good news was that it seemed as though Void's Disciple needed to match his finger with the skill, forcing him to keep pointing toward the sky.

The enormous branch was infused with the wrath of nature and his own Dao though, so even this massive poke wasn't able to eradicate it. Cracks and explosions kept appearing across the trunk as the finger was infused with whatever Dao the Dominator utilized, but the branch quickly regrew and shot more and more branches into the finger to whittle it down. If **[Nature's Punishment]** actually broke through right now Zac would harm himself as well, but he had a plan for that.

The radiant luster on both the wooden hand and the branch suddenly dimmed as Zac retracted the Fragment of the Bodhi, but his fractal edge lit up like a beacon instead. He had transferred his Dao infusion to his second strike, and the branch was quickly being dismantled as the finger pushed upward. That was fine by Zac though, as **[Nature's Punishment]** was meant to create an opening and restrain the Zhix even further.

A puff of golden clouds swallowed them both as Zac slammed his axe in a downward motion aimed to cut the Zhix from shoulder to hip, but another of the vortices had appeared in front of Void Disciple's free palm. It actually swallowed a good deal of the golden clouds, but Zac still knew he had succeeded as his target was illuminated in a golden sheen. **[Rapturous Divide]** was his only E-Grade skill in this class, and it wasn't as easy to counter.

However, Zac needed to get the second strike in as well, and fast. His skill in the sky was on the verge of falling apart, and Void Disciple's other hand would be freed in a second. He activated **[True Strike]** a second time, pushing all of his killing intent into creating a believable illusion of a fatal attack. The Zhix had impeccable instincts though and ignored the feeling, but both Zac and he were surprised to see a familiar spear stabbing the Dominator from behind.

It was obviously Ogras who had taken the opportunity to launch a hidden strike from the large swathes of shadows that Void's Disciple had created with his finger.

The wound barely drew blood, but Adcarkas briefly lost his concentration from the surprise and pain, and Zac reacted by instinct. His fractal edge bloomed with the sinister power of both the second half of **[Rapturous Divide]** and the Fragment of the Coffin as Zac swung **[Verun's Bite]** with both urgency and force. Void Disciple's eyes widened in alarm and the last vortex started to expand with an explosive speed.

However, it was too late.

The two shrouds had come in contact, and the divide between Heaven and Hell was drawn. A smooth line appeared across Void Disciple's torso before his body fell

apart. The spatial divide had completely bisected the Dominator, and the angle should have destroyed lungs, heart, and most of his innards in one go.

Jubilation filled Zac's heart, but his mind suddenly screamed of mortal danger. There was no hesitation as he flashed away with **[Loamwalker]**. Ogras, true to form, had already receded into the shadows once more, which was lucky as the three vortices simultaneously imploded. The was a bit similar to when he used his Bronze flash on Harbinger, but not quite as final.

A huge crack in space appeared whey they had fought, swallowing everything from Zac's branch to tons and tons of soil before the scar closed. Zac had no idea where that scar led, but his instincts told him that his odds of survival would have been zero if he had been caught up in that blast.

"Good attempt," a snort echoed out from every direction the next moment though, and Zac's elation was quenched in an instant.

There had been no surge of Cosmic Energy when Zac killed the Dominator!

Void Disciple had appeared once more standing exactly where he stood earlier, or rather in the bottom of the crater he had created. Unscathed. The fatal wound was gone, and even the fetters of **[Love's Bond]** lay down at the ground covered in cracks. His face wasn't a mask of fury either, but one of ridicule as he stomped down on the ground with a force that matched Rhubat's earlier efforts.

A wail echoed out the next moment as Ogras was somehow forced out of the shadows. The demon desperately tried to escape, but he was punched in his chest with enough force to be thrown over a hundred meters away. A huge amount of blood splashed in every direction until Ogras haplessly fell on the ground. He rolled for over a dozen meters more before he finally lay there, unmoving.

Horror and confusion plagued Zac's mind, but there was no time to see if his companion was alive.

"I have to admit, I underestimated you. It is no disgrace that my son fell to your hands," Adcarkas said as he surveyed the battlefield. "I can't help but wonder what else you have in store. But no matter. My intuition tells me we will have a chance to find out in the future, if you can make it to the heart of the Mystic Realm that is."

A token appeared in his hand the next moment, and he crushed it before Zac had a chance to respond. A bright flash obscured the crater for an instant, and when the light disappeared the Dominator was gone, not leaving a single clue as to where he had disappeared to.

They had failed.

Shock filled Zac's heart, and he flashed over to Ogras' unmoving form instead of trying to find the fleeing Dominator. Not that Zac felt he had any chance of catching up in either case. He didn't have a clue where the Zhix had gone. Even his upgraded **[Cosmic Gaze]** could only see a yellow glow at the spot he crushed the talisman.

It was some sort of escape treasure, but not one dependent on the Dao of Space.

But Zac didn't care about that right now as the demon released a racking cough before he weakly looked around. Zac's eyes were trained on Ogras though, or rather the enormous hole in his torso where his heart should have been.

"Did we get him?" the demon weakly asked, his voice barely a whisper.

"We got him," Zac said with red-rimmed eyes.

"What a shitty liar," Ogras smiled as he closed his eyes.

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## Chapter 562 - Back Again

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A deluge of sorrow and self-blame had turned Zac's mind into mush as he stared down at the unmoving form of Ogras. Countless what-ifs swirled in his mind, ways that he could have prevented this from happening. But he still couldn't comprehend how these latest events came to be. He had seen Void's Disciple die, he just knew it wasn't some sort of illusion that he cut the man apart.

However, things had gone out of hand too fast, even if you discounted the Dominator's miraculous recovery by the end. They had scrambled to get back in control since the moment two of the Anointed were swallowed by that scroll, but things had only got worse instead. It wasn't completely unexpected though, they had only learned of the situation less than an hour ago, and there had been no time for proper preparation.

The turbulence in his mind finally gave way to a bleak desolation. He had worked so hard, pushed himself beyond what he thought possible in his efforts to become stronger. Yet the ones he fought for kept falling one after another. First Alea, then Ogras. Would even more of his companions join the two when they set out for the Mystic Realm? The situation was almost as bad with the Anointed. The fight had lasted less than a minute, but Zac didn't doubt that the group of seven had burned a significant portion of their already limited lifespan.

Even more frustratingly, there was nothing he could do to remedy the situation. He still needed to enter the abandoned Research Base, and he still needed to fight Void's Disciple again, along with Inevitability and whoever else proved to be a threat to Earth. They had paid such a huge price just now, but they got almost nothing in return.

However, a sudden change startled Zac out of his self-reproach as the previously unmoving body of Ogras started to shudder and spasm. His skin turned pitch-black the next moment, and the instantaneously turned into shadows only to be reformed once more. His limbs twitched and kicked as well, but it didn't look like natural movements at all. It was more like a powerful electric current made him twitch uncontrollably.

Zac was aghast as he witnessed the macabre spectacle, but there was also a tinge of hope in the back of his mind.

If there was one thing that the demon excelled at, then it was keeping himself alive by any means. Had he actually found a way to defy death itself and bring himself back, just like Void's Disciple himself? However, Zac's anticipation was soon poisoned with suspicion. A minute passed while the cycle between demon and shadow kept repeating, and Zac could see that something was off.

The energy signatures the demon was emitting were wrong. They felt alien, sinister. Like a devil had taken the opportunity to possess Ogras' body when his own soul left it. However, Zac couldn't bring himself to nip this potential threat in the bud.

He could only shake his head in an effort to clear his muddled thoughts, preparing for the worst.

If something really had possessed the demon, then he could only pray it wasn't a strong one as he had already entered his weakened state after using [**Hatchetman's Rage**].

The odd fluctuations finally ended, but Zac's heart was still hammering as he stood vigil in front of the body. He had clearly seen what had the transformations had done. Ogras had cycled between shadow and flesh over and over, but a small change had taken place between each revolution.

The gaping hole in his chest grew a little smaller from each cycle, but not through flesh regrowing like how the Shard of Creation had healed his own mortal wounds. Missing flesh had instead been replaced with congealed shadows, shadows that had regrown the demon's missing organs bit by bit. An indistinct heart had formed from darkness itself, and Zac had felt its beat when it was fully formed.

The only sign of Ogras even being wounded in the end was the copious amount of blood around him, and the fact that the recreated skin on his chest was dark grey. Zac wasn't sure what to do, but the demon made the decision for him as he suddenly coughed and woke up, his eyes blearily looking around. Zac was relieved to see that Ogras' gaze looked the same, but he still could feel that sinister aura emanating from his body.

"Urh? Ah? I'm alive?" Ogras wheezed with confusion, but Zac wasn't in any state to answer him.

"What's the first thing you ever said to me?" Zac asked as [**Verun's Bite**] materialized in his right hand.

"What?" Ogras sputtered, clearly having some trouble understanding what was going on.

"Answer me," Zac said, the grip on his axe tightening. "What was the first thing you ever said to me?"

"I said 'You natives are barbarians, so aggressive.' You were wearing a dress at the time. Now what the hell is going on?" the demon sighed.

"You're emitting some pretty sinister energies," Zac said as he relaxed slightly, though not completely.

"Well, I can't seem to move. I need some healing," Ogras eventually said after a brief pause.

Zac hesitated for a second, but he eventually took out one of his best healing pills and shoved it into Ogras mouth as he infused the demon's body with the Fragment of the Bodhi. Only then did he realize how bad a state the demon was in, even after having reformed the hole in his torso. His spiritual sense couldn't see what was going on in the shadow-part of Ogras' body at all, but countless small scars covered the rest of his insides.

Worse yet, healing them with his Dao Fragment seemed to barely have any effect. The demon wasn't really at any risk of dying as far as Zac could tell, but it would no doubt be a long road of recovery, even provided that the demon's new heart worked as intended.

"What the hell happened at the end?" Ogras asked. "I remember escaping into the shadows when those vortices destabilized, and then waking up with your ugly face scowling down on me."

Zac sighed before he sat down himself, and he retold the final events without missing anything while simultaneously trying to gauge the demon's thoughts. However,

the demon didn't let on anything, he just silently listened to the series of events with a small frown on his face.

"Well, people often say that I am heartless, I guess they were right," Ogras eventually said with a weak smile, but Zac felt that he could hear some confusion and perhaps even fear in his voice.

"It wasn't you who did this?" Zac asked. "I thought it might be the skill you got at E-Grade or something."

"A skill that could allow me to walk away after getting a netherblasted hole in my chest? I wish. This must have been Leech. Can you take off my cast?" the demon said.

Zac nodded and he gingerly took off the metal arm that usually held the congealed shadows. He was ready to blast out with a [Verun's Bite] in case of an ambush, but his brows rose when the cast opened and nothing was there apart from Ogras' stump. He turned to Ogras, but he saw that the demon wasn't all that surprised by the disappearance of his shadow tentacle.

"I guess that I can't call that bast-, I mean little buddy, Leech any longer. How about Spare? If he's going to turn into spare organs for me in the future," Ogras grinned, still lying sprawled on the ground.

Zac wryly smiled, but there was still worry in his heart. Ogras seemed to want to pretend it was all under his control, but he had definitely cut it close just now. His pale was completely pallid, and his hand shook noticeably. And who knew what the future ramifications would be for something like this? Getting possessed and having your body turned into a vessel wasn't unheard of in the multiverse.

"Well, I'm glad you can laugh about this," Zac snorted as he glanced at the destruction around them.

It looked like Ogras had cheated death this time once more, but the others weren't so lucky. The two unscathed Anointed had just returned with the body of the one who was flung away, and he really had perished from the Dominator's strike. With Void's Disciple having escaped there was probably no chance of saving the ones trapped in the scroll either, if that was even possible in the first case.

It was a poignant reminder of how cheap life was in the multiverse.

"This was such a shitshow," Zac muttered with a shake of his head.

It looked like the universe agreed as a massive explosion erupted far in the distance, in the direction of Site 16.

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The displacement had caused more damage to Void Disciple's already harried constitution, and waves of all-consuming pain buffeted him until he finally couldn't take it any longer. The only way for him to withstand the chaotic storm in his mind had been to unleash his might once more, destroying parts of the town around him.

Sweat trailed down his face as he started running, unhesitantly abandoning his original goal. It was regrettable, but he had already found most of what he needed. The enormous surplus of foul Karma gathered from the Zhix Wars would hopefully be able to substitute what was missing. The notion made him start, and he quickly shook his head to refocus his straying thoughts.

He wasn't in the Mystic Realm right now, he couldn't let his minds wander so freely out here.

Fragment of the Vacuum helped remove the space in front of him, and he pushed himself as quickly as possible to get out of the range of whatever was preventing his [Cosmic Gate] from activating.

Void Disciple's mind was filled with reproach as the surroundings flashed past him. To think that a moment of anger could cause such devastating results. He knew that he should have just left, what could those people have done to prevent it? But seeing the face of his son's murderer had made him lose control. How could he face Harbinger in the afterlife if he didn't exact at least a punishment that was within the bounds of his Master's acceptance?

But the newly integrated sapling had grown into a towering tree, and Void's Disciple knew that he had barely gotten out of the situation alive.

At least he had managed to get back at that wretched demon for using **[Skybreaker]** right in front of him. There had been no energy forthcoming from his strike, but he should at least be crippled from the punch full of spatial tears. Void's Disciple kept moving for another hour until he finally sensed that the hidden dimensions were tranquil once more, and he arduously opened a gate toward the nearest hive.

However, he barely had time to walk through the portal before the pain erupted once more, and Void Disciple helplessly fell over as he desperately clutched his head. The cost of subverting fate wasn't an insignificant one, at least not with the treasure that his Master had provided. The timeline struggled to repair itself, and the wound spreading from his shoulder all the way to the hipbone on the opposite side deepened once more.

Having insight into a corner of space had driven home just how terrifying that final strike of Zachary Atwood was. It combined two opposing Daos to create an endlessly deep rift in space, and not even he would have survived normally. But it was also a testament to the greatness of space, the great delimiter.

The soul-shaking pain continued for a few more minutes until the bleeding finally stopped. The wounds managed to close a bit thanks to him having over 2000 Vitality running at a tremendous efficiency, but he knew that it would keep getting worse almost no matter how high the attribute was. The threads of karma surrounding the human progenitor were too strong, and subverting his deeds was far more difficult than normal.

Transferring all of it to the **[Karmic Subversion Effigy]** was impossible, and the effect would slowly weaken over time, the damage seeping back to him.

He popped a pill into his mouth as he got back on his feet, arduously opening a portal again. He needed to get back into the Mystic Ream, to enter the healing vats they had commandeered. He had been loath to use unknown technology thus far, especially since it required the assistance of those scheming natives, but now he didn't have too much of a choice. He would really end up bisected if he didn't increase his rate of healing.

Of course, the physical wound was just the most immediate concern.

The **[Karmic Subversion Effigy]** was a taboo item, and using something like that would have consequences even when not used against someone so loved by karma as the Super Brother-Man. It was one of his master's more successful experiments into harvesting Karma on a large scale, but it was ultimately a flawed item.

His Master hadn't mentioned anything of the sort in the scriptures he left behind, but Void's Disciple had managed to make a few discoveries over the past centuries. Using it would allow you to live when you should have died, but that life would eventually become a curse. He could already feel the darkness spread in the depths of his mind, and he still hadn't figured out a method to counteract it.

Not yet.

He couldn't stop now. He had a goal to accomplish, and his daughter needed him to be strong for a while longer. The loss of his necklace was a shame, but the **[Scroll**

of the Depths] would be able to be activated again as soon as it had absorbed enough energy from the stars. It should be finished well before the doors of the Mystic Realms closed.

Void's Disciple finally reached the hive, and he wordlessly activated the Teleportation Array before disappearing, his brooding aura quenching any questions from his followers. He appeared in a snow-blasted valley a minute later, the spatial tunnel just a few kilometers away. He entered the Mystic Realm after handing over the scroll to his trusted attendant, and he felt the sense of freedom once more as the darkness transferred him to a shielded subspace. Not even a brush with death and getting cursed could dampen the spirit of liberty after centuries of bondage.

Here he was Adcarkas once more.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 563 - Return**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Zac looked in the direction of Site 16 with incredulity. Void's Disciple hadn't fled as expected, but he actually went out of his way to blow up the town even when it was uninhabited. Was there some deeper meaning to his actions, or did he feel that he hadn't caused enough damage to their group before?

Zac personally wasn't really feeling ready for another battle as he had already entered his weakened state. Swapping over to his Draugr form wouldn't help against that, and he would have to use one of his very limited [Rageroot Oak Seeds] just to regain his combat strength temporarily. The others looked just as worn-out too, with only two of the Anointed maintaining full combat strength.

But could they just sit still, doing nothing?

"We are willing to set out if you are, Warmaster," Rhubat rumbled as the group of Anointed walked over. "We will ignite our life-force to explode ourselves if need-be."

"... I'm sorry. I can't. I'm in no state to fight him again, and neither are these two," Zac eventually said as he nodded at the two demons.

Janos was sitting still not far away, his eyes closed in a slight frown. He had been knocked unconscious by the backlash, but his breathing was steady and his aura was slowly stabilizing after having meditated for a while. Zac was confident that the illusionist simply needed rest to recover. But he still couldn't assist in another fight in this short a window. His soul might be irrevocably hurt if he did.

"Do not apologize, Warmaster. Without your efforts all seven of us would have fallen," Rhubat said, and the other Anointed nodded in agreement. "Sacrificing once life without a chance of victory isn't noble, it's foolishness. Especially now that doing so will empower our enemy."

“The Sage has grown so powerful. I couldn’t sense any corruption even at such close distance,” another of the Anointed said with a forlorn expression. “Three councilors lost for nothing.”

“Not for nothing,” Ogras grunted as he finally managed to get up to a sitting position, though he had to lean against a rock to stay upright. “That asshole was a mystery until now. No one knew anything about him apart from his affiliation and his connection to the Dao of Space. But now we know quite a lot. We can use that next time.”

Zac nodded in agreement. The mission was a failure, but not an abject one. They had gathered a lot of intelligence, and they had exhausted some of Adcarkas’ aces. The scroll seemed very dangerous, but he still only used it once, meaning it was either a one-time thing or had other restrictions. He also shouldn’t have too many peak-grade defensive talismans, as those things simply had no supply on Earth.

Furthermore, now that Zac had calmed down from the heat of the battle he realized something. Void’s Disciple was definitely strong even though he only went all out toward the end, but his power wasn’t insurmountable. Their Attributes shouldn’t be too far from each other judging by the stalemate from their clash, and Zac was probably even ahead in Strength and Endurance.

The cracks of bones had been heard when Zac launched his attacks, and Adcarkas had been slowly pushed down in their deadlock. Part of the reason was that the Dominator was taking the momentum for himself, but part of it was definitely because Zac was simply overpowering him with the help of **[Hatchetman’s Rage]**.

If he could make some improvements and perhaps even awaken a bloodline inside the Mystic Realm, then he would feel confident in clashing once more.

There was however the issue of the Zhix magically surviving getting bisected. It would be extremely difficult to finish off a person who not only was extremely strong but also had such a cheat-like skill. However, something so heaven-defying shouldn’t come without a price. Zac had lost decades of his lifespan because of the Shard of Creation, and who knew what complications Ogras be stuck with from getting his body fused with the shadow-creature.

“Do you understand how he survived?” Zac asked as he turned back to Ogras. “I’m confident that it wasn’t an illusion. He was really split apart by my attack. How the hell did he survive that?”

“Not illusion,” Janos added from the side without opening his eyes, and Zac felt that he would know if anyone.

“I agree,” Ogras nodded. “There are all kinds of odd techniques and treasures in the world, but it shouldn’t have been a mirage. I was in the shadows right behind him when it happened, I saw blood rain down toward me, I could see his body splitting. I felt him die. Pretty scary skill of yours, by the way. What’s it called?”

“Nevermind that. Do you think it was a skill or a treasure he used?”

“I’m guessing treasure. I haven’t heard of E-Grade skills that can subvert life and death like that. I’m guessing that whatever you pulled off in the base-town should be the same?” the demon said, his eyes boring into Zac’s.

Zac slightly nodded in acquiescence, knowing that the demon was referring to the time that his chest was blown apart in front of everyone, only to have it instantly regrow with the help of the last remnants of Creation Energy in his body. Zac still hadn’t explained how he did that to the demon, not that Ogras had asked until now. He still wouldn’t tell Ogras about the Shard of Creation though, for both their sakes.

He had been reminded the hard way of the dangers of dealing with those things earlier today, and he didn't want to bring another tribulation down on the demon's head as well.

"Is that even possible though? Where did he get something like this? He should mostly have stayed in secluded cultivation since the integration, apart from when he set out to cause some destruction," Zac said skeptically and turned to the Anointed to see if they knew anything else.

"Don't look at me, Warmaster," Rhubat said with embarrassment. "This is beyond our knowledge. The Dominators of old always followed one of three means of battle. Some controlled chains of enslavement. Others caused thousands of casualties with their spears. A few walked the path of pugilism as Adcarkas, rampaging through our ranks with their fists alone. However, there are no records of surviving something like this, and neither of the mystical skills of space we witnessed."

Zac nodded in understanding. They had already gotten an information package about ancient battles against the Dominators back on the Zhix homeworld. It wasn't much to go on though, especially as those wars took place around two thousand years ago. The Medhin Royals seemed to have followed the spear heritage as well, but Zac's best guess was that thousands of years had caused the heritages to diverge.

"You called him the Sage of the Basin earlier," Zac asked instead, changing the topic. "What did you mean by that? What was his earlier identity?"

Zac didn't know much about the civilian identity of Void's Disciple from before. Even the Zhix War Council had only managed to confirm the real identities of the Dominators after Harbinger appeared. Adcarkas and his children had passed completely under the radar until the integration, and pretty much everyone who encountered them after was killed.

But perhaps they could find out some useful information by digging through their past.

"Adcarkas was a great scholar and artisan, to the point that his name was known across the world. He was an expert on all kinds of topics, from painting masterworks to perfecting superior smelting techniques to create stronger metals. The Sage also invented marvelous machines that would have made the lives of our kin easier if there had been time for them to spread and become adapted," Rhubat explained.

A few of the other Anointed had moved over by this point and added to Rhubat's explanation. He had been a 'wanderer', a traveling Zhix whose Hive had fallen in a war. He had taken up residence in a hive placed in the middle of an enormous basin, where he had mostly stayed to work on his projects. According to general knowledge, he should be around 50 years old, but he could be much older since he appeared out of nowhere.

It sort of sounded like Void's Disciple had been someone like the Zhix World's Leonardo DaVinci, a great mind that could change the course of history. Then again, Zac suspected that Void's Disciple was quite a bit older than what was believed, and a few centuries was enough time to master all kinds of things.

He didn't have any proof on the last guess, but he trusted his intuition. Void's Disciple emitted a similar aura as the Demon Master he had fought during the Tower of Eternity. The aura of an old expert who had perfected his skills and combat techniques to the peak.

"All those treasures though, where did he get them?" Zac muttered.

"He might have made them," Ogras ventured. "At least the weaker ones. Just think about it, he spent decades, possibly centuries, in an unintegrated world with very

sparse Cosmic Energy. Cultivation would have to have been extremely slow. He might have built all those things in his search of improving his power in other ways.”

Ogras’ guess was as good as any theory they could come up with now, and the conversation eventually died out as everyone focused on recuperation. Only when an hour had passed did they begin to stir again, and Adcarkas was probably long gone by now.

“The Crusade will truly move into the hidden world you spoke of after all,” Rhubat eventually sighed.

Zac understood the giant’s despondency. The Anointed were almost out of time, and who knew how long the visit to the Mystic Realm would last? The Anointed would perhaps never be able to return to their hives even if they won, provided that the supposed lockdown that Julia mentioned lasted longer than expected. No one would cherish the thought of dying in a foreign world.

“I’ll look for more ways to restrain him until we set out. What will you do next?” Zac asked.

“We need to finish the rites for the fallen,” Rhubat slowly said. “We will return to the Hives for now, but we will follow you into the hidden world.”

“Will you be done with everything in one week?” Zac asked, and he received a nod of confirmation. “Good. We’ll try opening the pathway at that time. I’ll send someone to discuss the details, but I need to focus on getting stronger myself. I’m not sure he’ll back off next time going by how much importance he places on the Spatial Artifact.”

The group set out a few minutes later, and Ogras was able to walk again by the time they reached Site 16, albeit with the assistance of Janos. However, Ogras’ aura was even weaker than a mortal’s, and Zac wondered just how long it would take before he completely recovered.

The destruction of the outpost wasn’t as bad as Zac had feared, but everything within a hundred meters of the mine entrance had been reduced to rubble, including the Teleportation Array. That wasn’t a problem for Zac though as he could simply buy a new one, which made him even more confused as to why Void’s Disciple had done something so pointless.

“We can sense remnants of the corruption,” Rhubat said with some surprise. “We still don’t understand how they managed to hide it, but perhaps he was unable to in his current state. There’s a trail leading east from the epicenter of the attack.”

“Look,” Ogras added as he pointed to the left, and Zac’s eyes lit up when he saw that one of the security cameras were still intact.

Port Atwood was still sorely lacking in personnel, but they had a huge amount of resources that they were able to use to get almost anything from the Marshall Clan. All outposts had been equipped with old-world security measures to shore up the lack of guards, so Void’s Disciple’s actions might actually have been caught on film.

They hurried toward a secluded guardhouse, and Zac turned on the monitors while the giants tried to peer inside through the doorway, their bulky frames much too big to fit inside. The latest hours started to flash by on the screen as Zac fast-forwarded the film until there finally was a change.

“It’s him,” Zac muttered when the familiar form appeared. “He’s actually bleeding from the wound!”

There wasn’t much else to see on the tape, but it was still good to see that Void Disciple hadn’t come out unscathed after all. It broke the illusion of them dealing with

someone unkillable. And it also seemed as though he could confirm a suspicion; he was after the mine.

The Dominator had appeared within frame as he moved toward the mine with impressive speed, but he had suddenly stopped and grasped his head. A second later the screen turned to static for a whole minute until the current scene outside appeared on the monitors, with the Dominator gone.

It seemed as though he had been planning on entering the mine, but changed his mind and left eastbound if Rhubat's senses could be trusted.

"A backlash? Something else?" Zac muttered, his eyes glistening.

"Serves him right for killing me," Ogras muttered. "Though I wish he would have looked a bit more wretched than sporting some surface wound."

Zac wryly smiled as he stepped out of the guardhouse and bought a new Teleportation Array. There was just a week left until his sister would rip open the portal to the Mystic Realm once more, not much time for his final preparations.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 564 - Precipice**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**Bah! Saturday again, no chappy tomorrow. And we're right at the precipice of the next arc! If only there was some way to [read ahead](#)...!**

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The following days passed quickly after Zac's group returned to Port Atwood. He sent Ibtep and Joanna with the Anointed to act as liaisons to iron out the logistics of the upcoming mission. As for himself, he had been planning on dealing with all kinds of things to prepare Port Atwood for the Mystic Realm. However, Zac was quickly shown the value of a proper support system as everything was being taken care of better and more efficiently than if he had done it himself.

Triv and Abby were working in tandem to quash all sorts of issues, from designing a proper base that could hold everyone in Port Atwood, to figuring out what sorts of materials they needed to bring into the research base. The general plan was to set up a proper outpost in the garden on the other side of the portal, and then build advance posts as they reached further and further inside the Mystic Realm. This freed up most of Zac's time, allowing him to spend most of his time inside his Cultivation Cave, nursing his wounds while looking for ways to improve his power.

The brush with death had increased his desire to become stronger even further, but time was limited. The best he could come up with was to solidify his gains from the battle while trying to figure out if there was any concrete gain from his epiphany. Unfortunately, no matter how he looked or experimented he knew that he neither gained any affinity to his Daos, nor had he evolved any of them.

He had definitely taken a step in the right direction on the mountain top, but he was still very lacking if he wanted to upgrade any of his Dao Fragments to high mastery. However, he did make one interesting discovery as he searched for clues inside his

body. His **[Void Heart]** had turned inert since swallowing the tendril of Tribulation Lightning. It wouldn't activate no matter what he did or what energies he consumed.

Zac noticed the anomaly while dealing with the wounds from the fight. His broken ribs and flesh wounds would heal by themselves thanks to the atmosphere in his cave and his high Vitality, but there were extremely stubborn pieces of foreign Dao lodged in the wounds. Both the exploding stars and Void's Disciple's kick had been infused with Daos, and different ones at that.

The one in the kick was the strongest, and Zac guessed it might even be a High-Tiered Dao. It was completely foreign as well, and not something that he had encountered in any of his other fights. The closest sensation the stubborn Dao before was when he was thrown out of the Technocrat spaceship and found himself swirling in space for a bit. It wasn't surprising considering all of Adcarkas' skills seemed to be related to space.

The wounds from the stars instead contained an energy that made him think of the sun, a fire-aspected Dao that was distinctly different from neighboring Daos such as the Seed of Tinder. It wasn't as explosive, but it was still extremely stubborn as it smoldered in his wounds as though it would do so for billions of years. The Fragment of the Star did exist according to Big Blue, though the space octopus had no idea how to form it.

These invasive Daos didn't really affect his combat readiness all too much after his bones had set and flesh healed, but it was still a hidden threat that he needed to deal with. Grinding them down with his own Daos was slow and arduous, which was why he thought of his **[Void Heart]**. If it could swallow tribulation lightning, it could surely eat a little bit of foreign Dao?

The problem was that it didn't act on the alien energies in his body, and he didn't have any control of the Hidden Node either. Since manually activating it was out of the question, he instead thought of another way to activate it. He once more absorbed some miasma as a Human to kickstart the node, but it ended with him being nauseated for 30 minutes until he managed to disperse the chill of death inside his body.

He still didn't know what to do with this information, but he hoped that he would get a huge surge of energy when the node was finally done digesting the purple lightning. Getting a free level or two wouldn't be enough to defeat Void's Disciple, but it was a start.

Ogras had immediately entered seclusion as well when they returned, but the rest of Port Atwood exploded into action as every department worked around the clock to ready everything in time. His sister was one of the busiest people of all as she kept traveling between Mystic Island, Thea's Library, and The Tower of Myriad Dao to gather as much information as she could before trying to crack open the spatial tunnel.

The elites of his army were also recalled from the zombie hunt to prepare and consolidate their gains over the following days, while the non-combatants prepared hundreds of different things that might be needed in the upcoming mission in the Mystic Realm. The settlements that Void's Disciple attacked were recaptured as well, but no one could figure out what Void's Disciple had done in those mines.

The New World Government had sent in over 50 thousand people according to Julia, so there was definitely a use of man-power inside. Zac initially felt a bit reluctant to follow suit, as he had dealt with most threats either alone or with the help of a small group. But he couldn't run around those endless tunnels by himself in search of the Spatial Treasure, so this time he would bring a large chunk of his army. Besides, if it

turned out that the excess personnel was superfluous, then he could always send them back at the last minute.

Julia tried to help out by gathering more intelligence from the New World Government, but it was slim pickings. Thomas Fischer had put in place a new set of extremely restrictive protocols to stop any further leaks, and anyone who entered the Mystic Realm had to sign a contract of confidentiality. A System-enforced contract, so there was no chance of shirking the agreement.

Ilvere suggested launching an assault, but Zac decided against it. He was afraid that the New World Government would do something drastic if he appeared at this juncture, like opening the pathways so that the natives of the Mystic Realm could escape and reach Earth. He couldn't let that happen, he didn't feel confident in leaving Earth exposed to a bunch of E-Grade aliens while he was stuck inside the mystic realm.

It wasn't the end of the world though, as Zac doubted there was much that Thomas Fischer knew that he couldn't figure out by himself in a few days. There was no way that these so-called native allies had given the government too much intelligence on the research base, the New World Government simply wasn't powerful enough to barter with high e-grade elders that might be over a thousand years old.

Kenzie arrived at the Cultivation Cave five days after Zac returned from Site 16, and Zac frowned when he saw her eyes were sunken from chronic sleep deprivation. Triv was with her as well, and the ghost bowed toward Zac before it started sprucing up the place.

"Don't overwork yourself," Zac sighed as he looked at his sister with worry.

"I'll be able to rest as soon as I pack things up here," Kenzie smiled.

"So it's done?" Zac asked with relief.

"It's done," Kenzie said, her smile turning into a grin. "You could start it up right now if you wanted, but it's better if you wait two days. The spatial turbulence grows weaker every day."

"That's amazing, good job," Zac applauded. "Do you need any help here?"

"No, you'll just get in the way. Triv and I can handle this, you go deal with things in Port Atwood instead. Verana has been wanting to talk with you for a while," Kenzie said.

"Fine, I'll get out of your hair," Zac said as he stood up from his prayer mat. "What do the Tal-Eladar want?"

"They want to join us in the Mystic Realm, of course. No one should have told them outright, but it is impossible to keep an expedition of this magnitude secret," Kenzie shrugged.

"Is Ogras out yet?" Zac asked.

He liked having the demon with him when dealing with Clan Tir'Emarel. Ogras couldn't help himself when he saw the beastmasters, he immediately started to annoy them by ruining their plans out of spite. That usually resulted in a better negotiation position for Zac, which was just what someone like him needed.

"No," Kenzie said with a shake of his head, her smile turning into a frown. "What happened back then? He doesn't even answer when I call."

"Void's Disciple is just as strong as we feared," Zac sighed. "None of us got off scot-free. He was wounded, and he might be a bit depressed after taking a loss right after evolving. He'll be out for the Mystic Realm though."

Kenzie's eyes thinned a bit in suspicion, but Zac didn't want her to know just how close to dying Ogras got. He simply flashed away the next moment and teleported over to the academy to deal with the Tal-Eladar. Zac eventually made a deal with

Verana where she would send a squad of 150 experts into the Mystic Realm, focusing on cultivators excelling in scouting and healing.

Tylia was probably still the greatest healer on Earth, and having her join the mission might save a lot of lives. The keen senses of the Tal-Eladar war-beasts might be invaluable as well, so Zac relented on his stance against them for now. However, he did make sure to sign a contract with Verana that the Spatial Artifact and any D-Grade or higher treasures would go to Port Atwood.

They would be given Merit Points for turning them in though. This type of employer-employee contract was pretty common when exploring Mystic Realms, and she wasn't really surprised at all when Zac brought it up. As for E-Grade resources and lower, it was up to luck. If you found it, it was yours. That was the simplest way of encouraging people to explore the depths of the research base.

The next two days were like a blur, and more and more powerful people appeared in Port Atwood by the minute. First it was Thea along with a hundred experts and 500 support personnel of the Marshall Alliance. Then came Billy and Nigel, the latter looking less than enthused about entering such a dangerous place. However, Nigel had a rare buffing class similar to Emily's, and he would be able to singlehandedly bolster the defenses of any base.

The Underworld Council provided warriors of all four races as well, along with Gregor and five fellow councilors. The rest would stay to make sure nothing happened to their bases in their absence, just like the majority of the Port Atwood Army. Finally the Zhix arrived, and the appearance of over a hundred hulking Anointed caused quite the commotion among the citizens of Port Atwood.

In fact, a lot of people didn't even know about the existence of the Anointed since they mostly stayed in the hearts of their Hives. It caused quite some chaos, and Zac was forced to send them to Mystic Island early as to not cause a riot. Of course, it was only a day later that Zac and the others joined them.

Everyone had gathered in the central valley of Mystic Island, and Zac couldn't help but marvel as he looked back at the group of over 5000 people behind him. Most of them normal Zhix warriors and the soldiers of Port Atwood, but this was still the greatest army that Earth had ever assembled. This group would probably be able to take out the New World Government in minutes even if he didn't personally get involved.

Zac eventually turned back looked with anticipation at Kenzie and her group of craftsmen as they performed the finishing checks on the array they had drawn around the spatial tunnel. It would block out the turbulence from the Spatial Bomb that the Cultists detonated, allowing the old teleportation array to work once more.

Even Zac couldn't help but feel some butterflies in his stomach as he looked at the still inactive array. There was so much hanging on this expedition. If they won then Earth would finally be free of threats, at least for another 99 years. It would give him and everyone else a breather, an opportunity to solidify their foundations and find their bearings.

Conversely, if they failed, then that was that. The Great Redeemer would come sooner or later, and Earth would be turned into a cultivation resource. Ogras and he had even discussed giving out some of his teleportation tokens beforehand just in case, but he knew it was kind of a moot point.

Coughing up between one and ten billion Nexus Coins for the Nexus Hub activation wasn't something that the average people could endure.

"Sometimes I don't know whether you're my lucky star or an ill omen," sighed echoed out from Zac's side as Ogras appeared out of nowhere. "A normal warrior would

be given months to stabilize his foundation and get to understand their limits. I get time for a celebratory drink before I'm thrown at the big boss, and then I'm dragged here before I even have a chance to nurse my wounds."

"You can go on as long a vacation as you want after this is dealt with," Zac snorted.

"See, you say that, but how can that possibly be true while I am living next to a disaster magnet? If you run out of enemies, then the Ruthless Heavens will just conjure one for you," Ogras spat.

"Can't do much about that," Zac smiled before he turned serious again. "How's your situation?"

A shroud of shadows covered the two before Ogras spoke up.

"There's both good and bad news," the demon shrugged. "I won't be able to fight for at least a month, perhaps even longer. There are some complications on top of the wounds."

"Anything I can do to help?" Zac frowned. "I have a lot of pills."

"No, I think that I need to wait this out," Ogras said with a frown, and he hesitated a bit before he kept going. "Spare is redrawing my pathways."

"What?!" Zac blurted. "Is that even possible?"

"Apparently," the demon grimaced. "I don't think it's too bad though. The changes are small, and they seem to be improvements. Even better, my affinity to the Dao of Shadows has taken a huge leap forward. I was a genius before, but now I'm simply a heaven-defying scion."

Zac only rolled his eyes in response, but he couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy upon hearing about the affinity. Then again, Ogras had literally died to gain this lucky opportunity. And judging by the demon's face, it wasn't as simple as he let on. There were definitely dangers that accompanied this sudden windfall.

"Well, it's good that you're up and runn-" Zac responded, but he drifted off when he saw that Kenzie had stood up and waved at him.

Everything was ready.

"Do it," Zac nodded, his heart rapidly beating as he prepared for disaster.

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**Chapter 565 - Convictions**

There was no time to lose now that everything was dealt with. They were already running behind the others who had spent weeks, even months inside the Mystic Realm already, and they needed to catch up.

Kenzie immediately started drawing the final inscriptions that would complete the outer array since Zac had given the go-ahead. The assistants had already moved away just in case, with only Kenzie staying next to the array. The final touches only took a few minutes, and Zac saw the air all around them shudder for a few seconds before it returned to normal.

"It worked!" Kenzie exclaimed a few seconds later as the inner array lit up as well.

"Uh, it did?" Zac asked, feeling there was some lack of payoff.

He had almost expected a massive tear in space to appear, only for Kenzie's array to beat it back after a herculean effort. Zac obviously wasn't the only one feeling this way either. Ogras looked at the array with a visible disappointment, and Thea was looking at Kenzie with confusion.

"That's it," Kenzie snorted, clearly a bit miffed about everyone's reactions. "I can add some fireworks to the next array if you want."

"Just thought there would be some spatial rifts or something," Zac sheepishly smiled before he refocused. "I'll go first to make sure it's safe."

"I'm coming with, I know the place best after all," Ogras said. "I've also been inside enough to be able to tell if the array works as intended."

"What? In your condition?" Zac frowned as he asked with a low voice. "What's your goal? Last time we almost had to drag you through the teleporter."

"I figure I'm better off on the other side in case this thing breaks down after one use," Ogras shrugged with a grin. "I'll just hide in your shadows and reap the rewards."

"Well, fine," Zac said as he turned to Thea and the other leaders. "I'll send a message back through the portal in a minute at most. You can begin the transfer as soon as I've done so, provided Kenzie gives the go-ahead."

Thea looked reluctant at being left behind, but Billy didn't care in the slightest. Nigel on the other hand looked like he was praying for the thing to fail so that he could stay behind. As for the Zhix, they stoically stood in vigil, their facial expressions unreadable.

"What should we do if this thing breaks after you enter, Warmaster?" Rhubat eventually rumbled. "The enemies of the Zhix are on the other side."

"If this thing really breaks down after we go through, have Kenzie fix it. If she's unable to... Enter through the New World Government's tunnel. Thea can show you the way," Zac said without hesitation.

This was something he had about before, and he eventually decided to sacrifice the New World Government if it came to that. The survival of Earth was more important than anything else, and they simply didn't have any other options. He had sent out dozens of squads in search of other tunnels, including to the uncharted continent. But they hadn't found anything, meaning the New World Government tunnel was the only other one remaining.

Of course, following the Dominators through their own tunnel would have been the best option, but no one had been able to figure out where it was. Void's Disciple must have tracked down a pathway as secluded as the one on Mystic Island.

"Be careful around the New World Government though. The tunnel would be filled with traps. And be careful as to not let anything dangerous reach Earth."

"You won't mind if we oust your kind?" Rhubat asked curiously.

"They're not my kind," Zac shrugged. "But try a non-violent approach if possible, no matter if we meet them inside or outside. We're all part of this planet after all."

The Anointed nodded in agreement, and Zac stepped onto the array with the demon following close behind. The darkness lasted just an instant until he appeared in a familiar room, a wave of relief washing over him when he could confirm that the array worked just fine. He didn't even realize that he had been holding his breath as he stepped through, and his hands were clammy as well.

Getting almost killed while teleporting once had undeniably left a shadow in his mind.

“Ah!” a scream echoed out the second Zac appeared, and he spotted a young woman grasping for a spear that stood balanced against the wall. “Intruders! Wait, Lord Atwood?”

“It’s me. Tina, right?” Zac smiled as he recognized the Valkyrie. “I’m sorry it took so long to reopen the entrance. Is everyone okay here?”

Ogras appeared before Tina had a chance to answer, glancing around the building before walking up next to Zac.

“The array seems stable enough,” Ogras muttered after he threw the Valkyrie a glance. “I didn’t notice any differences compared to the last times. Should be fine I think?”

“Good,” Zac nodded as he sent back an information crystal to the other side, telling the others that it worked.

“More people are coming soon, so let’s get out of the way,” Zac said as he led the two out of the Teleportation Building.

The base camp outside looked pretty much the same as the last time Zac visited, except for a couple of new buildings having been added to the mix. The odd lines covered the sky, and the trees created a perimeter around the fields far off in the distance. Finally, there was the barely discernable wall, and Zac’s heartbeat sped up at the thought of what awaited inside.

“Everything seems fine here. Have there been any problems?” Zac said as soon as he could confirm that there were no immediate threats.

“Nothing much has happened here apart from us going a bit stir-crazy,” Tina said as she waved at the other castaways who looked at Zac with relief in their eyes. “We have just explored the vicinity and cultivated. Those worm-things don’t attack as long as five of us travel together. We have encountered something odd though.”

“Odd? What’s going on?” Zac asked as he looked around again, properly this time.

Only then did he realize that Ogras had stopped in his tracks after stepping outside the teleportation building, a deep frown adorning his face. Zac had only been here for a few short visits when he needed to talk with his sister, but he hadn’t actually left the immediate vicinity of the entrance. However, it appeared as though the demon had figured something out.

“This world is growing,” the demon finally blurted out, his eyes wide with shock.

“They are here,” Leviala said, her milky-white eyes opening for the first time in weeks. “The door has been reopened.”

“Sorry for having you do this, child,” Uvek sighed as he hurriedly handed his granddaughter the extract before the backlash kicked in.

She drank the murky texture down with a slight frown, but she didn’t complain about the astringent taste. She never did.

“It’s not more horned beings,” Leviala said. “Well, there are, but there are other races as well. Some I have never seen before.”

“Any humans?” Tictus, the squirrely chief Datamancer, asked with worry in his eyes.

“Yes, most,” Leviala nodded.

The eyes around the table lit up, but Uvek shook his head.

“Things outside are not like in here. Our races will not bring us together. Remember, it is our clan that that needs to stand united, even against other humans,” Uvek said.

The other elders soon remembered themselves and low discussion as to what to do next appeared in the sealed Elder's Hall.

"How powerful are they?" Tictus eventually asked.

"I can't see," Leviala said with a shake of her head.

"How about..." another elder muttered.

"No! She cannot open the Eyes of Heaven again so soon. She had used her bloodline too much already to keep track of all the changes. It might kill her if we push even further. We need to remember our goal! These outsiders that keep pouring in are after that thing in the center, but what are we after?" Uvek said.

"Freedom," Tictus muttered.

"Exactly! We need to leave here, but then what?" Uvek said as he looked across the room.

"I have learned some things by speaking with HekrUV Vira of the True Sky faction. They have had ample contact with the outsiders through their terminals. If he is speaking the truth, and I believe he is, then the planet outside has changed, and it will be thrown out into the universe in one hundred years. We need to have a D-Grade warrior before then to protect us, and Leviala is our best hope! She is the first one since the ancestor to awaken [Heaven's Eyes] instead of [King's Eyes] or [Lord's Eyes]. We can't ruin her potential for short-term benefits!"

"Do not forget Yvian," the decrepit voice of the second elder spoke up, and Uvek forced himself to nod in acquiescence.

However, his inner thoughts weren't quite as agreeable. It would be a disaster for Clan Cartava if that impetuous man became the next Patriarch. They had already been captured once due to their unique bloodline, and he knew they needed to keep a low profile as they stepped out into the true universe. But Yvian carried dreams of grandeur, to lead the clan to the peak.

But he didn't understand that they were just ants in the grand scheme of things. Their ancestral homelands had been like a fortress, and their echelon elders were known across the sector for their prowess. But their sanctuary was reduced to ashes the moment the ancestor passed away, their elders slaughtered like chickens, proving they were just frogs in the bottom of the well.

Having wealth was a sin if you weren't powerful enough to protect it.

Even then, Yvian bore a deep desire for conquest. Before he had wanted to conquer this accursed cage, but now he had turned his sights to the planet outside. He believed that it was ripe for the picking as the outsiders were pathetically weak according to the True Sky Faction. But Uvek knew better. The real powerhouses hadn't made their moves yet, or they moved in the shadows.

"So what do we do?" Tictus asked.

"The storms are acting up again," Uvek muttered. "And we haven't found any terminals that can reach this new faction."

"The old patterns no longer holds, and some subsystems have completely shut down," Tictus sighed said with a shake of his head. "A unit was caught unaware in Red-04, only three managed to return alive. We can't go to Section 8 at all the moment."

"We left a message where the horned one appeared," Uvek eventually said. "We can't go there now, but we might soon meet in the inner sections."

"What if they're hostile?" the second elder asked with a rasping voice.

"We won't look for trouble, but we will not back away either. We will never be captives again," Uvek said, his eyes burning with determination.

"Never again," the others echoed.

“This is our edge. The outsiders are treating this as a treasure hunt. We are fighting for survival. Our convictions aren’t the same.”

“He’s hurt,” Yano whispered, the soulgems studding his head glimmering as his fury instilled them with power. “Another is missing, and the third is in the vat. This is our chance!”

“We can’t,” Helo sighed, his own, far grander, gems instead spreading a soothing blue radiance. “Only three Masons remain, and they are badly wounded as well. And remember, they are not alone. Their armies outnumber us five to one. Those insectoids might be weaker in general, but you saw how they fought. We can’t match that suicidal ferocity. Our kin is not meant for battle like that.”

“But another opportunity like this won’t come again!” Yano spat, though the red glow of his gems had clearly dimmed.

He knew the horror of their new masters better than anyone. He had seen his own parents getting ripped apart by the bare hands of the one called Void’s Disciple, their soulgems being harvested the same way the old controllers did. What had their kin done to deserve a fate such as this? Captured and experimented on for thousands of years, and when they finally saw a chance at freedom, they were slaughtered and enslaved once more.

But Helo wouldn’t give up. To many had fallen for him to give in to despair now.

“We need to be patient,” Helo eventually said.

“You keep saying that, but our people are dying,” Yano said, tears already streaming down his face. “Besides. If you help Void’s Disciple to create that item... Even if you survive, you’ll be cursed. Heaven’s won’t abide something like this. With the old Masons fallen, only you can lead us now.”

“I will survive. I can’t fall here,” Helo said with determination, the soothing gems flashing a sanguine red for a second before he got a hold of himself. “We must endure for another ten days. At that time the thing will be born. The elders believed that would bring about huge changes to our world, with previously inaccessible parts being forced open.”

“How does that help us?” Yano asked. “Without our Masons, we are not powerful enough to compete for that thing.”

“But we might be able to nudge events in our favor. Perhaps we might even be able to nudge those monsters right off a cliff. The Grand Mason told me something before he succumbed to his wounds, something that she only learned recently,” Helo said, his voice growing even lower. “The Administrator is alive.”

“What? How is that even possible? The cataclysm back then-“ Yano exclaimed, his gems turning grey out of fear.

“I don’t understand either,” Helo said, his gems shimmering yellow in confusion. “But if these insectoids want the item, they will have to enter the Administrator’s domain. These interlopers are strong, but do you really believe they can survive such an encounter?”

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**Chapter 566 - Lunar Tribe**

Hevastes rushed through the forest, his sharp nose all the guidance he needed to avoid his distant, and far less enlightened, cousins. A squad of silent killers followed in tow, ruthlessness gleaming in their eyes. They set out five days ago at the behest of Cervantes to find a new path to the weaklings of the Cartava Clan.

A century ago this would have been considered a suicide mission, a way to discard unwanted members of the tribe. They would most likely perish to the environment, and if they somehow survived they'd still have an impossible mission to complete.

However, things had changed. Hevastes looked up at the distant Skythreads, both excitement and trepidation filling his hearts. He remembered running through these woods just three hundred years ago as a fledgling member of his first hunting squad. The sky had been so much closer then, and the distances weren't so insurmountable. But the world had grown, just as Hevastes himself had.

It almost felt like he would leave part of himself behind when they finally left this place.

They finally reached their target location; a seemingly insignificant corner of the forest where the wall made a slight turn. There were no signs of anything special about this place, apart from a small grate in the Memorsteeel close to the ceiling.

A century ago this small vent just had a diameter of ten centimeters, but by now it was over a meter across, effortlessly providing a new point of ingress for their kin. Similar weaknesses were appearing all over the base, with new ones being discovered every week. The sanctums of the Core Sector were still unreachable, meaning it still was impossible to reach the bloodline pools freely. But it was just a matter of time by now.

Of course, the dangers had increased just like the opportunities had.

"Isolating steps," Hevastes muttered and one of his subordinates produced a series of spikes, each of them connected to a small dongle.

Hevastes took out his charger and poured some of the harvested Base Power into each spike. He couldn't help but grimace at the expenditure, especially now that it was so hard to harvest. But times had changed, and there was no point in hoarding things that would be useless in the outer world.

Seeing that the spikes had activated properly he threw them into the wall with pinpoint precision, each of them hitting the wall with half a meter's distance, all the way up to the grate. The spikes embedded themselves in the Memorsteeel as though the wall was made of mud, and a few seconds later the fusion was complete.

The arrays on the had completely dimmed by the time that the spikes had become part of the wall, and Kato didn't need any prompting as he climbed up along the spikes. He took out a tablet from his backpack as he carved a small groove with his special tool, allowing him to connect to the local systems through a cable.

Hevastes saw the screen light up a second later, and the whole group tensed as they prepared themselves for retaliation. However, the seconds passed without either the wall awakening or the corruption appearing, allowing them to breathe out in relief. It wasn't that they didn't trust Kato, he was one of the most skilled Datamancers in the tribe after all. But things had become too unpredictable as of late.

The grate swung up a few seconds later, and Kato jumped down to the others with a relieved look on his eyes. After all, it was usually the Datamancers who got the worst of it in case they were discovered.

"Excellent job. How long?" Hevastes asked.

"Sixteen hours under normal operations," Kato said before he hesitantly added. "But the risk of anomalies is high."

“Ten hours. Everyone needs to be back here by that time in case we get split up. Any latecomers will have to return by themselves,” Hevastes eventually decided.

The rest of the squad nodded without hesitation, even though the implication was clear. Returning to the tribe without Hevastes’ source of Base Power was a suicide mission, and they were better off staying in the forest, praying that some other squad would pass by before they were discovered by the beasts.

“Remember the goal. First of all, find a path to the Cartava Clan. Secondly, if an opportunity arises, capture the Grand Elder’s granddaughter. Finding information about the interlopers would be a bonus, but other squads are working on that,” Hevastes said as he looked across the group.

The group of veterans nodded, though they couldn’t hide the confusion from their captain. After all, most of them had worked together for almost two centuries. But they were elite warriors that were content in following orders, which couldn’t be said about the ever-curious Datamancer.

“Is that brat really worth the risk?” Kato hesitantly asked when no one else would speak up. “We have already spent such a large amount of our resources on this one objective.”

“Are you questioning Cervantes’ orders?” Hevastes asked coolly.

“N-No, absolutely not,” Kato hurriedly said with a shake of his head, quickly realizing the folly of questioning the Alpha’s grand nephew. “I just hoped to understand the goal to better complete my mission.”

“Very well. I don’t know all the details either, but my uncle said one thing that might interest you. Leviaala Cartava is the key to prolonging our lifespans by many times over. Now tell me, is it worth snatching her?” Hevastes said with a cruel smile.

The eyes of even the veterans in the group widened in shock, before a red tint spread in their eyes. Hevastes knew all too well what they were thinking. The bloodline of their tribe was unmatched, and the only one in this realm solely focused on combat. Those gemlings far on the other side were only useful for creating living treasures, and the True Sky Faction had long lost their way by interbreeding.

Only the Titans and unique specimens were a match to their prowess, but the specimens were long gone while the Titans all perished when the cataclysm turned their sector into the wastelands. If it wasn’t for the unique environment, the werewolves would long have been able to dominate this whole realm.

But there was a downside to their power; it took them too long to cultivate. They were part-beast, which had provided them with superior bodies and power. But they still had the much shorter lifespan of humans, making it almost impossible to unleash their full potential before they grew old. But what if their lifespans could be improved upon?

Hevastes could feel it. This was the era of the Lunar Tribe.

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“Exactly! This world is expanding!” Tina nodded with an odd face as she looked at Ogras. “It seems impossible, but this whole base seems to be growing like it was a living creature or something. It’s already grown around ten percent since we were trapped here.”

“Growing how?” Zac said with confusion.

The rest of the leaders had already arrived through the teleporter by this point, and they all looked at Ogras and Tina like they were crazy. How could a base grow by itself?

“We first noticed it with the keypad that allows us to enter the real base. It was rising higher and higher up in the air, and now it’s 30 centimeters further up than before,” Tina said.

“Is it some sort of liquid metal?” Thea asked from the side, but the Valkyries shook their heads in response.

“I honestly feel like it’s some sort of magic rather than something that can be explained rationally. We first assumed that the wall was rising from the ground, but we soon realized that this affects everything except for living things,” Tina explained.

“I thought this place was made for giants, but what if the whole realm started growing around the same time the Integration took place?” Ogras muttered as his eyes scanned the surroundings. “Or perhaps even sooner.”

Zac looked over with confusion before he understood what Ogras was getting at. The demon was the first one to explore the mystic realm, and he had already noted that he believed that this section was built to accommodate some sort of golem or giant species reaching 5-6 meters in height. But what if that wasn’t the case, but rather the result of the place growing?

“A bunch of Cosmic Energy flooded Earth, and some of it was passed into this place?” Zac asked.

“Or that the shock of integration kicked the Dimensional Seed alive,” Ogras shrugged.

“We found out some of the rules by studying the trees,” another Valkyrie interjected. “They are the same as before, but they are now spaced further apart like the ground between them is expanding.”

“Spatial expansion,” Thea said with wonder as she looked around.

“But our people have only been trapped here for a few weeks and it’s grown by ten percent? This base should be thousands of years old, it doesn’t add up,” Joanna countered with a frown as she looked at the valkyries.

“The treasure is awakening,” Zac said. “That is probably speeding up the process if it’s the source.”

“It’s the most likely scenario,” Ogras agreed. “But that means two things if true. First, these changes will probably only increase in severity as the treasure awakens. Second, we are just at the edge of the Mystic realm. The effect might be far worse in the core, the closer we get to the treasure itself. We already knew this place is huge, but it might have turned into a continent overnight.”

“We have tried mapping the growth rate and it seems as though-,” Tina said, but he forgot herself upon seeing the form of Rhubat breaking through the roof of the teleportation house like some sort of insectoid Godzilla.

“I forgot about those giants in all the excitement,” Ogras looked over with a snort.

Zac sighed and flashed over, and threw away the rubble of the teleportation house, the pieces of the building flying far out into the grassland.

“Amazing. Worlds within worlds,” Rhubat said as it looked around, ignoring the mayhem its appearance had caused.

“This place is extremely ancient, older than both your and our civilizations combined,” Zac said. “There will be a lot of dangers inside, I’ll be counting on you guys.”

“The chief corruptor is still standing, so we will not stop either,” Rhubat agreed and moved out of the way to make room for more Anointed to enter.

“Start setting everything up,” Zac instructed the logistics crew before he flashed back to the core group. “I need some more details from the scientists who have stayed here.”

The Valkyries who had been marooned in the Mystic Realm was not the only citizens caught inside when the cultists attacked. There were also a group of professors that were studying the mystic realm while Zac was busy dealing with other things.

The logistics officers got to work while Zac entered a warehouse to go over things in detail. There were proper meeting rooms as well, but they were too small to house the Anointed, and he wanted them represented.

The scientists seemed extremely uncomfortable by being stuck in a building with not only 5-meter tall giants that stared down at them as though they were snacks, but also with the most powerful people on the former Ladder. But they quickly gathered their wits and started going over the measurements they had taken since they were stuck.

The biosphere had grown just like Tina and Ogras said, by 12% to be exact. This included everything that could be considered dead, such as stones, the metal walls, and the ground itself. The odd growth also affected organic materials that weren't alive, such as pieces of lumber. The people and the plants were completely unaffected though.

Most of that growth had happened over the last 16 days, and it seemed to be accelerating. As for the process of expansion, it couldn't be explained by science. The first guess of the scientists was that the spatial expansion acted on an atomic level, increasing the distance between molecules in materials. But it was quickly proven to be wrong.

Matter was literally appearing out of nowhere. A piece of lumber would keep growing in volume in this realm but its density would remain constant, meaning that its weight increased. As for where the additional matter came from, the Scientist had no idea. One conjecture was that it was being absorbed from subspace or neighboring dimensions, while some simply believed it to be magic no matter how unscientific that sounded.

“Isn't this a huge opportunity?” Ogras said from the side when he heard the explanation. “Can't we throw out everything of value and it will keep multiplying? What if we get a bunch of extremely valuable materials? Wouldn't we literally be growing money?”

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**Chapter 567 - Expansion**

Zac's eyes lit up at the idea, and he could see himself throwing out his mountains of loot and watch them grow. This could be a game-changer for Port Atwood, and he immediately turned toward the scientists with fire in his eyes.

“Unfortunately, no. It doesn't work that way,” a scientist said, but he quickly shrunk back when over ten angry glares were directed his way. “Ahem... That is... This change doesn't seem to affect items with a certain amount of energy. Nexus Crystals won't grow in size, for example, and neither will Spiritual Materials. However, we have only been able to test this on our limited supply of materials in this short while. There might be some materials we can grow this way to great effect.”

Zac couldn't help but feel some disappointment at losing such a good money-making opportunity before it could even start. Being able to grow things like gold and steel might sound amazing, but mortal materials were essentially worthless in the multiverse.

Even Zac could conjure a mountain out of nowhere with **[Nature's Punishment]**, and powerful beings could harvest whole planets with a wave of their hands. Some Mystic Realms also contained shocking amounts of certain elements. You could find a world containing hundreds of billions of tonnes of purest gold, ripe for the taking.

Of course, it was still worth growing some materials since it was free. There was a large demand for construction materials to build and expand the towns of his force, and normal materials were enough to build houses.

Zac already gave up on the idea, but the demon wasn't as easily convinced.

"What about the walls of this place?" Ogras said with a frown. "That metal can't be something common. I couldn't even leave a lasting mark when going all out last time I was here."

"That- We are not sure how to explain the walls, but we have a conjecture?" another scientist explained as she adjusted her glasses. "We believe that the material of the base itself, while extremely high technology, is not spiritual in nature. It is some sort of advanced metallurgy that we don't understand. Its regenerative properties are in turn powered by an external energy supply."

Zac nodded in agreement, remembering the Technocrat vessel he visited. It was the same there. The Technocrats seemed to use advanced techniques to somehow drain high-grade materials from their spirituality, while still retaining their strength. It seemed like a waste of time to Zac, but it might be required for the materials to work with the "Dao of Technology".

"We haven't been able to prove this though, as we've been unable to take samples," she added.

They asked a few questions more about the mysterious growth, but there was only so much that the scientists had managed to find out. They neither had the tools nor the strength to get to the bottom of things, and most of what they knew was conjecture. Zac guessed that he would find out more as he ventured deeper into the Mystic Realm.

"Have you encountered any living beings?" Zac asked next. "Apart from the worms."

"No, but the amount of time we spent inside the actual construct is limited. Only three of us managed to get clearance," Tina said from the side. "We also never left the security door that protects this section, as we were afraid to open it and let the natives inside."

"It's good that you took it safe," Zac nodded before he asked with confusion. "But what do you mean not getting access? That console doesn't give access to everyone?"

"No," Tina said with a shake of her head. "I think it's bugged or something."

"Or it has some sort of requirements we don't fully grasp just yet," the head scientist added. "There seem to be some requirements though, the main being a minimum power. All the people with access are over level 50."

"Anything else?" Zac asked.

"Two are mortals, one is a cultivator. So spirituality might not actually be a boon but a hindrance," a scientist hesitantly said. "But it's too early to tell with such a small sample."

“Also, we only managed to get Tier-2 clearance, which only let us travel a very limited section outside. Only some doors opened for us. We might not even have been able to open that security door even if we tried,” Tina said.

“Maybe I had beginner’s luck? Or maybe I’m just that handsome?” Ogras grinned from the side, drawing multiple eye-rolls in response.

It would be a problem though if only Ogras could control that main exit from their position on the frontier. Would they have to station him like some sort of doorman just so they would be able to maintain their mobility? And what about further inside? There would no doubt be more barriers toward the core of the Mystic Realm.

“It might be looking for some specific genome that only a few in the multiverse possess. It shouldn’t be based on human anatomy considering a demon has had the most success though,” Joanna ventured. “If this place is built by Technocrats it shouldn’t make its decision on something like constitution or levels, right?”

“Right,” Zac nodded. “Anything else?”

“There has been seismic activity in the past two weeks. It might be related to the growth,” another scientist said after some thought. “The earthquakes have been mild so far, but they might cause troubles down the line if they increase in severity. The walls might break apart from the vibrations, allowing outsiders to enter our secured area.”

Zac nodded in understanding, a slight frown adorning his face. He had heard just how sturdy this place was from Ogras. Furthermore, it had managed to hold peak E-Grade warriors trapped for millennia. He probably wouldn’t be able to open new pathways by punching his way through the walls even if he exhausted himself.

Then again, few things could contend against nature itself, and it wouldn’t be too surprising if some cracks started to appear. But Zac didn’t feel that to be just a negative. There were obviously problems with mobility inside this place since the natives still hadn’t managed to escape to Earth. That probably meant that it would be difficult reaching either the Dominators and the Dimensional Seed as well.

“Thank you for your excellent work,” Zac said as he looked around. “I know you guys are tired of this place, but we can’t leave just yet. Some new intelligence has come to light since you were locked inside, and every faction on Earth is scrambling to get inside this place. We are already behind the others because of the cultists, so I will need to rely on your expertise a while longer.”

The scientists nodded without hesitation, and Zac guessed that they were more than happy to stay now that there was a bunch of powerful people to protect them. After all, what scientist wouldn’t be interested in researching a magical world in a hidden dimension that kept bending the laws of physics?

Everyone already knew what they were supposed to do, and they split up to lead their respective factions as one person after another emerged through the teleporter. The transportation of personnel took hours as the teleporter couldn’t stay active continuously. Kenzie shut it down on multiple occasions to make sure that her array wouldn’t suddenly crack from overextension. It was important to maintain function as long as possible in case something unexpected happened.

They would probably need to order other things from Calrin as well as they kept figuring out the rules in this weird place. Besides, they were still able to spy on the other factions as long as the tunnel remained open, and Zac might also need to exit in the next few days depending on how things panned out.

Setting up a proper command center and barracks would take the better part of a day. They didn’t know how long they would need to use this place for, so they did everything properly like they were building a whole town from the ground up. It felt

extremely slow to Zac, but he also knew that something like this would be completely impossible without the aid of Cosmos Sacks and superhuman strength.

However, the mass-scale expansion angered the only other resident of the secluded biosphere, and a hundred worm-like creatures suddenly burrowed out of the ground and struck the settlers to protect their domain. However, they were immediately cut into ribbons by Thea who happened to be nearby.

Zac's whistled in surprise at the efficiency at which she disposed a bunch of peak F-Grade beasts. It looked like her gain had been pretty impressive, after all. It might be a result of incorporating that Sword Intent she gained inside the Inheritance, but Zac distinctly felt that her Dao was improving at a rapid pace.

"She's become more powerful," Ogras said as he emerged from the shadows. "You should either bed her or dispose of her while we're here. Either way, you'll have dealt with a potential threat."

"Whatever," Zac snorted. "I'm tired of standing around watching the construction. Let's go check out the base for a bit."

"What? Right now?" Ogras blanched. "I'm hurt over here."

"If you're well enough to run your mouth, then you're surely well enough to walk around a bit as well," Zac said as he started gathering people.

Soon enough a preliminary scouting party was assembled, consisting of Zac, Kenzie, Ogras, Thea, and Istep. The insectoid acted as a representative to the Anointed, and he also had a scouting class which might come in handy.

They weren't planning on going too far today, but just to see if they could get credentials and observe the changes inside the proper structure. There was also a hidden reason only known to Zac and Kenzie. Zac wanted to see if he or at least his sister could gain access to the main systems of this research base, either through their heritage or through Jeeves.

That would give them a huge edge in the competition for the treasure. In fact, it might end the struggle altogether if they could simply lock everyone in place while they went and fetched the seed.

The group set out, leaving the massive Anointed to guard the base in case of another monster wave, but Zac felt it was unlikely. He had gazed around the biosphere from a high vantage with **[Cosmic Gaze]**, and he only found a few hundred markings of attuned energies. That last skirmish had probably wiped out over a third of all so-called **[Ocodon Worms]**.

It didn't take long for Ogras to lead them to the gate he had used the last time he visited.

"It's really further up," Ogras said as he stabbed his spear into the ground to use as a foothold, and he had to jump up to touch the screen.

The door swung open without incident, displaying what looked like a storage room or perhaps break room.

"Well, the arrays and technology seem to function just fine, even if this place is growing," Ogras muttered as he made to stride inside.

"Wait a bit," Kenzie said before she floated up to the screen herself, no doubt temporarily assisted by her Dao.

Zac looked on with anticipation, and his eyes lit up just like the screen the moment Kenzie touched the screen. A pleasant female voice spoke out through some sort of hidden speaker, confirming that another credential had been handed out.

**[Chief Caretaker Signature added. Tier-4 Access Added.]**

“What? Chief Caretaker? I only became a caretaker with worse access?” Ogras spat with jealousy written all over his face.

“The computer obviously felt you were meant for grunt-work while I was leadership material. Or perhaps I’m just that handsome,” Kenzie said with a grin, drawing a glare from the demon.

Everyone quickly followed suit to get their credentials, but the others weren’t as lucky as Kenzie. Thea managed to at least get Tier-3 access like Ogras, but when it was Ibtep’s turn nothing happened. And worse yet, the same thing actually happened with Zac.

Zac looked at the screen with confusion, some intrusive thoughts gnawing at him in the back of his mind. He knew there was something odd about the timeline when he was a baby, and the visions of Leandra he had seen had hinted at some things that Zac didn’t really want to think of. His sister had been given the best clearance right away, but he wasn’t even accredited? How could that possibly happen when it was their family that build this place?

Unless his family tree wasn’t as clear-cut as believed.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 568 - First Entry**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

Had to take a sick day yesterday that’s why no chappy. There will be a bonus one released sometime during the weekend though.

Not being welcomed like a long-lost son by the Technocrat console felt surprisingly distressing, but Zac pushed all errant thoughts to the back of his head. There was no way for him to get to the truth of the matter as things stood, and it wasn’t like his biological heritage was all that important to him.

Besides, Zac wasn’t actually worried about not getting any access even if the implications of his failure were troubling. He took out Leandra’s talisman, and he jumped up to the console once more. He might not have got the reception he wanted, but he still held the key to the kingdom.

**[Council Inspector identity confirmed. Tier-4 Access Added.]**

“What was that?” Thea asked with raised brows, looking up from the detritus she was studying.

“I got it in the Tower of Eternity,” Zac lied, and he was relieved to see that the demon played along without causing trouble this time. “The enemies on one of the levels were technocrats. I snatched this thing, and I just figured it might work here as well.”

“What’s a council inspector?” Ibtep asked curiously.

“No idea,” Zac shrugged, and this time he didn’t need to know. He really had no idea. “But this thing gave the same type of clearance at the technocrat level in the tower. Maybe they’re Technocrat law enforcement, and this is their badge?”

“Can I try?” Thea asked, and Zac agreed after some thought.

She jumped up just like Zac did, but a scowl appeared on her face when nothing happened, and the scowl worsened into a glare when Ogras snickered to the side. Zac

didn't know why, but he actually felt relieved to see nothing happen, and that feeling only increased when Ibtep similarly failed to gain any credentials with help of the token.

"Perhaps it is bound to me because I was the first one to use it," Zac ventured. "It would be weird if multiple people could use the same identity."

"Well, let's just go," Thea said with a scowl as she entered the base, with the others quickly following.

However, Zac held Kenzie back as he erected an isolation array. The others looked back at them curiously, but they soon walked further inside to not look like they were prying.

"Your clearance, was that by itself or something Jeeves did?" Zac asked when they were alone.

"It was Jeeves," Kenzie said, disappointment evident in her eyes. "I was supposed to get the same credentials as Ogras, but Jeeves made the system give me the highest clearance available to this terminal."

She still didn't look happy with the fact that she at least got a normal clearance, and Zac understood what she was thinking. This realm was supposed to be some sort of bridge between her and their mother, but she was only given the same treatment as an outsider. And even that was better than what Zac got.

It wasn't a good start.

"Don't worry about it," Zac said. "Just look at me. I was the same until I used mom's token. The technocrats are advanced but they can't plan for every eventuality. The place was abandoned by mom's family an incredibly long time ago from the sounds of it, to the point that mom planned on hiding out in this long-forgotten place. She was probably not even born when this place was created. It would rather be odd if we were suddenly given access."

"You're right," Kenzie nodded, her features easing up a bit.

"Besides, this is just some random terminal at the edge of the compound. The good stuff should be further inside. Or could Jeeves connect to some bigger system?" Zac asked.

"There wasn't anything interesting. Just thousands of years or automated reports on readings of the biosphere where we're staying inside. It seems that the terminal was mostly made for access and climate control. I can make it rain I think, but that's about it," Kenzie said.

"Well, put a hold on that," Zac said with a small smile. "At least it's a good start that Jeeves can connect with these things. I doubt any of the other factions can get that much out of the systems in this place."

The two soon rejoined the rest of the expedition, and Ogras led them down the same paths as he had explored before. Zac had already read the reports, but he was still shocked at how massive the place was. Some of it was probably due to the spatial expansion, but it was undeniable that this base was most likely bigger than his whole island even before it started to grow.

It was hard to grasp how a structure could be so massive. Port Atwood was roughly the size of Hawaii according to measurements taken by some geologists, and his mind had trouble computing such an undertaking. Then again, for the Technocrats building something like might be as easy as turning a page. They just needed to send out a few million robots to work around the clock for a couple of years.

They kept moving further and further inside, with Kenzie and Thea being responsible for most of the conversation. Zac and Ogras talked a bit as well, but Ibtep mostly walked in silence.

“You’ve been pretty quiet for a while,” Kenzie finally said. “You don’t think this is interesting?”

“A Hive made of metal, large beyond comprehension. It makes one wonder of all the marvels out there in the universe,” Ibtep said after some thought.

“You’ll be able to see them sooner or later,” Kenzie said with a smile.

“Perhaps...” Ibtep said with a sigh. “But Nonet will never get the chance, and neither will the rest of the Anointed. A lifetime of service to the Zhix, and only death is their reward. This is not cutting off weakness, it is cutting off our roots.”

The Zhix suddenly turned to Zac, its eyes almost burning.

“Can you do something?”

“Save the Anointed?” Zac asked with surprise. “I have no idea how to do something like that?”

“Here,” Ibtep said as he took out a stone gourd from his massive backpack. “Please don’t tell anyone I gave you this. Especially not Nonet.”

“What’s this?” Zac asked with a frown as he held the gourd. He could feel that there was some liquid inside, and he guessed that it wasn’t something simple.

“It’s the Elixir of Anointment,” Ibtep said. “I figured you humans have all kinds of ideas and methods, so I... borrowed it from Rhubat’s Hive. Perhaps you can find a way to improve it, to cure the bad side-effects of taking it. Perhaps even reverse the effect and allow the Anointed to cultivate as normal.”

Zac looked at the odd Zhix with interest. It appeared as though this wasn’t something he had come up with at the spur of the moment. The Elixir of Anointment was no doubt a highly controlled substance, and Zac had no idea of how Ibtep managed to abscond with it from one of the greatest Hives in the world. Perhaps he had gained some unique advantages from his class?

Furthermore, it looked like his actions were highly sacrilegious among the Zhix, but he still went through with it to save the Anointed. It was a reminder that Ibtep’s thoughts and actions were much more flexible compared to most Zhix, who were strictly bound by their precepts and conventions.

But could Zac do something, even if he had the elixir? Perhaps Jeeves could help once more?

“I’ll be honest, Alchemy is one of the areas where our planet is especially lacking,” Zac eventually said after he saw Kenzie surreptitiously shake her head. “We can’t even make basic pills right now, let alone improving these types of formulae.”

Ibtep only sighed and nodded its head, clearly not too surprised with the outcome.

“However... There might be a way,” Zac said after some hesitation. “I made a connection with a very powerful faction while undertaking a trial. They are called the Zethaya Clan, and they specialize in Alchemy. If there is anyone who can help fix the Anointed’s situation and these Elixirs, it would be them,” Zac said.

“Really?!” Ibtep said with shock.

“However, visiting them is extremely dangerous. They have not only D-grade Hegemons, but even C-Grade Monarchs under their employ. They could destroy this whole planet without breaking a sweat,” Zac said.

“Are you not friends? Did you not provide a proper gift?” Ibtep asked.

Zac blanched a bit before his face returned to normal. Blowing up their store and almost killing their direct descendant was more an act of war than a gift. However, that wasn’t the only trouble with using the Teleportation Token.

“Well, my identity is a bit complicated for a number of reasons. I might be a wanted man in the whole sector, or I might be considered a promising youth worth nurturing,”

The others were listening in on the conversation, and Thea’s eyes were practically burning as she stared at him.

“Just what did you do in the Tower of Eternity?” Kenzie said. “Ogras said that you made a splash, but that’s not it, is it?”

“I had a bit of a cultivation deviation,” Zac said after some thought. “This got a bit out of hand, and I had to kill a few hundred people.”

“A few hundred scions of the most powerful clans around, including a prince of the most powerful Empire of the whole Zecia sector,” Ogras said, almost looking like he had finally gotten rid of a huge burden, his smile growing wider and wider. “Your brother is probably a living legend by now, a bogeyman used to scare children.”

“Won’t this drag even more enemies to our planet?” Thea asked with anger. “Don’t we have enough to deal with?”

“Like you’ve contributed so much until now,” Ogras snorted from the side, which almost made the Marshall heiress flinch.

“That’s enough,” Zac sighed. “I didn’t plan for things to get out of hand like that. The System was manipulating things from the shadows. It released something that made everyone lose their minds, and it was kill or be killed.”

“Why would it do something like that?” Kenzie asked with confusion.

“To make the strong even stronger,” Thea muttered as her fist clenched.

“Anyway,” Zac said as he turned back to the eager Zhix. “I could send you or someone else to the Zethaya with this mixture, but they would still know you were related to me. They might catch you to get to me. And I won’t be able to save you, no matter how much I would want to. They are simply too powerful.”

“I would still be willing to go,” Ibtep said without hesitation. “As would any number of Zhix, no doubt.”

“The cost to activate this token is two Billion Nexus Coins,” Zac slowly said after having made his decision. “I can’t fork out that much money right now. If you can cover half, I’ll give you the token.”

The main use of that particular token was to concoct a pill for Alea as a last resort. Now that things turned out as they did, it didn’t hold as much value to Zac. Certainly, having access to a D-Grade Alchemist from a top-tier force would always be extremely convenient, but he wasn’t in direct need of getting some item or pill completed.

Still, you never knew what would happen in the future, and he wasn’t certain that giving it away would be the best move. They were one-time tokens, after all. So he decided to give a test of sorts to the Zhix. If he couldn’t even scrounge up the money for transportation, how would he survive being sent to a C-grade continent?

Of course, Zac had to admit that he had a selfish reason for relenting as well. He was extremely anxious to know about what people were saying about him in the multiverse. He needed to make some adjustments to his plans if it turned out that he had become a wanted man, and they would need to make preparations for Earth as well.

“I will do it! I am going right now,” Ibtep said as he started running back toward the base, no longer caring the slightest about the Technocrat base, nor apparently about the fact that he never got any clearance to return through the security door.

The insectoid would have to wait a bit in the break room as others kept going though, since there still were sections to explore. They finally reached the door leading to the “outer section” that Ogras had mentioned, but they didn’t immediately open it. For all they knew, there might be an army lying in wait on the other side.

“Do we keep going, or head back?” Kenzie asked as she turned to Zac for a decision.

“You go back for now. Let me and Ogras sound things out first,” Zac said.

“I’m coming as well,” Thea said without hesitation.

“Like glue, this one,” Ogras muttered from the side, drawing another glare from Thea.

“It’s just a preliminary scouting mission to see if there are any threats nearby. Ogras and I’ll go because we’re already in the E-Grade. You’ll have plenty of time to get tired of this place over the coming weeks,” Zac smiled. “We’ll be back in a few hours.”

“... Fine,” Thea eventually relented. “But I won’t be left behind when the real missions start. Try to find a hunting ground like the ones you mentioned. If we just spend our days searching without cultivating we might fall behind the other factions.”

“I hear you looked like you just underwent a thousand-cut torture a few days ago, and you’re already rearing to get beaten up again?” Ogras snorted. “Did the inheritance turn you into a simpleton?”

“None of your business,” Thea spat and walked away in the direction of the garden.

“Don’t be like that to my sister-in-law,” Kenzie admonished before she turned to Zac. “And you, blockhead. How hard would it be to take her with you? Just send that demon away on some mission and you’re suddenly on a date. What a missed opportunity.”

Ogras only snickered in response, clearly taking some pleasure in Zac’s helpless expression. Kenzie gave a reminder to be careful before she left as well.

“You know. The two of you might be a pretty good match. She seems to have picked up a masochistic streak just like you. You can play around in beast tides for fun,” Ogras laughed as he walked toward the console of the security door.

“Let’s just go,” Zac sighed as he readied himself in case of battle.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 569 - Rifts**

“Are you ready?” Ogras asked as he stopped next to the console. “You’ll have to deal with any eventual threat by yourself, you know?”

“I’m fine,” Zac nodded as a swirl of emerald leaves surrounded him. “Open it.”

Ogras nodded and touched the panel, and he immediately melded with the shadows as the door slid open. A fractal edge had already appeared on [Verun’s Bite], but Zac could quickly breathe out in relief as there was nothing on the other side. Ogras soon reappeared from Zac’s shadows as well, though his eyes were fixed at the corridor outside, confusion evident in his eyes.

Zac was just as baffled, as the scenery definitely didn’t match what he had pictured in his mind. Ogras had described the dilapidated state of the inner sectors in

great detail for his report, but everything seemed to look the same as in their own private area. The hallway was devoid of life or activity, but it was clean and without damage. The fractals that ran along the wall shone with bright luster, and there was no dried blood to talk about.

“How is this possible?” Ogras muttered from behind as he looked around in confusion.

Zac wouldn't immediately trust his eyes though, and he carefully entered the inner sector, readying himself in case what they saw was an illusion. But if it was one, then it had to be a damn good one as Zac couldn't feel anything amiss.

“Is the layout the same as before?” Zac asked after some thought.

“It should be,” Ogras nodded after looking back and forth for some time. “The missing pieces have been replaced, but the general layout is the same.”

Zac nodded in relief. He was afraid for a second that the Mystic Realm was able to move its corridors to rearrange its layout. That would have made it almost impossible to map the place out, and any progress would be random.

“I guess it's the arrays?” Zac ventured. “The walls slowly heal themselves, so there are probably even more maintenance functions. There might be repair-puppets or machines running around and replacing broken things or something. Pretty convenient for the natives if the materials they scavenge actually get replaced somehow.”

“That might explain why our sector is untouched,” Ogras muttered. “No point in breaking past this door if they can keep mining their old tunnels. Perhaps they have already broken through to our place before, only to find the same empty corridors and barracks as us.”

“Or they've already taken everything of value,” Zac noted with a grimace. “We passed a lot of empty rooms back there.”

“The simplest way to find out what's going on is by catching another native. The last one I took hostage actually went and died before I got a hold of anything interesting,” Ogras spat as he looked around.

Zac nodded in agreement. It was a shame how things panned out with Ogras' captive. He had only managed to confirm that the beastkin truly was a real-life werewolf and that they were of rival factions. A short time later the human had shuddered and died, likely from suicide as to not divulge any critical information. Perhaps he was afraid of leading a new unknown force to his faction's gates.

“So, where do you want to go?” the demon asked.

“Let's head in the direction where you saw those two fighting. Perhaps we can find some clues where the natives stay,” Zac said after some thoughts. “No point in looking for the core areas at this stage.”

“It's this way... I think,” Ogras said as he led the way.

It was quite a distance between the door and the scene of the battle, and Zac only got increasingly baffled as they walked. He just couldn't make sense of the mental map of the compound. He understood that the Technocrats might not have the same sort of budgetary constraints as earthlings did, needing to make the most out of every square meter, but the winding pathways felt extremely sub-optimized. It almost felt like this place was built just for the sake of it, and that they didn't really fill any objective.

“What do you think the purpose of these endless hallways is?” Zac finally asked after a while. “It would be one thing if there were a bunch of laboratories or office

space, but the rooms we've looked into are just empty storerooms. Most of the space between these corridors doesn't even seem accessible."

"I guess millions worked in this place if this really was a research base," Ogras slowly said. "That is the same as a decent-sized clan. Any organization of that size would need a vast number of supportive functions. Perhaps this area is some sort of ancillary area, and arrays that run this place are hidden within the walls. These corridors might just be for array masters to make their way between the arrays."

"So service corridors," Zac nodded in agreement. "That might be it."

"It's also possible it's intentional," Ogras mused. "That these pathways form some sort of array themselves. Just think of those lines in the sky over the fields. They are not random, but rather form some sort of pattern."

"An array as large as a small country," Zac muttered. "It should be extremely powerful."

"We can't guess what's in the mind of some Technocrats," Ogras spat. "They're all insane. No offense."

Zac snorted, but he kept mapping the surroundings in his mind. It was a shame that the magical map that the Zhix owned couldn't be transferred over here as it would have been a huge help. He had already checked his [Automatic Map] as well, but it didn't possess an indoor function. There was just one dot on the parchment, which called the base [SGR-03].

He guessed it was the abbreviation for the base, but he didn't know if it was the name given by Leandra's force or something decided by the force who took over after the technocrats left.

"So, while we're on the subject. Care to explain how the token from your mom could turn you into a Council Inspector?" Ogras said as he threw Zac a sideways glance.

"I don't know," Zac shrugged, and it was the truth. "I only found out about the credentials inside the Tower of Eternity, I didn't lie about that. Personally, I don't think it's real. I think it's something she prepared as some sort of Technocrat Array Breaker, something that would allow her to go where she pleased without divulging her real identity."

"You know what that means, right?" Ogras said with a calculating look. "You would have to be a real bigshot to accomplish something like that. I can't imagine what kind of person would be able to create something that could bypass all the defenses of the Azh'Kir'Khat Horde. We would be killed long ago by the Beastmaster or some other enemy if it was that easy."

"Well, I'm still trying to figure out the truth as well. I'm hoping we'll be able to find more inside this place,"

"You... Don't think she's here right?" Ogras hesitated, a flash of fear appearing in his eyes. "That could prove deadly."

"What are you worried about?" Zac snorted. "If she really is a big-shot she wouldn't be bothered with some E-Grade people."

"Maybe she isn't happy about cultivators hanging around her Technocrat children and decides to purge us all," Ogras muttered.

"Well, I'm pretty sure she's isn't here," Zac eventually said. "I'm almost positive she left earth to heal and avoid pursuit."

"That would be for the best," Ogras muttered as he kept leading Zac down the hallways.

Ogras had no trouble remembering the path, provided that the sector truly hadn't changed, and it wasn't that far either according to the demon. But Zac suddenly

felt a sharp spike of danger after they had walked for ten minutes. He immediately drew his weapon before he jumped back, not forgetting to drag the weakened demon along as well.

“What’s going on?” the demon asked with confusion as he looked around for any threats. “I didn’t sense anything.”

“I suddenly felt a pang of danger,” Zac said with a bit of confusion, as the surroundings were still the same sterile walls of metal.

“Well, go forward and test things out,” Ogras said after a brief pause.

“You’re really taking advantage of your wounds right now,” Zac muttered, but he still went along with the arrangement.

“Well, it should work like this even if I was back in top condition. If I get hit by something in here I might die, whereas you will get a flesh wound that might hurt for a couple of hours,” Ogras said with an uncaring shrug. “If there’s a trap it’s better you fall in it than me.”

“Well, whatever,” Zac snorted as he transformed [**Love’s Bond**] to its shield form.

He also activated both [**Nature’s Barrier**] and [**Hatchetman’s Spirit**], the latter mostly to gain a better sense of the surroundings. However, nothing much changed. It was still an empty corridor in the middle of nowhere. Just what was it that made his mind scream of danger?

However, he only needed to take ten steps forward to find the answer.

The previously innocent-looking corridor transformed in an instant, and Zac found himself on a collision course with a spatial tear. There wasn’t even any time for him to retreat, and his eyes looked on with horror as his coffin-shield hit the tear head-on. This was something he had been deadly afraid would happen, that his Spirit Tool, or rather Alea would be damaged from something that it couldn’t block.

However, the spatial tear didn’t actually cut the thick black lid apart like it would with almost everything else. The coffin somehow managed to push back at it, destabilizing it enough to disappear. The clash did leave a mark on the lid, but something like that would heal by itself quickly enough, just like the chains that had cracked during his fight with Void’s Disciple.

The scene was a huge source of relief, as not only were spatial tears one of the few things that could still cut him apart if he wasn’t careful, but it was also something that Void’s Disciple used when fighting. Seeing that [**Love’s Bond**] was this durable gave him a lot more confidence for their next fight.

Seeing as how limited the damage essentially meant he could push his way out of the trap, but he didn’t leave just yet. He instead swapped over to his Draugr-form, and the fractal shield of [**Immutable Bulwark**] infused with the Fragment of the Coffin appeared in front of the lid.

The mainstay defensive skill of his undead side was, unfortunately, suffering from the same fate as [**Chop**], where the skill couldn’t quite keep up with his recent growth. The strength of the shield was based on the quality of his shield and his Endurance, but the increase in its durability had clearly not been linear lately. He would have to upgrade it to an E-Grade skill for it to maintain its usefulness going forward.

However, while the skill wasn’t able to completely block the spatial tears that came close, it did still manage to weaken them before they slammed into [**Love’s Bond**]. It lessened the strain on his physical shield significantly, and Zac only needed to keep infusing more Miasma and Mental Energy into the skill to restore it.

Zac took one step after another as the buzzing sounds of void tears disintegrating echoed through the hallways. However, he didn't move back toward Ogras, but he rather kept going straight ahead.

A hidden spatial minefield had for some reason appeared to block their path, and Zac wanted to see if he could push through. Perhaps the anomaly only lasted for a few meters, allowing people to skip through if they were careful and skilled enough. Conversely, the whole area in this direction might be compromised, which would be valuable intelligence as well.

However, Zac didn't get far before new tears appeared out of nowhere, almost doubling the density of threats around him. Zac knew he was approaching his limits as new cracks were forming almost as quickly on his shield as they healed up again. But he kept pushing forward until there finally was a change to his surroundings.

A red barrier suddenly appeared five meters ahead, and Zac's eyes widened in recognition. It looked a lot like the barrier that Jeeves had conjured when he first met Kenzie in the border town. However, it was almost as though it was infected, with tinges of some unknown energy floating about within the shield. And it was from these corruptions that spatial tears kept spewing out one after another.

Some of the tears stayed put and hovered in front of the barrier, while others drifted about, some even disappearing out of sight. However, Zac's Danger Sense told him that they didn't actually disappear, but rather that they turned invisible somehow. However, just as Zac noticed the barrier, it was as though the barrier noticed Zac. A spatial storm rippled out from the corruptions, pushing the previously static spatial tears in the tunnel toward him while simultaneously spewing out an endless number of new ones.

This time there was no hesitation as Zac fled for his life, not even trying to break that barrier. He would be long dead before his attack landed. He spotted the demon in the distance looking in his direction with a slight frown, but his face suddenly turned into a mask of terror as Zac closed in on him.

"Lunatic! Did you cause a crack in this dimension?!" Ogras shrieked in horror as he started running, but he only got a few steps before he was wrapped up by a chain as Zac flashed past him like some sort of nightmare spider.

There was no way for Zac to return to his human form without getting ripped apart by the spatial storm, so he had to use the chains of **[Love's Bond]** to drag himself and Ogras away. He tried to hamper the progress of the rapidly approaching storm by erecting one fractal bulwark after another, but they were cut apart without slowing the tears by more than a second.

"What's wrong with this place?!" Ogras screamed, tightly wrapped by a chain, and Zac couldn't help but agree.

It was one hell of a place his ancestors had built.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 570 - The World is Ending**

The chains of **[Love's Bond]** slammed into the walls and floor of the research base with tremendous force, but they still barely managed to dig deep enough for Zac to propel himself forward. A swirling storm of spatial rifts was right on his tail, like a maw of a terrifying beast. If they caught up they'd both be ripped apart in an instant.

“Left!” Ogras suddenly shouted, and Zac immediately changed the course.

However, both Zac and Ogras couldn’t believe what they were seeing when the spatial tears actually turned to continue the pursuit, though many of them didn’t manage to pivot in time. There was no time for Zac to figure out why some dimensional rifts were seemingly alive, but the scene did give him an idea of what to do.

Zac kept turning back and forth in the endless tunnel, though he was careful to not stray too far from the pathway they came from. Each turn they managed to shake off another group of tears until there only were a handful left. A small group was manageable, so Zac stopped in his tracks and let Ogras down before he changed [**Love’s Bond**] to its shield form.

A second later another group of scars covered the coffin’s lid, but there were at least no threat any longer. They managed to escape unscathed, but a sheen of perspiration covered Zac’s forehead as he looked at the demon.

“Since when did spatial tears get tracking capabilities?” he muttered, and Ogras snorted as threw Zac a scathing look.

“What did you do back then? Everything was fine, then all hell broke loose,” the demon said. “By the way, you better never use that movement technique in public. I’m not sure I’d be able to survive the second-hand shame.”

“It’s not stupid if it works,” Zac muttered. “Did you find any clues what was going on?”

“I suddenly saw you disappear into thin air, not even leaving a hint of energy behind. Thirty seconds later a bunch of spatial tears appeared before you reappeared, looking like there were a dozen Rakefiends hot in pursuit,” the demon said.

Zac was surprised to hear that he had disappeared from the demon’s sight, just like some of the spatial tears seemingly appeared out of nowhere. It looked like the hallways were equipped with technocrat cloaking technology just like what he encountered by the Battleroach King. That technology didn’t release any energy either, at least not anything he could spot.

He still didn’t know what to make of the encounter, so he retold everything he saw in the booby-trapped corridor. Of course, he didn’t mention that Kenzie, or rather Jeeves, could create shields that looked a lot like the one he saw. He instead likened it to the orange shields that the Technocrat Incursion used. Ogras frowned as he listened, but he didn’t immediately offer an opinion.

“What do you think?” Zac finally asked. “Did you really pass through this way before?”

“I have never heard of something like this. But it sounds like something suddenly took control of those rifts if they originally were almost static as you said. My guess is that it’s a security feature. Did you notice? Not one of the tears hit the walls. They either turned to follow us or gave up to avoid a collision,” Ogras explained.

“It seems like a really weird security measure though,” Zac muttered. “It almost looked like the spatial tears seeped out of the Technocrat barrier like it was part of its energy source. Why make things so complicated instead of just adding some normal energy weaponry?”

“Perhaps it’s not how things were originally designed,” Ogras shrugged. “A powerful dimensional treasure is growing somewhere in the base. I’ve heard that grand treasures can affect whole planets. Perhaps Spatial Energies has somehow infiltrated whatever this place runs on.”

Zac nodded in agreement. He remembered the vision of the cursed lotus in the Tower of Eternity all too well. A whole planet went insane with bloodlust because of

its existence, and who knew what would happen if that giant didn't seal it before it was too late. However, the implications were clear if this really was the case.

"If the treasure is powerful enough to cause something like this before it's even born, then just how powerful is it? It might even be greater than D-Grade. The Low-quality D-Grade treasures I've found so far didn't have such a shocking effect on its surroundings at all.

"Well, the Tree of Ascension and that mushroom you found can barely be considered D-Grade treasures. Their ranking is as much based on their rarity as the actual power they contain. But I agree. Something like this should be Peak D-Grade at a minimum. No wonder that the cultists discarded everything for a chance at this treasure. It is likely worth more than your whole planet," Ogras said, the familiar tint of greed shining in his eyes.

"It's still odd that they only seem to be sporadically active," Zac muttered. "Unless the situation when you arrived the first time was out of the norm."

"Perhaps it was," Ogras ventured. "The blood and destruction wasn't fresh, but it wasn't too old either. Perhaps the defenses suddenly failed, allowing the natives to push further away from their bases than usual. Then the security measures recovered, and this sector became inaccessible again. We might be locked out of the rest of the base."

"But if that's the case, how will we ever be able to reach the core? If I can't survive pushing through in my Draugr Form, I don't think anyone of us will," Zac said with a frown.

"If the defenses have been down once, then it might happen again. Or perhaps the spatial turbulence here is a result of the artifact awakening, and is completely random," Ogras ventured.

Zac nodded before he turned toward the way they came from

"What are you doing?" Ogras asked with confusion as he followed in tow. "Ready for round two?"

"No," Zac said with a shake of his head. "But I want to see if the rifts are still there."

The chains of **[Love's Bond]** had moved them quite a distance in the minutes they fled, but they were soon back to the position where they stopped the last time. There wasn't a single spatial tear in sight the whole way, and everything looked exactly the same as before with not even a hint of a spatial storm having swept the hallways just a few minutes ago.

However, Zac still felt the same sense of palpitations from his Danger Sense from the area ahead of them, meaning that the tears no doubt still hid behind some sort of cloaking. He shot a second glance at the corridor just to make sure, but **[Cosmic Gaze]** still couldn't spot anything. Taking six steps forward took him to the outer layer of the spatial tears, and his vision immediately lit up from the powerful energies they contained.

It really was the same sort of cloaking technology.

Zac eventually stepped back and placed a boulder to the side of the corridor at a safe distance from the trap before left a communication crystal warning of the dangers ahead on top of it. He didn't know if it would be cleansed just like everything else, but it was worth trying out.

"And there really was nothing like this the last time?" Zac asked as he turned back to Ogras.

“No way, you think I’d forget to mention something like this in my report?” Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. “I wasn’t attacked a single time while I entered here, not counting the werewolf.”

“It’s a bit weird we’re being attacked at all,” Zac muttered. “I have a Tier-4 clearance of a Council Inspector. It should be enough for me to not get attacked just for walking down an empty corridor. There were no warnings or anything.”

“There might have been warnings though,” Ogras interjected. “Just that we don’t have the equipment to hear it. So what do we do now?”

“Well, there’s no lack of corridors,” Zac eventually said. “Let’s see if we can find an alternative route to the scene of the battle.”

The demon nodded in agreement before he led Zac down another way. However, reaching their destination was quickly proving easier said than done, and they were forced to reroute by the very same type of spatial barriers as before another twenty-six times before Ogras finally declared they had arrived.

Altogether they had walked almost five times the distance as the direct route, and even Zac was starting to become a bit confused by this seemingly endless labyrinth. But coming here was definitely worth it since they had finally encountered something different. They weren’t surprised that the bodies of the two fallen warriors were gone, but they didn’t expect to see that something else left in their stead.

A large steel board had been placed in the middle of the corridor, and two lines of words were written in an eye-catching red. The letters were penned in the general script of the Multiverse, which Zac had mostly mastered by this point.

***We are Clan Cartava, we mean no harm***

***The world is ending - Free us and gain an ally for life***

Beneath the words was an extremely intricate map that highlighted a certain path. It was a bit hard to judge, but it looked like it would take them up to half a day to follow the path indicated. As to where it led, the board didn’t say.

“A bit bombastic message,” Zac muttered before he thought of something. “Do you think it’s true? Will the birth of the treasure actually destroy the Mystic Realm?”

“I doubt it,” Ogras said, though not without hesitation. “The Zealots are crazy, but they are not idiots. They wouldn’t be so willing to move into this place if the treasure would blow up the whole mystic realm. Those guys clearly know what that thing is, and if it would break this place they would find some other way to snatch it. It’s easy to forget because of their antics, but that bunch of lunatics belongs to a proper B-Grade force that spreads far beyond this sector”

“So they’re lying?” Zac nodded at the signpost.

“They are either lying or they simply don’t understand what’s going on. We couldn’t find out what a Dimensional Seed was even on the outside, so how can these people know? I’m more interested in the second line. ‘Free us and gain an ally for life’? I guess that means the implicit meaning is ‘Hinder us and gain an enemy for life?’”

“I feel they’re trying to make first contact without divulging too much about themselves to either us or any other faction that might discover this thing. How did they know to leave this message here though? It’s clearly meant for us, or perhaps any outsiders, rather than some other native faction. Did you leave a note as well?” Zac asked.

“No, I tried to make it look like the two killed each other. I didn’t want my presence to be known at all. Otherwise, I would have snatched the bodies for further study,” Ogras said with a shake of his head. “I must have slipped up or they have some means that could see through my actions. What do you want to do? Follow the map?”

“Not right now,” Zac eventually said. “It will take us almost straight east for a huge distance. I’d rather get a better understanding of what we’re dealing with before I head that far from our base.”

A compass didn’t work in this place, so directions were obviously a bit unclear in this place. However, they had a rough sketch of the Mystic Realm thanks to Julia’s and Thea’s efforts, and it looked a bit like a crude drawing of a sun or a star, where their secured area was located in one of the outer spikes.

The whole core section of the Mystic Realm formed a shockingly large circle, and the map essentially detailed a path that kept to a small part of the outer rim. The indicated path did have a huge amount of backtracking and twists and turns as well, making Zac believe that it took the spatial rifts into consideration.

They had already encountered a large number of barriers in their preliminary exploration, and it wasn’t too out of field that there would be a lot more of them peppered throughout this place. This map might actually allow them to head over to the other camp while avoiding those spatial tears altogether.

“How is this thing still here though?” Ogras suddenly muttered, making Zac start and look away from the map.

“What?” Zac asked with confusion.

“All debris has been removed, even bloodstains are scrubbed clean. Why is this thing left untouched?”

“It’s made of metal that looks a lot like the walls,” Zac slowly said. “Perhaps the cleaning arrays or whatever doesn’t touch it because of that?”

“Perhaps,” Ogras muttered as he tried to lift the foot that the sign was attached to, but both were surprised to see that Ogras couldn’t budge it.

“Let me try,” Zac said and gripped the signboard, and veins started appearing across his forehead as he strained to dislodge the thing from the ground.

A snap finally echoed through the corridor as the sign gave way, and Zac was thrown backward from the accumulated force.

“What kind of super-glue was that?” Zac muttered as he rubbed the back of his head.

“Not glue,” Ogras muttered as he pointed at the base of the sign. “Look.”

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**Chapter 571 - Back-up Plans**

Zac curiously looked where the demon pointed and he realized that there were three thin spikes, each of them no more than five centimeters long, at the bottom of the sign. Just like the rest of the signpost they seemed to be made from the very same material as the walls, though the spikes had intricate engravings covering their surface.

His eyes immediately moved to the spot where the sign stood earlier, and he saw that three matching holes could be seen in the floor. However, the cavities were rapidly closing, and just a few seconds later they were gone. It would have been impossible to know that something was socketed there just a moment ago if they hadn’t seen it themselves.

“Weird,” Zac muttered, and he stabbed the sign down into the ground to see whether it would get stuck again.

However, a pinging sound echoing through the corridor, and three light marks on the floor were the only results of his attempt. Not even forcibly pushing it into the ground did any good, and neither did instilling the board with his Dao or Cosmic Energy.

“We’re clearly missing something,” Ogras eventually said after having watched Zac’s failed attempts for half a minute.

Zac nodded in agreement and stowed away the sign, hoping that his sister or the scientists would be able to figure out what’s going on with the help of that thing.

“You want to follow the map?” Ogras asked.

“We’ve done what we came for,” Zac said with a shake of his head after some thought. “Let’s return.”

The two started making their way back while simultaneously searching for other points of interest, but there was really not much going on. There were just more corridors and storage rooms, all of which were emptied apart from the occasional crate full of worthless materials.

They also made a slight detour to see whether Zac’s own leave-behind had survived like the signpost, but neither of them was really surprised to see that both boulder and communication crystal were gone. It wasn’t a disappointment though as it cleared some things up for Zac. There really were secret rules that governed this place, as evidenced by the native’s ability to manipulate the floor and sign like that.

Was this perhaps the true message this Cartava Clan wanted to convey?

The message was short, but it had exposed a lot. First of all, Clan Cartava knew of their existence somehow. Secondly, they showed that the previously thought impervious metal was somehow possible to influence to great lengths. The map might lead to a third clue as well. All-in-all it proved the value of the clan, and Zac leaned toward following the map as soon as possible.

They soon reached the security door leading to their area, and Zac used his credentials just to test that his unique title worked as well as the caretaker credentials. However, they didn’t immediately return to the settlement as there was something Zac wanted to try first. They walked into one of the massive empty warehouses, and Zac took out **[Verun’s Bite]**.

Ogras had already reported how sturdy the alloys the base was made from were, and seeing what happened with the Signpost had piqued Zac’s interest even further. He wanted to cut off a piece and bring it back for further study.

Zac walked over to a wall and swung his axe in a precise arc, but he only ended up with a slight pain in his wrist as the wall didn’t budge at all. He frowned and infused the axe with the Fragment of the Axe, and his weapon finally cut into the wall without too much resistance. However, it reminded him of the early days of the integration, where he barely managed to cut into the extraordinarily hard walls of his Nexus Crystal mine.

Worse yet, the wall quickly healed itself the moment Zac prepared to swing again. However, a minute of furious swings later he had managed to cut out a slab of metal that was as big as his fist, and it actually weighed over a hundred kilograms from the feel of it.

Ogras walked over curiously to take a look at the sample, but neither of them could make heads or tails of the situation. The alloy had definitely changed properties after Zac managed to cut it out, but not as they expected. He had almost thought that it would turn liquid from what they had seen, but it had only turned.... Worse.

It was definitely a solid like before, but Zac had no problem remolding it with his hands. It suddenly felt like it was barely as hard as gold, let alone steel. It was a far

cry from the walls, or the signpost that seemed to be extraordinarily sturdy as well. However, they didn't have the opportunity to play around for long before Zac's senses prickled as previously unseen scripts appeared across the walls.

Zac had specifically chosen to enter a storeroom to cut out a sample since not one of the warehouses they had visited were booby-trapped with spatial rifts. However, it was quickly becoming clear that not even these side chambers were safe as the whole room transformed in front of their very eyes. The walls turned into spears that shot toward them, and worse yet a red barrier had appeared across the exit, blocking their escape. A series of spatial tears emerged a second later, all of them heading for Zac.

"Give it back!" Ogras screamed as he dodged the incoming stabs, and Zac could only comply.

He tossed the slab of metal toward the wall where he took it, and they both breathed out in relief when the spears slowed down. However, Zac was still forced to block a series of attacks for half a minute before the room had calmed down again and the barrier disappeared.

"What a stingy building," Ogras muttered as he kicked one of the empty shelves, and Zac couldn't help but agree.

It had billions of tonnes of this alloy, and it couldn't share just a handful of the stuff?

So it was mostly empty-handed that the two returned to the town, though the signpost caused some waves among the core members of the expedition. Some were worried that their activities were already spotted, and a frantic search for hidden cameras begun. The scientists were instead more curious about the spikes, and the odd material that seemed to almost be alive.

Their first assessment was that their earlier assumptions were correct. It wasn't the material itself that was magical, it was either the script that covered the walls or some sort of energy that transformed it. However, why the natives could build a sign made from the material and maintain its strength while Zac couldn't even harvest a single ingot still eluded them.

Zac left the sign with his sister, hoping that they could figure some things out. As for himself, he didn't head out again. There was no point in him running around in those endless corridors himself. Zac and Ogras had been walking around for hours, but they had only seen a fraction of the immediate area. It was more efficient to send out a hundred scouting units who could work together to map out the place and mark all traps.

As for himself, he still had multiple things to work on, the most pressing being the intrusive Dao from Void's Disciple and pondering on the Dao.

This was both a way to save time and a way for him to relinquish some control. Zac knew he had a problem with delegating tasks he considered important since seeing Alea fall. He left the nitty-gritty to his people in Port Atwood while doing the rest himself. But his explorations had really driven home just how massive this base was, and the fact that he wouldn't be able to explore it by himself even if he was given months.

Things progressed quickly over the two following days. Kenzie's drone army was a huge help in mapping out the interiors of the base, which allowed the subsequent scouting squads to make rapid progress inside the Mystic Realm. The master map of the corridors was quickly expanded and improved upon without needing Zac to do much of the work himself.

There were a few issues that had quickly cropped up though. The drones were unable to move too far in the tunnels as Kenzie, or rather Jeeves, would lose control over them. This wasn't something unique to the Mystic Realm, but rather that the range of the AI was limited. Kenzie believed that this range would increase by a huge margin if Jeeves evolved, but there was no indication of that happening anytime soon.

Jeeves had only consumed a scant few items from the Technocrat Incursion, and Zac doubted an item that magical would be easy to evolve. That was exactly how Zac liked things though, as an overpowered AI was not something he wanted to deal with. It was better if Kenzie focused on her own Strength in Zac's opinion.

The real issue was the matter of the missing squad.

One Hundred scouting units and ten elite squads set out as soon as a strategy could be devised, and their goal was to find and map out the areas that the Drones couldn't reach. The elite units consisted of powerful warriors of all factions, and they were supposed to take the vanguard in case one of the native factions showed up. They were all equipped with a lot of powerful talismans, both offensive and defensive, to the point that they would be able to blow up half a city if need be.

However, one of the ten squads, which included three Valkyries, had simply gone missing. There had been no sounds of struggle, and there were no clues left behind. They had vanished without a trace. Zac himself had set out to search for them, but there was simply nothing to go by, forcing him to return after a few hours.

Zac initially suspected Clan Cartava of kidnapping his people, but after thinking it through he wasn't so sure. The map they provided seemed to indicate that the Clan was located to the east, while the missing scouting unit had rather tried to move northbound in search of a way into the core sections of the base. That might mean that the second force in the area that was responsible, or perhaps even some new type of trap.

But the spatial barriers that blocked the corridors weren't actually that dangerous unless you forced your way inside as Zac did, so most were inclined to believe foul play was involved. They also had no idea whether Clan Cartava was the werewolves Ogras encountered or the humans, or perhaps even a third force. In either case, it wouldn't be a surprise if there were both hostile and friendly factions inside the mystic realm.

However, the rest of the scouting units were making rapid progress, and the command center was bustling with activity as well.

A massive courtyard was immediately cordoned off for Zac in the original biosphere, which raised a few brows among the different forces. He already had a massive area for himself on his island, so people started to wonder whether he had turned agoraphobic or something. However, the real reason wasn't quite so exciting, though Zac still didn't want it to be known.

His compound needed to be pretty big to house not only his home, but also his Life-Death Array. Kenzie and Triv had dismantled it when they arrived to his cultivation cave a few days ago, though it only was a temporary measure until Kenzie was able to create an Array Disk able to match the death-attuned one in his possession.

Zac wasn't willing to let up on his soul cultivation, and who knew how long this place would be locked down when the Dimensional Seed awakened. This had become especially important after realizing that the array also kept his soul in check. Thankfully he only caused some murmurs with his massive set of concealment and isolation arrays, and there was no lack of open space around.

In fact, people had already spread out across all the Biospheres within the outer section they controlled. It allowed the various forces to keep to themselves a bit, and it was also necessary to deal with the limited amount of Cosmic Energy.

A surprising issue had cropped up while Zac and Ogras were off exploring. More and more people arrived in the Mystic Realm, and the supply of Cosmic Energy soon couldn't meet the demand. Thankfully this issue was solved the moment they split up.

The tunnel to the real world also held steady, and according to Kenzie it should definitely stay that way for at least another week, which incidentally was the deadline of the New World Government projects. It was Jeeves' opinion, based on data it extrapolated from analyzing the array that kept the pathway open. The cost of keeping it running kept increasing as the turbulence from the Mystic Realm's side slowly grew worse, and it believed the spatial chaos to reach a breaking point in around 7 to 12 days.

After that point, the turbulence would be too strong for the natural pathway to remain open. The array Kenzie set up would be rendered useless, and the portal would naturally close. Zac was pretty impressed that AI had managed to extrapolate such critical information just from an array, but he was perhaps even more impressed that the New World Government seemed to have figured the same thing out somehow.

It was a valuable reminder that even a weak force like the New World Government had a lot of talents that he didn't even know about. A lot of the top scientists of the old world were probably part of the government as well, along with any next-gen technology that the governments controlled before the integration. That might be what allowed them to make such detailed plans for the Mystic Realm.

With things being a lot clearer, Zac finally decided to take the risk and go ahead with his back-up plan. He had spent ten days in recuperation by now, and he was in peak condition apart from some remnant Dao that he still hadn't managed to completely route. However, he sorely needed more tools to deal with Void's Disciple, along with the High E-Grade elders who were apparently waiting for him.

He needed to break open the next floor of his Dao Repository.

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**Chapter 572 - Flames**

Zac normally wouldn't have done something so risky as to challenge a Half-Step D-Grade Golem, but he was running out of options. He had ambushed Void's Disciple with the strongest people he could muster, but he still walked away almost scot-free. Certainly, he did seem to have been slightly worse for the wear in the security feed, but their group was in a far worse condition.

He needed another power-up.

That was his greatest takeaway from the battle, and that feeling had only increased since arriving at the Mystic Realm. The influence that the Dao of Space had over this whole base was far greater than he had expected, and who knew whether that would bring Adcarkas even more advantages.

He had tried to come up with other ideas over the past ten days, but this was the only thing with a decent chance of success. His first hope had been to quickly find some way to awaken his bloodline, they hadn't found a single useful thing inside so far. There were a lot of signs pointing toward this being a bloodline research base, but the

useful stuff might all be locked in the center of the research base. Furthermore, the portal would close in a couple of days, so it was now or never.

It didn't look like his Hidden Node was gearing up to provide him with pure Dao distilled from Tribulation Lightning either, so he would have to risk his life for power once more. If he could gain access to the E-Grade skills he would gain a large boost in power, and the same went for Ogras and the elite Demons who had already evolved as well.

Besides, Zac wasn't doing anything he didn't have a certain confidence in succeeding. Zac believed that he had found a path to victory, or at least a way to survive the attempt.

It became possible only when combining a few things that had changed over the past weeks. First of all, was the discovery that **[Blighted Cut]** worked just as well on inanimate objects as it did on living beings. Even rocks would rot and lose their structural integrity when hit by the E-Grade skill of his Undead Class.

Zac had also confirmed the same thing on the guarding puppets he got for closing the Incursions. It was the most similar target to the trial of the Dao Repository, and his undead skillset was extremely efficient in taking them out. Even the captains were helpless against the combination of his extreme durability and high lethality.

Secondly, it was the fact that Triv had already confirmed that the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]** would work on his undead form. He had been worried before that he would encounter the same issue as with the Race-improving herbs. Luckily there were surprisingly almost no Life-attuned energies inside the seed, just a fiery power that would work even on the unliving.

Finally, he had visited Brazla five times over the past week, each time finagling a little bit of information about the trial as he mainly focused on finding out about the Dimensional Seed. The takeaway was that berserking items such as the seed were allowed in the trial, whereas powerful arrays or talismans were not. The logic was that surviving using a powerful Berserker Treasure could be considered a strength of your own, and a unique perk of cultivators with high Vitality.

This meant that he could use his Draugr-class, push it to the equivalent of Middle E-Grade with the seed, and restrict and grind down the trial golem while staying safe with the toolkit of his Fetters of Desolation-class. Zac quickly turned thoughts to action as he snuck back through the Spatial tunnel, with only the guarding Valkyries knowing he had left the Mystic Realm.

Zac wasted no time back on Earth either and he immediately teleported back to his compound. Everything pointed to him having almost a week, but he still felt the risk of getting locked outside. He had already decided that he would stay in Port Atwood at most for an hour or two, even if he had to drag himself back to the Mystic Realm while half-dead.

"Oh? I thought you had left. I was looking forward to some peace and quiet," Brazla snorted as Zac entered the Repository, but Zac still inwardly breathed out in relief when he saw that the Tool Spirit seemed to have one of his more amiable personalities today.

"I want to undergo the trial to unlock the E-Grade skills," Zac said as **[Verun's Bite]** appeared in his hands.

"So you think you're infallible now that you've spent some time among the weaklings," Brazla said with disdain. "Well, no matter. It makes no difference to The Great Sage whether you live or die."

Brazla lazily waved the arms of his golden robes next, and a portal appeared in the middle of the hallway.

“Just step inside and you’ll be taken to the trial ground,” Brazla said with disinterest.

Zac nodded but he didn’t immediately enter. He instead swapped over to his undead class while [**Love’s Bond**] transformed into its shield-form. Zac didn’t stop there either, but he also activated [**Vanguard of Undeath**] along with [**Immutable Bulwark**]. This would be a trial conducted by Brazla himself, and Zac wouldn’t take any chances. He might not get the opportunity to transform on the other side.

“So cautious,” Brazla snorted, but Zac only ignored him as he stepped up to the teleporter.

“Any last-minute advice?” Zac asked.

“The faster you fail the quicker I can return to my rest,” Brazla said after some thought. “So don’t dally.”

“Great,” Zac sighed as he stepped onto the teleporter.

The teleportation was immediate, but Zac didn’t even have an opportunity to take stock of his surroundings before a stream of lava the thickness of his thighs almost hit his head. He barely had time to move his shield in time, but he was still pushed back over ten meters from the incredible force of the molten rock. If that wasn’t enough Zac also was assailed by a terrifying heat until he finally managed to divert the stream in its entirety. He could feel a stinging sensation on his face, and he audibly groaned when he knew that he had become a monk once more.

However, he was still more concerned about the stream of molten rock as it wasn’t simple lava like the one in the Underworld. This lava contained a fierce spirituality, and Zac actually guessed that it could be considered a powerful E-Grade material. That fact alone made him gawk as he took stock of his surroundings. It was a huge sea of lava, with the only solid ground being the small island he was standing on.

Far in the distance rocky walls could barely be discerned through the smoke rising from the fiery lake, and they reached toward the sky in all directions until he could spot a circle of red sky straight above him. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that he had appeared inside a volcano, and a high-grade one at that.

Thankfully Brazla had saw fit to let him out on the only safe spot, a circular plateau that rose a few meters above the sea of lava and spanned around five hundred meters across. It didn’t seem to be a natural formation as it was perfectly circular and flat. Even its surface consisted of beautiful tiles, each of them with a unique image engraved.

The platform was mostly empty apart from what looked like an enormous anvil placed in the middle. Next to it was what looked to be a small pool of lava, no more than ten meters across. Zac guessed that it was connected to the massive lake, but he couldn’t be certain as the intense attuned energies that rose from that pond almost blinded him when using [**Cosmic Gaze**].

There were also several boulders studded across its surface along with a dozen slabs of unknown metals stacked to the side. The raw materials looked different from each other, but it was clear that all of them could withstand the intense heat without a problem, meaning they likely were spiritual metals.

At least Zac guessed anything that could survive in this harsh environment to be a valuable material.

Zac couldn’t be certain, but it felt as though the sea of lava was at least a dozen miles across, which meant this monstrosity of a volcano completely dwarfed both the volcano in the underworld and the one that the Church of Everlasting Dao had controlled. It almost beggared comprehension how much lava would be required to fill it up.

There was one break in the lava right behind him though, a single pathway leading across the whole ocean into a tunnel on the other side of the wall. But it was precariously narrow, just two meters across, and it was constantly being blasted by waves of magma or gouts of flames.

His first instinct was that his trial would take place on the other side, and Zac couldn't help but feel he had bit off more than he could chew by taking on this trial. He wasn't confident in making it across that narrow bridge even when using his sturdier class. The power in that sea of lava was just too intense.

However, a voice soon dragged him out of his musings.

"This was my creator's smithy. Or well, one of them," a grating voice echoed out, and Zac looked up to see Brazla floating in the air.

The Tool Spirit had changed getup since entering the trial ground, and he was currently gripping a grotesquely large hammer, its massive bulk even overshadowing Billy's club. It was golden just like everything else Brazla used, but this weapon actually had a palpable aura in contrast to the other weapons the Tool Spirit often conjured. A thought suddenly struck Zac, and he looked at the Tool Spirit with suspicion.

Was the guardian actually Brazla himself?

"A Celestial Craftsman such as Brazla wouldn't deign to lower himself to muck around in the mud with some child," Brazla snorted with disdain, clearly understanding what Zac was thinking. "Your opponent is over there. The Great Sage is only here to be amused."

Zac nodded in understanding as he turned in the direction the tool spirit was pointing in.

A ten-meter rock was lying on the other side of the stone plateau, looking just like the other boulders that studded its surface. Zac had initially thought that those pieces of rubble were things that had been spit out by the lava and accidentally fallen onto the plateau, but the truth didn't seem so simple. Just as Zac looked over a startling change took place as the rock itself exploded, causing the whole area to be shrouded in dust.

"Have fun," the Tool Spirit laughed as he floated higher in the air.

Zac wanted to swear at the cavalier attitude of Brazla, but he knew better than that. It was better to direct his ire toward the guardian than the tool spirit, as there was no telling that Brazla would do if he got annoyed. Zac couldn't see what was going on inside the dust cloud, but his **[Cosmic Gaze]** noticed that vast amounts of attuned energies radiated from its center.

Something illuminated the cloud in grey and a fiery orange, and Zac recognized both the Daos; Fire and Steel. Zac frowned when he felt the intense spiritual fluctuations, as they almost rivaled his own Dao Field. He had somewhat hoped that the trial guardian would be more like the Cyborg in the Underworld. It had possessed shockingly high attributes, but it didn't utilize the Dao at all, severely limiting the damage it did.

If the Cyborg had also been able to use just a Peak Seed rather than just its body, then Zac definitely wouldn't have survived the encounter.

However, he was clearly not as lucky this time around. An explosion erupted from within the cloud once more, and the blast forced Zac back a few steps. He quickly swallowed the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**, decidedly going all-out from the start. His instincts told him that undergoing this trial without it would be nigh suicidal.

It was as though Zac swallowed the molten ocean itself as a shocking force spread through his limbs. It felt like every cell in his body suddenly had a heartbeat of its own,

and all of them were beating like the drums of war. Even his soul had ballooned up to unprecedented proportions and Zac almost believed he was the heavens themselves for a moment before he found his bearings.

However, he couldn't sit still and wait to see what was going on in that ominous dust cloud. A surging momentum was building up in his chest, and it demanded release. A mighty roar escaped from his lips as he bent down toward the ground to rip out one of the intricate tiles. He would start this battle like he often did, with a pre-emptive throw containing all his bloodlust.

However, the stone refused to budge, and Zac felt a towering fury lambasting his mind, a fury directed at the creator of this place. How dare a mere tile setter subvert the will of a god? His arms shook with exertion, but it was to no avail. But Zac figured it might be for the best as he started running toward the cloud with purpose in his steps and death in his eyes.

After all, was there any better feeling than ripping apart your enemies with your bare hands?

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**Chapter 573 - Ash and Steel**

Ash and steel swirled in Zac's eyes as he pushed forward, urged on by the call of battle. His muscles trembled in anticipation and veins were popping out all across his body to accommodate the overflowing Miasma, and there was even a red haze rising from his very pores. It was no doubt weakness leaving his body, a miracle that the Zhix warriors could only dream of achieving.

The trial no longer mattered. The E-Grade skills no longer mattered. The only thing of import was the thrill of the fight, to use this smithy as an opportunity to temper himself in the fires of war. His axe was already salivating corrosive venom across the floor, no doubt anxious to bite into their shrouded enemy.

A third explosion erupted from within the haze, but Zac's anticipation only grew as his arm swelled. His power was already enough to rival the firmament itself, but it wasn't enough. He pushed into the cloud, but he only took two steps before he sharply stepped to the right as his axe fell. The pincer of a massive tong suddenly appeared and barely missed his head, its size enough to grab Zac's whole torso even when he already had turned into his ultimate form that rose over three meters into the air.

Zac only sneered as his bardiche fell toward the exposed hand, his response already planned out. His soul was one with the Dao itself, so how could a paltry sneak attack ever work? However, he screamed in anger when his foe didn't have the decency to lose his hand from the transgression. What should have been a fountain of nurturing blood only turned into a reverberating clang that finally pushed all the dust out of the area, exposing his prey.

And it was big.

The target towered almost three meters above him, but Zac didn't care about the specifics. There were weapons to clash with and limbs to cut, what else was there to know? His first attack had only left a jagged scar on metal and a small festering wound, far from accomplishing his goal. But wasn't that great news? How boring would it be if one swing would have ended the fight? This way he could keep tempering himself, keep reveling in the glory of slaughter.

The massive slab of a hand swiped out at him after being cut, and Zac laughed as he moved his shield to slam it out of the way. A faint voice whispered in the back of his head about a way to empower its defensive capabilities, but he couldn't abide by such cowardice. An intractable force pushed into the core of his being as he was thrown away, and the sweet taste of miasma appeared in his mouth as he slammed into the ground over thirty meters away.

But Zac had eaten the divine seed, making him invulnerable. He could be kicked down a million times, yet he would rise again to tear down his foes. Not even a second had passed before he was almost back at his target, launching a flurry of strikes aimed to maim and brutalize the big bastard in front of him. The tong kept slamming into him and throwing him away, but Zac was more than happy to go along with the cycle of destruction.

Every time he came back he could see a few more scars on his enemy while he was just fine. The wounds were like a beautiful piece of art, and Zac an artisan using his axe as a paintbrush. A bit more and a masterpiece would be born. However, the coward in front of him seemed to finally have realized the futility of catching Zac with its tongs.

Zac was the incarnation of war, his technique and movements the peak of perfection. To catch him unaware was as impossible as catching the wind. The miscreant was clearly on its last legs as it reached for something attached to its back, no doubt another feeble attempt to take him out. Zac laughed uproariously, as he gathered power in his fist to meet whatever his prey had in store. A punch felt like the right decision here.

Violence would be met with violence, and blood would be repaid with blood.

However, a piercing scream of danger finally managed to cut through the madness, and Zac's eyes widened in horror when he saw what was about to hit him. He barely managed to stop in his tracks and move his shield to block, but there was no time to activate **[Immutable Bulwark]**. He was also unable to completely dispel his accumulated momentum, so Zac was still caught by the edge of the enormous hammer and thrown to the other edge of the platform like a ragdoll.

His whole body hurt, but the pain was still muted and somehow distant thanks to the fierce killing intent still churning in his chest. However, his Danger Sense had allowed him to at least regain most of his rationality, though Zac couldn't be sure. He had felt completely lucid just a second ago as well, and that he had everything under control. But only now did he realize that he had acted like a raving lunatic, and worrying wounds covered his whole body.

Zac had severely overestimated his mental fortitude when planning this fight. He previously believed himself almost immune to the effects of taking a berserking item thanks to his experience dealing with this kind of mental affliction before. But it turned out that not even the Splinter of Oblivion had managed to prepare him for the insidious whispers of the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**.

Thankfully he wasn't hurt to the point of no return, though it didn't look great. His shield arm was hurting quite a bit, and there were even some cracks in a few bones. He hadn't used his defensive skills at all when he fought like a rabid animal, and his body had paid the price. His internal wounds were too numerous to count, and black ichor leaked from the seams of his black armor. He would probably have to use one of his two remaining **[Serene Flesh Pills]** to quickly recover from this mess.

At least he still felt power coursing through his body, allowing him to fight far above his normal capability. No matter if it was speed or strength, it had nearly increased by 60% as far as he could tell. Besides, Zac wasn't the only one who had taken

damage from his insane offensive, and he looked over at his target who seemed content to maintain its distance.

Only after having woken up from his furor did Zac get a proper look at what he was dealing with. It was indeed a golem, but calling it a robot might be more appropriate going by its appearance. It was a bulky bipedal machine that reminded Zac of a five-meter-tall dwarf. It was roughly the height of the greatest Anointed, but its circumference was a few times wider than even Rhubat's. Its four limbs were short and stocky, with an almost spherical torso that was clad in a steel mesh apron. The apron was mostly in tatters by now though, and Zac distinctly remembered having attacked it multiple times already.

Its head was attached straight on its torso without a neck, and in its right hand was an almost picture-perfect copy of the hammer that Brazla had in his hands earlier. The only difference was that it was wrought from some black metal, and it emitted an extremely heavy aura. The array on its hammer face was a bit different too, and Zac almost got a bit dizzy when tracing the extremely intricate lines. This was the weapon the golem had finally grabbed from its back to deal with him.

The golem still held the same steel tong as before in its left hand, completing the look of a mechanical blacksmith. It looked far more like a proper craftsman when compared to the Creators over at Zac's shipyard. Perhaps it really was one too, an assistant who had helped the original Brazla in his work. That would explain why the hammer emitted such shocking pressure.

Anything that could be used in forging spiritual metals would have to be extremely durable as to not break apart after a few days of hammering. The golem blacksmith was clearly made from some sort of attuned materials, making it exude an aura akin to Zac's own Dao Field. It wasn't quite at the same level, but it spoke volumes about the quality of the materials the golem was crafted with.

This was just further proven by his series of frenzied attacks earlier. Zac had maintained some sort of rationality earlier, or perhaps it would be fairer to call it a beast's instincts. He had primarily focused on cutting off the golem's limbs, and over a dozen strikes empowered by **[Blighted Cut]** and sometimes also **[Unholy Strikes]** had reached their mark before he was thrown away. However, the golem clearly had its limbs, and they seemed to be in working order.

However, that wasn't to say that his efforts were completely ineffective. The colors of the metals around the axe scars were decidedly darker than the rest of its body, meaning that Zac had laid the foundation for victory. He was clear on how powerful his new E-Grade skill was, and not even spiritual metals would be able to resist forever.

The golem might even have some problems judging by the fact that it didn't move toward him. It just stood in the distance and stared at him. Zac just needed to keep working on it and it would sooner or later lose its limbs. However, now that he was awake he would hopefully be able to do so without directly trading blows. After all, his body was sturdy, but not as sturdy as spiritual metals.

Zac really wanted to just sit down and rest up a bit first though, but he forcibly pushed those ideas to the back of his mind. The timer had started the moment that he swallowed the berserking seed, and he had no idea how long it would retain its effect. He had turned a bit insane there for a moment, but its potency couldn't be denied.

Its boosting effect was far beyond what **[Hatchetman's Rage]** provided, a qualitative boost that pushed every aspect of his power to the next tier. Zac knew there was no way for him to break through this golem's defenses without it, especially not if he was suddenly forced to deal with a weakened state.

Calrin's book only described the general properties of the Rageroot Oak and its seeds, but it didn't provide any details. He didn't know exactly how bad the drawbacks were, and when they would kick in. He only knew that it would last longer than a skill, 15 minutes at the minimum. That left ample time, but Zac was afraid that he would slide back into his delusions of being a god of war without notice. He needed to quickly finish this so that he could eat a soul-nurturing pill to calm down a bit.

Besides, the golem had finally started moving when it realized that Zac wasn't rushing back toward it, and it was already lumbering toward him.

Its step was slow and deliberate, and its weight caused tremors in the ground. Part of its slow speed could probably be attributed to the scars that covered its legs, but Zac also felt that the golem should have an attribute spread similar to his own; focusing on Endurance and Strength. It definitely wasn't something that excelled at speed, which was a shame as his current class was particularly effective against those kinds of targets.

A power-based class was a lot trickier to deal with. That swing before had contained a ruthless finality that had warned him of death and he didn't feel confident in trading a series of blows with the giant in front of him now that it didn't only use the restraining tongs and its fist. Not even with the seed empowering him to unprecedented heights.

But Zac already had experienced dismantling an even bigger golem during the hunt, and he knew how to deal with something like this. Zac released a deep breath as he started to walk back toward the golem, causing a storm of corrosive mists to spread across the whole platform. He didn't really expect the golem to be hurt by **[Winds of Decay]**, but he wanted to turn the battlefield more in his favor.

If some of the corrosive mists managed to enter the dozens of festering scars, then all the better.

The miasmatic mists of **[Fields of Despair]** soon billowed out as well, but it barely had time to spread out before the golem's chest expanded to the point that it almost doubled in size. A storm of fire spewed out of its mouth the next moment, spreading hundreds of meters in every direction and utterly destroying Zac's efforts in an instant.

Not a shred of his two skills remained, but the flames lingered on the floor, turning the plateau into an inferno as well. Zac stomped down with force, dispelling the flames in his immediate vicinity. But the temperature was definitely out of Zac's comfort zone, and he looked at the stoic golem with some trepidation. It looked like the golem had more abilities than just its physical prowess.

Zac had to admit that he might have taken on a bit more than he could chew this time.

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**Chapter 574 - Deathwish**

Zac swore in annoyance when he saw the blacksmith effortlessly quash his attempts to putrefy the surroundings.

Turning a battlefield into one that favored you and restrained your enemy was a basic tactic that both his classes possessed. His human side had **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, while his Draugr side had multiple skills in this category. Zac was hoping to use these methods to counteract the blistering heat, but he was out of luck this time.

There was no time to formulate a plan either as the hammer in the golem's meaty hand suddenly turned into a blur. The distance between the two was still over 200 meters, but that wasn't much to E-Grade beings. Zac immediately conjured a fractal bulwark to meet whatever blow the guardian had prepared, but he frowned in consternation when the hammer slammed into the ground right in front of it rather than launched an attack in his direction.

It obviously wasn't a mistake, and Zac's first guess was that it launched something through the ground, like an earthquake or metal spikes that would rise to stab him. However, Zac had still underestimated the advantage that the golem enjoyed in this place, and he was shocked to see a monstrous pillar of smoldering rocks rising out of the lava lake behind him.

It looked like a fiery dragon jumping out of the sea, and it reached almost a hundred meters in height before it started falling in a parabolic arc. Straight toward Zac. There was no hesitation as Zac started running as quickly as his legs could carry him. He would probably be able to block the pillar as it only held the attunement of the lava sea itself, but doing so would fill no purpose.

The stream of lava slammed into the ground half a second after Zac got out of the way, causing a wave of magma to splatter in every direction. Even its fiery droplets were as large as small boulders, but it was far more manageable for Zac to control and he easily blocked the ones who flew in his direction. However, the attack had left pools of magma across half the plateau, severely limiting Zac's mobility. Just the ambient heat was causing a constant drain on his Miasma, and this only made it worse.

Zac frowned at the scene as he felt that the golem really was cheating. His **[Cosmic Gaze]** could clearly sense that there seemed to be some connection between the robot and the sea of lava surrounding them, which steadily supplied it with a stream of power. It all surged toward a spot roughly at the same place as his own Duplicity Core, which no doubt was the command core of the golem itself.

Destroying it would instantly end the battle, but it was easier said than done. Those kinds of cores were always the most heavily protected components of a puppet, and this blacksmith was no exception. Zac would have to cut his way through the extremely thick plating of its torso if he wanted to take out the golem that way.

And Zac didn't know if he had the energy to keep fighting that long, especially when the Golem was getting outside help. It was like the Dao Discourse all over again, and Zac was pretty certain that this thing would never run out of steam unless he somehow managed to break that connection.

He briefly considered erecting **[Profane Seal]** now that the lava pillar had already landed, but he eventually discarded the idea. The golem was still in peak condition, and Zac felt that he would have to wear the thing down a bit before trying to entrap it. He could only use the skill once, and it would be wasted if it immediately got destroyed by that huge hammer or another lava pillar.

First thing first, he needed to sound out the power of this thing, this time while in control of his faculties. Zac made his way toward the robot, the black armor of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** at least somewhat protecting him from the scorching heat. He still couldn't quite match the golem in bulk even in this form, but the disparity wasn't nearly as bad as without it.

His fractal bulwark repositioned itself to the front of **[Love's Bond]**, superimposing his defenses. Zac didn't have any movement skills to increase his speed, but the plateau was only so big. Each step forward increased his momentum, and he was in front of the golem in just a few seconds, his accumulated force already transferred to a mighty swing aimed to strike down its left leg.

His arm had already swollen up to a size that matched the golem's own as **[Unholy Strike]** was pushed to its limits once more. He needed to dig deeper and deeper with every swing, further increasing the amount of corrosion that could be left behind. However, the robot blacksmith responded with a speed that belied its stocky frame. Its hammer was somehow instantly moved to its left hand, and it pushed the massive hammerhead down toward the ground to block Zac's swing.

The clang of two metals clashing reverberated across the whole area and the inner walls of the volcano bounced the sound back, making it sound like the tolling of church bells. But Zac had no chance to appreciate the hauntingly beautiful sound as he looked at the hammer for signs of damage, only to come up empty-handed.

The first clash between weapons had ended without a victor.

**[Verun's Bite]** had reached new heights since its evolution, but the densely inscribed hammer was obviously a lovingly crafted treasure as well. A fractal had lit up on its side, completely protecting it from getting cut into by the furious swing of Zac's axe. He had managed to cause some damage to the metal plating on the golem itself during his earlier rampage, but it seemed that the hammer itself had reached a far greater level of durability. He didn't even have a chance to apply any corrosion with the array blocking the blackish liquid.

However, the power of Zac's swings wasn't anything to scoff at even for a half-step D-Grade golem. It contained layers of empowerment from multiple skills and the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**. Its power was far beyond Zac's normal limits, and even the dragon wouldn't have been able to withstand its might. The enormous golem stumbled back a few steps and the hammer was pushed away, exposing its legs once more.

Zac's eyes lit up at the opportunity, but the blacksmith managed to expertly make use of Zac's force to power a counter-swing before Zac had the chance to swing again. The enormous hammerhead moved in a precise arc, with Zac's head at the end of its trajectory.

There was no time to move away, so Zac forcibly stilled the whispers in his mind that told him to fight fire with fire. He instead readied himself to block the swing, moving to intercept it with his shield. Blocking a direct hit would activate **[Deathwish]**, and the distraction would hopefully create another opening to attack.

The array on the hammer lit up as it approached Zac's barrier, illuminating the pitch-black armor in gold. Zac's aura surged in anticipation of launching a counter of his own, but his abyssal eyes widened in shock when the golem's attack reached **[Immutable Bulwark]**. A weight that Zac never had felt before hit him, far surpassing any Gravity Array he had ever encountered.

It felt as though he was being crushed in the heart of a black hole as a soul-crushing pressure immediately threatened to break every bone in his body. The furious energy of the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]** surged within his body to counteract the effect, but even the top-quality berserker item proved insufficient. It only took a fraction of a second to realize that his arm would break if he didn't back down.

He immediately angled the shield to allow the hammer to slide down its side and slam into the ground instead. The shockwave would still wound him at such proximity, but it was far preferable to being brutalized by a direct hit. However, just as Zac was tried to divert the attack, so did the golem try to keep the original trajectory. It somehow seemed to be able to anticipate and match Zac's actions, and small adjustments to its stance was all it required to keep the force pointing toward Zac.

A desperate push thankfully forced the golem a bit off-balance, allowing Zac to take a step to the side as he angled the shield even further. The hammer slid down its surface, the friction causing sparks across the whole coffin lid. But the massive slab of

metal slammed into the ground instead of onto Zac's body, allowing him to breathe out in relief.

Zac still felt like he was being punched in the gut by the force from the shockwave, but he grit his teeth and stood his ground knowing he would have taken damage for nothing if he didn't respond in kind. The golem's reaction was quick as it tried to keep Zac at bay with its tongs but he managed to push them aside with a swipe of his axe. However, his mind wasn't exactly on the tongs, but rather another realization.

It was **[Deathwish]**. He hadn't truly blocked the hammer's strike, but he had still absorbed some of the force from the swing while redirecting most of it. He didn't actually know that was enough to activate the strike, and he quickly took the opportunity to conjure a massive spectral blacksmith that slammed down toward the back of the blacksmith's head.

The huge golem seemed to take the threat of the spectral hammer extremely seriously, perhaps thinking it would do as much damage as its own. It actually swiveled its torso 180 degrees to meet the attack while its legs stood rooted in place. Zac's had no idea that its upper body could spin around like that, but he could spot an opportunity when he saw it.

The massive blacksmith's hammer rose to meet its spectral twin, and the whole ghost was obliterated in an instant as the true hammer ripped through the false one. Zac didn't care about that though as he lunged for the closest leg. One, two, three swings bit into one of the deeper scars as Zac desperately tried to cut off its leg in one go. However, the metal was simply too hard, and Zac was beset by a counterforce almost strong enough to sprain his wrist.

The barrage was enough to deepen the wound at least, and this time even more corrosive liquid empowered by the Fragment of the Coffin was left behind. The golem's response was quick and it kept spinning its torso clockwise as it kept its hammer swing going. The two-meter wide hammer once more ripped through the air as it moved straight toward Zac, but he was already moving away from the blacksmith.

The hammer ripped through the air just in front of Zac's face, a gust of fiery wind buffeting his face through the slits of his helmet. However, Zac didn't care as it felt as though a new door had opened to him thanks to the latest exchange, and he realized that there was huge room for improvement in how he fought as a Draugr.

Zac had always been extremely confident of his Endurance since getting his second class, certain that he would be able to outlast anyone in a brutal melee. That had made his technique sloppy, where he relied on his body to be able to take the beating. There was no reason to take on unnecessary punishment though; he needed to improve his efficiency.

Rather than blocking 100% of a strike he could block 20% while diverting the rest of the force. This was just how many of the more experienced fighters had acted, like how Void's Disciple had somehow sapped the strength from his strikes. It would result in the same outcome, but with him wasting less Miasma and getting wounded less.

He needed to increase as much damage as possible while taking as little damage as possible. It was such a basic concept, but it was easier said than done to apply it in the heat of battle. The tongs were already coming for his head as the blacksmith advanced on him, but Zac took a step forward while angling his shield once more, allowing the pincers to push right past his head as he came close.

The corrosion from his previous strike along with his Dao was still lodged in the golem's leg, but it was quickly being eroded by a fiery heat emanating from the Puppet

Core. He couldn't allow his earlier efforts to go to waste, and he swung twice in quick succession once more before a terrifying swing of the hammer forced him back.

Zac's mind screamed at him to keep going, to stop backing away from the battle, but he refused to give in to the battle lust again. He had already taken too much damage, so he needed to be measured in his approach. The golem kept pushing forward with an intractable momentum, like Zac was just a stubborn block of metal on the anvil.

Zac felt a slight in his arm as he rerouted the hammer toward the ground, and another spectral blacksmith appeared. The golem froze from indecision for an instant, but Zac shook his head when it quickly chose to ignore the ghost.

The spectral hammer slammed into the golem's head with furious velocity, but Zac knew it was just a hollow strike. However, Zac's eyes widened in surprise when the hammer slammed into the golem with enough force to cause it to stumble, and a small but noticeable dent had appeared on its head. There was no earthly reason that his counter-skill could do enough damage for something like this to happen except one.

**[Deathwish]** had evolved to the next stage.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 575 - Tempering**

Zac was elated to see that another one of his skills had evolved. It had become increasingly hard to push them forward lately, partly because of his lack of good targets to practice on. **[Deathwish]** was a mainstay of his class too, a skill that was a constant drain on his enemy and the bane of any Dexterity-based classes.

However, Zac knew that he couldn't expect too much from the skill in this fight, even if it had just reached Late Proficiency. The spectral blacksmith's attack did cause a slight dent, but the golem immediately regained its footing. The small stumble did give Zac the opportunity to launch another barrage of axe swings before the tongs came for him though, which was exactly what he needed.

He tried to repeat his earlier successes and block the pincers next, but he had underestimated the golem as Zac suddenly had a meaty leg slam into his shield as the tong disappeared from sight. Zac was thrown away once more as pain wracked his body. He had made some improvements to his fighting style just now, but it was too little too late. This couldn't go on.

He was getting better, but the golem was also slowly adapting, and Zac would bleed out before he managed to completely dismantle that thing if he didn't change things up a bit. He eventually made a decision as **[Love's Bond]** turned into its offensive form, its four free chains hovering in the air around him like venomous snakes. Droplets of corrosive liquid fell down on the burning tiles beneath, causing a constant sizzling sound around him.

The fractal shield of **[Immutable Bulwark]** disappeared as he no longer had a shield to base it on, but that was easily solved as Zac took out one of his back-up shields. It wasn't anything special, but it was enough to conjure his defensive skills. The defensive capabilities of the skills were considerably worse when based on a normal shield, but it wasn't like Zac dared to take a direct hit in any case.

He rushed back to repeat the process, and the golem met his approach with a wide vertical arc of the hammer again. Zac had already expected this, and a new fractal

bulwark had already appeared to divert the hammer. He quickly took a diagonal step as the four chains shot forward. Two of them moved to intercept the golem's left hand as the other two tried to poke holes in the golem's legs like spears.

Zac himself was in hot pursuit, though not without his own difficulties. His left arm hurt like hell as the provisional shield had been turned to scrap metal that dug into his arm. Even blocking a portion of the hammer had completely destroyed both the fractal bulwark and the shield beneath. Zac could only throw the twisted shield to the ground and summon a new one from his Spatial Ring as he reached the golem's legs.

Metal clashed against metal, but the crisp sounds were slowly turning dull as the metal was steadily being deteriorated. Zac almost decided to go all-in then and there, but he quickly shook his head as he backed away. He had almost let his success go to his head, allowing the seed to take control once more.

But the two-meter wide hammer was still a deadly threat. One hit and it would be game over. Zac couldn't help but briefly think of Ogras while he walked a tightrope, moving back and forth to whittle down the golem while narrowly avoiding taking a lethal blow. Cold sweat would no doubt be running down his face and back if he was in his human form right now. Was this how fighting felt like for Dexterity-based cultivators, walking hand in hand with death?

It was just terrifying.

However, while the golem was mighty, but it was ultimately not a sapient cultivator. It had some sort of battle-algorithm that improved over the course of the fight, but Zac was able to figure the preferred trajectories and fighting patterns soon enough. The swings that had felt life-threatening a few minutes ago no longer felt as dangerous as Zac and his chains swirled about.

The golem's attacks still contained the same power as before, but Zac was well aware of its reach and speed by now. He didn't take as much damage from his blocks either, as he slowly managed to lessen the force he forcibly had to block every time. In the beginning, he was taking on up to 30% before he managed to divert the strike, but after just a few minutes that number should have decreased to 20%.

His back-up-shields now managed to withstand two strikes before breaking apart, and his arm wasn't hurt every time either.

The chains of **[Love's Bond]** kept slamming into the scars with extreme force, and the ground was littered with metal plates and molten puddles from the disposable shields. It was like the chains lived their own lives as they targeted the weaknesses of the golem, and Zac could almost exclusively focus on creating as much damage as he could.

The golem, or rather its components, finally couldn't take it any longer after another five minutes of intense battering. It took a step toward Zac to launch its next swing, but a snap echoed out as its left leg shattered like it was made from brittle glass. The ceaseless attacks of **[Blighted Cut]** had finally permeated the whole leg, and Zac's eyes lit up as he saw his opportunity.

He immediately stomped into the ground while the golem toppled over, and the cage of **[Profane Seal]** sprung up around them. The lava lake just outside the cage immediately started to wear down the skill, but Zac didn't care about that as he ordered the 20 spectral chains to shoot toward his prey. The four available chains of **[Love's Bond]** were even quicker as they wrapped around the golem multiple times before they slammed into the ground to pin it down, especially focusing on keeping the hammer-wielding arm in check.

The golem desperately tried to pry itself free with its tongs, but Zac was already upon the golem with his axe, and a frenzied series of swings destroyed the arm before

the spectral chains had even reached him. Soon enough the golem was barely visible beneath over a dozen chains, but Zac still felt a pang of danger as the whole golem burst into searing-hot flames.

Zac's eyes widened in alarm, knowing that his spectral chains wouldn't be able to last more than a second or two in this state. But he still didn't back down. If the golem managed to break out then it was over. He was running dangerously low on Miasma already, and just summoning **[Profane Seal]** had been a risk.

A bit more and his Specialty Core would activate by itself, and a 3-second phase of weakness was enough for him to be turned into paste. The fires spread from the golem to the point that the pile of chains looked like a bonfire, and even Zac's armor had been ignited.

The golem was seemingly trying to bring Zac down with it to hell as it exuded more and more flames, but Zac ignored the scorching pain across his body as the fire danced in his eyes. He was waiting, each moment feeling like an eternity, but suddenly there was a change in the skill fractal on his arm.

The real strike of **[Blighted Cut]** was finally ready.

Zac didn't hesitate, knowing his time was limited. The moment felt the change in **[Blighted Cut]** he immediately seized the opportunity. This was what he had worked so hard for, and he needed to make it count. Three black waves appeared around the golem and they shot into its bulky frame in an instant, cutting through the flames like they weren't even there.

It was like the strike was both corporeal and a projection as it passed straight through the chains that held the golem in place, and the waves disappeared into the golem's torso, each of them aiming for the same spot. The robot blacksmith frenetically struggled for another few seconds, but it was futile. A subdued crack could be heard from within, and Zac breathed out in relief, knowing that the golem's core had been cut apart.

Without that, it was just a big hunk of metal, and it unsurprisingly stopped moving just a second later. There was no surge of energy entering his body to confirm the kill, but that was always the case with beings without sapience. The blacksmith was ultimately a puppet rather than a true golem cultivator like the Creators, and destroying it didn't award any Cosmic Energy at all.

It was as though the air left Zac's body after golem stopped moving, and he barely managed to escape the flames before he helplessly fell down on the ground from exhaustion. He still felt the effects of the seed coursing through his body, but he knew his body wasn't in any state to take advantage of it any longer. Activating the final and ultimate strike of **[Blighted Cut]** had drained him of his last Miasma as well, and his Duplicity Core had already begun reverting him back to a human.

He would normally hold off on turning back to human considering the state his body was in, but Zac didn't have much choice at the moment. He could only prepare the **[Serene Flesh Pill]** and he popped it into his mouth the instant the transformation was complete. A surge of pain wracked his body the moment he came alive, but it was thankfully quickly soothed by the High-Quality Zethaya pill.

His body was still drained of energy though, and he was content lying on the ground gasping for air a while longer.

"What a disgraceful display," a disgusted voice snorted, and Zac turned his bleary eyes toward the Tool Spirit who had appeared next to him at an unknown time. "I knew you were talentless, but this was beyond the pale. What kind of craven backwater planet was I sent to if you're the best of the best?"

“Well, the golem is down, which means I passed, right?” Zac sighed, his voice barely recognizable.

“Luckily for you, my creator didn’t add any base requirement of skill or grace, so you barely passed,” the Tool Spirit said with a shake of his head. “As specified, you will be provided with a round of tempering for being the one to open the second floor of the Dao Repository. Considering your level you would be given the full 30 minutes, but I’ll go ahead and deduct 10 minutes for cheating by using a Berserking Item.”

“What tempering? And wait, I got a reduction for using the seed?! You never mentioned anything like this before,” Zac said with a frown as he dragged himself up to his feet. “You said it was okay using things like that!”

The fact that he had missed out on some rewards because the Tool Spirit wasn’t doing his job was infuriating, and anger overcame his caution as he glared at Brazla.

“Well, you never asked,” Brazla laughed, clearly delighted by Zac’s anger. “Besides, The Great Sage only said that you were allowed to use it. I never said that it wouldn’t affect your grading.”

Zac wanted to argue that it clearly making things difficult for him, but his head was just a mush after the fight. He could only point at the Tool Spirit in righteous indignation, which only seemed to delight Brazla even further.

“Can’t be wearing those rags during the tempering though,” Brazla muttered, and Zac found himself floating in front of the Tool Spirit the next moment.

“Wai-” Zac screamed, but it was to no avail as everything from his robes to his spatial ring was dragged off his body, leaving him stark naked.

“Now, off you go.”

Zac’s eyes widened in alarm, but the Tool Spirit was impossibly fast as its golden hammer turned into a blur. He wasn’t even able to consider a response before the Tool Spirit had already attacked him. Zac was already exhausted from the battle, but he inwardly knew that he wouldn’t have been able to block that strike even in peak condition. It was just on a completely different level than even the golem just now.

Thankfully there was no painful sensation from being hit by the golden hammer, but alarm bells still went off in his head when he was launched into the air. Worse yet, he found himself completely restrained as his body became covered in dense golden fractals. He couldn’t circulate his Cosmic Energy at all, and his mental connection to his Spirit Tools was severed as well.

He was utterly helpless, and he could only look on with trepidation as he flew closer and closer to the enormous anvil in the middle of the plateau. The battle before had caused massive shockwaves and fires to spread across the whole area, but the massive slab of metal still stood there completely unscathed.

Zac’s flight got an abrupt end as Zac slammed into the anvil’s side face first, and the blinding pain almost made him pass out. He wanted to get away, or at least reset his broken nose, but he still couldn’t move because of the runes covering his body.

So he could only mentally curse the tool spirit one last time as he started sliding down toward the pool of magma below.

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**Chapter 576 - Plunge**

Zac struggled against the restraints that covered his body, but it was to no avail and the only reason he didn't cry out in shock as he fell toward the red-hot magma was that he was physically unable to.

It was a poignant reminder of the true power of the annoying braggart who usually just messed around in the Towers of Myriad Dao. Brazla might not be a real cultivator, but he was definitely a top-tier D-Grade Tool Spirit, perhaps even approaching C-Grade. Going by how powerful Verun already was in E-Grade, then Brazla was probably the most powerful being in Port Atwood, with Karunthel being the only possible exception.

The lava in the small pond below him was definitely something far more dangerous than the lake surrounding the platform, and Zac was almost thankful that he couldn't activate [**Cosmic Gaze**] close to the pond. The shocking amounts of attuned energies below him made the hair on his arms stand on end, and looking straight at it with his skill might have blinded him.

However, Zac quickly calmed down even as he still fell. Suddenly being stripped naked and thrown into a metal anvil with enough force to break his nose had plunged his exhausted mind into chaos, but he quickly remembered what was going on. Brazla might be annoying and fond of causing trouble, but he always did what his creator had instructed him to.

The Tool Spirit's execution was definitely lacking, but this was no doubt an opportunity that Zac had to seize.

That notion only grew stronger as an extremely intricate script appeared on the pool of lava just before he dropped into it, and Zac immediately realized how similar it was to the golden array that currently covered and restrained his body. He didn't get the chance to get a better look though as he was submerged in the lava the next moment, forcing him to quickly close his eyes.

His body instinctively strained to swim up to the surface, but he was still completely unable to move as he sunk deeper and deeper into the depths. Thankfully, he quickly realized that the lava around him didn't hurt at all. The magma rather felt like a warm embrace, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief. That by itself confused Zac even further as fresh air somehow entered his lungs even when he was supposed to be submerged.

Was the lava around him just an illusion?

The notion was so strong that he actually opened his eyes, but surrounding him was just an endless red, with the occasional wisp of white-hot fires. It definitely looked like lava, but his vision wasn't completely obfuscated as he could actually see his body just fine, making him feel like he was submerged in water rather than molten rock.

The situation was extremely odd, but his attention was quickly seized by the small sparks of white flames that flitted about before they disappeared. There was something unique about those flames. It was definitely fire-attunement, but also something more. It felt like he could only grasp the edge of it, similar to how he was unable to understand even a corner of the Chaos Pattern back then.

It was pretty annoying that he couldn't activate [**Cosmic Gaze**] to get a better look, but he wasn't too sure it would do him any good against those small fires. They didn't feel as vast as the Purple Lightning or domineering as the System's presence, but they were extremely pure. The impression they gave Zac was that all the attuned energies he had seen until now were fake, a hollow mimicry of energies truly touched by the Dao.

Was this perhaps how C-Grade attuned energies looked like? Or was it something else entirely? It honestly didn't feel as powerful as something that could be considered

C-Grade, and it was rather more reminiscent of the Dao Intent that Thea had been imparted from the Inheritance. In either case, it was definitely something valuable, and Zac's heartbeat sped up in anticipation.

The odd surroundings made it impossible to get a proper bearing but it felt like he was being submerged deeper and deeper by the second, to the point that he had descended thousands of meters into the depths of the volcano. The pure energies around him only seemed to become even stronger as he sank deeper, and the surroundings quickly changed from red to a warm yellow until it was just a world of pure white.

When the color gradient stopped changing so did Zac's impression of descending, and he knew that his opportunity was about to arrive. Brazla had said that he had gained 20 minutes of Body Tempering, and he guessed that the clock had already started ticking. The problem was that Zac had no idea what to do next.

He didn't own any bloodline tempering manual just yet, and the white fire around him didn't seem to do anything apart from heating his body. He wasn't a cultivator either, so he was unable to naturally absorb the energies from his surroundings. Not that he was sure it would be possible to circulate a Cultivation Manual when covered in a set of restraining runes.

However, tendrils of warmth finally started burrowing into his body, filling him with that mysterious force he had sensed earlier. Zac was initially worried that such a force would be dangerous to absorb when he was just E-Grade, but the white fire was extremely gentle as the warmth spread across his body. The intensity kept increasing, but it didn't hurt at all.

It was as though his body could contain an endless amount of this force without issue, and that he could withstand the steadily increasing heat in his body. The exhaustion from the battle was soon forgotten, replaced with a state of complete relaxation. It was like he had returned to the womb, and his eyes were starting to get heavy.

But Zac's eyes shot open just as they were about to close as he noticed a startling change across his body. His skin had started to change color, rapidly turning molten red. Zac couldn't believe what he was seeing as he looked down at his hands. It looked like he was made out of metal, and that this metal was heated in a furnace to a melting-point. It didn't hurt at all though, and Zac guessed this was the tempering that Brazla mentioned.

Zac was about close his eyes again and let the warmth wash his body clean, but a sudden force slammed into him, startling him awake. It felt startlingly similar to when the blacksmith golem pummeled him with its hammer, and sharp pain radiated across Zac's torso. It wasn't quite at the level of the terrifying **[Bone-Forging Dust]** he had used a couple of times by now, but it was still extremely painful. However, he knew that he had to endure to get the full benefits of whatever this tempering entailed.

One slam after another made Zac's body shudder, and the words of Brazla reappeared in the back of his mind. Less than a minute had passed and it felt like he was about to pass out from the pain, how would he be able to withstand almost 20 more minutes of this? But Zac forcibly pushed those cowardly thoughts out of his mind, and he emptied his mind as he welcomed another hammering.

This was a god-given opportunity to empower himself, and he wouldn't waste it.

The hits kept increasing in both strength and frequency though, and Zac's conviction was quickly starting to crack. He had essentially been turned into a piece of raw metal that was being worked over by this mysterious array, his flesh turned malleable by the heat around him. Were there even any benefits of doing this? He was

just being pummeled over and over. What if this opportunity was meant for Peak E-Grade warriors who had properly evolved their bodies to D-Grade long ago? Was this perhaps even detrimental to him rather than beneficial?

However, those invasive thoughts were suddenly thrown away after a couple of minutes as Zac suddenly could see palpable results, and his eyes lit up as he wished the hits could come even faster.

His body was still glowing red-hot, but murky clouds were being expelled from his pores all across his body. They tainted the pure white of the surroundings for an instant before incinerated to the point that they were utterly annihilated. These clouds were definitely impurities and various types of sequelae trapped in his body, and he could even recognize their sources with the help of the weak aura they emitted just before they were burnt away.

First to get expelled was the fiery energies of the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**, and small explosions erupted as they came in contact with the magma. Next were the stubborn Dao energies left in his body from his fight with Void's Disciple. The sight made him widen his eyes, as there was a lot more stuck in his body than he had realized.

His pores kept spewing out the two foreign Daos, and by the time the slams no longer could extract any more he had expelled even more than he had removed himself over the past ten days. The tempering didn't end there though, and Zac's eyes were wide with marvel as impurities left from his **[Bone Forging Dust]**, node-breaking pills, and all other sorts of treasures spewed out one by one.

Every second he felt as though his body was becoming lighter, and worry had long been exchanged with elation. Who would have known that such a huge boon was hidden within the Dao Repository? The magical molding even managed to find hidden remnants of the wound Mhal left when implanting him with the Draugr-samples so long ago, and the deathly energies were quashed in the lava lake.

Zac couldn't help but lament that his time in the lake was limited even though it felt like his body was being broken and remolded every second.

That feeling only grew when there was finally a reaction from his **[Void Heart]**. It had been utterly silent since swallowing the Tribulation Lightning, but it had suddenly started vibrating as it gobbled up a small part of the fiery energies in his body. Not only that, but Zac' actually felt two more spots on his body vibrate in a similar fashion.

First was the same spot in his head as he had sensed before, the spot that Zac suspected to be another hidden node related to his soul or the Dao. The second vibration came from his spine down at the small of his back. It immediately made him think of the **[Bloodline Marrow]** he had been awarded before, and he could only lament that it was left in his Spatial Ring.

Unfortunately, the three spots only seemed to resonate with each other, with the two spots seeming unwilling to be opened. Zac tried everything he could to steer more of the mysterious energy into those two spots, but it was to no avail. Soon enough there were only seconds left before twenty minutes had passed, and Zac knew that this opportunity wasn't enough to break open the two nodes.

He could only give up on breaking open those two nodes, but he also knew that just finding them was a huge step forward. Before he only suspected the spot in his head, but now he was 100% certain about the location of two hidden nodes. Forcibly opening them was just a matter of finding the right sort of treasure by now.

The time was running out, so Zac readied himself mentally in case he would have to swim out by himself somehow, but a scene right at the end made him almost forget about the hidden node.

Not one, not two, but six small runes that clearly were of different origins suddenly shot out between his brows just before his vision blurred. The next moment he found himself panting on the ground in the hallways of the Towers of Myriad Dao, and Zac was relieved to see his spatial ring and treasures lying next to him.

His mind was foggy and unfocused after having both gone through a tough battle and the subsequent tempering, but he forced himself to stay awake as he reached for his spatial rings and robes. Just getting dressed felt like an almost insurmountable task, but by the time he was clothed again, he actually felt a lot better.

The six runes he saw at the end were definitely cause for concern, but Zac couldn't stifle his curiosity as he quickly opened his status screen. His body had been thoroughly cleansed and tempered, and he hoped that the encounter had pushed him to D-Grade race. However, confusion rather than elation marred his face after opening the status screen. His status had changed, but definitely not as he had expected.

**[E] Human - Void Emperor (Corrupted, Unawakened)**

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**Chapter 577 - Corruption**

Zac mutely looked at the revised line in his status screen for a few seconds. There was only one way to interpret the addition even though it didn't exactly match the intelligence he had gathered so far. His lava bath had purified his constitution to the point that his previously unknown Bloodline could be listed, even if it hadn't completely awakened yet.

And he had to admit that it sounded pretty damn powerful.

Zac almost ate his **[Bloodline Marrow]** then and there in hopes to properly awaken it, but he barely managed to restrain the impulse. First of all, his body was in a completely drained state after using the **[Berserking Pill]** even if the lava bath had managed to expel most of the toxins. Eating a treasure in this condition was essentially the same as flushing them down the toilet.

But more importantly, the fact that the status screen termed his bloodline 'corrupted' gave him pause.

He had never heard of something like this before. Zac had bought a few general missives about bloodlines after realizing he might have one, but they didn't cover anything like this. The unawakened line was just as described, but the mention of corruption had never been brought up at all.

The most basic way to explain a bloodline was to call it a genetic mutation brought on by an extremely powerful ancestor. After reaching a certain stage their bodies became vessels of their cultivation path, fundamentally affecting their genetics. The body of someone walking the path of fire would essentially turn into a being whose flesh could turn into flames at will. Even their convictions and beliefs were added into the bloodlines.

The rules of what was required to pass on a bloodline weren't exactly clear, but the general consensus was that one needed to reach middle C-Grade at the least for one's body to transform to the point that their cultivation path could be passed on. However, this actually happening was still extremely rare, which meant that there most likely were more requirements. Some posited that there was a requirement of affinity

and understanding of the Dao, whereas others believed that great mental strength was required.

In either case, one needed to be beyond the norm for a bloodline to be born. It was also generally believed that the more powerful a cultivator became, the greater a bloodline they would leave behind. A C-Grade Monarch's bloodline would probably be the lowest rung, to the point that it disappeared after a few short generations. Only the most powerful beings could leave behind bloodlines that could stay on generation after generation.

The effect of bloodlines was extremely varied as well, ranging from giving huge boosts to controlling specific Daos or calling upon the strength of your body, whereas others were essentially useless. Some might even become detrimental to the descendants if the ancestor practiced some cruel and unorthodox path.

Bloodlines started unawakened, but they could be awakened through either cultivating a Body Tempering Manual or some specific Bloodline Manual. Of course, some treasures could get the job done as well, such as the **[Bloodline Marrow]**. The average effect of the first awakening was generally set at around 15 to 25% provided the bloodline matched your path, and this boost could be anything from cultivation speed to power output in battle.

That meant that a mortal with a combat-oriented bloodline was almost equal to a cultivator without one, as one got a boost from their heritage while the other got a similar boost from their Cultivation Manual. Of course, having both would provide multiplicative boosts, which was the situation most cultivators longed for. Higher-quality bloodlines could even provide unique skills, and Zac considered the devouring ability of **[Void Heart]** to belong to that category, even though he couldn't control it yet.

The line that said Corrupted on his status screen was actually the place that should display the rarity of the bloodline. Bloodlines shared the same rarity as classes, going from Common to Epic. Zac guessed there were even greater bloodlines as well, though that wasn't something that a cheap missive in the Zecia sector would either cover or confirm.

Bloodline rarity was also fixed according to the manuals, and not something that either training or treasures could impact. A higher rarity generally meant a more powerful bloodline that could be awakened more times. Of course, a higher-rarity bloodline was a lot harder to improve as well, just like how it went with classes. Furthermore, the number of awakenings you could perform depended on your bloodline's rarity to a large degree, but it could still be influenced by hard work and opportunities.

But what did corrupted mean? The line felt extremely ominous, to the point that Zac almost felt he was beset with an affliction rather than an opportunity. Nothing in the information missive had prepared him for that line, and he wasn't sure whether.

But Zac eventually decided to simply keep going. There were multiple possible explanations of why his bloodline was considered corrupted, with the most likely one being that it was affected by his Technocrat heritage. Perhaps the System immediately considered his body corrupted from that as a basis.

He had to admit there being a possibility of his condition being a result of his mother's experiments as well. But even if that was the case, it still shouldn't be something detrimental. Leandra should have been trying to make a powerful bloodline or modify an existing one to suit her needs better, which should mean that it wasn't a detrimental constitution.

What was important was that it was useful and provided benefits, and Zac already felt that it was doing just that. For now, he only had only one Hidden Node doing some work, but Zac believed it might prove extremely useful in the future. He still remembered the vision of that mysterious man passing by a sun, stealing its essence for his own cultivation.

That was exactly what he needed; an alternative method of cultivation that would help him move forward. Reaching the higher grades of Cultivation as a mortal was already akin to defying the heavens, he was also doing it with multiple high-rarity classes. Gaining the ability to break past bottlenecks might prove even more helpful than yet another power boost.

Zac could only put the matter aside for now, and he instead turned his attention to the state of his body. The tempering process had hurt to the point that he almost went insane, but it hadn't actually wounded him. The pain that he felt just a minute ago almost felt like a dream, and even the wounds from the battle with the golem had improved considerably. He still felt too tired to move at the moment, so he simply scrambled up to a sitting position for now.

It was a huge wake-up call for Zac to see the amount of impurities he had expelled during the tempering. He had thought himself almost in perfect condition based on looking at his interiors with his spiritual sight, but there was actually so much gunk left behind without him noticing. Almost every life-threatening encounter seemed to have left a hidden wound, and who knew if the tempering even got it all.

However, the most worrying part wasn't the sequelae, but the small marks that had been expelled right at the end. Zac barely had a chance to study them before he was returned to the repository, but he did manage to sense familiar auras from a few of them. The first, and perhaps the most worrying, definitely came from Faceless #13. The mark carried the same sinister aura as the spikes he still carried around in his Spatial Ring.

Zac couldn't imagine having a hidden mark left behind by that man a good thing, no matter if it was meant to track or slowly kill him.

The second mark was made him think of Rasuliel Tsarun for some reason. He didn't know how he had been marked by the Tsarun scion, but his eyes suddenly turned to the Spatial Ring on his finger. He had already swapped the ring he got from the Tsarun Disciple for the much superior ring he looted from the Mentalist, but perhaps he had been branded when stealing Rasuliel's ring.

That would also explain why he didn't get a mark by taking the second ring, as he wasn't actually the one who killed the mentalist or stole her ring. It was rather that squirrely thief who had tried to rob them while they both were out of commission.

The third mark, which was also the one that emitted the strongest energies, felt just like he cursed sword in his possession. He guessed that it was a hidden trap of using that accursed thing, a brand that would grow in power with every use. Nothing good could come from having that thing in his body, and he vowed to not use the sword again unless absolutely necessary.

Finally, there was one mark that was created with miasma, but Zac didn't get much more than that.

The fact that the mark was wrought from miasma severely limited the number of suspects. Be'Zi, Catheya, Adriel, and perhaps Mhal were the main ones, though Be'Zi being the source felt like a long shot. Not because Zac implicitly trusted her, but rather that he didn't feel confident that an opportunity created by the original Brazla would be able to extract something that she had planted on him. Case in point; the miasmatic cage in his mind were utterly unaffected by the tempering.

Be'Zi was definitely far stronger than Brazla ever was, sitting at B-Rank cultivation at the minimum. That was a full two-stage difference, which should simply be too much to deal with for an opportunity left behind.

The last two marks Zac couldn't make heads or tails of, but that was perhaps because they were weaker than the first four. The other four marks were all far more intricate, which perhaps was what allowed Zac to recognize them. His best guess was that they were left by people in the Base Town.

In either case, it was better to have them gone than remaining, but the experience made him wonder what else was hidden in his body. Unfortunately, there was not much he could do about the situation at the moment. Most cultivators had elders to turn to, far more powerful cultivators who could blast most hidden threats by circulating their own energies through their descendants' bodies.

Zac didn't have that advantage, meaning he would have to rely on other opportunities to purge himself of hidden threats. He knew there were cleansing arrays out there, and it was perhaps about time something like that was added to his cultivation cave.

"Are you done wallowing about? I can't have trash littering my floor," the all-too-familiar voice of Brazla echoed out from above, prompting Zac to reluctantly get up on his feet with a grunt.

"Thank you," Zac said, though he didn't feel all that grateful to the Tool Spirit itself, but rather its creator. "Is there any way for me to get back to the lava pool for another round of refinement?"

Zac wasn't thinking about going there right now, but rather when reaching Peak E-Grade. He almost regretted partaking in such a good opportunity right now, as he probably would be saddled with another round of impurities by the time he was ready to form his Cultivation Core. He still remembered reading about Galvarion, the aquatic mortal who needed to spend over a century to remove all his impurities. Zac simply didn't have that kind of time.

He had made a huge splash in the Tower of Eternity, and there was also the issue of The Great Redeemer coming for revenge in a hundred years even if Zac managed to obscure Earth. Urgency pushed him forward, and his goal was to reach at least the middle stages of D-Grade before Earth got integrated for real.

At that level he should only have to worry about C-Grade Monarchs, and those kinds of people generally wouldn't come for a tiny D-Grade planet like Earth. There were only so many C-Grade cultivators in a remote sector like Zecia, and they were either in perpetual secluded cultivation or exploring the most dangerous corners of the sector in hopes of progressing their cultivation.

But cultivating with that speed would be hard even for a genius cultivator, let alone a mortal. But this lava pool might be one of the keys to speeding up the process.

"Greedy little brat. Do you think such purification is something mundane that can be used as one wanted? It was only possible thanks to the Earthen Fire seed that my master found in the bottom of that volcano, and it has a finite source of power. It had already been nurtured for tens of millions of years by the time my creator found it on an uninhabited world, and he kept purifying it for dozens of millennia as he turned the whole mountain into his forge. It was so limited that my creator couldn't even bear to use it for his own cultivation, so it was eventually left to future generations," Brazla said with a haughty voice.

"So it was something that magical?" Zac said with disappointment, though he wasn't too surprised.

Galau was the one who taught him about Pill Toxicity and how hard it was to get rid of it. If ridding your body of hidden threats was as easy as jumping into a pool of lava, then all volcanoes would have long become strategic resources of the multiverse.

“Of course, why else would the System expend so much energy to cram my master’s forge into a pocket dimension left in a corner of my body?” Brazla snorted.

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**Chapter 578 - Sacrifices**

“What? It was the System who created that trial?” Zac asked with confusion. “I thought it was Bra- ahem, your creator who put it there for his descendants?”

“Are you stupid?” Brazla sneered. “My creator didn’t plan on being dead when his descendants would use the Towers of Myriad Dao. Why would there be restrictions and trials to visit the higher floors? It was the System that refitted my body a bit, perfecting the towers even further. Seems like a waste of effort to award the towers to someone like you if you ask the Great Brazla, but here we are.”

Zac was surprised to hear that the System was personally stepping in to modify its rewards, but he had to admit that he had never considered things from Brazla’s perspective. Indeed, why would the original Brazla put forth such trials to access the skills? Most Dao Repositories were free to enter for the owning force, with the elders deciding who could get what skills. But Zac had to accomplish feats of strength to gain the same sort of access.

Furthermore, it was the same with Thea’s library. She would also have to pass some sort of trial to gain access to higher-tiered intelligence. So it turned out that the System was refitting these quest rewards, both improving them and making them serve as motivational- or training tools.

“Besides,” Brazla said with a shake of his head, a hint of wistfulness flashing in his eyes. “That world is no more. Now that the final fragment was awakened, it will be lost forever, with the System taking the last energies.”

“Then why couldn’t you let me have it?” Zac muttered with some annoyance. “If the System was going to steal the rest anyways.”

“Those were the rules that were put in place,” Brazla shrugged. “It doesn’t really matter in either case. You would only have gained the same amount of time even if you waited until reaching middle E-Grade for real. I guess it was a bad matchup. If you focused on Agility or Intelligence you might have had a shot even without that treasure. That puppet was even dumber than you, after all.”

Zac felt a bit disappointed he couldn’t have his body forged inside the lava again, but he couldn’t complain. It was a free bonus that he didn’t even know existed, and while it hadn’t directly improved his power it did solve a lot of hidden issues for him. Besides, there was still the real reward to go for. However, Zac wanted to take advantage of the Tool Spirit’s uncharacteristic mood to see if he could get some information.

“The tempering expelled something from my body I didn’t know was there. Six marks, probably left by my enemies. Do you know what those are?”

“I saw, you really shouldn’t let yourself get branded like that. Most of them were tracking marks, and one was a curse,” Brazla snorted.

“Tracking marks? Are heading for earth now because of me?” Zac exclaimed. “Is it a Karmic Link?”

“Karmic Link? Don’t get blinded by that one Karmic Cultivator who wants this desolate rock for some reason. Those methods are beyond rare. Isn’t his family famous through this whole sector because of their extremely rare ability to touch upon that Dao?” Brazla snorted. “Even then, a small mark like those that got expelled isn’t enough for something as great as intergalactic tracking. Perhaps if it was a supreme existence placing the mark. But why would someone like that turn his gaze toward you, or even this whole sector for that matter?”

“Then what is it?” Zac asked.

“The trees and bushes around my square-“

“I’ll have someone beautify and prune the forest around you,” Zac sighed without pause.

“I can’t tell you about the curse, but the others are minor markers that would stay dormant until triggered,” the Tool Spirit said as a satisfied grin spread across his face.

“Triggered? How?” Zac asked.

“The better ones could trigger upon entering an array covering a set area, usually a town. The worse ones would require a direct scan of your body specifically. It would essentially make it harder for you to stay hidden while traveling. Intelligence houses are notorious for placing such things on their clients if they think they can get away with it, but anyone with a portable array can do the same. Those runes are easily destroyed by purification methods though, so they are generally useless against the wealthy,” Brazla shrugged.

Zac sighed in relief, realizing it wasn’t as bad as he had previously feared. The looming threat of The Great Redeemer had really made him a bit paranoid about the dangers of the multiverse. But it was worth remembering that the plan of Vovidis A’Heliophos was thousands of years in the making, and it still seemed easier said than done to find even Earth after all that effort.

It was a weight off his shoulders, and it allowed him to properly focus on the task at hand. As for plotting revenge for some random tracking mark, it wasn’t really worth his time and effort. He had enough enemies as it was.

“I want to see the E-Grade skills,” Zac said as he slowly got to his feet.

Brazla shrugged with disinterest and a set of stairs leading to a previously inaccessible section appeared to Zac’s left. He looked over to see if Brazla was planning on joining him, but the tool spirit had already disappeared. It felt a bit like Brazla was depressed after visiting the lava world. It might have brought back memories of his creator, and the volcano was perhaps even Brazla’s own birthplace.

Zac didn’t mind the peace and quiet as he made his way toward the next floor. However, he actually had to stop and take a breath after just a couple of steps, his hands shaking with exhaustion. The lava bath had managed to cleanse him of the remnants of the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**, but he was still completely wrung dry. He felt hungover, sick, and voraciously hungry at the same time.

He was really craving a proper dinner full of E-Grade meat, but he wasn’t sure he would be able to hold it down at the moment. He ate a couple of fasting pills instead, which somewhat relieved his symptoms and allowed him to walk up the rest of the stairs.

So he soon found himself in an austere chamber illuminated by only natural light. Gone were the opulent displays of the first floor, replaced with a display of pure

craftsmanship. There were painstakingly engraved pictures covering the wall, and a quick look indicated that they were probably scenes out of the original Brazla's life.

It piqued Zac's curiosity, but he was ultimately more interested in the fourteen crystals that hovered in a semicircle on the other side of the room.

There were not a lot of crystals compared to the first floor, but Zac already knew that each and every one of them was a peak-quality skill hand-picked by Brazla himself, with the purpose of creating a foundation for his family. He could only pray that there was at least one or two that he could make use of.

Zac walked past the crystals one by one, touching a plaque in front of them to receive a stream of information about the skill stored within. After having gone through the whole set he couldn't help but nod in appreciation at Brazla's foresight when preparing this set of skills.

There was an endless number of paths to take in cultivation, just like the name of the Dao Repository indicated. That meant that the odds of being a perfect match to a skill you randomly picked up was pretty slim though. The first floor of the Dao Repository was a reflection of this, as the skills placed there were extremely varied, to the point that Zac barely had gained anything from it.

But seeing the selection on the second floor Zac realized that the original Brazla probably had a purpose of arranging things like this. The first floor was available to anyone who had just set out on the path of cultivation. A new level one cultivator would be able to unlock a huge array of classes with the help of that set of skills.

That was how most people in the Tutorial started their cultivation journey according to Thea. They were given a choice of skill after completing the first mini-mission, and that skill would become their main method of survival until reaching level 25. If someone picked **[Fireball]** and used it during the month-long Tutorial, then they would probably be able to choose some sort of mage class upon reaching level 25.

However, cultivators who had reached E-Grade would generally set in their own ways, with the more talented ones already having started forming their cultivation path. The Celestial Craftsman understood this fact and had therefore focused on skills that would be helpful for a wide array of people.

Six of the fourteen skills were heavily related to the six base attributes, without possessing a connection to a specific Dao. They also seemed to be following the concept of greatness from simplicity, which not only made them powerful but also easy to fuse with other skills down the line.

For example, the Dexterity-based skill was an offensive skill simply called **[Soaring Ocean]**, but it wasn't actually a water-based skill. It was rather a bit reminiscent of how Ogras fought with his shadow spears.

It was a speed-based attack that made use of a rapid series of strikes rather than one strong attack. The weapon could seemingly be almost anything from the looks of it, from hands to bladed weapons to even things like Ogras' shadows. The true power of the skill came from the fact that each consecutive strike would increase your speed by a bit, and your momentum would keep growing endlessly as long as you kept attacking.

Eventually, your speed would be far beyond your normal limits, and with increased speed came improved lethality. The enemy would be drowned in an endless sea of attacks until they succumbed.

It was a bit like a berserking skill though. If you pushed your speed too far your body would start to get hurt as well.

Meanwhile, both Endurance and Wisdom were defensive skills, while Vitality was a self-recuperating ability. Intelligence was surprisingly not a spell, but that was

perhaps because most spells leaned toward a specific attunement. It instead was a mind-boosting spell that put your mind into overdrive, essentially slowing down the world around you.

That would allow you to use your other spells even faster and from the sound of it, to the point that you would become a spell turret wreaking havoc on the battlefield. Zac was initially pretty interested in that skill even if it was meant for mages, but it clearly stated that it put high requirements on both calculating speed and affinities, so he would be completely unable to use it for things like rapid-fire **[Chop]**.

As for the rest of the prepared skills, they were mainly ancillary skills that would come in handy for most adventurers.

The first one that piqued Zac's interest was actually an upgraded version of **[Thousand Faces]**, aptly named **[Million Faces]**. It worked similarly to the F-Graded skill, but it both gave a greater influence on modifications.

With this skill he would be able to completely change his build if need be, and even be able to pass off as other humanoid races to a cursory glance. But most importantly, it allowed you to curtail and modify your aura to some degree. It could both bolster the aura you emitted, fooling others into thinking you were stronger than you were, or weaken it to make others underestimate you.

It would even be able to slightly change the 'flavor' of your aura, which was even better. Your aura was like a fingerprint, and Zac could essentially identify anyone he knew in the base was just by sensing their aura. There were a few exceptions to that though, namely Billy and Kenzie.

Kenzie had help from her AI to completely mask her aura, while Billy could do so himself for some reason. Ogras was hard to spot as well, but that was because his shadows helped mute his aura a bit. Zac still could recognize the flavor as long as they were close enough.

The other ancillary skills were similarly impressive and Zac felt like a child in a candy store as he looked at the varying options. However, his luck had finally caught up with him, as he, unfortunately, had spotted several clashes with his current skills. He only had so many slots for skills, and more than half of them were already used up.

If he wanted to learn these new skills, then he would have to sacrifice a few of his old ones.

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**Chapter 579 - Void**

Zac still hadn't fully gripped what he could and couldn't do with his future skill upgrades and skill fusions, so he couldn't help but worry about making a colossal mistake by removing some of his class skills to get a quick power-up. However, some choices weren't very hard to make, the first being his shapeshifting skill.

The upgraded version unsurprisingly commandeered the same skill slot as **[Thousand Faces]**, and it was the first pick of Zac. A familiar screen appeared in front of him the next moment.

**[Learning the skill Million Faces will result in the permanent loss of the skill Thousand Faces. Proceed?]**

Following that was a simple **[YES/NO]** prompt.

Zac touched the 'YES', prompting a stream of energy to enter his body. It made its way to his throat, and a stabbing pain spread across his neck as one skill fractal branded itself on top of the old one, supplanting its spot.

The discomfort was thankfully just at the level of redrawing one's pathways, and Zac had ample experience with that after breaking open a bunch of nodes. The pain soon abated, and the transfer was complete. He opened his skill screen and Thousand Faces was gone as expected, replaced with a new line.

**[Million Faces - Proficiency: -. A million Faces, A million lives. Become an untraceable stream in the fabric of reality. Upgradeable.]**

The prompt earlier was something that Alyn had already told him about, and Zac knew that he would only get it once like some sort of tutorial. There wouldn't be any warnings in case of skill clashes again, except when getting a new skill through one of his classes.

The skill was the same as the new one in the sense that it didn't have any proficiency, but its fractal was far more intricate compared to the old one. However, Zac saw the base pattern was pretty much the same, just with greater details and a couple of additions.

Zac also needed to add the skill in his undead form, but he would have to wait for an hour before he could swap over again.

In the meantime, there were more skills to learn as a human. The second one that Zac immediately learned was **[Primal Polyglot]**, a skill that was a superior E-Grade alternative to **[Book of Babel]**. Zac had already learned that multiple skills had similar functions as **[Book of Babel]**, but the better ones provided additional benefits as well.

This skill was one such example.

**[Primal Polyglot]** provided the same feature of breaking down language barriers, but it went one step further. It provided the user with an almost instinctual understanding of 'Dao-based' language according to the description. This applied to a lot of things, most notably inscriptions, formations, and even pathways.

The skill wouldn't allow him to understand any fractal he saw at a glance, but it would help him get a sense of what he was dealing with based on the fundamental characteristics of the fractal. The same went for inscriptions and even some written languages. It would help Zac with everything from deducing arrays to spotting hidden dangers, and it seemed like a skill that could go hand in hand with his **[Cosmic Gaze]**.

**[Primal Polyglot - Proficiency: -. To comprehend the Language of the Dao is to comprehend the universe.]**

Zac hoped that this skill would not only help him catch up with cultivators who had properly learned to decipher fractals and pathways since they were young, but perhaps even bridge some of the gaps of having no Dao Affinities.

Another skill that he considered replacing was **[True Strike]**. The one that occupied the same slot was **[Surging Vitality]**, the skill unsurprisingly related to the Vitality attribute. The skill he got from the duplicitous demon during his tower climb had proven useful in a couple of battles, but it wasn't a critical addition in his human form.

His Edge of Arcadia-class rather excelled in large-scale battles, and **[True Strike]** couldn't help much there.

More importantly, its effect had proven somewhat limited on enemies with ample combat experience, such as Void's Disciple. They seemed able to intuit it was a feint with their honed battle instincts, making it a waste of an effort. Replacing it with a skill that could boost his healing abilities drastically seemed like a worthy trade.

However, he held off on it for now, opting to wait to see whether he could add the skill in his Draugr class instead. His undead side was still superior for recuperation as it didn't require his organs to function, and there was no skill occupying that specific slot in his second set of pathways.

The only issue was the fit on his undead side. The original Brazla had planned for a lot, but preparing for undead descendants wasn't one of his contingencies. Only the ancillary skills on the first floor had fit his Draugr side at all, and Zac wasn't sure he would fare any better this time around. But it was worth the try if it meant he could keep another skill.

Having gone through the options he eventually sat down to rest, waiting for the cooldown of his Specialty Core end. During that time he kept absorbing Cosmic Energy from E-Grade Nexus Crystals. It didn't really help him with his cultivation, but some of it was swallowed by the core to be converted to Miasma. He had been completely drained when he swapped over, and this way he wouldn't be hit by a severe state of weakness when turning undead again.

It was a bit stressful to stay outside the Mystic Realm this long, but he didn't have much of a choice. He needed to learn every skill that could be useful right now, and he was in a pretty wretched state in any case. He had joked about crawling back to the Mystic Realm if need be, but he might actually have been forced to do so if he didn't rest up while waiting for his Specialty Core Cooldown.

Some of his weakened state could be traced to dozens of internal wounds he accumulated during his rampage, but most of it no doubt was an effect of the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**.

Zac had really underestimated that seed, no matter if you were talking about the influence it had on his mind or the side-effects of using it. Most of the toxins had been removed during the tempering, but he still felt almost like he had one foot in the grave. He didn't even dare to imagine what kind of state he would be in if he hadn't enjoyed the cleansing magma immediately after. More importantly, Zac understood that he never could use that item in front of people he couldn't trust 100% as he would be utterly vulnerable afterward.

An hour quickly passed and Zac reluctantly got back to his feet. One new skill after another was added to Zac's repertoire before he finally swapped to his Draugr form and went another round. The final tally was six skills in his human form and three skills in his Draugr side. His fears were unfortunately realized when it turned out that only the ancillary skills could be added to his undead side, which forced him to give up on **[True Strike]**.

A top-tier E-Grade healing skill simply trumped the utility that the misdirection skill provided.

Seeing that he was done with everything he exited the Repository, almost thankful that Brazla was nowhere in sight. Waves of exhaustion crashed against his mind, but he still made a last-minute decision to head over to the Thayer Consortia.

He had a lot of outstanding orders with the Sky Gnome at the moment, most of them for quite rare items. It felt prudent to check things out himself in case he needed to ask follow-up questions to whatever Calrin had managed to acquire.

But more importantly, he needed to see if the Sky Gnome could find out anything about corrupted bloodlines or the Void Emperor Bloodline. Hopefully, he would be able to get his hand on some missive explaining the situation before he was locked inside the Mystic Realm. That would allow him to side-step a potential mistake down the line.

Each step felt like a workout, but he soon enough arrived at the Thayer Consortia, surprising Calrin who was busy at work fielding the hundreds of work orders

for everything from defensive talismans to cultivation resources to use in case they got stuck inside the research base.

“Lord Atwood, don’t you look... Eh...” Calrin coughed, seemingly unable to come up with a compliment that wasn’t a blatant lie. “There’s no need for you to come yourself next time. Those spear maidens of yours can bring the things you require next time.”

“I was in the neighborhood. Have you found what I asked for?” Zac sighed as he collapsed into the closest chair.

“I have. It’s only the box though,” Calrin said, a slight blush tinting his round cheeks. “I’m afraid that the rest were out of our grasp, even at a premium.”

Zac had tried getting his hands on all kinds of items that could provide immediate power-ups, the most pressing being E-Grade Dao Treasures. He hadn’t eaten a single one since reaching E-Grade, which meant that he would get the full benefit if he managed to secure one.

There was a decent chance that a high-quality Dao Treasure would propel him all the way to gaining a High Mastery Dao Fragment, which was why Zac had wanted to get one even if he had to pay ten times what they were worth. He was even ready to sell off most of his treasure stockpile if the Sky Gnome could make it happen. But it looked like money couldn’t just solve everything.

Zac also expended some efforts to figure out what the Spatial Artifact in the Mystic Realm was in case he needed to prepare something to snatch it. Void’s Disciple had divulged the name but neither Brazla nor Calrin could find anything out at all. Of course, Zac didn’t dare to outright ask around about a ‘Dimensional Seed’.

This treasure was something that the Church of Everlasting Dao went all-out to obtain, to the point that they gave up all their other objectives. If someone suddenly started inquiring about such an item to the intelligence-gathering houses, trouble might soon follow. Certainly, most such establishments prided themselves on their discretion, but that was just up to a point.

So they could only gather missives on spatial and dimensional treasures in general, hoping that one of them would detail what a Dimensional Seed was. But so far there wasn’t much.

“Oh! That reminds me,” Calrin said as he took out a crystal. “This one didn’t have any information on the Dimensional Seed, but it did actually have some information about the **[Ferric Worldeater]**.”

“Oh, really?” Zac asked with surprise.

“There is a faction called the Void Monastery led by a peak figure of the Zecia sector, the Void Priestess. They are in control of a unique spatial anomaly the Void Star, and according to rumors there have been sightings of **[Ferric Voidwyrms]** drifting in the void around it. The name sounded familiar, so I started looking into it. Apparently **[Ferric Voidwyrms]** are the larvae-form of a **[Ferric Worldeater]**”, Calrin said.

This was great news to Zac, and the excitement dispelled some of the exhaustion.

The **[Ferric Worldeater]** was one of the materials that Karunthel required to upgrade the shipyard. Zac already knew about the first two items, and it was just a matter of time before he could get his hands on them. The last two were trickier. But Zac believed he might be able to find out some more about the fourth item **[Daemonic Manastone]** through Ogras.

Since it had the name Daemonic, it might perhaps be related to the Demonic hordes. There were only two pure demonic factions in the whole Zecia sector, with the

Azh'Kir'Khat Horde being the stronger of the two. There were certainly more demonkin spread across the sector just like humans, but Azh'Kir'Khat was his best bet.

That left only the worldeaters, but there hadn't been much to go by. They were surprisingly hard to gather intelligence on, even after having such an ominous name. But it looked like the Sky Gnome had come through for him once more.

Better yet, Zac actually had an in with this particular force.

"They are still quite dangerous even in their larvae form, but they will only evolve to their true state if they manage to devour a World Core. The better the World Core, the greater the potential of the critter. If it manages to gobble up a C-Grade World Core, then the thing would eventually become unstoppable in a remote sector such as ours," Calrin said with some fear in his eyes.

"What kind of faction is the Void Monastery?" Zac asked.

He knew that they were religious in nature based on the terminology, but he never had a chance to ask about it when he met Leyara in the Base Town. His curiosity had grown since getting the [Void Heart]-node, and now it felt as though they were connected by fate.

The Void Monastery might hold not only the solution to finishing Karunthel's quest, but it might even hold the key to his new bloodline.

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**Chapter 580 - Gate**

It wasn't such a stretch to think that a faction that all seemed Centered around the 'Void' was related to his constitution. Someone called the Void Priestess living by the Void Star lording over a faction called the Void Monastery was a bit too on the nose for it all to be a complete coincidence.

Then again, there were no doubt quite a few heritages containing the word 'Void', just like there was an endless number of ones having the name Heavenly, Primordial, Divine, or Origin. These words conveyed a sense of profundity and vastness, a sense that was rarely justified. The only reason he had held back researching Leyara's heritage until now was the shocking cost of buying intelligence on a powerful C-Grade faction.

But looking into it was worth the expense now, especially considering the [Ferric Worldeaters].

"I can certainly buy the missive..." the Sky Gnome said, though he looked a bit troubled. "But... Ah... Our operational funds are currently a bit..."

"How much?" Zac asked, understanding what the Sky Gnome was getting at.

"Two point five billion," Calrin coughed, looking disgusted even if it wasn't his own money.

"Just send the report to the Mystic Realm before it closes. I'm especially curious whether they have a Void-related bloodline," Zac sighed as he transferred the funds. "Also, see if you can find out anything about abnormal bloodlines. Mutated, corrupted, and unique bloodlines."

"Mutated..?" Calrin muttered before he quickly nodded. "I haven't heard of anything like it, but I will make some discreet inquiries."

“Great. Also, prepare for a flash sale of our stockpile of resources in case we need to flee in the future. I’m running a bit low on money,” Zac added after some thought.

“Not to make Young Master’s day worse, but the box came at a certain premium as well,” the Sky Gnome said with a weak smile.

The box in question wasn’t a treasure, but rather a treasure box that would hopefully house and isolate the Dimensional Seed when he managed to snag it.

It cost 775 million nexus coins even though it wasn’t even a Spirit Tool, and Zac felt almost physically ill when he had to fork out such an exorbitant sum for an empty box. The reason for the price was the same as with **[Everlasting]**, the shield that had become a component of **[Love’s Bond]**. The locker was almost exclusively made from some sort of Treasure Jade that was one of the best materials around for storing treasures.

Part of the cost also came from the meticulous arrays that covered both its inner and outer surfaces, inscriptions meant to boost the effectiveness of the materials even further. It might be a bit overkill, but Zac wouldn’t take any chances with an item that was so valuable that both the Dominators and the cultists would stop at nothing to get it.

“Thank you,” Zac said as he put away the box in his Spatial Ring. “If you manage to get your hands on anything else, send it directly into the Mystic Realm. I doubt I will exit again before the Mystic Realm closes.”

“Certainly... And good luck,” Calrin said. “Remember, wealth is important, but surviving even more-so. My instincts are telling me that this treasure might cause more harm than good.”

“I actually feel the same way,” Zac grunted. “But someone is going to get it, and that someone might as well be me.”

Zac made his way to the teleporter, and he could breathe out in relief when he passed through the tunnel to the Mystic Realm. Everything pointed toward the pathway lasting a few more days, but it had still been in the back of Zac’s head the whole time he spent outside. He didn’t know what he’d do if he actually was closed out early by some freak accident.

Zac immediately made his way toward his temporary compound, as the exhaustion from using the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]** was only growing in severity. His surroundings were soon just a blur, and he simply fell down on the grass the moment he had entered his protective arrays, immediately entering a dreamless slumber. He had no idea how long he had slept when he finally roused himself, but the realization that he wasn’t alone shocked him wide awake.

“I wish I had one of my cameras with me,” a leering voice reached Zac’s ears just as **[Verun’s Bite]** appeared in his hands, causing him to sigh in exasperation and turn to Ogras who was sitting by a table not far away.

“Wasn’t it you who told me that entering others’ arrays was the height of rudeness?” Zac muttered as he took out a bottle of water from his spatial ring.

He still felt drained even after having slept, but he didn’t really feel weakened any longer. It felt like he would be ready to go again as long as he got something to eat.

“Well, that rule’s for strangers, not good comrades. So, care to tell me what you’ve been up to? You look like you’ve been swallowed and spat out by a Govidar Mawbeast,” Ogras asked as he took a swig of wine.

“Your home planet sounds like a real nightmare going by all these monsters you’ve described,” Zac snorted. “If you must know, I broke open the second floor of the Dao Repository, unlocking the skills within.”

“WHAT?” Ogras exclaimed, immediately jumping to his feet.

“How is that possible?! You shouldn’t be that powerful!” the demon said, his eyes a chaotic mix of confusion, glee, and jealousy.

“I have my ways,” Zac said with a smile as he took out a massive slab of meat.

Zac rarely felt hungry any longer, but he felt like his stomach was about to implode right now. He tore into the meat like a ravenous beast, and he only stopped when he had eaten over ten kilos of E-Grade beast meat. He didn’t understand the physics of it, but he didn’t question it either as every bite felt like quenching rain in the parched desert that was his body.

“So?” Ogras eventually asked, posture leaning forward.

“How about a pretty please?” Zac smiled.

“I’d rather get cut apart by those spatial storms,” Ogras spat.

“I’m kidding,” Zac snorted. “You can bring up to five of the evolved Demons. Oh, and bring Verana.”

“Why bother with her?” Ogras asked with confusion.

“The charges in the crystals are limited, but not to the point that we can’t spare a couple of slots. It’s all to improve our upcoming odds,” Zac shrugged.

“Well, those beasts have been proven useful lately,” Ogras thoughtfully nodded. “Might not hurt to keep them happy.”

“What do you mean?” Zac asked as he looked at his watch, and he was shocked to find out that he had slept for 30 straight hours.

“Now you realize?” Ogras laughed. “The beastmasters were getting anxious that no one really was overly interested in cooperating with them, so they volunteered to expand our maps. It turns out that their beasts can actually smell or somehow sense the spatial traps. Guess that’s another thing you have in common with them.”

Zac ignored the jab, but he understood what the demon was getting at. He was able to easily identify the hidden traps thanks to his Danger Sense, but others weren’t as lucky. They had to tread carefully all the time, as moving too quickly could result in suddenly getting bisected by a hidden spatial tear. The scientists were working on some means to identify the tears ahead of time, but progress was slow for now.

However, these beastmasters actually could keep a decent pace thanks to their companions. That would not only decrease the risk of getting hurt but also rapidly speed up the progress they were making. They might prove integral to dealing with the inner parts of the Mystic Realm, as Zac could only imagine that the spatial anomalies would get even worse in there.

“Have a beastmaster join every scouting unit. Take three Tal-Eladar to the repository instead,” Zac eventually said. “Up to 3 skills per person.”

“How about five for your good buddy?” Ogras asked. “I did just die helping you.”

“Fine, but I honestly doubt that you can even benefit from that many. I only took six different skills myself, and that’s for two classes,” Zac said with a roll of his eyes. “So, what else happened while I slept?”

“Nothin spec- oh, speak of the devil. Your little spear maiden is waiting outside. She might know more,” Ogras said before he was swallowed by the shadows.

“Deal with the scouting parties before you leave!” Zac shouted with a roll of his eyes before he walked out to get Joanna.

Joanna understood what he was looking for, so she immediately started updating Zac of what had transpired while he was out of commission. Nothing urgent had happened, apart from their people learning new things by the hour. Their internal map had rapidly expanded, but the most important realization might be that the Cosmic Energy seemed to grow denser the further inside the Mystic Realm you moved.

There were already murmurs of people wanting to move further into the base, to turn some of the massive warehouses into advance camps. Zac wasn't too surprised, as the ambient Cosmic Energy in the biospheres was pretty dismal, especially for the people of Port Atwood who were accustomed to living on top of a Nexus Vein.

This area right here was the safest thanks to the meter-thick door that only Tier-3 access could open, but every cultivator felt as though they were being stifled by the lacking ambient energy.

The difference was already measurable in the abandoned halls, and people believed that the inner sections of the Mystic Realm to be even better. However, moving to the core of the Mystic Realm was easier said than done, as they had discovered a troubling phenomenon. There didn't seem to be pathways leading further inside the Mystic Realm.

After they exited the massive door they could walk for roughly an hour toward the center of the Mystic Realm. But at that point one could only turn left or right, forgoing exploring the inner reaches. This was partly because most of the corridors simply stopped, while the few remaining ones were all guarded by endless spatial barriers.

They had already termed the sector they explored the 'Outer Band', endless corridors, and Service Tunnels, and their current goal was to find a way to reach further inside.

"Are you really okay?" Joanna asked with worry after having delivered the status update. "No one has seen you for almost two days, some people even believed you to have getting hurt by a spatial storm."

"I'm just a bit exhausted. I had to go all out to upgrade the Dao Repository," Zac said with a tired sigh. "What about your mission? Did you make it?"

"Yes! We reached the end of the map," Joanna nodded.

Most of the activities had been focused on dealing expanding their map while improving their understanding of this place. However, Joanna had put together a small squad of elites where she had teamed up with Thea and Billy to follow the map to see where the Cartava Clan wanted to lead them. It was a test for his group of closest allies. It was a test for himself of sorts as well, to see if he could let go and let others handle important tasks.

The fact that Joanna seemed fine was ample proof that he hadn't misplaced his trust.

"We mostly followed the path, while also making sure we had a back-up route in case of ambush. But there was nothing untoward through the path. At the end, there was an enormous gate, a lot bigger than the one leading into this biosphere. We, unfortunately, couldn't open it, which is why we returned. We figured that one of you two siblings might be able to open it with Tier-4 clearance?" Joanna explained.

"A gate?" Zac mused. "Did you knock?"

"Well... Billy tried to break it open," Joanna said with a grimace. "We almost got ourselves killed then and there. The corridor came alive and tried to stab us."

“Sounds like Billy, alright,” Zac snorted. “It’s good that you’re okay. Guess it’s good to know what happens when you try to force these things open. Did you find out anything else?”

“No,” Joanna sighed. “But the door is in the inner edge of the Outer Band. I think it’s your best bet at reaching further inside of the base.”

“Good,” Zac said with some excitement as he stood up. “I’ll check it out myself.”

“What credentials did Billy get?” Zac asked as he suddenly thought of something.

“Nothing,” Joanna said with a shake of her head. “I did manage to get a Tier 3 Clearance though.”

“Could it be...” Zac mused. “Bloodlines?”

“Excuse me?” Joanna asked with confusion.

“Nothing,” Zac said as he passed through his arrays. “Are you rested enough to set out again? It would be best to bring someone who has already traveled that path.”

“We’re coming with,” a familiar voice reached Zac’s ears just as he exited his compound, and Zac looked over at Billy and Thea who seemed to have been standing in wait for some time.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 581 - Hunger**

“What’s with you lately?” Zac asked as he looked over at Thea with confusion. “I can’t go five meters without you popping out of nowhere.”

“Do you not want me around?” Thea asked with a frown.

“No, I appreciate your company,” Zac sighed. “You just seem... Angry. Is everything okay?”

“Well, I am a bit annoyed that you apparently went ahead and put a sector-wide bulls-eye on our planet when you went off-planet,” Thea said with a glare, but she soon deflated. “But I’m angrier with myself. The Inheritance... Was a wake-up call. I’ve been playing it too safe, never going all out to push myself further.

“Yet I’ve been complaining about the fact that the disparity in power between us just keeps growing. I already wasted my time while you did all the hard work, and I need to grasp every opportunity that I can now. I can feel it. If I don’t increase my momentum, I might not even make it past E-Grade. My class rarity won’t allow it.”

Zac looked at Thea with wide eyes. He wasn’t sure if he had ever heard her speak that much in one go, and Zac also noticed that Joanna had moved far away at some unknown time. It looked like she had already thought things over, and what she said made sense. You could never relent on the path of cultivation. He had gathered a huge advantage during his time in the F-Grade, but he needed to keep at it if he wanted to stay relevant.

His titles and attributes would slowly lose their value as others gained more powerful cultivation manuals and improved their Dao Control. According to his sister, the ability to braid two Dao Seeds into one attack essentially had the same effect as boosting both seeds one stage. The sum became greater than its parts.

He could only imagine that Dao Arrays were even more powerful, and he would be left in the dust unless he came up with his own strengths. It was good that Thea also

had come to understand this fundamental truth. That insight alone might be worth more than anything else she gained from that Inheritance.

“Well, that’s fine... But don’t overextend yourself,” Zac eventually said as he scratched his chin. “I only act like I do because I have layers and layers of defensive measures. I’m not really someone to take after.”

“No, I’ve seen how you fight,” Thea snorted. “I’m more interested in taking after your guts than your battle techniques.”

“I’m sure you’d make an excellent axe-warrior,” Zac smiled before he turned to Billy who was standing not far away with a contrite look. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Billy made a mistake,” Billy sighed with a blush. “Billy is so smart, but for some reason the door was harder.”

“Well, it’s bad luck you didn’t get any credentials to open it the normal way,” Zac said, though he wasn’t so sure.

The more he thought about it, the more sense it made. If Billy’s titanic bloodline came from this place, then it made sense that he wouldn’t be able to move about freely. What kind of security system would hand out clearance to research subjects?

If he really was correct on this, then it might even explain why he didn’t get any credentials either, and why Ogras got one so effortlessly. He already knew that clan Azh’Rezak didn’t possess any hereditary bloodlines, and Ogras hadn’t acquired a synthetic one either unless his fusion with a shadow creature could count.

The only hole in the theory was the fact that Kenzie got access while he didn’t, unless he considered the very real possibility that Kenzie wasn’t the only child that Leandra experimented on. She gave Jeeves to Kenzie, but she might have infused him with a bloodline instead for two separate experiments.

“Stupid door realized Billy was too powerful, tried to keep Billy away. But we’ll see,” Billy muttered, but he shrank back a bit after getting an even look from Thea.

“Don’t thwunk any more doors,” she said simply said, but Billy still nodded hurriedly in agreement.

“Well, let’s go,” Zac shrugged as they set out.

“I’m coming as well!” a youthful voice shouted, and Zac grimaced when he saw Emily run toward them.

“What happened to your face?” Zac asked with a frown, noticing the new scar that just barely missed her eye.

“My face? What about your head? Have you become addicted to being bald?” Emily said with a glare. “No scouting parties dared to take me with them because of you, so I’ve been fighting on Mystic Island to gain levels. Come on, let me come with you. I swear I’ll be careful. And look, this!”

Cosmic Energy in her body suddenly surged as a five-meter-tall Totem Pole appeared in front of her.

“I’ve reached level 50 already, and this is my new skill,” she said with a proud smile. “Not bad right?”

“It looks good, but what does it-“ Zac muttered, but he stopped when he felt the Cosmic Energy churn in the area.

Not only that, but it almost felt like he had turned into a cultivator as the Cosmic Energy seemed to be actively burrowing into his body.

“That’s not all!” Emily smiled as a fiery axe appeared in her hand.

She didn’t use the buffing skill on Zac though, but rather threw it straight at the Totem Pole. This led to a startling transformation as the Totem almost grew twice in

size while its design changed. If the earlier version looked like something that a bit like something you could find in Incan ruins to worship one's ancestors, then the new one was something made to worship a sun god.

Fiery energies radiated from the pillar, and a large flame radiated at its top.

"My Strength has increased," Thea exclaimed with surprise, while Billy almost drooled as he looked at the Totem Pole.

"It buffs everyone in an area this way?" Zac said with surprise, but he suddenly noticed something different compared to getting directly buffed by the axe.

It only gave half of the amount it normally did.

Still, a 5% area boost was huge if this thing was placed on a battlefield, and that number might even grow as the skill's proficiency increased. Coupled with the increased energy restoration it could even turn the tides of a war.

"I don't get any buff when using it like this. But I can even detonate this thing in case an enemy tries to take it down," Emily whispered so that only Zac could hear. "Its explosion should hurt anyone that's not crazy durable like you."

"Alright, you can come with us," Zac eventually nodded. "Let's go see what's on the other side of that door."

It looked like Emily's face was about to split in two judging by her grin, but she quickly composed herself after getting stared down.

"This is a serious mission. No messing around," Zac said. "And if things look dangerous on that other side of the door you need to back down immediately while I try to keep you safe. Understand?"

"I understand," Emily quickly nodded with a serious expression. "You can count on me. I'm not some kid any longer."

She put her hands to her hips and pushed out her chest to underscore her point, but the power-pose didn't really inspire a lot of confidence. She still looked like a cosplaying child due to the combination of her oversized furs and diminutive frame. Even Thea could barely contain her smile, whereas Billy openly snickered.

"Where's the demon?" Thea suddenly asked as she looked around. "That guy is like bad weather, always appearing to ruin a good day."

"He's busy elsewhere," Zac smiled. "It's just us."

Zac considered bringing some more people, but these three and Joanna were enough. The rest would need to stay and guard the fort while he was away. Getting to the end of the map would take the better part of a day even if they didn't take any detours, so they immediately set out as to not waste any time.

However, they only managed to get to the security door before Zac had to stop the group.

"Wait," Zac said as he took out a massive slab of grilled meat, digging into it like a voracious animal.

"What? You're hungry?" Emily asked with confusion. "You had grease on your face when you left your compound as well. Are you a pig or something?"

Thea looked on with confusion as well, whereas Billy's reaction was much more straightforward. He sat down himself and produced an even bigger slab of meat, happily joining Zac for a travel snack.

"I was forced to use a Berserking Item yesterday," Zac sighed after he had devoured another few kilos of meat. "It turns out that it left my body starving for nutrients. We might need to take a few extra pitstops."

“Should we cancel this mission?” Thea asked, and Joanna seemed to agree. “Someone told me that I shouldn’t overextend myself earlier, I think that advice can apply to you as well.”

“I’m fine,” Zac said. “I’m already a lot better than I was yesterday. I’m sure I’ll be back to normal by the time we reach that gate you mentioned.”

It was true. Between his sleep and the E-Grade meat he felt a lot better. He was still feeling a bit drained, but he would be able to fight just fine, especially if he had time to digest some more energy-dense food over the following hours. Thea and Joanna eventually relented and they set off again, though this time with a slightly slower speed to allow Zac to recuperate and restore his reserves.

His new skill, **[Surging Vitality]** unfortunately didn’t work at all against something like this either. The nourishing storm that swept through his body helped with the countless small wounds left from his battle with the Golem Blacksmith, but they weren’t the real problem right now.

Emily also tried imbuing him with her Earthen axe that improved Endurance and Vitality, but it didn’t really help either, so Zac simply kept walking while almost constantly nibbling on something or another. The endless identical tunnels quickly turned into a blur, but having Emily and Billy around kept the atmosphere light. They quickly reached the inner part of the outer band, at which point they veered east.

They actually did pass a few corridors leading further inside, but they were blocked by spatial storms without exception. Not only that, the spatial tears were placed a lot more densely in these traps, and Zac’s danger sense seemed to think these pathways were a lot more dangerous than the first one he encountered.

He wasn’t really confident in breaking through a normal spatial blockade, let alone these empowered versions.

“It’s a bit odd,” Thea eventually said after Zac had backed away from the third pathway that might lead out of the Outer Ring. “Have you looked at the layout on the other side of these storms? I’m not actually sure they are leading to the inner reaches. These corridors seem to end in large empty rooms. There might not actually be any physical path leading further inside, which seems like a crazy design choice.”

“Ogras and I guessed that these corridors might be an enormous array or something, forming massive fractals. Perhaps they wanted that stuff separate from the inner sections,” Zac said, though he agreed with Thea’s sentiment. “Those rooms on the other side might be teleportation rooms as well. The Technocrats have real teleporters that don’t use Cosmic Energy. I saw something like that in the Tower of Eternity.”

Of course, Zac wasn’t really sure he would dare to use one of the ancient teleporters left behind by his mother’s family. The research base had been abandoned for god knows how long, and it was now infected by a powerful Spatial Treasure. Using an unknown teleporter sounded like a surefire way to get ripped apart by spatial anomalies.

“Do you think it’s worth for me to go to the Tower of Eternity as well?” Thea suddenly asked, dragging Zac out of his thoughts.

“Absolutely,” Zac said without hesitation. “My power almost doubled over there. It was the only reason I could take down the Undead Incursion in one go. Why, have you got your hands on a token?”

“Both Billy and I have, we have been thinking about going as soon as this Mystic Realm is dealt with,” Thea said, and Zac noticed some hesitation on her face. “I think I owe you an apology. I was furious when you disappeared. But I only considered things

from my perspective. It was unfair of me to demand of you to risk your life before you felt confident in success.”

“Well, my sister seems to believe I have problems communicating clearly, so I think I’m partly to blame as well,” Zac said with a wry smile.

The two kept moving forward where Zac detailed most of his experiences in the Base Town and Tower of Eternity, sharing the lessons he learned the hard way. Thea in turn tried to teach him how to braid Daos to empower skills even further, though things quickly became a bit embarrassing as Zac couldn’t even finish the first step.

“So I guess I haven’t completely fallen behind,” Thea said with a small smile when Zac eventually had to give up.

Zac only laughed in response as he went back to surveying the surroundings. It felt nice, almost when the two traveled together during the Hunt. A lot of the pressures of command could be put aside for a while, allowing Zac to just be himself. However, the journey eventually had to end.

It took them thirteen hours to reach their target; an enormous gate that reached over thirty meters into the air. In fact, even the tunnels were extra supersized the last kilometer or so, meaning that this area probably was more spacious than the usual tunnels even before the spatial expansion began.

That fact alone made Zac believe they had finally reached something of value after running around in empty hallways for almost a week. Zac’s heart beat rapidly as he walked up to the console to the side. His axe was already in his hand, while the others prepared themselves in case of battle.

“Here I go,” Zac muttered as he activated the gate mechanism.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 582 - Conformation of Supremacy**

The group released a collective sigh of relief when the gates slid open without issue, giving them a first look at what waited for them on the other side. It was definitely a change of pace, and the group walked inside curiously. It looked like they had entered actually a glasshouse in the middle of a forest.

The gate led them into a room over one hundred meters across, and it appeared to be some sort of holding room or stable for beasts, with metallic troughs and dozens of reinforced stalls. They could also spot all sorts of advanced equipment in a series of adjoining rooms, which was only possible because both the inner and outer walls were made from some transparent material.

Outside the building was an enormous forest completely different from the artificial biospheres they had arrived in. It felt wild and genuine, like something they might find on Earth if you discounted the fact that most of the foliage was either white, silver, or purple. The place was huge as well, and Zac could even spot a few mountains in the distance. Zac couldn’t be sure from where he stood, but he guessed that it would take hours to traverse the whole thing even if he kept a high pace.

However, it didn’t take long to realize that this massive forest was still just another part of the research base as the familiar lines ran across the sky as the enormous alloy wall stretched into the distance. There was one odd addition though; nine orbs in the sky that reminded Zac of the moon. Four of them seemed broken, but the other five radiated a silver glow.

The transparent building they found themselves in was installed like an extension of the wall, with the gate they passed through on one side and a large barn door at the opposite.

The glasshouse was just enormous, but Zac figured it probably that it was only a few hundred square meters before the spatial expansion began. Furthermore, going by the current size of the stalls, the animals that were housed here should be around the size of a rhinoceros, which wasn't that big for a multiverse-beast.

"I think it's a satellite base to perform field experiments," Thea eventually said as she looked across the building. "The original owners of this place were studying something inside this forest, and this place was used to take measurements."

Zac slowly nodded in agreement, feeling there was a lot of merit to that theory. It looked like there was room for about a dozen animals at a time going by the number of stalls, whereas the forest outside was large enough to sustain a whole ecosystem.

"Ah!" Billy suddenly exclaimed from another room, and Zac's swirled toward him with wide eyes, fearing that the giant had triggered another trap.

Zac breathed out in relief though when he saw that Billy had actually managed to open the gates by pressing a large button on one of the closest consoles.

"Be careful," Zac quickly exhorted. "We have no idea what these things do. One of them might trigger an alarm and make the building attack us."

Billy quickly nodded and stepped away.

Still, it was good news to know that even someone without any clearance could open the door without assistance. As long as Zac placed a squad at this place in the future they would be able to come and go as they pleased without having to rely on himself or Kenzie.

"Why would the Cartava Clan lead us here?" Zac muttered as he looked over the consoles.

Most of them seemed to be out of order or at least turned off. There were no new messages like another signpost either, leaving Zac a bit confused.

"This place definitely leads further inside the Mystic Realm than what we have accessed until now," Thea answered as she nodded to their left. "Look, we're right at the edge of the Outer Band, but the forest continues for god knows how further in."

"Let's check it out," Zac said after some thought. "Not much anyone of us can gain from these machines anyway."

"Might have been a good idea to bring something more than a bunch of muscleheads," Joanna muttered from the side, and Zac could only wryly smile.

True, his expedition squad was a bit lopsided, with the three strongest humans along with a teenage shaman and a Valkyrie guide. Billy's disposition spoke for itself, and both Zac and Thea were only focused on getting stronger, to put it nicely. More accurately, they were both fighting idiots.

Billy was more than willing to get out of the boring stables and he pushed open the barn doors with a grunt. The group walked outside, but they stopped after only a few meters, realizing the glasshouse had disappeared. More importantly, Zac felt a sense of impending doom, like he would die if he didn't get out of the way.

The only reason that he didn't start running was that the feeling was distinctly different from his Danger Sense, like it was a cheap mimicry of the real thing.

"Illusion array," Thea muttered as she looked around with some trepidation. "Do you feel the weird sensation of dread as well?"

"It might be something to keep beasts away," Emily ventured. "Like bug repellent."

“Probably,” Thea nodded before she looked into the sky with a slight frown. “The ambient energy is so dense in here, and there is some attunement in it as well.”

Zac needed a bit longer to properly sense the Cosmic Energy, but he could immediately see what she was meaning with the help of **[Cosmic Gaze]**. The whole forest was shrouded in a silvery haze after he activated his ocular skill, and it seemed to radiate down from the moons like light summer rain.

“Should we head toward the closest mountain? The closest one isn’t too far, and we might be able to spot other exits that way,” Thea ventured. “It’s either that or keep to the wall.”

“Let’s go to the mountain,” Zac eventually said. “The wall looks the same far into the horizon. We will probably learn more if we head a bit further in.”

They immediately set out, this time led by Zac who was using his natural affinity with the forest that came from **[Forester’s Constitution]**. There were occasional calls of beasts that reverberated through the forest, and Zac tried to keep them away from any potentially dangerous spot. It was worth remembering that this place wasn’t like Earth or the Tower of Eternity, and Zac couldn’t help but feel some pressure as he walked through the woods.

There were no limits here, so the beasts could even be D-Grade for all they knew.

The fact that the strongest cultivators were just High E-Grade indicated that the beasts weren’t that powerful, and neither did the howls contain that kind of power. But they couldn’t be certain. So Zac’s senses were pushed to their limits as he kept a vigil of the surroundings, and the others looked back and forth as they snuck through dense parts of the undergrowth.

However, they only had time to advance for fifteen minutes before Zac sensed a hint of killing intent to their left. He looked over with a frown as he hadn’t seen any actual threat, but Thea reacted even quicker as her sword both left and entered its sheath before Zac even had time to summon **[Verun’s Bite]**. A thin sapphire blade shot out from her weapon, appearing to be a wind blade infused with some Dao.

The wind blade contained extremely sharp energy along with a hint of that mysterious force that Brazla called Sword Intent. A muffled thud sounded out the next moment, and the group hurried over to see what had been the source of the killing intent.

It turned out to be a wolf with luxuriant white fur, with a grey marking in its forehead the only exception. It was about as large as a cow, and seemingly just at the bottleneck of the E-Grade judging by the pressure the carcass emitted.

“Won’t be too bad if the beasts are just at this level,” Zac muttered. “But there could be stronger ones out there as well. Maybe we should-”

“We can’t back down from seeing just one F-grade beast,” Thea interjected. “We’ll never reach the core of this Mystic Realm then. But we need to be careful, if there is one wolf there are definitely more.”

“Billy isn’t afraid of any stupid dogs,” Billy muttered as he gripped his club even tighter.

“Let’s keep going then,” Zac said as stowed away the carcass before spreading some corpse-removing powder across the grass to remove the scent of blood.

The group kept going, moving in a circuitous path toward the mountain ahead. Zac kept his eyes peeled for more wolves, but there were no odd energy movements in the air, nor were there any bloodthirsty howls of a pack on the prowl. A couple of minutes later they started to relax again as they closed in on the mountain.

However, Zac's eyes widened in shock when hundreds of wolves materialized out of what looked like moonlight, each of them emitting an aura of an E-Grade beast. Not only that, but Zac could tell with one glance that they weren't some average mutts. They should come from some powerful bloodline, as even the weakest E-Grade wolves easily eclipsed the pressure that the Fiend Wolf of the Beast Tides emitted.

He even sensed a few auras that were a match to his own.

"Run!" Zac unhesitatingly shouted, but he froze upon turning around.

They were surrounded.

More and more wolves kept appearing out of thin air and there were thousands of them encircling their small group before they had a chance to react. Zac didn't know if there were even more of them on the way, but he knew that dealing with just these ones would be difficult enough. They needed to get back to the glasshouse before they were overrun.

None of the wolves had made their move yet, but Zac wasn't above drawing first blood as a massive fractal blade appeared, stretching over a hundred meters and cutting dozens of trees apart from its aura alone. It shimmered in gold and black, and Zac launched two series of swings at the wolves who blocked their retreat.

Two wolves, each of them radiating an extremely condensed aura, were ready for the attack though. The marks in their foreheads lit up as the two clouds of **[Rapturous Divide]** shot toward their rearguard, and the thousands of wolves immediately released a unified howl. A huge moon appeared above them the next instant, and it drenched the whole battlefield in a silver radiance. The light contained an immense pressure as well, and it immediately forced Emily to her knees.

The others were able to stand it, though Joanna was visibly pale from the effort.

More importantly, Zac frowned when he sensed the energies of his strike being continuously whittled down. He tried to counteract the effect by using his recently improved command of his Dao, but it felt like he was trying to hold back the tide with his bare hands. By the time the two energies of **[Rapturous Divide]** reached the wolves they were all but hollowed-out.

The familiar scene of the paradisaical divide still appeared, but it almost felt like an illusion. A few dozen wolves were cut apart in an instant before one of the larger wolves literally bit the image with enough force to rip it apart, but there were more than enough beasts to fill up holes in the ranks.

The two wolves who towered above the others howled again, and the previously orderly encirclement rippled as over a hundred wolves started rushing toward them.

"STAY AWAY FROM BILLY'S FRIENDS!" Billy roared as his body started growing, but the growth actually stopped when he reached just four meters.

His physique had transformed though, his muscles turning inhumanly defined as a golden set of runes spread across his frame like a wildfire. Zac was mostly focused on the incoming wolves, but he could swear that the giant even gained at least twenty additional muscles that humans simply lacked. Even Billy's eyes radiated an immense primordial aura as the air exploded around him, and he was among the E-Grade wolves before Zac had a chance to make his next move.

A coruscating shockwave erupted where Billy appeared, and five wolves were turned into paste before he had even swung his club. What followed was a tremendous horizontal swing that caused sixteen wolves to implode, and the whole area shook and heaved as the titan remolded the area with his fury.

However, these wolves were far from ordinary prey, and a squad led by a grizzled alpha moved to intercept Billy's advance, and a wave of silver light actually managed

to stop the giant's attack. It looked like the energy of his attack was whittled down just like Zac's was just a few seconds ago.

Five wolves appeared out of silver light next to Billy the next moment, but it was as though the giant had eyes in his neck as the series of muscles in his shins generated a furious and instantaneous momentum, which allowed him to spin his club in a 360-degree arc, killing three and maiming another two.

"Help him carve a way out. I'll protect our backs," Zac said as he exploded into action as well as a series of fractal blades shot out to hopefully cause some damage to the incoming beasts.

However, the incessant moonlight from above was still causing trouble, and the fractal blades couldn't even guarantee a single kill before they were drained and broke apart. It was like the environment itself was fighting against them, and the animals kept getting closer to the exposed backs of his squad. Thea and Joanna were already desperately pushing forward and Emily's form was in constant motion as she sent out one buff or minor axe strike after another.

Zac frowned as he saw the incoming tide, and his eyes darted at the two leaders who still kept their position on top of a rock in the center of the pack like generals overseeing their army. His wide-scale attacks were restrained by whatever that moon above was doing, so he would need to get closer if he wanted to kill them. But doing so would likely result in the death of at least one person in his squad.

The fighting only started a few seconds ago, but everyone but Emily already sported wounds. If they also had to deal with the wolves coming from behind they would be overrun in seconds. He needed to thin out the herd a bit before he dealt with the leaders. Using **[Deforestation]** or **[Nature's Punishment]** felt extremely risky as well as long as the moon remained, so he needed to come up with another solution.

A huge amount of energy surged toward an intricate fractal at the lower end of his spine, and it quickly started to radiate a shocking amount of power.

There hadn't even been a chance to test the skill out, but Zac saw no option but to active **[Conformation of Supremacy]**.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 583 - Overrun**

A shockwave erupted from Zac's body, causing the closest wolves to be thrown away as their bodies twisted and deformed. Zac wasn't focused on that though, but rather the three-meter halo that had appeared behind him. It was a circle that shone in silver, though the silver of a honed blade rather than the moonlight that drowned out the area.

It was covered in dense scripts, but the true core of the skill was the image in the middle of the halo.

It was the deceptively unadorned axe that Zac had witnessed in his very first Dao Vision, the weapon of the axe-man who had singlehandedly caused the death of both the divine faction and most likely a whole world. The axe looked almost exactly the same as how Zac remembered it when it was stabbed into the ground next to the endless chasm, and the image infused the halo with an almost blinding sharpness.

"Supremacy," Zac muttered as he started running forward, each step causing cracks to spread for dozens of meters.

His momentum was rapidly growing as his spectral forest rose around him, giving him perfect vantage of the incoming wolves. He realized that there were as many invisible wolves approaching as visible ones, but he didn't worry. The heaviness and sharpness of the halo behind him coursed through his body, and it was ready to be released at moment's notice.

Zac swung [**Verun's Bite**] toward the closest clump of wolves when they were just twenty meters away, and pained yowls cut through the incessant roars of the vast wolf pack. The mournful cries were immediately cut short though as a dozen E-Grade wolves were flung away like they were pieces of trash, their bodies mangled almost beyond recognition. The ground itself was crushed and split apart as well, forming a deep chasm that stretched almost fifty meters before the power in Zac's swing lost its strength.

That was just the beginning though, as one swing after another started reaping the lives of the vanguard of the wolves, to the point that his killing speed surpassed that of the other three combined. Waves of moonlight drowned him both from above and from the wolves themselves, but this new skill wasn't as easily worn down as [**Chop**]. The halo was connected to Zac himself and almost impervious to the effect while the strikes were instantaneous, not allowing for the slightest weakening before the damage was already done.

His targets weren't cleanly bisected as they would have been from [**Rapturous Divide**] or the final swing of [**Blighted Cut**], but they rather looked like they had been cut and bludgeoned simultaneously. Wherever Zac turned his attention a wave of carnage would soon follow as long as the halo behind his back remained.

Each swing of his axe contained not only his own strength, but it also contained a fragment of the boundless conviction and power of the original wielder of the simple woodman's axe. The blood of the wolves was already dying the whole area red, and a shocking stream of Cosmic Energy was entering Zac's body from the kill.

There were simply too many wolves to stop them all from reaching the Thea and the others, so he could only focus on the most powerful-looking squads. The others would be able to deal with the peak F-Grade wolves and their recently evolved brothers, but only Zac could kill the ones who were approaching middle E-Grade quickly enough.

Five packs was enough to almost open up his next node, and Zac was forced to trap the rest as to not break a node in the middle of the battle. It almost looked like he formed a sanguine cloud that rotated around him as he flashed back and forth among the trees, each jump with [**Loamwalker**] resulting in the death of even more wolves.

These elite wolves weren't dumb brutes that simply took Zac's attacks lying, and his whole body was covered in wounds caused by razor-sharp claws and hundreds of energy-attacks that they could launch from their foreheads. Their bodies were extremely sturdy as well, and if it wasn't for the added sharpness of his swings, he would eventually have been overrun by their sheer numbers.

It was all thanks to his recently acquired skill; [**Conformation of Supremacy**], the skill in the Dao Repository that was linked to the Strength Attribute. It didn't conjure a massive weapon like [**Deforestation**] or any fantastical sights like [**Rapturous Divide**]. It simply infused his normal swings with the power of the object depicted in the avatar.

The axe-man in his Dao Vision had almost split a whole world apart with a swing of his axe, but Zac obviously couldn't quite reach that level with his swings. But it still produced an effect far beyond the destruction he could cause with his most similar skill; [**Unholy Strike**], while also having a slew of other benefits.

First of all, **[Conformation of Supremacy]** didn't need to be charged for every attack like the skill he got from Mhal required. The halo did dim down a bit after every attack, but Zac could push more Cosmic Energy into it to reignite its power. The effect also wasn't limited to an increase in physical strength, but it rather imbued his swings with a mysterious energy based on the avatar, almost like it gained an additional Dao Seed.

The only downsides to the skill were the high energy consumption and the fact that the skill could be considered a mid-range attack at best since it didn't actually launch any projectiles. The damage caused by Zac's swings were rather just an outburst of the force contained in his attacks.

It had been a pretty big disappointment to see that the Endurance-based defensive skill clashed with **[Deforestation]**, forcing him to give up on getting a new defensive skill now that **[Nature's Barrier]** was lagging behind. However, the fact that the Strength-based skill didn't clash with a single one of his skills felt like a huge windfall. It was the third skill he had picked up, and his only regret was that he couldn't get it in his Draugr side as well.

The skill was simple and direct, just how Zac liked it. He was only able to infuse it with his Fragment of the Axe at the moment, but some Dao limitations weren't that uncommon with early proficiency skills.

The fact that the picture within the halo looked just like the axe in his Dao Vision obviously wasn't a coincidence, but the skill actually had no connection to that axe-wielding master at all. **[Conformation of Supremacy]** was rather a blank slate, where you could create your own avatar of supremacy.

The image was interchangeable, and it could be different every time the skill was activated. However, the better the image resonated with your current intent, the more power it would provide, albeit at a higher energy-consumption.

Zac chose the image based on that Dao Vision as it still held a huge position in his heart, and his thoughts often wandered back to the scene of that man's battle against the celestials and the gates of heaven. He had witnessed even more shocking sights and even more powerful beings since then, for example the Grand Protector who defended his world against the death of a universe. But the axe-man was the first true supreme being Zac had seen, a testament of what was possible in this new world.

There was probably no avatar that was as defining of Zac's cultivation path as that lone axe, making it the optimal choice for an avatar. Choosing other avatars might bring out all kinds of interesting effects, but he needed every advantage he could eke out at the moment.

Another horizontal swing resulted in a wave of destruction rippling outward, but a solid silver crescent flew out to intercept the attack. It was one of the leading wolves who had launched some sort of attack from its forehead, and Zac glanced at it with a frown. He tried another few attacks, but the wolves had caught on by now as they spread out.

**[Conformation of Supremacy]** was able to boost the power of his attacks by a great degree, but its range was limited to around fifty meters, and it weakened the further away from Zac the strike was. He was forced to keep running back and forth, but each swing only managed to take out a couple of wolves after they started to adapt.

He was still keeping a decent pace, and the Cosmic Energy gathered in his body was starting to reach almost uncomfortable levels, but he knew that the situation wasn't really sustainable. Each swing empowered by his new skill cost a decent chunk of Cosmic Energy, even more than a dozen **[Chop]**'s. That was fine when he killed over

twenty powerful wolves with one strike, but he was killing fewer than five with each attack right now.

Zac appeared next to another elite wolf, and it bit straight at his throat the moment he appeared. Zac was ready for the attack thanks to **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** though, and he simply pivoted his body a bit as **[Verun's Bite]** fell, cutting both its spine and lungs apart as a heavy wave of sharpness swallowed another three wolves before they had time to jump away.

Another surge of energy entered his body, and he was starting to feel bloated. However, his mind wasn't on slowing down his killing, but rather the opposite. He needed to change the current situation somehow. The moon in the sky was able to whittle down any long-range attacks from the looks of it, forcing both him and the others into a melee against the beasts.

The moon itself was hundreds of meters in the air, and there was no way for Zac to break it apart. He tried flashing toward the two leaders in an attempt to take them out, but two massive lunar crescents forced him into a defensive stance as the other wolves heedlessly started rushing toward the others.

He could only scramble back to protect the rear of the others, unable to leave as much as a flesh wound on the two alphas.

Zac growled in annoyance as he crushed the head of the closest wolf, and he was even considering taking out the cursed blade to deal with the moon above him. The curse that he just had managed to expel was a troubling hidden threat, but he didn't have a lot of options at the moment. He tried shooting a few fractal blades toward the sky, but the pressure that the moon emitted was clearly stronger the closer the blades got.

A sigh escaped his lips as he took out the rotting sword, but he froze when a sudden thud echoed out from his chest. The closest wolves staggered backward with bleeding ears, but Zac wasn't all that much better off as he stumbled to his knees. Another thud caused a wave of weakness to spread across his body, and he sensed how his accumulated energy was rapidly being stolen.

The **[Void Heart]** had finally woken up, and it was hungry.

The wolves clearly saw an opportunity when Zac fell down on his knees, but a sapphire sheen cut apart the two closest nearby wolves as Thea suddenly appeared next to him.

"Are you okay?" she shouted as she desperately fended off the elite wolves that were going in for the kill.

A wave of destruction rippled out to clear the area as Zac swung his axe from a kneeling position, but another heartbeat made him lose his balance causing him to fall over. Even worse, he sensed that the hidden node was still voraciously hungry, and Zac was afraid that it would start feasting on his own Cosmic Energy if he didn't quickly kill some more beasts.

"Can you create an opening on the big ones? I might be able to take one out then," Thea whispered as she helped Zac to his feet.

Zac wordlessly nodded as he looked at the two wolves in the distance. Creating an opening didn't only mean to occupy the two big bastards, but it meant also dealing with a huge number of the more powerful that was barring the path. He looked down at the tattered sword for a second, but he decidedly put it away.

The white arc that the sword produced was extremely powerful, but it wasn't that fast. He was afraid that the moonlight would have whittled it down before it even had a chance to pick up its pace, which would place a curse on him for nothing. More importantly, the cursed sword was considered an external tool, and kills with the

weapon wouldn't count as his kills. Normally that wouldn't matter, but his hidden node was screaming for sustenance. **[Deforestation]** was also a risky move, and something he wanted to save for later if possible.

Finally, there was only one thing that he could think of, and **[Love's Bond]** slithered across his body as it fastened itself to his back. He hadn't expected to waste any of the long-cooldown skills of his Spirit Tool at this juncture, but he saw no better option. He had one remaining card that might work even in these conditions, and it might even be able to destroy the foundations of the moon itself.

He needed to activate **[Fate's Obduracy]**.

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### **Chapter 584 - Storm Surge**

The offensive skill of his Spirit Tool was extremely powerful, and it even had the unique feature of becoming stronger by being damaged. The moon would only assist him by forcing the chains to break and split apart like a hydra, and kills by his bound weapon obviously counted as his own. It was an attack of massive proportions as well, to the point that it might even destabilize the moon in the sky, killing two birds with one stone.

It was clear that the two leaders didn't conjure the enormous moon by themselves. It was continuously bolstered by hundreds of streams of energy coming from the whole pack. The moon had already grown a bit dimmer from the mounting death tally, and Zac hoped there would be a critical point where the skill failed.

The two fractal lines on the lid lit up as the four chains of **[Love's Bond]** shot forward, and an eerie rattling sound echoed across the area as the fractals turned into two new chains wrought by pure darkness. A discordant sizzling sound immediately entered Zac's ears as the moonlight started to break them apart, but Zac breathed out in relief when he saw that two chains turned into four as a result. Waves of silver light erupted from the wolves as well, and they slammed into the incoming chains to dispel the attack. But the result was simply even more chains.

The last time Zac used this skill he had focused it all on a small clump of targets, but this time he spread the net wide. Most of the chains flew in the direction of the leaders to clear out all the beasts that were in the way, while the remainder turned in a parabolic arc in the opposite direction to assist his beleaguered squad. Billy was fighting valiantly, but his chest rose and fell like two bellows as sweat streamed down his face.

He was maintaining a speed that even Zac would have trouble matching, and Zac guessed it was the skill he had learned in the Inheritance. There was no way that such a powerful technique didn't have a downside though, and Zac guessed that its energy consumption was immense. Billy was still not even peak F-Grade, and he wouldn't be able to keep going indefinitely.

One wolf after another was gored by the chains, and the two leaders finally lost their patience as they roared in anger, each of them swiping at the chains from their position. A series of lunar blades shot out from their claws, and the air itself was ripped apart as they flew forward.

The chains of **[Fate's Obduracy]** was no match from the combined attacks of what no doubt were two middle E-Grade beasts with powerful bloodlines. But that was

just what Zac hoped to see as the chains rapidly multiplied, instantly turning into a sea of links that caused havoc across the battlefield.

A terrifying surge of Cosmic Energy soared into his body, almost immediately eclipsing what Zac could bear. But the **[Void Heart]** had turned into a black hole, unceasingly swallowing more and more pure Cosmic Energy. It was the exact opposite of how it usually worked which was a bit concerning, but Zac figured that it was better than releasing it out into the atmosphere.

Over two hundred E-Grade wolves had died from one single attack, and it was still going strong. This was no doubt Zac's largest harvest ever, and it had significantly lessened the pressure of the moon above. One of the leaders seemed to have entered a state of madness after witnessing the sea of corpses, and it could no longer hold back as it jumped forward, releasing a frenzied barrage of attacks on the chains of **[Love's Bond]**.

Its whole body shone with lunar light, and the extremely durable links were like dried wood in front of its all-out offensive. The chains kept splitting and rejoining the fight, but they were steadily pushed back. Zac tried to cause as much damage to the wolf as possible, but he only managed to cause some minor wounds.

However, that was fine with Zac as he intentionally retreated the chains further and further back, and he had soon created a distance of hundreds of meters between the two alpha wolves. The second leader seemed a lot more coolheaded, and it roared a warning to its companion. Only then did the leader seem to cool down a bit, but Zac had already achieved his purpose.

The wolves in the way were dead, and the leader was alone. It was just in time as well as the sea chains had reached a breaking-point after taking on the whole wolf pack for half a minute, and all but four chains shattered and dissipated in an instant. It left a slightly wounded and disoriented wolf among a sea of corpses.

However, the Chains didn't even have time to completely dispel before another form appeared right above the alpha wolf. It was Thea, and both her palms were pointed straight at the back of the wolf's head as terrifying energies surged around her body. The wolf was in a frenzied state, but its reactions were on point.

It immediately lit up with lunar light as it tried to jump away, but four chains had unknowingly snaked around its legs, rooting it in place. It was the true chains of **[Love's Bond]**, and Zac had snuck them next to the wolf among the skill he launched. The chains cracked in an instant from the pressure that the wolf emitted, but a fraction of a second was all that was needed.

A beam of pure energy that made Zac's hair stand on end slammed into the back of the alpha wolf's head before it had a chance to dodge, and Zac almost lost his footing as the beam passed straight through the skull and slammed into the ground with barely any loss of power. It was the very same skill that Thea had tried using against Inevitability during the hunt, but this time it was not only far more powerful, but it was also performed point-blank.

However, Thea wasn't unscathed either, and her eyes rolled up in her head as she fell down on the ground after releasing the beam of destruction.

The concentrated power was perhaps only matched by Zac's final strike of **[Blighted Cut]**, but it took everything of Thea to launch it. The other alpha wolf howled with rage and jumped off from the rock as well, but Zac's reaction was even quicker. He appeared next to the unmoving form of Thea and scooped her up before a barrage of attacks had a chance to kill her.

Such speed would have been impossible a second ago, but the combination of Zac's widespread killing and Thea assassinating one of the leaders was enough to break

the moon lording in the sky. It dissipated into a cloud of chaotic energies that slowly started to dissipate.

The remaining wolves were utterly infuriated by seeing their leader getting killed, but they still maintained their distance. Zac wasn't clear whether it was because they hadn't received any orders from the infuriated alpha, or if it was because of the hundreds of corpses that surrounded Zac's position.

But the air was almost vibrating by the incessant howls that came from every direction. There was a ruthless bloodlust in them, to the point that it was palpable. Their combined fury had essentially become a mental attack that caused even Zac to feel some shudders in his mind. And if he was in that state, then there was no need to explain the state of the others.

Thea woke up after just a second, but her face was pallid and her hands were shaking badly.

"Billy! I need you to help the others! Take them and run back where we came from! I'll hold the rest off and lead them away from you. Can you do it?" Zac said as he started launching a barrage of fractal blades at the wolves.

Without the moon protecting them **[Chop]** once more had a decent lethality, but that was just to a certain point. They still had only killed off less than 30 percent of the whole pack, and each fractal blade only managed to kill a few of beasts before they lost their strength. Cutting through powerful E-Grade beasts took a lot of energy, and **[Chop]** could only contain so much being an F-Grade skill.

These wolves were still a lot sturdier than most things Zac had encountered in the Tower of Eternity, and it probably wasn't a coincidence.

In fact, they reminded Zac more of Verun than any wolves he had seen thus far. They weren't similar in appearance, but rather the primal aura they emitted. Zac could only guess that it wasn't a coincidence that these beasts were brought here. They were most likely former subjects for experimentation just like the groups of cultivators stuck in the research base.

"Billy will save them! Then Billy will come back and save you too!" the giant shouted before he gently scooped up an unconscious Emily in his free arm.

The teenager had constantly infused the others, including Zac, with buffs while also providing Cosmic Energy through her dance. But all of them were peak fighters with a lot of titles while Emily was just level 50. She had already overtaxed herself to the point she fell unconscious, with Joanna standing vigil over her.

Joanna herself wasn't much better off as she was barely keeping upright with the help of her spear. Billy simply picked her up by the lapel of her battlesuit and threw her across one of his shoulders. Billy was about to do the same with Thea as well, but she shook her head as she steadied her steps.

"I can walk by myself," Thea said before she turned to Zac. "I'm sorry. I keep letting you down."

"What are you talking about, things would have been a lot worse if you didn't take out the big guy," Zac said. "Don't worry, I'll be fine now that the moon is gone. This might be an opportunity for me. You've already got your levels. I'll join you guys a bit later."

"That kill pushed me all the way to level 75. Next time I won't be a burden," Thea said, and she led Billy away.

A group of wolves suddenly appeared out of nowhere to intercept them, but a blinding blue flash lit up the surroundings before they simply fell apart. Thea stumbled as blood poured down her ears, and she looked like she was teetering on the brink of

collapse. However, she somehow managed to steady herself and start running, allowing Zac to finally breathe out in relief.

Unfortunately, the relief was short-lived as over a hundred of the wolves split off from the main pack while the elites kept Zac busy. Thea was barely standing by this point, and Billy was carrying Joanna and Emily. There was no way they'd be able to fend off such a squad.

Zac growled in annoyance as he activated [**Hatchetman's Rage**], and sharp pain spread across his body. He initially didn't want to use this skill while still dealing with some lingering effects of using the [**Rageroot Oak Seed**]. However, he was out of options and he needed to kill a lot of wolves quickly.

The fractal edge attached to his axe grew over 100 meters and gained a golden sheen. [**Rapturous Divide**] had finally come off cooldown from his first attempt, and now was as good as time as any to use it. However, he didn't shoot launch his massive fractal edge at the hundreds of wolves that went for Billy, but rather toward the elites that were blocking his path.

His new skill was powerful, but the hides of these wolves were far too durable, and it wouldn't be able to take out all of them in one go.

That was not to say that he had abandoned his allies. Massive amounts of Cosmic Energy was already surging into his left forearm as he launched two swings toward the elite wolves with enough speed to turn his arm into a blur. The wolves shot out a barrage of crescent moons to stop the clouds, but [**Rapturous Divide**] wasn't possible to stop that way.

The alpha moved to intercept as well, but it was too slow. The hulking wolves were first covered in a layer of gold which was immediately followed by the darkness of the abyss. Zac didn't bother looking at the result, confident in the fact that most of the wolves should die from that attack. He instead activated [**Loamwalker**] flashing right past the spatial divide.

He was more worried about the pack of wolves that were rapidly closing in on his allies. They thankfully didn't get far before a massive hand appeared in the air above them, and most of them were pushed down on their stomachs from the terrifying pressure it emitted thanks to [**Hatchetman's Rage**] and the Fragment of the Bodhi.

It was finally Zac's who restrained the wolves, rather than the other side around.

A shocking amount of water spilled out the fractal the next moment, drowning the whole area in water. A lot of wolves were crushed to death by the endless deluge while the survivors were swept up in a tsunami that started leveling this whole sector of the forest.

The water punishment wasn't as deadly as the wooden one, but it was able to cause more widespread chaos. He had essentially poured half a lake on top of the leader of the Underworld Golem Incursion, and this time there was no lava to immediately turn the endless amount of water into steam.

A mighty howl reverberated through the air, and Zac frowned when he knew that the Alpha Wolf had made his move. This was only further evidenced by the fact that the whole area was drowned in a cold white luster. It was almost like the world had become monochrome, and Zac quickly turned back toward the alpha just in time to see an enormous beam shoot past him, aiming straight for the array in the sky.

Zac wanted to stop it, but there was no time. The speed of the beam was almost instantaneous, and it slammed into the emerald array the next moment. Zac's grunted and staggered a step backward as the array cracked. Even the hand was pierced by the light, and Zac was forced to immediately discard the skill.

Billy and Thea had already managed to flee by this point, but Zac knew his job was not over as he turned toward the remaining leader and the hundreds of wolves who were still standing.

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**Chapter 585 - Alpha**

The burning embers of **[Hatchetman's Rage]** kept Zac standing through the frenetic absorption from his **[Void Heart]** as scores of wolves were drowned or crushed by **[Nature's Punishment]** before the manmade calamity was ended prematurely. Each thump from the Hidden Node caused a bout of dizziness, but Zac forced his mind to focus as he gazed at the remaining wolves.

As for the wolves that had been swept away by the tsunami, he didn't really care. Almost half of them had died judging by the streams of energy that still entered his body, and the survivors shouldn't be in any state to cause any more trouble. Billy and Thea were long out of sight, and Zac felt a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulder. He just needed to keep these rabid bastards at bay for a bit longer before he could retreat as well.

However, he would only escape if he really ran out of options, especially after having activated **[Hatchetman's Rage]**. He really didn't want to stop while his **[Void Heart]** still absorbed energy. Something important was definitely happening inside the Node, and Zac didn't want to ruin it at this juncture.

It might be evolving, or it might be fusing it with the extremely pure Dao Energy of the Tribulation lightning to create something amazing.

Besides, Zac still had some cards up his sleeve, though the same could obviously be said about the Alpha. A gibbous moon had appeared a hundred meters above its head, and it was no doubt the source of the earlier beam. The moon was different than the earlier one though, as a single look with **[Cosmic Gaze]** indicated that it didn't draw any energy from the other wolves. Zac didn't feel any restrictions either, which hopefully meant that the moon wouldn't be able to whittle down his large-scale attacks.

The new moon might have been lacking some functionality, but it clearly had some other abilities to make up for it. Its luster gradually increased in intensity as the alpha howled, and Zac guessed that another beam was incoming. His mind raced as he tried to think of a solution. The last attack was just too fast, and he wasn't confident in countering its speed. The second skill of **[Love's Bond]** would no doubt be able to block it, but he had already wasted one of his aces for this fight.

It took a lot of resources and time to light up the two fractals of **[Fate's Obduracy]** after using it against the cultists, and he wasn't sure he'd be able to restore the skill again before he met his real enemies. He couldn't waste limited skills like his bronze spark or **[Death's Embrace]** against these wolves, as it was just a chance encounter with the wildlife.

Thankfully there were some other options available now that the whole battlefield wasn't locked down.

Zac's arm strained as a massive axe appeared above his head, and the first swing of **[Deforestation]** was launched the moment that the second pulse of the moon shot toward him. The wave of destruction and the beam of lunar light clashed in the air

between the two, and Zac's brows scrunched when he actually couldn't cut through the moonlight.

It was rather the beam that crushed his cutting wave, though it lost almost all its strength doing so. The rest was quickly dispersed by a swing of Zac's axe. The moon itself dimmed considerably as well, and it shrunk from a gibbous moon to a half-moon. That no doubt meant that the conjuration had more charges in store. But so did Zac.

The Infernal Axe appeared while the shockwaves of the first clash had yet to ebb, and Zac immediately launched it toward the wolf pack. If the Axe of Felling barely fell short, then the second swing should get the trick done. Better yet, it appeared as though the moon needed a few more seconds to charge up its next attack. It gave Zac time to create some wholesale slaughter in the meantime.

A rippling wave of flames crashed toward the wolves, and there finally was a primal fear deep within their eyes. Not even the drowned shrubbery in the surroundings was spared as they were incinerated the moment the Infernal Axe crossed their path.

The alpha was obviously far smarter than a regular beast, and it seemed to understand that its pack was in a bad spot. It released another keening howl into the sky, and the scores of wolves around it quickly followed suit as their bodies started to radiate lunar light.

Zac's brows first scrunched at the scene, but his confusion was quickly replaced with shock as the howling wolves turned into pure light that was swallowed by the moon. Each infusion increased its luster by a noticeable degree, clearly cutting down on the time the skill needed to attack again. Zac couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Not only had the wolves activated what essentially was a War Array before, but they were even able to coordinate some sort of sacrificial skill now. The half-moon released a blinding wave of light the next moment, this time a widespread radiance that was a match to the incoming wildfire in width.

Fiery goutts and white flashes turned the battlefield into a blinding hellscape, and Zac was forced to close his eyes from the intensity. However, [**Hatchetman's Spirit**] was still active, allowing him to narrowly dodge a series of errant blasts of chaotic energies. A large number of the wolves weren't as lucky, and yet another dense stream of Cosmic Energy was gobbled up by the Hidden Node.

The last round of energy seemed to finally have satiated the [**Void Heart**] though, and Zac could finally breathe out in relief as the incessant beating stopped. However, the fact that the node didn't seem to demand any more energy wouldn't stop Zac from releasing the final axe. The last alpha wolf was looking a bit worse for the wear, and it couldn't have too much energy left after unleashing these powerful attacks.

If Zac could kill it along with a last batch of elites then he would get a round of energy just for himself, and it would definitely be enough for him to gain another level. Perhaps even two levels depending on how much the alpha provided. That would put him at level 85, and it wasn't completely unheard of to gain some sort of class quest at that point. Most got their second quests at level 90, but it wasn't an iron-clad rule.

The ominous Axe of Desolation took shape above his head even before the chaotic energies of the battlefield had abated, and his arm strained as he begun the third and final swing. However, an extremely scary stream of almost impossibly condensed energies was suddenly spat out of the [**Void Heart**], and it started to rampage through Zac's body as though it was looking for something.

It felt like a stream of lava was burrowing through his body, and Zac was completely unable to maintain the skill because of the pain. A small gust of the ashen desolation shot out toward the wolves, but it was a far cry from the true power of the

final swing of [**Deforestation**]. The alpha wolf quickly noticed Zac's wretched state as he was lying on the ground spasming, and its eyes lit up as the remaining crescent moon actually shot straight toward him like a projectile.

"I think I need some help buddy," Zac croaked as he looked at the army of remaining wolves.

An infuriated howl immediately answered in his mind, and Verun appeared next to him in all its splendor. Its eyes were immediately trained on the incoming crescent, and bloodlust shone in its eyes. It released another mighty roar, this time for real rather than in Zac's head, and the forest shook from the power it contained.

The red streaks across Verun's hide shone with a sanguine luster as its mane danced in the wind. Swirls of blood floated around its paws, and Zac felt as though he was looking at a sea of death when gazing at the streams. The crescent was almost upon them, but Zac didn't worry even if he was barely able to remain conscious. His Tool Spirit emitted a haughty confidence even in front of the incoming attack.

Verun actually sent out a crescent of its own the next moment, a massive arc of condensed blood. It clashed with the Crescent Moon the next moment, but there was no explosion or shockwave. The blood was liquid, and it actually swallowed the moon whole as it continued its trajectory. The blood crescent quickly destabilized though, exploding into cascading streams of silvery blood that maimed any wolf it hit.

The Tool Spirit was clearly the one with the advantage, but Verun actually seemed enraged that it didn't manage to hit the alpha wolf with its attack. It turned into a stream of sanguine energy as it flashed forward, heading straight for the core of the pack. A few wolves tried to block Verun's path, but they were quickly turned into dried husks that fell to the ground, causing Zac to be beset by another wave of Cosmic Energy.

A bloodthirsty aura exploded out from the alpha once more as it ran toward the Tool Spirit, and its eyes had turned into two silver moons.

A storm of red and silver erupted in middle of the pack as the two beasts fought for supremacy. Zac himself wanted to help, but he was in no state to even move. He could only make himself as inconspicuous as possible as he hid behind the carcasses of a couple of wolves, spectating the battle from his hidden spot.

Most of his concentration was still aimed at the situation inside his body though, and he was starting to worry when he saw that the stream actually had glommed onto his [**Axe Mastery**] skill fractal. That skill wasn't all that important to him any longer, so losing it wouldn't be the end of the world. But if that odd stream of energy could destroy one skill, then it could destroy another.

A massive outburst of power forced Zac out of spiritual sight though, just in time to see Verun bite down on the alpha wolf's neck with its oversized maw. Both combatants sported a series of wounds, but the wolf was clearly worse off. Not one of the other beasts helped their leader though, and they just stood rooted in place as Verun started fling his head back and forth until it managed to rip off most of the wolf's neck.

Blood poured out of the dying alpha wolf like a fountain, but it was quickly absorbed by Verun as the Tool Spirit roared victoriously toward the sky. Zac was completely inundated with Cosmic Energy as well a second later, to the point that he almost forgot the pain he was in. He was about to force himself back on his feet in case the wolf pack went berserk, but his eyes widened when he saw that the sea of wolves lay down on the ground in an act of submission, their heads pointing toward Verun.

Zac couldn't believe what he was seeing. Had these wolves actually accepted Verun as the new alpha after it killed the old one? A few of the more powerful wolves

seemed to share Zac's skepticism though, and they jumped the Tool Spirit as one. However, Verun had turned the far more powerful alpha wolf into a bloody mess, so how could these upstarts match its might?

They were ruthlessly slaughtered in seconds, and soon there was not a single wolf who dared to lift its head. Zac hesitated for a second before he started to make his way toward Verun who still proudly stood on the hill overlooking its new subjects. His movement was immediately discovered, and dozens of wolves seemed ready to pounce.

However, a snarl from Verun stopped them in their tracks, but Zac could see that they barely were able to restrain themselves. The instinct of these animals was extremely strong, to the point that their muscles shuddered as they kept themselves at bay. Zac knew that just a hasty movement would be enough to set them off, no matter how much Verun ordered against it.

It was a shame as thoughts of domestication had entered his mind when he saw the situation unfold. Who would say no to a powerful pack of E-Grade wolves who could do their bidding? Having them would be far more effective than the Barghest who had essentially turned into training fodder for the young cultivators of Port Atwood.

His only hope was that the wolves were overly excited from the battle and all the blood, and that they would be easier to domesticate after things calmed down.

"Good Job," Zac smiled as he patted the Tool Spirit, not caring at all about his hand being drenched in blood of the alpha wolf. "Do you think you can keep these guys under contr-"

He didn't get any further though as the sound of a tremendous heartbeat rippled out from his body. Verun yowled in surprise and took a step back, and the nearest wolves seemed to have been physically impacted from it as blood started pouring out of their mouths and ears.

Zac himself was shocked to see that the terrifying stream of energy of before was just the first half, and second part had just been expelled from the Hidden Node. He was barely standing upright with the original force in his body, and he felt the same sort of despair now as when he saw the Tribulation Lightning coming for him.

This was too much for him to handle.

"Protect me," Zac only had time to say before his Hidden Node beat again, causing the two streams to join up and slam into his soul.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 50 chapters ahead) please check out my**

**Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have a**

**Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!**

**Chapter 586 - Delayed Gratification**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**You thought it was shameless plug, but it was me, Dio [Amazon Announcement!](#)**

**Yes, Defiance of the Fall is following the path of the great predecessors. The story is coming to Amazon, Kindle Unlimited, and Audible! Book 1 is dropping on June 8th, but you can already [Pre-Order](#) to give yourself a nice surprise in a few months.**

Book 1 will take you back to the golden age of DotF written in Summer 2019, when Corona was just a beer and when Zac was still running around in dresses and having a generally bad time on Demon Island. There will be edits, some fixed inconsistencies, and a fancy new cover (also here on RR and below).

Here is a higher-fidelity version of the cover as well since the RR downsamples it so much:

Unfortunately, that means that the chapters for Book 1 will soon disappear from RR, but the weekly chapters will continue as usual on RR and ([did you know I had a ?](#)).

I know that it's a bit unfortunate to announce this on April 1st, but no joke.

The Bodhi had stood like a beacon in the arid badlands for centuries, its vitality in a constant struggle against the desolation around it. With each turn of the seasons it was buffeted by the anguish of a dying world, but the onslaught only served to temper the purity of its conviction. The inscriptions on the golden leaves contained deeper truths every year, and its intention was clear; to bring life to this sea of suffering.

Another century passed before a wind picked up pace among the lifeless glaciers in the far east, and it met no resistance by the flat steppes as it pushed forward. The leaves of the Bodhi was once again dancing with delight from the ethereal caress, and a song of nature echoed throughout the badlands. The proclamation of the Holy Sangha was hidden among the leaves, constantly consecrating its surroundings.

The world had been on the brink of death for untold ages, but life always finds a way. A stalk of grass pushed through parched dirt, heralding the new era.

A hundred hooded beings walked forward between the Fallen Hills, each step bringing forth the rattling of chains and clattering of bones. The sun was high in the sky, blasting an uncomfortable warmth that was rapidly dispelling the soothing haze. Now and then a protector would emerge from his grave and charge at the procession, but their oath kept them bound them to their graves. They finally reached their target, the Nameless Mountain.

The hooded beings knelt in obeisance, keeping in check their desire to gaze upon the Holy Coffin. The coffin in question was the only interment on the whole mountain, as nothing could encroach on its domain. One day the black coffin had simply appeared there, and to this day no one had been able to figure out its origin. They didn't even know who, or what was inside.

But they knew it was powerful, akin to a god.

A thud echoed out from the coffin, a thud that made the whole clergy shake with excitement. The coffin had answered their call, meaning that their plight was over. A small crack opened in the chained-up coffin, and an endless tide of darkness and pestilence surged toward the sky to meet the punishing rays of the sun.

The whole world was covered in darkness a second later, and the land was once more at peace. The clergymen once more performed the rites of obeisance before they rose to their feet. The junior acolyte finally couldn't help himself as they started making their way out of the holy hills, and the skeleton snuck a glance at the peak of the mountain.

The coffin silently hung from its chains from the branch of a pitch-black tree, behind it a faltering sun; That was the last thing the novice Necromancer ever saw.

Zac finally remembered himself after being awash in the two visions, but his spiritual journey wasn't over there. He was shown one scene after another, not all of them from his own memories.

Many of the visions were all-too-familiar, each bringing with them a painful memory. They showcased his struggles and desperate battles, from the barghest who had found his campsite to the wolves who had surrendered just seconds ago. There were also visions of strange lands, of weird objects containing terrifying amounts of wild energies. They all beckoned to Zac, urging him to conquer the opposition and claim them as his price.

The visions were so quick that they almost turned to a blur, but he did notice one odd detail. In every single scene there was one constant; the Stele of Conflict he had conjured during his climb. Sometimes it was placed right next to the action, and other times it was discretely placed in the background.

But it was always there.

Zac tried to make sense of the scenes, but something was just out of his grasp. He was instead swept up by the heat of the battles he witnessed, and it almost felt like he had eaten another berserking treasure as he saw one scene of bloodshed after another. Something was growing inside him. Each kill was another building block, each battle setting the foundation. He was building a bridge toward the Heavens with the corpses of his enemies.

The scenes were suddenly ripped apart by a shocking flash of blue lightning, throwing him into one final vision.

A cracked dome floated in space, an impossibly large structure broken and scorched beyond repair. An infant's cry echoed out toward the vast beyond, but it was overpowered by the roar of an endless sea of lightning. It should have ended then and there, but a hand pushed through Heaven's Wrath and brought him away, ignoring the sizzling sounds of molten flesh and metal.

Darkness.

Only a then did Zac find himself back in his own body, and he took a ragged breath as he opened his eyes. Most of the wolves were gone, but a few new carcasses were strewn around him as Verun stood in vigil next to him. The streams of blood around its feet were mostly gone by this point though, meaning that the Tool Spirit was running out of time.

However, Zac sensed that he would be able to keep Verun around for a few minutes longer as long as it didn't need to expend a bunch of energy fighting. Seeing that he was safe for the moment Zac breathed out in relief before his mind turned to the scenes he had just witnessed. The last thing he remembered was the stream of power rushing straight for his mind, and then he was swept up in a series of visions.

He was curious about his status screen, but the state of his body took precedence. Zac had seen how his skill was attacked earlier by the initial stream of energy, and he definitely felt that something was different compared to before, prompting him to turn his sight inward. The moment he activated his spiritual sight Zac realized that drastic changes had taken place, though he couldn't understand what the significance of the change was.

First of all, all three Skill Fractals that came with a Dao Vision had changed, not only [**Axe Mastery**]. The other two skills, [**Forester's Constitution**] and [**Bulwark Mastery**] were transformed as well. Their fractals had looked like an axe, a tree, and a shield respectively, but they had now looked like abstract skill fractals just like all the others.

Intuition fueled by **[Primal Polyglot]** told Zac that it wasn't an upgrade, but neither was it a devolution. The change probably came from the second difference that Zac spotted a second later. He could make out three objects in the middle of his soul.

His soul had looked like a slightly murky glass ball in his mind until now, with scars and lines crossing its surface. The cage for the remnants was hidden in a subspace of its own so it wasn't directly visible, but now actual objects were moving about in his mind.

In the absolute middle of his mind Zac actually saw himself, or a rather a small spiritual avatar in his likeness. He was holding **[Verun's Bite]** in his hand and he kept swinging it as he dodged and pivoted in place. It looked like the small spirit-copy was fighting an endless number of invisible enemies, and the constant battle was generating some sort of power that Zac could sense hidden within the avatar.

Pure streams of the Dao from the surroundings were steadily entering the avatar's body as well, like his miniature self was a black hole.

The energies didn't come from his soul though, but rather the two other objects that were slowly orbiting his avatar. The first of them was the chained coffin hovering from the branch of a dead tree with a dying sun serving as its backdrop. The scene looked almost exactly like his vision earlier, and half of the energy that his avatar was absorbing was the deathly haze that escaped from within the coffin.

The final addition was unsurprisingly the Bodhi Tree that he had witnessed in two Dao Visions by now. Its canopy formed an almost perfect circle, and the leaves continuously radiated golden energy that slowly drifted toward avatar Zac. The energies of the two apparitions continuously clashed as they formed a black-and-gold nebula that swiveled around the avatar until they were swallowed.

It was obviously his three Dao Fragments given form, and Zac started to understand what was going on as he looked upon the scene. This was an actual embryonic representation of his cultivation path where the "core" of his Daos had moved from Skill fractals to his Soul. It seemed a lot more logical compared to before, though he didn't know if there were any real benefits of the change.

The odd thing was that neither Ogras nor anyone else on Port Atwood had never mentioned anything like this. Zac had even asked if problems could arise when upgrading the skills or his Daos, but Ogras seemed to be of the understanding that it didn't matter. The fractal would upgrade to a better form that could keep housing the Dao according to the demon.

The first reason for the change Zac could think of was the fact that he had taken the first steps toward a proper path worthy of an Arcane Class. It wouldn't be too surprising if Ogras didn't know about that change, as Arcane classes simply didn't exist on his homeworld. Zac figured that the change could only be good if that was the case.

There might be hidden benefits of changing things up this way or even hidden pitfalls of keeping one's Daos inside the Skill fractals.

However, what confused Zac a bit was where those energies were going. All three apparitions were steadily generating pure Dao, but it was all swallowed by the avatar. Zac tried to magnify the scene as much as he could until he suddenly froze in shock. He didn't hesitate this time as he took out what looked like a piece of coal, and he crammed it into his mouth like he was starving.

A prickling sensation spread through his body the next moment, like every cell in his body was undergoing some sort of acupuncture. A comfortable heat was also starting to accumulate in his spine. He was neither undergoing another round of tempering or acupuncture though, but he had rather eaten the **[Bloodline Marrow]** because of what he sensed inside his avatar.

It was his second Hidden Node, nestled in the head of his spiritual avatar.

Zac had spotted this node a few times by now, but the latest burst of energy had almost completely opened it. He could feel that it was just on the verge of breaking open, but the burst from before wasn't quite enough to get the job done, causing it to slowly close again. The Dao Energies were trying to keep it open, but it was a losing battle.

He had saved the marrow all this time in hopes of using it to awaken his bloodline, but he couldn't give up on this opportunity. Breaking open Hidden Nodes were far more difficult than nurturing one's bloodline, and if his marrow could take him the final stretch it would definitely be worth it. Zac thought of eating the spiritual **[Four Gates Pill]** as well, but he soon decided against it.

There was nothing that actually indicated that the pill would be able to help with Hidden Nodes, and his body was already chock-full of Cosmic Energy thanks to Verun's onslaught. Besides, he had already decided to eat it before reaching the core for a burst of levels in case he still hadn't gained enough power-ups by then.

This was no time to get distracted though, and he stopped the energy from the marrow from burrowing into his bones, instead directing it toward his mind. He guessed that the **[Bloodline Marrow]** was trying to activate his bloodline, but he didn't change his mind as he staunchly pushed all of the energy into his spiritual avatar instead.

More and more power was crammed into the node hidden within his spiritual self until a ripple spread out from his glabella. It was his second Hidden Node that had properly been broken open, and Zac felt his mental energy surge and spread out like never before. For a moment he felt connected with everything in the universe, where he was one with the Dao. But he lost the fantastical feeling as soon as he gained it, and Zac's mind was once again whisked away to yet another vision.

He was once more sitting next to his mysterious ancestor, hurtling through the vast space on top of a meteor.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Just want to discuss the story/chapter? I have a

Please remember to vote on at least once a week! It helps me a lot!

**Chapter 587 - Pathstrider**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**Was the text up here too long yesterday? TL;DR:**

**1. DotF + Amazon = [True](#). June 8th.**

**2. Join my and read 50 chapters ahead.**

It almost felt like Zac had never left the solitary rock hurtling through the boundless expanse. He felt the heat of the drained sun on his back, and the surface of the meteor was still illuminated by its rays. He soon realized that the meteor wasn't as simple as it seemed though as space and time seemed to bend to its will. It kept running into one energy-dense object after another at a rapid pace, the vast distances of outer space made inconsequential.

Everything from stars to mysterious meteors was sucked dry by the cultivator, turning him into a wandering calamity. But the world suddenly shuddered as the meteor was forced to a stop in the middle of nowhere, and Zac spotted a man standing in the

void. He radiated terrifying killing intent, and he looked at the unmoving man on top of the meteor with greed in his eyes.

The man said something as a sword materialized in his hand, but Zac couldn't make out any sound at all. However, the sword alone spoke volumes, and its sharpness immediately forced Zac to look away. Zac's still couldn't see the features of his presumed ancestor from his vantage, but it looked like he didn't care all too much about the man who barred their path.

The ancestor didn't summon a weapon of his own, but he rather just pointed at the swordmaster with his left hand. Zac felt the world was ending the next moment as both space and time were ripped apart. An area spanning millions of kilometers was caught up in the storm of annihilation, and not even the vacuum of the void was unscathed.

Zac could somewhat spot the swordmaster struggling within the torrent for a few seconds, but he was soon drowned and obliterated. Neither his body nor his treasure sword survived, and the whole sector of space still hadn't restored its spatial integrity by the time the meteor started moving again.

The vision started to fade as soon as the 'battle' ended, but it still replayed over and over in Zac's mind.

There was one thing that Zac was certain of; the attack hadn't contained even a shred of Cosmic Energy. It was a simple outburst of Dao and mental energy, a truly weaponized version of a Dao Field. That fact alone almost made Zac's mind short-circuit, and one thought remained even after Zac woke up in the silver forest.

Just how powerful was that man's soul to be able to utterly destroy an area far surpassing a planet just with just his Dao?

Another screen appeared like when he opened his last node, but the text wasn't all that helpful this time around either.

**[Spiritual Void - An omnivorous mind tempered by the primordial void.]**

He quickly turned his sight inward once more, but not much had changed. The three apparitions still floated about in the center of his soul, and the Hidden Node inside his avatar was still slowly drawing on the energies of the three images. However, the node was properly opened this time around, and Zac figured that this behavior was one of the features of the node.

Part of him wanted to immediately start experimenting with his Daos, but the time that Verun could maintain its corporeal form was quickly running out. He conveyed a couple of orders through the Tool Spirit, and he was relieved to see that most of the remaining wolves blended into the forest the next second.

He had only given two orders to the pack since he was afraid that they wouldn't be able to follow anything more complex than that. The first was to stay away from the wall at the side with the glasshouse. Secondly, he ordered all but six wolves to go away, to go about their business. The remaining six wolves were just at the Peak F-Grade, and Zac alone could subdue their fighting spirit with his aura even after being afflicted by the weakness of **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

Verun turned into a stream of blood that squeezed into the axe a minute later, leaving Zac and the wolves in an awkward stalemate. However, Zac was relieved to see that releasing his aura wasn't even necessary. The wolves were actually subdued by Verun even after it returned to the axe, and they even followed basic commands by Zac himself.

The group started to walk back the way Zac came from as soon as he had looted the corpses of both the alphas and most of the elites. Zac still held off on experimenting

with his Daos, partly because he was afraid that he'd spook the wolves, and partly because he felt that his new hidden node hadn't completely stabilized yet.

But there were other things to check while he made his way back, and he opened his status screen to see if the recent experiences had changed anything there.

**Name**

Zachary Atwood

**Level**

83

**Class**

[E-Epic] Edge of Arcadia

**Race**

[E] Human - Void Emperor (Corrupted, Unawakened)

**Alignment**

[Earth] Port Atwood - Lord

**Titles**

Born for Carnage, Ultimate Reaper, Luck of the Draw, Giantsbane, Disciple of David, Overpowered, Slayer of Leviathans, Adventurer, Demon Slayer I, Full of Class, Rarified Being, Trailblazer, Child of Dao, The Big 500, Planetary Aegis, One Against Many, Butcher, Progenitor Hegemon, Duplicity Core, Apex Hunter, Heaven's Chosen, Scion of Dao, Omnidextrous, Eastern Trigram Hunt - 1st, Tyrannic Force, Achievement Hunter, The First Step, Promising Specialist, Tower of Eternity - 8th Floor, Heaven's Triumvirate, Fated, Peak Power, Monarch-Select, Frontrunner, Pathstrider

**Limited Titles**

Tower of Eternity Sector All-Star - 14th

**Dao**

Fragment of the Axe - High, Fragment of the Coffin - Middle, Fragment of the Bodhi - Middle

**Core**

[E] Duplicity

**Strength**

2756 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 228%]

**Dexterity**

1312 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 187%]

**Endurance**

2338 [Increase: 99%. Efficiency: 218%]

**Vitality**

1552 [Increase: 89%. Efficiency: 218%]

**Intelligence**

584 [Increase: 65%. Efficiency: 187%]

**Wisdom**

1071 [Increase: 70%. Efficiency: 187%]

Luck

359 [Increase: 91%. Efficiency: 197%]

Free Points

0

Nexus Coins

[F] 1 839 996 020

Zac felt a surge of adrenaline course through his body when he saw how much his attributes had improved, almost completely making him forget how exhausted he felt from the backlash. The probable source was easily spotted as well, and Zac quickly opened up his Dao Screen.

**[Fragment of the Axe (High): All attributes +30, Strength +500, Dexterity +250, Endurance +30, Wisdom +110. Effectiveness of Strength +15%.]**

He had initially been afraid that the series of Dao Visions wouldn't improve his Fragments, but it looked like it was an unfounded fear. The digested Tribulation Lightning had actually allowed him to push his main Dao to the next level just based on his insights back during the Zhix Wars. That was a huge windfall for Zac, and that improvement alone drastically increased his confidence for the upcoming battles. The attributes were a welcome boost, but the true gain was the improvement to the Dao's lethality in battle.

It was a bit of a disappointment that his earlier theory had been wrong though, with neither the All Attributes nor Efficiency doubling at every upgrade. It rather looked like he gained 10 All Attributes and 5% Efficiency at every step. It meant that he would end up with 40 to all attributes at Peak Mastery, as opposed to 80.

The total amount of gained attributes would still be the same, but the difference meant a loss of hundreds of points in Luck when including all three Fragments. This way it would possibly be easier for him to maintain his lead compared to others though, so Zac figured it might not be too bad. The other two Dao Fragments hadn't improved this time around, though Zac felt he had made some strides just by congealing those two apparitions.

That wasn't the only gain of the battle, as he had actually gotten a new title. Zac eagerly opened his Title Screen to see what the Pathstrider title provided, but the prompt almost made him collapse in despair.

**[Pathstrider: Form a cohesive Cultivation Path while still in E-Grade. Reward: Marked for further training.]**

This was the second title he got without an actual reward, but Zac inwardly groaned as he felt that this one was even worse than the Terminus title. He knew all too well what the System considered 'training'. This title was essentially a trouble-magnet, and the only thing that Zac felt was missing was the infuriating 'congratulations' that the System extended.

Zac sighed and closed the status screen, which drew a few wary glances from the young wolves. At least the title brought some good news; his cultivation path had been given a passing mark by the system.

There was nothing else for him to do in this forest for the time being, and he increased his speed toward the glasshouse. The wolves followed in tow, though it looked like every step they took was full of reluctance as they ran further and further from the rest of the pack.

The return trip took him almost an hour thanks to his weakened condition, but he finally reached the area with the camouflaged glasshouse. Zac wasn't sure whether the others were still around or whether they were on the way back to the base, but his question was soon answered as Billy appeared out of nowhere with his club at the ready.

"Wait! I tamed these guys," Zac explained, but his voice rapidly lost its strength as the group of wolves pounced at the giant without hesitation.

The young wolves were clearly out for blood, and nothing Zac did with **[Verun's Bite]** could quell their bloodthirst. Zac could only sigh and flash forward, punching the closest one on the side of its head, instantly knocking it out. Billy grinned and followed suit as he bashed the closest one, and a few seconds later all six wolves were lying unconscious on the ground.

"Ah, stupid dogs," Billy muttered. "Need to be trained."

"Exactly," Zac nodded as he turned to Thea who had walked out from the illusion array while the two dealt with the wolves. "Are you okay?"

Billy was still looking a bit tired, but his wounds were mostly superficial. He would most likely be fine in a few days. However, Thea looked a lot worse for the wear. Her face was completely pallid and her eyes were sunken, and they even seemed to have lost some of their color. The skill she used, **[Void Piercer]**, was able to display a completely shocking might, but something told him that the cost of using it was equally harsh.

She simply shouldn't be able to release such an amount of power as things currently stood, and Zac guessed that the skill could be considered a Taboo Skill like the escape method she possessed. It either had to cost life force or come with some other huge drawback, something far worse than his current state from using **[Hatchetman's Rage]**.

"It's nothing," Thea said with a shake of her head. "I'll be better in a bit. It's good to see you're fine as well, the energy outbursts before were pretty intense."

"... Be careful," Zac could only say, realizing that Thea didn't want him to worry. "How's Emily and Joanna?"

"They're both sleeping," Billy yawned. "Thea should be sleeping as well, but she refused."

"Emily overdrew her energy to the point that she even used a little bit of life-force," Thea sighed. "She needs to rest, or it might harm her future cultivation."

Zac nodded with a grimace, feeling a wave of guilt coming over him. He knew that the teenager needed to spread her wings and join proper missions if she would have any chance of making it on the road of cultivation, but this was probably the wrong place to do so.

"Don't blame yourself. No one can predict everything, and she will be fine," Thea said. "More importantly, we were afraid you would be coming with a thousand wolves nipping at your heels, but you actually tamed a few of them? What's going on? Why didn't these guys attack you?"

"It's my Tool Spirit," Zac said after some thought as he looked down at the pitiable animals, explaining how Verun became the alpha of the pack.

"It's that powerful?" Thea asked with glimmering eyes. "It seems I need to focus even more on my new companion."

"I was hoping they would stay docile even when I'm not around, but It looks like that might take some time. Perhaps the beastmasters have some means to quickly domesticate them tough," Zac muttered.

“The Tal-Eladar, can they be trusted?” Thea asked. “Your relations seem a bit strained.”

“They are a business partner rather than an ally,” Zac said after some thought. “They were pretty useless before, but they seem to have come around since they failed to assist during the Undead Incursion. Their ambiguous situation makes them work really hard as well.”

“So what are you planning on doing next?” Thea asked, putting the matter of the wolves aside.

“I’m going to explore the forest a bit,” Zac said without hesitation. “But I need to do something first.”

As for what that was, it was simple. He still had a storm of Cosmic Energy rampaging about in his body, and he needed to break open some nodes now that he was safe within the glasshouse.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 588 - Lunar Forest**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

Happy Easter, defiers!

Zac had considered his next step on his way back, and he decided to take a tour of this place, taking advantage of the fact that his axe had somehow given him a carte blanche of the forest. He had already sensed that there was a lot of valuable herbs in this forest, and only he could pass through these parts without becoming food for the wolves.

Everything pointed toward this place being created for bloodline research, so any plant that grew in this place might be useful for exactly that. Opening his second Hidden Node had been an unexpected gain, but it also cost him one of his two bloodline treasures, leaving him only with the **[Bloodline Nucleus]** he gained during the Tower Climb. It would be best if he could find some plants to make up for the loss.

The Dimensional Treasure wouldn’t wake up for a few days in either case, and his sister seemed to believe that the spatial obstructions would be in place until it did. Now was his last chance to break open his nodes and do some simple exploration. He guessed there would be no time for that afterward.

He also wanted to set out on his own for a bit to get a better understanding of the changes in his body and to get accustomed to his new skills.

“So you’re setting off alone again?” Thea asked with a frown.

“Bringing these guys was a test,” Zac said as he pointed down at the unconscious wolves. “I can somewhat move among the wolves because I’m connected to my axe, but it looks like that protection doesn’t extend to others. However, I still need your help.”

“What are you thinking?” Thea asked, her brows relaxing a bit.

“A squad needs to find the entrances to the inner reaches of the Mystic Realm. I tried instructing the wolves to stay away from these parts, which hopefully will allow you to move along the wall toward the center. It might still be extremely dangerous

even without the wolves though,” Zac said. “I’ll take a look at the other side to see if there’s another structure like this one over there.”

“We’ll go back and update the main group and bring Emily to a safer place to recuperate. Should we bring your sister back here?” Thea said before she gave Zac a pointed look. “She’s the only other one who can open these doors. It’s a bit odd that only the two of you managed to get Tier-4 clearance, by the way.”

“I got my clearance through the Tower of Eternity. Kenzie might just be lucky. There can only be one chief caretaker after all. Have Joanna stay in the glasshouse to open the gate for you instead. My sister has enough on her plate,” Zac said after some thought before he looked down at the wolves. “Someone needs to look after these guys as well.”

Billy and Zac carried the unconscious wolves into the oversized stalls next, and Zac was relieved to see that a barrier automatically sprung up, trapping them inside. Not only that, but water was also dispensed and a few light bulbs started to emit the same lunar light as the moons outside. It saved Zac a lot of headache, allowing him to immediately prepare to open his nodes.

It was over an hour since he gained the energy by this point, and he had already lost a third of the energy he gained from the battle. More and more energy seeped through the cracks of his energy trap, and if he didn’t use the energy soon it would all be lost.

“I need to break open a node. Give me an hour,” Zac said as he sat walked toward one of the adjoining rooms.

“What? Break open? Are you crazy?” Thea blurted as she grabbed his arm. “I read that doing so is extremely harmful. It can even kill you!”

“I don’t have a lot of options as a mortal,” Zac explained with a grimace. “But I’m pretty sturdy. I’ll be fine.”

Thea reluctantly let him go, and Zac sat down as soon as the sliding doors closed. The next node was in his leg just like most of the previous ones, though it was a bit further up. It was just below his knee this time, forcing Zac to be extremely careful. He became a little bit more skilled every time he opened a node, but getting wounded was inevitable.

The only thing he could hope to accomplish was to try to avoid letting anything important get destroyed and rather sacrifice his muscles. It hurt just as much that way, but muscles seemed to be the easiest part to restore with healing pills and his Dao. So it was with extreme caution that he pushed more and more of his excess energy into the node, until a surging force erupted twenty minutes later.

A stabbing pain almost made Zac black out, but he clenched his fist with enough force to draw blood from his palms to stay awake. His left leg had almost been blown clean off this time even with how careful he was, and it almost looked like one of the wolves from before had ripped out a part of his calf.

Blood drenched the whole floor, and some had even splattered on the glass walls, and Zac quickly ate a healing pill as he activated [**Surging Vitality**]. For a few seconds there was no effect, but the maimed muscles on his legs started to wiggle and writhe a moment later, almost looking like a pack of snakes as they twisted about.

The pain intensified over twofold, but Zac held on, ignoring both the sweat that streamed down his leg and the large amount of Cosmic Energy that was drained. It turned out that [**Surging Vitality**] could actually utilize the energy he gathered from kills, and one stream after another entered the skill fractal by his Specialty Core.

The energy wasn’t transformed into life-attuned energy or something nature aspected like his Dao though, but it rather reminded Zac of his [**Bone-Forging Dust**].

The energy was unattuned, or perhaps flesh-attuned if there was such a thing. The energy entered his mangled leg, and it boosted the natural healing ability of his body rather than traditional life-attuned healing. That was why his muscles were wriggling so much; they were being forcibly regrown.

Such a process was excruciating though, a far cry from the warm and soothing streams of healing pills or the curing skills of people like Sui. It also only worked on his flesh physical body and not his pathways, though that wasn't a surprise.

What was a bit surprising was how much energy it cost. Using the skill for just fifteen minutes had cost him almost as much Cosmic Energy as the pitched battle before, and it had cost him over half of the accumulated kill energy. The remaining energy was barely enough for him to push his human side to level 84 and start working on his next node.

But on the bright side, it was very effective. Newly grown flesh had replaced the broken mess, and a process that would take even someone like Zac days had been shortened to fifteen minutes. His new muscles still felt a bit stiff and weakened, but he would no doubt get used to it soon enough.

This efficacy alone was reason enough to ditch **[True Strike]**. He would save so much time with the help of the skill in the future. The fact that the healing cost him around half a level was regrettable, but someone like Zac would always be fighting powerful enemies that provided huge amounts of energy.

Mending his flesh was quick, but his pathways were far harder to deal with. He spent another hour making basic repairs after his flesh was fixed, which should allow him to use his Cosmic Energy as long as he didn't use over 50% of his power. Any more than that and he would probably overtax himself like he did during the Undead Incursion. Falling unconscious was fine next to his sister and the Valkyries, but doing so in a foreign forest was another thing altogether.

He slowly got to his feet, causing a series of crackling and popping sounds as the dried blood that covered him started falling off. He saw Thea waiting just outside the transparent walls staring at him with shock.

"How are you still standing? That room looks like something from a horror movie!" Thea exclaimed, her face completely pale as she looked at Zac with worry.

"Well, I'm used to it by now," Zac shrugged.

"Is this what you have to do every time to level up?" Thea said, her eyes fixed on the pool of blood on the floor. "I've read about it, but I had no idea..."

"Well, it's not like this when I use pills or treasures to gain levels," Zac said. "Sorry for making you worry."

"I..." Thea mumbled, but she eventually only shook her head with a sigh. "I can't join the squad you mentioned earlier. I need to rest, after all. Should I get the demon instead? He's crafty enough."

"He should be back by now," Zac agreed. "Have him come over. I'll head out now."

Thea seemed inclined to stop him, but she eventually just walked next to Zac as he stepped out of the glasshouse again.

"The spatial tunnels might close while you're out. Anything you need to relay to the outside world?" Thea finally asked just as he was about to leave.

"I won't be that long. A day or two tops," Zac said. "Just let my sister and the other leaders know I'm okay."

"Okay," Thea nodded. "Stay safe. There's no guarantee the wolves are the only threat in this place."

Zac immediately set off, cutting a straight path through the enormous forest. His leg was hurting a bit, but he could maintain a good pace even with a slight limp. Only five minutes passed before he met a small family of wolves, but they quickly backed off when Zac waved Verun in their direction. It somewhat proved that they hadn't just forgotten about his Tool Spirit, at least not yet.

Thea's final warning echoed in his mind, but he eventually realized something odd after half an hour had passed. She seemed to be wrong about there being other threats than the wolves, almost impossibly wrong. He didn't encounter a single living being in this vast forest even after running for over an hour, except the occasional spotting of lunar wolves. Confusion marred his face as he looked back and forth, but he couldn't make sense of the situation.

Didn't these wolves need to eat?

He knew that it was possible to sustain yourself solely on Cosmic Energy further down the road, but that went for D-Grade warriors and above. They still ate in general though, as high-quality food could provide some benefits. But it wasn't necessary to survive. However, E-Grade beings shouldn't have evolved to that point just yet.

Were these wolves perhaps an exception? Or were they rather vegetarians? They definitely didn't look like animals that lived only on fruits or stalks of grass, so he was more inclined to believe they were able to find sustenance from energy alone. Perhaps that was the true purpose of those artificial moons in the sky, and even the reason why the wolves were brought here.

The solitude gave him a chance to try some things out though, and he stopped in a secluded valley after having traveled for another hour. The aftermath of **[Hatchetman's Rage]** was completely gone by this point, and the halo of **[Conformation of Supremacy]** appeared behind his body once more. However, this time the avatar didn't depict the unadorned axe of the axe-man, but rather the insanely powerful shield of the Grand Protector who appeared in the Dao Vision for his second class.

A surge of power filled his body, and Zac could almost feel his mind connect with the ancient cultivator who had sacrificed his life to save his world. However, no fractal barrier appeared to protect his front as he swung **[Verun's Bite]**. He rather found his strikes gain a tremendous weight, like each of them carried the weight of a world. His attacks were heavy enough to cause scars in the air, but the damage to the ground looked completely different than the long scars before.

This time it almost looked like a small meteor had hit the ground when he swung his axe, with a crater no more than 5 meters wide appearing. It was deep though, reaching twice as far down as it was wide, and Zac accidentally fell into it when it appeared. A slight pain bloomed up when he faceplanted on the ground, but a ten-meter drop couldn't hurt him any longer.

He was more interested in the soil itself. It had become almost impossibly dense, and it took some force for him to dig into it with his hands. It was as though the area had been subjected to a terrifying amount of gravity, packing the soil to the point that it had almost turned into solid matter. Zac jumped out of the pit before he looked back at his new skill with mixed emotions.

The effect of using the shield as a basis for the skill instead of the woodsman's axe was impressive, and it was perhaps a better avatar for a duel, but Zac was disappointed to find that it didn't work as he'd hoped. In his fight with the wolves, he used a weapon as an avatar, which increased his might. He had hoped that using a defensive treasure with **[Conformation of Supremacy]** would instead create some sort of defensive effect.

But his new skill was true to its nature as a pure Strength-based skill, and it looked like it just took the weight and power of the shield to use it as a bludgeon. It still opened a few new avenues of how he could use it, but it clearly wasn't a one-size-fits-all-type situation where he could use it as everything from a defensive to a movement skill.

The limitation was a bit of a let-down, but not overly so. Partly because Zac somewhat expected such a situation, but mostly because he felt that he finally could use his Dao again.

His new Hidden Node had finally stabilized, and it was time to see what it could do.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 589 - Tracks**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**Missed the fat yellow text? I bet. [Here's some blue text as well](#). Join my , read 50 chapters ahead. It's good for you.**

Zac's new Hidden Node had finally calmed down and the somewhat erratic trajectories of the two circular apparitions had stabilized. The three now formed a stable system, and Zac's intuition told him that using his mental energy shouldn't pose a problem any longer. However, Zac still noted that his Hidden Node was still slowly eating the energies from the three Dao projections, though not nearly as frantically as before.

It felt like a small drain on his mind, but his soul was pretty strong by this point, and he was generating new Mental Energy a lot quicker than the speed of consumption of his Hidden Node. It would no doubt slow down his recuperation after a battle, but he still had a pile of Soul Crystals in case he was in a hurry.

He was about to infuse his skill, but a thought suddenly struck him as he activated **[Primal Polyglot]** first. The translation function worked passively just like the **[Book of Babel]**, but the active interpretation of the Dao-based language needed an infusion of Cosmic Energy. He had tried using it a few times before as they traveled through the endless tunnels, but it appeared as though the skill didn't really help with Technocrat materials.

His vision didn't change at all after activating the skill, but it still felt like he was looking at something different than before as he gazed at the halo hovering behind him. It felt a bit similar to how two different people could have completely different impressions of a painting or a poem, it gave Zac a completely new outlook as he gazed at the circular fractals.

The skill allowed him to gain a better understanding of how the halo and the apparition were connected, but he didn't gain any immediate insights into the limitations of his skill though. Zac guessed he would have to experiment with one apparition after another to see what would be useful, and what would be inefficient.

Zac briefly considered using the Chaos Pattern or his Remnants for a huge destructive boost, but he quickly dispelled any such thoughts. He didn't want to call down the Tribulation Lightning again, even if things turned out pretty good the last time around.

That scene with the endless sea of lightning might even have been a warning by the heavens, so he instead focused on his Dao. He tried infusing [**Conformation of Supremacy**] with the Fragment of the Axe seeing that everything seemed to be in order, but worry gripped his heart when nothing happened.

However, Zac immediately calmed down when he found that he could infuse the skill with the Fragment of the Coffin just fine. It would appear that the choice of projection also impacted what Daos were infusible. The feeling he got from the shield was mostly one of imperviousness and hardness, and his Fragment of the Coffin was the Fragment that best represented that feeling.

A stream of mental energy made its way into the halo from his mind, and Zac noted with interest that the energies seeping out of the hanging coffin joined the mental energy flow, effectively turning it into Dao Energy. The infusion somehow felt a lot smoother from before, like the process had been streamlined. That by itself didn't really change its power or anything, though the speed of his infusion seemed to have somewhat sped up.

It was only a difference of a fraction of a second, but even such a small boost could prove vital in a pitched battle.

However, another change made Zac's eyes glisten. A second stream was released from his avatar, or rather the Hidden Node lodged within his body. It was the same pitch-black energy as the one released from the coffin, and the two streams seamlessly merged just before they entered the skill fractal.

Zac initially didn't know whether this change held any significance, but he quickly realized what was going on. He hadn't used his new E-Grade skill a lot, but he was almost certain that he was able to instill more of his mental energy compared to before.

Of course, that might be because he had changed the avatar to a shield that really matched the Fragment of the Coffin.

There was a simple way to make sure though, and Zac quickly dispelled [**Conformation of Supremacy**] to instead conjure a fractal blade with [**Chop**]. It was the skill he was most used to, and he knew exactly how much mental energy he could infuse into the blade before it wouldn't work any longer.

Zac's eyes lit up as he infused more and more of his Dao into the blade, and he was still using the Fragment of the Coffin. A similar scene took place in his mind this time around as well, as two streams of energies fused just as they entered the skill fractal on his hand.

The fractal blade immediately gained a sinister aura as it was filled with the putrefying part of his Dao Fragment, but the color kept increasing in intensity and power until it almost turned pitch-black.

It didn't take Zac long to figure out the difference from before. He could suddenly infuse around 20% more mental energy into his skills, which made his attacks around 10% more powerful compared to before if you contributed half his power to his Dao Fragments. It was an amazing boost that seemed to come with pretty much no downsides, apart from a small but constant drain on his mind.

Of course, there was some bad news that came along with the good. Zac had hoped that the Hidden Node in his mind would be related to Dao control and affinity like the general Hidden Node [**Spirit Gate**], but it rather looked like [**Spiritual Void**] was a combat-oriented node that replaced quality with quantity.

Zac experimenting for a few minutes longer to make sure, but he could quickly confirm that he was still beyond incompetent when it came to things like Dao Braiding.

He couldn't turn his Hidden Node on or off either, though he could somewhat reduce the amount of energy it expelled along with a Dao infusion.

Another change took place a few minutes later, as the additional infusion from his Hidden Node started to wane, leaving Zac with just his own mental energy. He wasn't too surprised about that though. He had already guessed that the **[Spiritual Void]** acted like some sort of Dao Battery, storing excess energy until it would be released in battle.

The node was a bit unwieldy in the sense that he couldn't control when to use it and when his own Dao was enough, but his control would probably improve when his bloodline awakened. The boosting effect would probably become even greater in the future as well, and he couldn't help but think back to the scene where his presumed ancestor crushed his enemy by simply releasing the floodgates in his mind.

Perhaps even more importantly, the node gave him an important glimpse into his Void Emperor bloodline. Things were finally started to make sense, and the lack of affinities no longer felt as detrimental as they once did. His body might be 'corrupted' with a complete lack of affinities, but it appeared that his bloodline was shoring up those weaknesses one by one.

The **[Void Heart]** was related to energy gathering, allowing him to eat all kinds of energies as an alternative form of cultivation. The second node in his soul allowed for an additional outburst of mental energy, replacing Dao Braiding or Dao Arrays with additional force.

It perfectly aligned with his insights back during the Dao Discourse to the point that it made him question whether that epiphany was actually just his bloodline telling his subconscious how to fight.

Zac did fell a few trees with his improved Fragment of the Axe as well, and it had taken a noticeable step forward in lethality. The fragment hadn't really seemed to gain any new functionality as they sometimes did, but it had rather just become more powerful. It wasn't too surprising, as the upgrade had been based on war and conflict rather than adding something new like Mental Heaviness.

Seeing that everything was fine even after the drastic changes to his mind Zac set out again, taking a circuitous route through the forest. It took almost 20 hours for him to reach the other side, but he had spent a few hours picking up energy-dense plants.

He didn't recognize a single one of them, but they all contained the energy of the moon. The combination of specific growth requirements and unique attributes was usually a recipe for a valuable treasure, so he had high hopes that the Sky Gnome could turn these things into piles of cash even if they proved useless in awakening his bloodline.

A few hours were spent on rest and redrawing his pathways as well. He ate a small hill of meat before he set out again, but he finally felt like he had rid himself of the last after-effects of the **[Rageroot Oak Seed]**. His body was in pretty good condition all things considered, with only his pathways causing some issues now.

It was a bit of an annoyance, but Zac knew he couldn't complain. Most mortals would probably turn green with envy when hearing how quickly he pushed through levels.

Zac kept moving forward after resuming his exploration, and the silver forest finally gave way to the band of grass that ran along the wall. The opposite side of the forest was constructed pretty much the same way as the area they came from, with a thirty-meter tall wall stretching across the horizon.

However, there was one startling difference; the wall was actually damaged, like it had just endured a siege. The scripts had lost their luster at multiple places, and there were hundreds of cracks. Zac even believed he would be able to cram himself through some of the larger fractures.

Zac's first guess was that another battle had taken place here just like the one that should have taken place just before Ogras first arrived in the Mystic Realm, but he quickly discarded that thought. The damage was simply too widespread, going on for as far as he could see. If a battle had caused this kind of damage they definitely weren't at the E-Grade.

But more to the point, Zac sensed the same type of spatial energies in many of the cracks, making him believe that this was rather the result of spatial turbulence.

There were no spatial tears or other dangers for the moment though, so Zac started walking along the edge of the forest in a parallel to the wall, keeping his form hidden among the shrubbery. He was looking for a natural exit like the glasshouse or a gate, but so far there were no clues.

The cracks might provide ingress to the other side, but Zac wouldn't try that unless he really needed to. After all, the walls were alive, and he didn't want to get buried alive inside the technocrat alloy. A sudden shudder from his forester's intuition made him turn his concentration to a patch of the forest ahead of him.

He first didn't understand what [**Forester's Constitution**] was trying to tell him as there were no herbs there, but his eyes widened when he noticed something.

There were footsteps, and not something left by the wolves.

Zac bent down to get a closer look, and while he was no expert in tracking he felt the trail was fresh. He hesitated for a second, but his curiosity quickly overcame his caution. He soon took out his axe and he started to follow the tracks, taking great care to not create any sounds.

The tracks came from the depths of the forest before they made a turn at the edge. It looked like a group had taken a shortcut like him, but the droplets of blood on the grass indicated that their passage might not have been as carefree. The trail moved in the same direction as the one Zac already walked, keeping to the edge of the forest all the time.

There was no doubt that the owners of the footprints weren't far away as the blood on the ground still hadn't dried, and it only took him fifteen minutes before he spotted some movement ahead. Zac had thought about how to make first contact with the natives a fair bit over the past weeks, but no planning had prepared him for the situation in front of him.

Five werewolves were standing not far from the wall, most of them sporting somewhat severe wounds. One of them even seemed to have lost an arm recently, and he swayed a bit where he stood. But more importantly, one of them was carrying an unconscious human, a girl who looked no older than Zac himself

How were you supposed to react to what looked like a straight-up kidnapping?

His first instinct was to save help the captive out simply based on the fact they both were human, but he quickly discarded the thought. He had no idea what was going on, and getting involved might cause unnecessary trouble. His main goal was to kill the two remaining Dominators to cut off the last two Karmic Links leading to earth.

Anything else was secondary.

However, a burst of annoyance made Zac grit his teeth when an all-too-familiar prompt appeared in front of him.

**[Damsel in Distress (Training (1/10)): Rescue the Damsel in Distress. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1) NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of two random skills and 9 levels.]**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 590 - Let's Talk**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

Things are finally heating up in Mystic Realm Arc. How about dodging the endless cliffs and reading [the next 50 chapters in one go](#)? Join my today!

Zac mutely looked at the quest prompt for a few seconds, realizing that his new Pathstrider-title wasted no time in causing trouble for him. He had been free from any meddling by the System since the battle outside the Tower of Eternity, but it looked like his good days were over.

Not only did the System force him to take a side, but it even said that this was just the first of a series of quests. The failure penalty was almost of grotesque proportions as well. Losing nine levels would put him right back at the start of the E-Grade, and this time he wouldn't be able to gain most of the levels through pills.

Of course, the real threat was losing two of his skills, and it was something he couldn't allow to happen no matter what.

The one small blessing was that there was no time limit on the quest, which allowed Zac to stay hidden for a bit longer to spy on the werewolves. The beastkin actually felt a bit familiar to the lunar wolves in the forest with all of them emitting the same sort of lunar energy. Most of them had mottled fur in black and silver, but one who emitted the strongest aura was almost completely silvery-white.

Zac guessed that the silver werewolf was the leader, and he even had a marking on his forehead. It pretty much confirmed Zac's earlier theory that the werewolves in this Research Base and the lunar wolves were somehow connected through bloodlines. The werewolves might even be normal humans who had the bloodline of the wolves transplanted into their bodies for all Zac knew.

The more pressing issue was how to deal with the situation.

The auras of the warriors weren't weak by any means, but neither did they make Zac feel a lot of pressure. He felt pretty confident in dealing with them without wasting any more of his aces, but that by itself made him a bit wary. The system wouldn't just give him a freebie, making him believe there was some catch to the quest.

So Zac wasn't in any rush to rush out, especially as the group was doing something that sparked Zac's curiosity.

They had been standing at a seemingly inconspicuous part of the wall, with one of the werewolves touching and prodding the smooth surface all this while. But it looked like he finally had found what he looked for, and he took out one disk after another and pressed them against the metal. The disks stayed in place like they had suction cups, and the beastkin quickly formed two vertical lines with the help of twelve identical disks.

The werewolf wasn't finished there, but he actually took out a tablet next and he connected it to one of the disks through a cable. It was a bit surreal watching a

werewolf deftly using what seemed to be futuristic technology, but perhaps he shouldn't be surprised considering what kind of place this was.

There was still no sign of what they were up to even after the werewolf had been tapping away at the tablet with an almost dizzying speed for five minutes, but then there was finally a change. Zac couldn't believe what he was seeing as a gate started to take form in the wall with the disks acting as the frames.

It looked just like the gates they had passed through to get to this place, though it was only three meters high. It was also looking very rough, but it was gradually transforming into a proper door. Part of him wanted to stay and watch a while longer to see what else the tech-savvy werewolf had up his sleeve, but Zac knew that he couldn't wait longer if he wanted to intercept.

That door might disappear the moment they passed through it, locking Zac outside. There was no timer on the quest, but that didn't mean that he couldn't fail it. He slowly rose from his hidden position, but he had underestimated the senses of the werewolves as even that small movement put them on edge.

Their bodies immediately grew half a size as Zac prepared himself for battle, allowing them to tower over a meter above Zac. Their claws grew longer as well, and Zac felt that they could even match low quality E-Grade Tool Spirits.

Zac's hypothesis that these beastkin were related to the lunar wolves was further confirmed as they started radiating a cold piercing light that turned the whole area into a blinding white.

But Zac had already figured out the solution to this trick though, so he activated **[Cosmic Gaze]** and **[Hatchetman's Spirit]** which immediately allowed him to spot the trio. They had discarded their captive on the ground and were now rushing straight toward him while the leader stayed behind to observe.

The auras the warriors had grown since they transformed, but it was absolutely not to the point that Zac feared for his life. He still found himself in a tricky spot as he didn't want to kill them in order to not ruin any potential cooperation with these people. After all, the quest had told him to save the girl, but nothing about killing these people.

"Wait, let's talk-" Zac said as he lifted a hand to indicate that he didn't want trouble, but he was quickly forced to move his hand away as a series of claws ripped through the air in an attempt to cut it clean off.

The werewolves seemed to have taken his words as a sign of weakness as they looked at him with disdain. Zac was a bit confused about what gave these guys the guts to attack him even if his words were a bit defensive, but he suddenly realized that his aura was actually quite weak at the moment because of his broken pathways.

Not only that, but a lot of his excess spirituality was also swallowed by his **[Spiritual Void]** rather than being passively emitted from his body as an aura. He hadn't realized it before, but these two facts combined probably made him appear like a recently evolved cultivator at best. He still had a hard time deciding on a course of action though, so he was immediately put in a passive state as he started avoiding a furious barrage of claws infused with the power of the moon without trying to expose his real strength.

However, a single sentence immediately quenched his hopes of a peaceful release of the human girl.

"Don't kill him. He's one of the outsiders," the leader growled as he spectated the battle. "The others we caught were even weaker than this one. Let's take him with us to the relay station as well."

Zac's pupils shrunk as he immediately realized what the werewolf was talking about. It turned out that it was these werewolves who were responsible for his missing squad. A thick killing intent roiled out from his body, far eclipsing his diminutive aura, causing the pupils of his enemies to shrink into needlepoints.

The outburst was so powerful that even the unconscious human on the ground stirred awake, and the werewolves quickly tried to back away and regroup. However, how could Zac allow for something like that?

The closest werewolf was instantly bisected as **[Verun's Bite]** emitted a sanguine glow, leaving just four alive. The other two werewolves barely had time to flash away by turning into moonlight before Zac's blade reached them as well, but he was immediately hot in pursuit.

"He must be one of their leaders!" the silver werewolf shouted from behind. "Restrain him!"

The silver light in the whole area transformed the next moment as the wolves lit up like beacons, and the radiance was so powerful that the moonlight almost seemed to have turned into a liquid. It felt just like the restriction during his last fight, but perhaps even more powerful. Even worse, the pressure was steadily increasing, forcing him to flash forward with **[Loamwalker]**, finally leaving the forest.

The light put some painful pressure on his still tender leg, but he knew that he simply needed to fight in a melee range to almost completely circumvent its effect. Someone with less Strength than him might have been completely unable to move due to the pressure though. He quickly targeted one of the soldiers at random, and while he seemed surprised at Zac's decisiveness he still quickly responded by slashing at Zac's throat with his claws.

Zac blocked it with his axe before he rammed him straight on with his shoulder, but he was a bit surprised by the result. He had expected to send the wolf flying with multiple broken bones, but he was actually just pushed back with a grunt. The bodies of these people were clearly extremely sturdy, making Zac wonder just what they had gone through to be in such a wretched state.

The attack had caused a shock to the werewolf's system though, allowing Zac to immediately follow up with a swing of **[Verun's Bite]** infused with the Fragment of the Axe.

A lunar barrier appeared to block the strike, but this was a High Mastery Dao Fragment. The barrier was cut apart like it was made from paper, and the werewolf's head was lopped off the next moment. Zac didn't get any time to celebrate though as he felt a searing pain on his neck and back as a series of crescent moons hidden in the moonlight slammed into him, instantly drenching his body with blood.

Zac grunted with pain, but he was more surprised that the attacks managed to hide from the omnipresence of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**. He wildly looked around with **[Cosmic Gaze]** to spot the source of the attacks, and he realized that another werewolf had appeared from the forest. But Zac was even more surprised to see that the newcomer was ignoring him after the first barrage, and instead was rushing straight toward the gate.

Not only that, but the others were doing the same, even leaving behind their tools and backpacks on the ground.

"Run! Run!" the leader shouted as he kicked the girl on the ground, which launched her body into the arms of one of the others. "Open that god damn thing even if the algorithms are imperfect!"

Zac could sigh at how different these guys were compared to their frenzied cousins as he set out in pursuit.

Two combatants were already down, which left three more to go, not counting the wolf who was still desperately working on opening the door. Zac was starting to feel a bit woozy from fighting in his current condition, but it wasn't like he had any option but to keep going.

It was a bit risky, but he started pushing energy into the skill fractal of **[Rapturous Divide]** as a fractal blade appeared in front of his axehead. Zac knew he would need to take them out before they opened that door so he wanted to catch them all in a close-range swipe. However, a series of spatial tears suddenly appeared out of nowhere, almost cutting him to ribbons.

Zac desperately jumped out of the way as he looked for the source of the attack. It was the backpack that one of the werewolves had discarded earlier. It was actually a booby-trap, but Zac had ignored it because it didn't emit even a hint of Cosmic Energy, and his danger sense didn't warn him either.

He quickly tried to find his footing and resume his pursuit, but a sense of foreboding suddenly came over him. However, he didn't even have time to make a move before a hand appeared from the moonlight and pressed a small mechanical item against his chest.

Terror filled Zac's heart when he thought he was about to get ripped apart by a bunch of spatial tears, but one fear was replaced with another as he found his body completely restrained. That little thing that looked like a toy had somehow taken control of the Cosmic Energy in his body, and his body had locked itself into place.

He tried to struggle free, but moving was completely impossible.

"Shit, the outsiders have some formidable people," the silver werewolf spat as he emerged out of the moonlight, and he lifted Zac by his neck before started to walk toward the others. "But that's good. This one should know a lot more than those scouts."

Zac wasn't even able to respond, but he was suddenly filled with hope as he noticed something. His Specialty Core wasn't restrained at all by the odd item latched to his chest, and it had even started its transformation. The werewolf was thankfully completely oblivious to that fact as he was more focused on the wolf dealing with the gate.

He didn't get any further than ten meters though as the massive cage of death sprung up around him, trapping all the remaining werewolves along with the human captive. The cable connecting the werewolf's tablet to the wall was ripped apart by the barrier of **[Profane Seal]** as well, effectively stopping his work.

The weird Technocrat restraining tool fell to the ground as Zac's hand punched through the chest of the werewolf leader. The bindings before had made him drop **[Verun's Bite]**, but his hand still had terrifying penetrating power since it was infused with his recently upgraded Dao Fragment.

The werewolf leader looked into Zac's abyssal eyes for a second before his head rolled over, and Zac felt a surge of energy entering his body. The pitch-black armor of **[Vanguard of Undeath]** covered him the next moment as he turned toward the remaining werewolves, and over a dozen chains stabbed toward the disbelieving targets as Zac started to advance on them.

The unexpected close call was enough for him to completely clear his head, and Zac immediately started his customary grinding down of his targets with newfound zeal. The werewolves tried to turn into motes of light to escape again, but their moonlight was completely overpowered by the combination of **[Winds of Decay]** and **[Fields of Despair]**.

Just a few seconds later only one enemy was left alive, the werewolf who had been responsible for summoning the gate earlier. Zac figured that he would be able to answer some questions in case the human girl didn't know, for example where that relay station was. He left the werewolf utterly restrained by his sets of chains, but he couldn't help but feel a headache coming on as he turned his abyssal eyes toward the human.

She had been shocked awake by the kick earlier, and she had witnessed everything that came afterward. Him getting locked down and then transforming to a Draugr. He knew that his unique situation would be exposed to the world sooner or later, but it was still too early. If this girl was allowed to return to her clan, then he would sooner or later be exposed. Not even a contract felt like a surefire way to protect the secrets as Catheya had explained.

But could he really kill her to protect his secret? That would definitely be crossing a line.

"Don't kill me. I won't tell anyone, I swear on my Clan's name," the girl hurriedly said, clearly understanding what kind of thoughts were running through Zac's mind.

"I won't harm you," Zac eventually said after some pause. "But I can't just let you go either. At least not for the time being. What you saw can get both me and my people in trouble if it spreads out. You will need to sign a contract and stay with me for a while."

"I understand your predicament, I really do," the girl sighed. "But I have too many people depending on me. I cannot let that happen. But don't worry. You risked your life to save me, so I'll keep my word."

Alarm bells immediately went off in Zac's mind when he heard her response, and Zac immediately erected every defense he had while launching every single free chain at her. She was planning something, something dangerous. The feeling of alarm only intensified as the girl's eyes turned white, and Zac fought a strange feeling that enveloped his mind as he tried to restrain her before it was too late.

Zac desperately jumped out of the way as he looked for the source of the attack. It was the backpack that one of the werewolves had discarded earlier. It was actually a booby-trap, but Zac had ignored it because it didn't emit even a hint of Cosmic Energy, and his danger sense didn't warn him either.

He quickly tried to find his footing and resume his pursuit, but a weird mental nudge pushed him back a step.

"Behind you!" the human girl screamed in warning, and Zac's reaction was instantaneous.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**If you want to support me and Defiance of the Fall (or just read up to 50 chapters ahead) please check out my**

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**Chapter 591 - The Hero's Journey**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**Yellow yellow yellow yellow [blue](#). 50 yellow yellow.**

Zac spun around, just in time to see a hand materialize out of nowhere a meter away from him. It held some mechanism in its hand, but Zac slapped the thing out of the furry paw before he swung his axe twice in quick succession.

The clouds of **[Rapturous Divide]** spread in the area in front of him as a surprised-looking silvery werewolf was cut apart by the spatial divide. It was the werewolf leader who had been caught by surprise. He had somehow managed to hide completely in the moonlight, tricking both Zac's senses and his Danger sense.

Thankfully he had the tables turned on him because of the early warning, and the werewolf helplessly fell on the ground as his blood flowed like rivers. Zac didn't immediately target the other wolves, but he rather stopped for a second and looked down at the dying warrior. He didn't know why, but Zac felt an eerie sense of déjà vu as he saw the hand just now.

"It's you!" the werewolf coughed as he bled out, but his two blood-red eyes were actually staring at the girl fifty meters away rather than at Zac. "You weren't restrained!"

Zac looked over in confusion and was surprised to see that the young woman was in an extremely precarious condition for some reason, with blood freely running from her eyes, nose, and ears. She couldn't even respond to the werewolf's accusations, as she puked out both her dinner and a bucket of blood before she fell in a heap.

"You used the eyes of time to meddle! Don't think this will save you! You hold the key to immortality, and the Lunar Tribe will not be stopped! We will-" werewolf raved until the light in his eyes died.

The dying words of the werewolf leader rekindled the feeling of wrongness, but he was more concerned about dealing with the remaining werewolves. He left the dead leader where he was and instead focused on the last two as he rushed toward the gate. However, he couldn't believe what he was seeing when the werewolves actually made a 180-turn, rushing straight toward him.

Did that werewolf leader hold such a big position in their hearts that they were ready to throw their lives away to avenge him? Zac's state was pretty bad from fighting so soon after node-breaking, but these remaining wolves were absolutely not his match.

Zac prepared to meet their assault head-on, but he found himself swinging his axe through empty space as the wolves suddenly disappeared. He immediately sensed where they had appeared though; right next to the girl and the fallen corpse of their leader.

A wave of anger surged in his mind when he thought of the wretched state of the former captive. She was clearly on the verge of death. Had the wolves decided to retaliate against her instead of him when realizing they couldn't deal with him?

Rage bubbled in his heart when he saw her pitiable state, and he once more pushed himself beyond what was safe, instantly appearing next to the closest werewolf. The beastkin desperately reached for a pouch on his leaders' waist as his body turned into moonlight, but the process was interrupted in the middle as Zac punched clean through his head with an Axe-Infused jab.

The other werewolf actually appeared right next to him before his attack was even finished, snatching the satchel and disappearing. But his camouflage was nowhere near the level of his fallen leader, especially not when most of the moonlight in the area had dissipated by now. He might as well have skipped using the skill as Zac could see his outline perfectly with the help of **[Cosmic Gaze]**.

Zac caught up with him with the help of **[Loamwalker]** and ended his life in one swing. He looted the stolen pouch without losing his momentum before he appeared right next to the smallest werewolf who was still desperately typing on his tablet.

Despair flooded his eyes when he saw Zac appear next to him, but a hint of ruthlessness flashed in his eyes as he pushed a button at the corner of his tablet.

A surge of danger screamed in Zac's mind, allowing him to barely dodge a metal spike as the wall came alive, ruthlessly stabbing at both himself and the werewolf. One attack after another was launched in quick succession like a crashing wave of liquid metal.

A painful wound was ripped open in Zac's side as the wall almost had turned into a terrifying maw that tried to swallow him whole, but he pushed through the pain as he ran for his life. The werewolf was even worse off as he was instantly killed by an alloy spike that pierced his head. Zac risked it to look behind, just in time to see the corpse being dragged inside the wall itself.

The scene only boosted Zac's desire to escape, but he still stopped for an instant to snatch up the wounded girl before he ran into the forest. He felt the spikes pierce into the ground right behind him even after reaching the edge of the forest, and only after running for another minute could he confirm that the wall wasn't hunting him any longer.

The girl had already gone unconscious again, and Zac sighed as he fed her some of his better healing pills for both the body and the soul before dealing his own wounds. She was his ticket to learning about this base, and he couldn't let her die after going through all that trouble.

A sudden wave of dizziness threatened to push him into the embrace of unconscious just like the last time he fought while still over-doing it right after breaking open a node, but he couldn't risk it in this place. A burst of pain jolted him awake as he stabbed himself in the leg, and the shock to his system pushed the drowsiness away.

His body was still in a pretty pathetic state though, but it slowly improved over the next two hours. The wound in his side was purely physical in its form, which allowed him to quickly heal it up with the help of **[Surging Vitality]**. It cost him most of the energy from his battle, but it wasn't all that much anyway.

Only the leader was powerful, but his aura was pretty unstable even before the fight. The energy rewarded by the System took things like that into account, so he didn't get nearly as much energy from this battle as from the one against the wolves.

The whole fight made him wonder what the purpose of this training session was. He hadn't really learned anything new from the battle, and it definitely hadn't pushed him beyond his limits to make some sort of breakthrough.

Was it more about setting a series of events in motion?

A second quest prompt quickly answered his question for him.

**The Hero's Journey (Training (2/10)): Rescue your scouting squad before they are moved from the relay station. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/7). [04:34:22] NOTE: Three deaths count as failure. Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of two random skills and 7 levels.]**

Zac quickly read the quest, and a sense of relief filled him when he saw that the punishment had lessened. However, the loss of skills was still there, meaning that he definitely couldn't skip it. Then again, he had no plans to do so anyway.

He had already decided to rescue his people the moment the werewolf leader opened his mouth, so the quest didn't really change anything this time around. The problem was that there was a time limit for this quest.

Four hours wasn't little, but it wasn't a lot either. The relay station was definitely on the other side of the wall, but the gate had disappeared when that smaller werewolf somehow triggered the defenses of the wall.

The encounter had also proved that there was even more about this place he didn't understand than he had anticipated. He took out a small trinket from his Spatial ring and he turned it over a few times before stowing it away again. It was the thing that the Werewolf leader tried to attack him with before he was killed, but Zac couldn't figure out how it worked or what it did at all.

Who knew how technocrat weaponry and tricks these werewolves had? Zac was afraid that he would just get himself killed if he stormed the relay station blindly. Perhaps they could control the walls freely, easily trapping him in a corridor before flooding it with spatial tears. Not even he would be able to escape something like that.

Zac's eyes slowly turned to the unconscious girl lying next to him. She was the key to this mission. He felt a bit bad about bringing her with him on a rescue mission in her wounded state, but he didn't have a lot of options. He couldn't risk failing the quest, and she would definitely increase the odds of success thanks to her knowledge of this place.

At least the girl's situation seemed to have stabilized thanks to his pills, though she was still unconscious. He looked down at her curiously, feeling for some reason that they had met before. But that was obviously impossible since she clearly wasn't someone from his force. She was wearing what looked like a technocrat uniform, but she was definitely a cultivator judging by the aura she unconsciously emitted.

Zac couldn't be certain, but it felt like she had recently evolved to the E-Grade, which was pretty impressive considering her young age and the somewhat lacking cultivation environment. Then again, the girl might look 20, but she could be 100 years old for all Zac knew.

Normally Zac would have been happy to recuperate a while longer while waiting for the girl to come around, but the timer left him restless. He was in decent shape in any case, and he hadn't used any of his long cooldown skills during the battle. It was time to start looking for a way to get to the other side of the wall.

He got up to his feet and slung the girl across his shoulder before he made his way back toward the wall as he kept vigil of the surroundings. There might be more werewolves lurking in the area, or some other hidden traps initiated by the werewolf technician. But it looked like the alloy had returned to normal, and an unmoving wall met his eyes when he reached the edge of the forest.

Even throwing anything from boulders to corpses at the wall elicited no response, and Zac finally dared to personally move closer. He let the girl down on a patch of grass before he started to prod the wall, but there was no sign of the gate at all. A quick survey of the immediate section of the wall exposed a pretty huge crack a few hundred meters away, but Zac was extremely hesitant to use it.

The wolves hadn't even tried using those cracks as a means of escape when facing death, making Zac believe that the jagged scars in the walls were deathtraps. But he had no idea what to do next. He had found a few technological gadgets along with a spare tablet in the werewolf leader's cosmos sack, but he had no idea how to use it.

The tablet wouldn't turn on, and the disks wouldn't stick to the wall no matter how hard Zac pushed. Three minutes passed without him making any progress, and he finally couldn't wait any longer. He walked over to the unconscious girl as he took out a bottle of water. However, an idea struck him and he released a burst of killing intent

aimed at her. It actually worked. The girl groaned as her eyelids fluttered, and she woke up a second later.

Her bleary eyes peered back and forth until they finally found Zac. Her pupils constricted for a second, but she quickly calmed down as she slowly got up to a sitting position.

“Thank you for saving me. I’m Leviala Cartava,” she said with a weak voice.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 592 - Datamancers**

Zac once more got a weird feeling when he looked into Leviala’s eyes now that she had woken up. Of course, that might be because of the way they looked. The girl looked like a normal, albeit frail, Caucasian girl, with a both short and lithe frame. However, her eyes dashed any chance of mistaking her for some random Earthling.

One of them was normal, though it seemed to contain impurities, small spots of darkness peppered about her sclera and green iris. But the other eye was completely white, to the point that it seemed that she was born without a pupil at all. In its place was an extremely dense fractal, and trying to understand it with [Primal Polyglot] could only provide him with one hint.

It was a curse, one aimed at the girl herself.

“I’m the one who should be thanking you for the warning before,” Zac shrugged as he handed her the bottle of water, trying to not appear weirded out by the odd appearance of the eye. “Are you okay? I didn’t know what was wrong with you, so I simply gave you a couple of different healing pills.”

“My soul is wounded, but whatever you gave me is really helping. The outside is really full of marvelous things,” she said with a weak smile.

“So I’m guessing you’re from Clan Cartava?” Zac said. “How did you end up getting captured?”

“The Lunar Tribe have kept a lot of secrets over the years it seems,” Leviala sighed. “We’ve always thought them muscleheads with limited understanding of how this world works. But they managed to sneak all the way to our domiciles without triggering any of our alarms. They used pathways that we had no idea existed and killed my guards before the elders had a chance to react.”

Zac slowly nodded. It wasn’t too surprising if the native forces finally started to make use of hidden aces they had accumulated over the past millennia now that the world was changing. No matter if it was to get out of this place or to seize the treasures of this Mystic Realm, now was the time to go all out.

It was a bit odd that these werewolves had wasted this opportunity on this girl in front of him though. It was almost a suicide mission to infiltrate a hostile faction like that, and he couldn’t see anything on her that was worth the effort. He had already searched her for Cosmos Sacks or other spatial tools, and there simply wasn’t anything on her.

The most likely reason was the parting words of the werewolf leader, but Zac had no time to worry about the key to immortality. He had a quest to complete. But there were some things he needed to understand before setting out.

“What is this thing?” Zac asked as he took out the small mechanism that he almost was struck by before. “A weapon?”

“No, they’re called restraint modules,” the girl said with a shake of her head as she took out an identical one from within her robes. “It locks your Cosmic Energy in place, which also restricts your movement. It was used to restrain research subjects long ago.”

“So it was something like that,” Zac whistled, though he wouldn’t completely take her word for it. “Then how are you free?”

“They lose their efficacy over time as the body adapts. But my parents also implanted me with a hidden blocker at birth and only told me and my grandfather. It contains an algorithm to deactivate restraint modules and some other things, and enough Base Power to connect with items outside my body,” Leviaala said. “I was waiting for an opportunity to escape, but those werewolves were too vigilant. Luckily you came along.”

“Base Power? What’s that?” Zac asked as he put away the small mechanism.

“It’s the energy that this base runs on. All the tools we’ve looted in this world runs on Base Power, and it’s also required to interface with the base itself,” Leviaala explained.

“Is that why this tablet won’t start up?” Zac said as he waved the thing he looted from the werewolf leader.

“Yes, these things require a fresh stream of Base Power to operate,” Leviaala nodded before she looked at the disks lying next to Zac with a frown. “What are you doing?”

“I need to get to the other side, but the door those werewolves summoned is gone. You should have heard them before, they have captured one of our squads. I want to get them back,” Zac said. “How do I get that door to open again?”

“You shouldn’t go there. The Wasteland is in that direction,” Leviaala said, her face turning a shade paler. “Besides, they should have been taken to the relay station. There are probably multiple squads waiting there to cross the Wasteland together. Not only that, the base might be protected by other means as well. I’m afraid that it’s impossible to save your friends.”

“Let me worry about that,” Zac shrugged as he poured out everything from the werewolf’s Cosmos Sack on the ground. “Where can I get this Base Power? Does anything among these items contain it?”

“Listen to me, it’s a shame about your people, but we need to get out of this world. We are about to be trapped again in just a few days. The world is ending. Getting caught inside will only doom both our Clans,” she said as her odd eyes bore into his.

“We know,” Zac said, ignoring the discomfort of the stare. “About the trapped thing, that is.”

“You know? Why are you people still staying here then? The space treasure? You don’t understand the horror of that thing,” the girl said with fear in her eyes, a fear that didn’t seem faked to Zac. “Our Clan is ready to form an alliance with your leaders, provided that you help us out of this place. We left you a map to this forest before the storms returned. If you open a specific gate from your side, we can all-“

“I’m sorry, but we aren’t going anywhere,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “And neither are we letting anyone out. Now, these things, how do-“

“Why not?” Leviaala blurted, and it was obvious she felt that Zac was a lunatic for wanting to stay in this place. “We know that your world is newly introduced to the

world of cultivation, and we can help. There is much we have lost while locked in this place, but we can help each other to face the threat of outsiders.”

“Various reasons. But most the most important task our faction is dealing with is to hunt down a group of insectoid humanoids,” Zac sighed, slightly annoyed at the delay.

He knew that he needed the help of this girl if he wanted to use these machines though, as there was no time to go get his sister. So he quickly calmed down so that he could explain what was going on. He took out a picture of Void’s Disciple that they had captured when the Dominator had entered Site 17.

“Unless this man dies, then everyone, including the people of your Clan, will die. The same probably goes for a group of cultists that have entered this place. They need to be taken out as well. I don’t really care about that treasure, but our enemies do. That’s our way to hunt them down.”

Blank incomprehension was written all over Leviala’s face, but even more-so despair. Zac guessed that she had expected to finally be able to leave this prison of theirs pretty soon, but that door had suddenly closed right in her face.

“I cannot speak for my elders... But if what you’re saying is true, then Clan Cartava might be able to help you locate these threats. But can you explain what’s going on? I’m willing to act as a liaison between our forces,” she said after some thought.

Zac immediately explained the threat of The Great Redeemer and the Church of Everlasting Dao in broad strokes, about the Karmic Ties that needed to be severed for their planet to remain hidden. This was not some secret intelligence, after all, but rather something that was generally disseminated by this point. Of course, a lot of people believed it was just a ruse by him and Port Atwood to seize control.

“A Deviant Karmic Cultivator, at peak D-Grade at that?” Leviala blanched. “It seems the outside isn’t all that safe either.”

“We all have our problems,” Zac said with a wry smile. “Now, the door?”

“A Datamancer is needed to open this thing, along with the specific key-code. This whole world is full of hidden pathways like this, but we know of less than one percent of them. Forcing the gate-protocol to activate is almost impossible without the prerequisite knowledge.”

“A Datamancer? What?” Zac asked.

“That’s what we call those who can interface with this base. Only they can rewrite protocols and bypass the restrictions. You should have people like this as well. Opening the gate to this forest was a test of sorts. Unless you have people extremely skilled in data manipulation you wouldn’t be able to pass that gate, let alone let us out,” Leviala explained.

“Hackers?” Zac muttered. “I’m sorry, but that’s not how we got here.”

“What?” Leviala said with confusion. “Did you manage to break the door open? Do you possess such powerful means?”

“No. One of my friends almost got himself killed trying that,” Zac snorted. “I have clearance high enough to open the door.”

“Clearance? Wait... You’re part of the Builders?!” she shrieked as she tried to get away.

Zac was a bit surprised at the strong reaction, but he couldn’t let the girl get away. He instructed [**Love’s Bond**] to snatch up the running girl, which wasn’t too hard considering how weakened her current condition was. She didn’t even get to her feet before she fell over again, only making it three meters in her escape.

Using the chains was as much to help her get up as to prevent her from escaping. It was a bit of a safety measure though as he was afraid Leviala possessed some sort of escape treasure or skill.

“Calm down. I’m not part of any builders,” Zac said after Leviala had stopped struggling against the bindings. “The terminal where we arrived gives out clearances left and right. Most people got Tier-2 or Tier-3 clearance, but I managed to get Tier-4 clearance thanks to an item I acquired off-world. That’s how I got in here.”

Of course, Zac suspected that he tenuously could be considered part of the “builders”, provided that Leviala was referring to his mother’s Clan. But he wasn’t about to divulge that sort of information seeing her strong reaction. Still, her reactions just now had divulged a lot. Not only did the natives completely lack clearances, but Clan Cartava didn’t seem to know as much about them as he’d feared after seeing the signpost left behind.

“What? Such a thing is possible? I’ve never heard of a terminal giving out clearances. Is it because you’re outsiders, perhaps? It seems a lot of our assumptions about you were incorrect.” Leviala mumbled with a slight frown before her eyes lit up. “You have traveled between worlds? How is it? What kinds of places exist out there?”

“I’ve been off-planet a few times, yes. There are all kinds of worlds out there, but I can’t tell you about it right now. I’m a bit strapped for time,” Zac said. “So, the Base Power? Anything among these things that has it? I want to activate the tablet.”

It felt like Zac had over a hundred questions rattling around in his head, but he needed to prioritize his quest for now.

“These things are called chargers,” Leviala eventually said as she pointed down at a cylindrical item. “Press the sheer side against the bottom of the tablet for a few seconds to instill it with power.”

Zac followed her instructions and it worked just as described. The tablet turned on after two seconds of charging, though that didn’t help Zac much. Rows and boxes full of illegible text covered the screen, and Zac couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

“Do you know how to work these things?” Zac asked.

“No,” she said with a shake of her head. “I can read the language, but I don’t know how these things work. It takes decades to learn these things, and only the Datamancers can make use of this information in any case. You would have to find the line for activating the door, and then bypass the security protocols.”

Zac thought for a second before he showed her the tablet.

“Let me worry about the security checks. Can you tell me if one of these boxes is related to gate opening?”

“It’s either that or climbing through one of the cracks,” Zac added.

“That’s even more impossible!” Leviala said. “There are security protocols in place to trap research subjects. You’re almost guaranteed to get trapped inside the Memorysteel if you try to enter through one of those places, and there are no builders to let you out. Not a single one who has been caught inside a wall has ever made it out as far as I know.”

Zac simply stared at her in response as he held the tablet toward her. She eventually sighed in defeat before her eyes started darting back and forth for almost a minute. She finally pointed at one of the boxes, though hesitation was written all over her face.

“Perhaps this one? It seems to mention something about a security check, which is always performed when opening a door. The other algorithms seem to be more

related to the general operation of the wall itself,” she said. “But just finding the right program isn’t enough.”

Zac nodded in thanks before he took the tablet. He honestly had no idea what to do from this point on, but he gained some confidence from the simple fact that he got the quest by the System. It seemed to believe he would have a chance to complete it, meaning he should be able to open the door.

He didn’t even try to understand what he was looking at since it was too far beyond his understanding and he simply pressed the box Levala indicated. However, he did take one precaution though. He had taken out his mother’s token from his Spatial ring, and he held it against the same spot as the charger when he pressed the button.

“Wait, what are you doing?! You will alert the security protocols!” Levala screamed when saw Zac’s impetuous actions, but her words got caught in her throat when the gate started forming without issue, and at a much greater speed than when the werewolf was trying to conjure it.

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**Chapter 593 - Old Friends**

“I’m in,” Zac said, his mouth tugging upward as he felt like the lead in an 80’s movie about hackers.

This was obviously lost on the Cartava scion though, and she blankly looked back and forth between him and the gate.

“Wh- How?” she eventually sputtered, looking like a lifetime of common sense was rapidly being upended.

“I have my ways,” Zac smiled as he stashed away the talisman again before the Cartava scion could spot it.

The talisman didn’t contain any clear hints of its origins as far as Zac could tell, but it was obviously a technocrat Tool if you knew a bit about them. Even Ogras could discern the truth at a single glance, and someone like Levala could probably glean even more. He obviously wouldn’t divulge his secrets to this stranger, even if she was cooperative so far.

The door slid open a second later, exposing the interiors. The state of the base on the other side was far worse than even the war-torn wall. The walls of the corridor had completely crumbled, and even the roof was missing at spots.

Only an endless black could be glimpsed through the cracks, making it seem as though the research base was hurtling through space. But the darkness that Zac could see through the cracks rather reminded Zac of the bleak blackness of the Abyss he could glimpse through **[Rapturous Divide]** rather than the empty darkness of outer space.

The truth probably wasn’t quite that sinister though. Mystic Realms were pocket sub-dimensions, and they had to have an end somewhere. What he saw was probably the void between dimensions, the place where one would end up if you fell through a spatial tear. However, he still got an oppressive feeling when he looked, so Zac’s instincts told him there were other dangers lurking in the darkness.

The scene gave Zac some pause, but he quickly roused himself. There was no telling how long the door would last even if he used his mother’s token.

“Okay, let’s go,” Zac nodded as he started walking, but Leviaia looked at him like he was crazy.

“What? You want me to go?” Leviaia almost screamed, her face a mix of horror and confusion. “I am no good to you. You’ve seen the state I’m in, I’ll only be a burden. I’ll rest up before returning to my clan instead. That way I can warn them about those enemies of yours so that we can start prepar-“

“There’ll be plenty of time for that later,” Zac said as the chains of **[Love’s Bond]** once more lifted the aghast Cartava scion into the air. “I’m sorry but I’ll need to bring you along as a guide. You’ve already proven you’re essential to rescuing my people by helping me with the tablet.”

“I’ve never been to this section of the base! I’ll be of no use to you!” she exclaimed as she vehemently struggled against the restraints.

But Zac ignored her complaints as he stepped through the gate which soundlessly closed behind them. A few seconds later it had turned into another piece of broken corridors that ran along the wall. Strangely enough, there was no telling that a vast forest stood on the other side of the wall after passing through, not even after peering through the cracks. Only a murky haze could be seen on the other side, making Zac believe the cracks were actually filled with spatial anomalies.

No wonder the werewolves refused to take a shortcut.

“So much for not being captured. It was all for nothing,” Leviaia muttered with a hint of despair from her chain cocoon, and Zac could only apologetically smile in response.

She was right. She might have gone out of the ashes into the fire from her perspective, swapping a known captor to a more powerful unknown one. Not only that, but Zac was also fumbling in the dark in this dangerous place, which put them both at risk. But there was nothing to be done about the situation. The System gave him no choice in the matter.

“I really am sorry about all this,” Zac coughed as he stepped further inside, dragging a clearly unwilling Leviaia along with his chains. “You could say my hands are tied.”

“Stop, STOP!” she screamed. “Alright, I’ll help you. But stop walking ahead randomly or you’ll get us both killed!”

“What, really?” Zac said, but he still stopped in his tracks. “Help me with this matter and I’ll make it up to you. Is there anything you or your Clan needs? I can send for it before the pathways to this world close.”

“Like what?” Leviaia asked curiously as she stopped struggling against the restraints, confirming Zac’s guess.

This girl was full of curiosity about the outside world and its marvels, which wasn’t too surprising considering her situation. Hopefully, he would be able to use that to keep her cooperative.

“I have no idea what you guys are lacking in this world. Pills? Manuals? Attuned Crystals?”

“Land,” Leviaia said without hesitation. “I’ve heard that planets have spots with greater energy density compared to others, treasure lands where you can cultivate at twice the speed at half the effort. Can you provide us with such a thing?”

“There are a few such places on Earth,” Zac slowly nodded. “But those places are extremely valuable strategic resources. Being my guide for a few hours isn’t worth a Nexus Vein, no offense.”

"I also saved you from being captured by werewolves by warning you, but fine. We'll revisit this matter later," Leviala sighed. "Our first priority should be staying alive in this place."

"Good. Now, how do I find that relay station?" Zac asked.

"I don't know where it is, but it shouldn't be too far in from this gate. Half an hour away at the most. Any further and the station would be inside the Wasteland itself, and no permanent structure can survive in there. But make no mistake, our lives are in peril every second even here at the edge."

"What's the Wasteland?" Zac asked with a frown. "Another Biosphere like the forest before?"

"No," Leviala said with a shake of her head. "Something much more dangerous. It will take some time to explain, but you need to understand the dangers to not get us both killed."

"Give me the abridged version," Zac reluctantly agreed, though part of him just wanted to set out.

The windows into the void looked pretty unsettling, but the atmosphere was intact and there was no suction dragging items out through the cracks. As for spatial tears, Zac figured his Luck had proven a pretty good early warning system. But seeing Leviala's exaggerated reactions there were probably more dangers than what met the eyes.

"Our people were taken here over fifteen thousand years ago and experimented on for millennia," Leviala began, but was interrupted by an impatient Zac.

"Is this really the short version?"

"Just listen," Leviala said with a glare. "We were taken here because of our bloodlines, but there was an incident that put an end to the experiments around five thousand years ago. A mystical item appeared out of nowhere, rippling through the spatial barriers like they didn't exist.

"It slammed into this base like a meteor, completely ripping apart a large section of it. It hit the base from the east, annihilating the subjects who were experimented on there. Only by digging through data did we find out that the subjects there was a clan of Titans, renowned for their physical prowess."

Zac's heartbeat sped up a bit when he heard the mention of Titans, although he had already been somewhat certain that this place was the source of Billy's heritage. However, it seemed more likely that Billy's ancestor somehow managed to reach Earth through a spatial tear or something, rather than the whole clan escaping.

"The object made its way into the core of the base, presumably killing all our captors as well," Leviala continued.

"Presumably? You don't know if they were killed?" Zac asked with confusion.

"What followed after the impact was over a hundred years of spatial chaos. We call the event the Cataclysm. You should have encountered those rifts by now, right? Those kinds of things raged across the whole base, wreaking havoc. We lost most of our people during those days. But one day it just stopped and the base woke up again. By that time our captors were all gone, and we slowly managed to eke out a living here," Leviala said.

"Do you know who was it that captured you?" Zac asked curiously.

"They called themselves the Tsarun Clan," Leviala said.

"WHAT?!" Zac exclaimed. "Those guys?"

“You know of them? Are they still around? Do they know of your planet?” Leviala said, fear shining in her eyes. “Our elders were peak D-Grade, but they were all slaughtered by those people when they came for us. They are terrifying.”

“They’re around, and they are still extremely powerful. They have a pretty unsavory reputation as well, and no one wants to make an enemy out of them. There are also rumors of them working with unorthodox forces to become more powerful. So I guess it’s not too surprising they started messing around with a Technocrat Research Base,” Zac explained.

Leviala looked shocked that their captor was still around and living well.

“You don’t need to worry about me selling you out though,” Zac added when he saw the fear in her eyes. “They probably are more interested in capturing me than they are in capturing you.”

“What? Are you carrying a unique bloodline as well?” Leviala blurted.

“No, we are enemies for other reasons. A small disagreement ended up with them losing one of their main-branch descendants and getting publicly embarrassed,” Zac slowly said, his voice somewhat decreasing in strength after seeing the mounting horror in her eyes. “Anyway, I guess we have a common enemy? So what happened afterward?”

“When my ancestors realized they were left alone in this place they immediately started looking for an escape. But movement in this place is always highly restricted, and we never found a way out. However, we managed to find a few tablets left behind by the Tsarun Clan and that’s how we learned the methods of the Datamancers,” Leviala said.

“Unfortunately, only a few of our people can become true Datamancers as they can’t be registered as research subjects by the AI of this place. Only one out of a thousand might have the ability to become a Datamancer, and even then it’s highly random their degree of success,” Leviala said.

“People without bloodlines,” Zac muttered.

“Exactly,” Leviala nodded. “Our clan was essentially bred and experimented on for millennia with the sole purpose of purifying and strengthening our bloodline, and it was the same with the other clans. For someone to be born without it after all that it is extremely rare. I guess there are a lot more potential Datamancers among you outsiders.”

“In either case. We found out about the fundamental rules of this base through reading the Tsarun Clan reports. As you mentioned, they didn’t build this base. They rather stumbled upon it during an exploration trip outside of integrated space. They spent tens of thousands of years slowly gaining control over the basic functions, but we believe they never managed to get a hold on the core secrets of this place,” Leviala continued.

“What do you know about the original creators?” Zac asked, straining to keep his face impassive.

“Not much,” Leviala said with a shake of her head. “We know they were terrifyingly powerful, far greater than the Tsarun Clan. We think they finished their research then left this base, though we don’t know why they didn’t repurpose this place. The Tsarun were only digging through the scraps for their own project.”

Zac sighed and nodded. He wasn’t sure she was telling the truth or kept the secrets about his mother’s clan to herself, but there was still ample time to find out the truth.

“This is all valuable information, but what does this have to do with the Wastelands?” Zac asked, returning to the main subject.

“I needed you to understand how dangerous it was during the age after the cataclysm, where less than five percent of our Clan survived. Because the wasteland never healed. It is the sector where the dimensional treasure passed through before hitting the core of this base, and the laws of space are still in flux here. The rest of this world has found an equilibrium and is bound by the rules of the Builders, but the wasteland is in a permanent state of turmoil,” Leviaia sighed.

“So what? If the werewolves can pass it, so can I,” Zac said.

“We have spent millennia mapping the spatial storms, but that knowledge holds no sway in the wastelands. A spatial storm can descend on you at moment’s notice, and that’s not all. This area is full of spatial holes, and sometimes things fall out. Dangerous things,” she said, her eyes inadvertently darting toward the ominous scars in the ceiling.

“Dangerous things?” Zac said with a frown.

“There are weird dimensional beasts hidden in the darkness. They can’t survive in our environment for long, and they cause massive destruction in their attempts to return to the void. Encountering those things almost always results in death. But other things can fall out as well, like a mountain getting dropped on your head. You never know,” Leviaia said.

“Then how can the Lunar Tribe pass it?”

“They live the closest to the wasteland, so they understand it the best. Their bodies are also very strong, and their lunar skills allow them to briefly pass through spatial storms unscathed. I’ve heard they also maintain routes where they have left protective measures, like small safe bubbles powered by Base Power,” Leviaia said.

“Don’t your clan have something similar?” Zac asked with a frown.

“No. We never go here. Treasures sometimes fall out of the void, but the dangers far overshadow the potential gain. Besides, passing the wasteland only leads to the Lunar Tribe, and you’ve seen how our relationship is,” Leviaia said.

“So, the relay station?” Zac asked.

“It’s probably a base where the scouting units gather to cross the wasteland together. Powering those safe bubbles require a lot of Base Power, and each squad can’t pass alone. Besides, there is safety in numbers. I’ve also heard that they make the troublemakers and the elderly take the vanguard, so they’ll somewhat block the spatial storms with their bodies if one arrives unnoticed,” Leviaia said.

“Okay, we hopefully won’t need to worry about that. Which way? If you don’t know, just follow your instincts,” Zac said.

Leviaia looked into the eyes of Zac for a few seconds before she sighed as a small glimmer activated in her eyes. Her one remaining good eye turned milky white the next moment, eliciting a strong sense of unease in Zac’s mind. However, it soon returned to normal, though Leviaia looked even more sickly than before.

“That way,” she said as she nodded at a route as blood started to flow down her nose again. “Now, can you rearrange these chains to something more comfortable?”

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## Chapter 594 - Bubbles

Zac frowned when he saw that Leviaala's condition seemed to have worsened even further, instead simply nodding in thanks. He went down the corridor that Leviaala indicated, maintaining a pace just slow enough so that his Danger Sense would be able to pick up any hints of spatial tears in time.

He would have preferred to transform [**Love's Bond**] to its defensive form as well, but it turned out that was impossible because of Leviaala. She could barely stand at the moment, let alone keep up with him. He instead had to fashion some sort of chair out of two of his chains, allowing him to carry her to his side. Carrying her on his back would have been a lot more convenient, but he definitely wasn't about to let a complete stranger have her arms around his neck. That was a good way to get yourself killed or captured.

The path they followed looked much very much the same as the area where they entered, with a state of decay that far exceeded anything Ogras described in his report. Occasional flickering in the scripts on the wall indicated that the area wasn't completely disconnected from the base, but it apparently wasn't in any state to repair this place. Or perhaps the Base AI had simply deemed it too costly what with the spatial turbulence.

They continued down the corridor for a few minutes before they reached a huge crack in the wall. It was wide enough for five people to enter together, and it seemed to be heading in the direction of the wastelands. Zac tried to peer inside, but it was completely pitch black apart from some light at the end of the tunnel, making it a possible shortcut.

"Do you think they entered here?"

"I can't activate my eyes again, I will end up in a coma," she said as she peered into the darkness. "But it's doubtful. I don't think the Lunar Tribe would use these kinds of paths unless absolutely necessary. The corridors are still connected to the base and they follow most of the rules, but anything can happen in a crack like this. I think we should continue down the road."

Zac nodded and kept walking without hesitation. He felt a vague sense of threat from that dark ingress anyway, and he probably wouldn't have entered even if he traveled alone. Something dangerous waited inside.

A minute later they reached a crossing, with a proper path heading the same way as the eerie crack from before. Zac looked at his reluctant guide again, but she still shook her head.

"No, not that way either," Leviaala said. "That corridor is the start of a looping spiral, a dead end. Cracks might have created a new path in there, but perhaps not. We would waste almost an hour going this way."

"A looping spiral?" Zac asked.

"These endless corridors follow certain patterns and we have learned to somewhat intuit some of them after living in them all our lives. I'm almost certain that this will corridor is a dead end, but I can't actually explain how I know it. It's a vague sense based on the direction we're walking, proximity to the forest, previous corridors, and so on."

"Is it your ocular bloodline?" Zac asked.

"No, everyone born in this place can somewhat do this," Leviaala explained.

Zac guessed that it was a naturally nurtured equivalent to his recently gained sense from [**Forester's Constitution**] unless she was hiding something. Perhaps she could tell based on the inscriptions on the wall or some other small sign that Zac

couldn't notice. Either way, he felt it was better to go with her instincts unless his own Danger Sense started to rail against them.

The state of the base gradually worsened even further as they proceeded until Zac suddenly froze before he activated [Loamwalker], moving himself and Leviala back where they came from. Not even a half a second passed before an extremely dense storm of spatial tears passed right through the corridor, seemingly both exiting and entering through the Memorysteel walls.

"You see?" Leviala sighed, her face ghastly white. "We were lucky this time, but things will only get worse from here on out. You can't sense these sudden storms either, so it's imposs- "

She didn't get any further before Zac moved again, once more narrowly avoiding a weird fluctuation that appeared from one of the cracks in the roof. It almost felt like the spatial tears from before had summoned something.

"-ible to completely avoid. Wait, how are you doing that?" Leviala asked as she looked down at Zac with confusion.

Zac didn't immediately answer, but rather kept his eye peeled at the situation ahead. The thing that had appeared clearly was of a spatial nature, but it was something else than a tear. It almost looked like a soap bubble, but it actually reflected a blue sun rather than the surroundings. The bubble was almost two meters across, and much smaller spheres surrounded it like satellites.

It only remained a few seconds before it destabilized with a pop, causing an extremely powerful implosion that made Zac's hair stand on end. There was no way that he would have survived it if he hadn't moved away in time.

"What was that?"

"We call them Void Bubbles," Leviala said with a sigh. "It's actually a pretty rare sight. We don't really know what they are. Some believe that they are the result of the dimensional layers temporarily weakening, giving a glimpse of the outside. More than one desperate cultivator has jumped into those bubbles in hopes of escaping this place, but I doubt anyone actually survived."

Zac nodded in agreement. He could somewhat see the power brewing in the center of that bubble, and it was definitely not something any random E-Grade cultivator could survive. However, he suddenly froze with realization. Triv seemed certain that quite a few people had escaped from this base because there were so many high-quality corpses on Earth. Was this the method they used?

"Is it always that blue sun?" Zac asked to make sure.

"No, the scene is always different. Most of them picture outer space though," Leviala said. "Seeing one depicting land is very rare."

Zac nodded, feeling that his theory wasn't completely without merit, but something she said piqued his curiosity.

"You guys know what space is?" Zac asked curiously.

"You know, we've lost much, but we've only been in this place for a couple of millennia. My great grandfather was born in the Zecia Sector," she said with a scathing glance.

"Alright then," Zac coughed and started walking.

He felt a bit stupid hearing her explanation, and his plans for exchanging information of the outside for information on the inside died in its cradle. She might know even more than himself about the Zecia sector for all he knew since the Cartava Clan was seemingly a proper cultivation clan before they were captured.

They kept going further from their starting points, and the spatial anomalies only grew more and more common. Zac's Danger Sense kept doing wonders though, and seeing that Zac really was able to somewhat predict the spatial tears made Leviala calm down a bit. It allowed her to relax before she started explaining the base patterns in greater detail.

Zac felt he learned a lot, though he knew that he simply couldn't gain an intuitive feel for the place just by hearing about patterns such as 'Downstream Wing' and 'Fierce Otodon'. But it did give him a glimpse into how these native forces functioned, which might be even more valuable.

"We should turn here," Leviala eventually said as they reached another crossing. "This should be the main path leading toward the Wasteland, and if we go any further without turning we'll reach the Outer Divide. I doubt that the Outer Divide is breached even this close to the Wasteland, so going there is a waste of time."

Zac nodded in agreement, but they only proceeded a hundred meters before Zac's mind once more screamed of danger. However, this time it was to the point that Zac almost fell over from the shock to his mind, with only thoughts of escape remaining. He scrambled out of the way like his life depended on it, completely forgetting about Leviala.

The Cartava scion was dragged along thanks to the chains of **[Love's Bond]**, barely missing a massive claw that suddenly appeared from one of the cracks in the roof. It slammed into the ground with a devastating force, shredding the sturdy alloy like it was nothing. Zac desperately scrambled to his feet to keep backing away, and he looked at the hand with fear. He didn't even dare to think about attacking that thing out of fear that it would sense his killing intent.

The hand emitted energy waves almost at the level of Greatest, meaning that the beast should be somewhere in the late D-Grade.

The hand looked both corporeal and energy-based, and it twisted and distorted as it tried to grab hold of something in the corridor. It almost looked like a hologram if not for the deep scars that were caused in the walls. However, the runes on the walls suddenly lit up, and dozens of Memorysteel spears stabbed into the hand.

But seeing the result only made Zac even more certain of the power of the creature. He had been on the receiving end of those things, and the still tender flesh in his side was a poignant reminder of how powerful they were. But the spears were actually completely unable to harm the claw, and it easily crushed them like they were made out of paper.

The claw had its own problems though, and it kept distorting more and more until it was barely recognizable any longer. Only then did the hand recede into the void again, leaving an utterly decimated hallway that seemed unable to restore its previous form,

"It's a dimensional creature," Leviala whispered, her face pallid. "I never expected to see one in person. We're lucky to be alive."

"Where the hell did it come from?" Zac muttered as he peered into the darkness.

"We believe they live in the void. But I have no idea how that's possible," Leviala said.

"Why did it attack though?" Zac muttered.

"They are drawn here by the dimensional treasure, but they can't enter this type of dimension freely. So they skulk around the cracks in space, sometimes reaching in to attack people. A few of the smaller ones sometimes fall through completely, but that only happens in the wasteland and the core region where the cracks are larger," Leviala said.

Zac grimaced when he heard the mention about the core section where the Dimensional Seed was located. It sounded like the sector itself was just as dangerous as the Wasteland, perhaps even more so. Void's Disciple and the zealots might be the least of his worries when he reached that place.

"What now?" Zac muttered. "Is there an alternative path?"

"The beast should go away if we wait a few minutes. But be careful," Levala said. "I already overdid it by activating my bloodline twice. You're on your own now, I can't warn you again as I did during the battle against the werewolves."

"That's no problem," Zac said. "But while we're at the subject, just how did you manage to warn me before? You've seen how sharp my senses are, but I didn't sense a thing. More to the point, you shouted out before Hevastes had even reached me. Are your clan members Karmic Cultivators?"

Levala's warning was as good an opening as any, and Zac finally couldn't hold back his curiosity after having walked these broken hallways for almost an hour. He had replayed that battle over and over in his mind, and Karma was the only explanation he could think of. He still remembered that odd feeling of déjà vu, and it made him think of his battle with the Hayner Patriarch more than anything.

He knew that Karmic Cultivators were exceedingly rare, but it really looked like she had divined the future before, warning him of something that was about to take place. The backlash also matched with what he knew of divination. There was always a price to pay to peer into the future, and even a powerful monk like Lord 84<sup>th</sup> wasn't an exception.

Perhaps the Tsarun clan wanted the power of precognition for themselves and had tried to extract that capability from the Cartava clan. Or perhaps they wanted to breed a bunch of seers, forcing them to write divinations day in and day out until they were killed by the heavens. There was no doubt that such a power would prove immensely beneficial for a power-hungry man like the Tsarun patriarch.

"No," she hurriedly said as she shook her head with such force that she almost fell out of her chair made out of chains. "Our clan has nothing to do with Divination or Karma."

"Then why such a strong reaction?" Zac said as a frown spread across his face. "Our planet does have a grudge against a Karmic Cultivator, but that doesn't mean we're enemies with all of them. But let me be clear; if I find out that you're lying, then your clan will have to find another way out of this place than through me. I can't have another group of people manipulating Karma against me or my people. You better tell me right now what's going on."

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**Chapter 595 - Karma and Time**

"No, I swear I'm not lying!" Levala exclaimed with a pale face. "You're not the first one to make that deduction. Our clan was constantly harassed because a lot of forces believed us to manipulate Karma for our profit. I only reacted strongly because our clan suffered a lot of harassment because of this."

"If not Karma, then what?" Zac asked.

"You have probably realized that my clan has an eye-based bloodline after seeing me," Levala eventually said. "That's why we were caught and brought here."

“Really? Just because of that?” Zac asked, skepticism written all over his face. “There’s no way the Tsarun clan would capture you because of that.”

It wasn’t without reason Zac had that sort of reaction. He had learned a thing or two about bloodlines from gathering missives by now, and he wasn’t completely clueless any longer. The most common types of bloodlines were combat-oriented, with the second most common being affinity-related, either boosting cultivation speed or Skill Control.

Ocular Bloodlines were a lot rarer than those types, but not to the point that it was exceedingly rare. But more importantly, they were generally not seen as too useful since they mainly focused on scouting or helping with things like inscriptions and crafting.

There was no way that the power-hungry Tsarun-clan would waste so much effort on something useless though. Those wolves had gained a pretty decent boost to their combat strength when their bloodlines awakened, surpassing the general estimates of common bloodlines. There had to be something special about Clan Cartava to warrant their capture.

“Our clan has nothing to do with Karma, really. Our bloodlines provide us with scouting abilities and some suppression,” Leviala repeated once more.

“Then why did that guy say that you’re the key to immortality?” Zac asked with a frown, feeling he was being taken for a ride.

Zac’s gut told him that the werewolf threw out that last line with his dying breath to cause trouble, but that didn’t mean that he was lying. These werewolves had fought in the Outer Ring against the humans, and now they had managed to somehow capture one of them. The fact that the werewolves worked so hard against the humans rather than trying to escape meant they possessed something even more valuable than freedom.

Immortality was one such thing. Even a pig would become an overlord given enough time, so it was definitely an alluring concept for most cultivators. Perhaps the werewolf believed Zac would feel the same and torture the girl for her secrets. However, Zac wasn’t personally all that interested in the prospect of immortality.

He grew up expecting to live around 80 years, so his current lifespan approaching the thousands was already shocking enough. Who would want to walk the universe until the end of time? It sounded torturous more than anything. The girl seemed reluctant to say anything more though as she looked around back and forth. Zac had an idea of what she was worried about, and he took out and activated an Isolation Array.

“No one can hear us now,” Zac said. “I normally wouldn’t pressure someone like this, but you’re simply acting too suspiciously. I can’t have anything going wrong in this place. Billions of lives depend on it.”

“...Fine,” Leviala eventually sighed. “You have to swear on your path of cultivation to not divulge what I’m about to say, and not to experiment on me or my clansmen.”

“I swear to not divulge anything as long as you don’t move against me or my force,” Zac nodded. “And I would never experiment on people.”

Leviala looked at Zac for a while longer, before she eventually nodded.

“Our bloodline really isn’t anything more than a decent ocular heritage. But that wasn’t always the case. Our founding ancestor’s eyes were different from ours. They contained the power of time itself. Not only did he live five times longer than a normal cultivator at his stage, but he was able to glimpse into both the past and present to some degree,” Leviala said. “His children never inherited his gift though, but the ancestor’s actions started the rumors about us being a Karmic Clan.”

“Eventually, the rumors died down though and our lives started to return to normal. However, the Tsarun Clan found out about the true nature of our founding ancestor’s eyes through a traitor. They wanted that power of time for themselves. I don’t know why, but I think it was for the same reason as the Lunar Tribe. They want to extract the power in our eyes to increase their longevity,” Leviala said.

“And you have the same types of eyes as your ancestor,” Zac deduced before he looked at her with exasperation. “All that talk, and it’s still related to Karma after all?”

“You seem to have a flawed understanding of the Dao of Karma. Karma and Divination are completely separate from the Dao of Time. Karma is an understanding of the interconnectedness of everything in the universe. It’s understanding causality, and in some cases deliberately influencing the future by taking some seemingly inscrutable actions,” Leviala explained.

“They are unable to see the whole picture as normal cultivators though, so they connect with the omnipresent Heavens for a short moment to borrow its omniscience, all the karmic ties and relations. But ultimately, they are still not actually peering into the future or the past,” she continued. “Furthermore, Karma is just one type of Divination. There’s also the Numerology of the Dao of Order, and some oracles even enter contracts with strange beings of other dimensions who can show them glimpses of the unknown. I’m sure there are even more types out there.”

“So they aren’t actually able to see the future. But you are?” Zac said with a frown.

Timeline altering seemed extremely overpowered, especially for someone in the E-Grade. Getting your soul wounded and a bleeding nose could barely be considered a backlash for something so heaven-defying. The brand on her eye looked a lot more worrisome, but how could that compare to altering the past?

“No. I can just glimpse fragmented images, and generally just the from past. When I chose a direction before I looked into the past and saw werewolves coming from this corridor,” Leviala explained. “But during your battle, I felt a sudden urge to peek into the future, and I saw a hand holding a restraint module behind you. I knew that we both would be in trouble if that really happened, so I called out.

“As you saw, looking into the future is a lot more dangerous than the past, because even just looking will invariably change the future. Besides, I can only see a short image, but there’s no guarantee that I would understand what I saw. This time I was lucky since I knew that you getting sealed would be bad for me, but the risk of receiving the backlash and gaining nothing in return is high,” Leviala said. “The backlash is also extremely harsh, every usage comes with a permanent cost.”

Zac slowly nodded. He couldn’t pinpoint what, but he felt that there was something odd with her description of the events. Perhaps it was the ‘sudden urge’ to peek into the future that was the most suspect. Then again, he often got those sorts of urges thanks to his high Luck, and perhaps she had a similar ability.

“So you got a glimpse of a bad future, and warned me to prevent it? Can everyone in your clan do this?” Zac asked.

“No,” Leviala said. “Just a select few.”

“Thank you for letting me know. And don’t worry, I have no interest in your time eyes,” Zac said as he picked up the isolation disk. “I don’t want to be hunted down by the old monsters in the sector for holding a key to increased longevity.”

Leviala could only weakly smile in response, and the two set out a few minutes later after there was no sign of the Void Creature returning. Zac wasn’t joking when he said that he would keep the secret to himself. Part of it was the reason he just said.

He didn't want to live a life where he was hunted by powerful factions, like Yrial or the Eveningtide Asura.

But part of it was definitely because of her situation. She hadn't said it outright, but warning him had definitely come at a cost. He had noticed that Leviala had repeatedly reached for her branded eye as they traveled along the corridors, and he guessed that the curse was a direct result of peering into the future.

After all, if meddling with the strings of Karma came at a sharp price, then the same would probably hold for meddling with time. The System or the real Heavens protected the fundamental rules of the universe it seemed. Otherwise things would turn extremely chaotic with people jumping back and forth through timelines as they pleased.

The minutes turned into two hours as they progressed further and further from their starting position, though they had to backtrack a few times after encountering completely crumbled sections of the corridors. Perennial spatial storms were swirling about in these places, making it completely impossible to pass through.

But finally, there was a change as they heard a loud argument in the distance. They had moved in complete silence after the first 30 minutes out of fear of alerting the sensitive werewolves, with Leviala only giving directions with her hands. Two gruff voices echoed through the corridors, making the two freeze in position. Zac once more took out the isolation array, hoping that the energy fluctuations wouldn't alert anyone.

The two listened for a bit, and it quickly became apparent it was an argument between two squad leaders. One of them wanted to set out immediately since he believed something had gone wrong. The other wanted to wait for Hevastes as he carried a lot of the Base Power required to power the safe bubbles placed in the Wasteland.

They couldn't hear everything though, and the voices stopped after a minute.

"It should be just up ahead," Zac said with a low voice. "Stay here."

"You'll come pick me up, right?" Leviala said with worry. "I don't think I can get back alone. I should tell you; I hold some weight in my clan, things will get a lot easier for you if you have me assisting you from the inside. I doubt my people would be ready to head for the depths of this place rather than the exit if my grandpa doesn't tell them to."

"Of course, I'll help you," Zac assured her as silvery tufts of hair started to grow from his face.

A blinding agony spread through Zac's body the next moment as he activated **[Million Faces]** for the first time. The fit with his pathways wasn't any better with the upgraded skill, which meant that every minor adjustment was accompanied by the feeling of his bones being crushed and reformed. And Zac wasn't planning on a minor adjustment.

His face elongated while his body grew a few decimeters as he donned a hunched-over posture with his arms hanging low. Sharp claws grew out from his hands and he felt his teeth growing sharp as well.

"How do I look?" Zac grunted a minute later, though he had some problems forming words properly with a canine snout.

"Just what are you? Can you turn into anything?" Leviala whispered in shock.

"It's a transformation skill," Zac snorted. "Do I look like a werewolf?"

"Honestly, you look like a failed miscreation," Leviala said, and she clearly had problems looking in his direction.

Zac sighed when he saw her disgusted face, and a wave of disgust hit him as well when he took out a mirror. The only way he would be mistaken for a werewolf was if the werewolf not only suffered from a severe case of mange but also a series of birth defects.

The extent he could change his body was a lot greater with his new skill, but turning into a werewolf was clearly overreaching. But he still wanted to get a small advantage this way. Leviala believed that the Relay Station was in what she called a chokepoint chamber, a large warehouse with one entrance and one exit.

It would be the only path to get to the other side, and it was easily defended. Most settlements in the Mystic Realm were built in these kinds of chambers, or series of such warehouses, and sometimes they could even control the barriers leading in and out. Leviala guessed that they wouldn't have too great a control of the base this far from their real domain, but she couldn't be sure.

The Lunar Clan had already provided her with plenty of surprises.

He thought for a second before he had an idea to improve the disguise. He took out a couple of bandages next and covered over half his face and hands, with the uneven tufts of silver hair sticking out between. He took out the dead werewolf leader next and pushed his bisected body against the bandages, drenching them with blood.

Leviala seemed ready to vomit at the macabre display, but Zac had long turned numb to these kinds of grotesque actions. What did it matter if he got a little bloodied if he could complete his quest and save his people? Next, he put on a spare set of the clothes he found in Hevastes' Cosmos Sack, finishing the makeshift transformation.

"What about now?" Zac said as he spun around.

"I guess you can pass as Hevastes from a distance, but you won't be able to infiltrate them this way," Leviala said.

"That's fine, I just need to get through the door," Zac muttered.

"You know, Hevastes and the others were weakened after they killed my guard, but I don't think the other squads are in that bad a shape. And there might be quite a few of them," she exhorted. "You might not-"

"I have to do this," Zac said as he stood up and cracked his neck. "Wait here, we'll be back in a few minutes."

Zac started making his way toward the source of the argument earlier, and he took on a shuffling walk to make it look like he was wounded. He wanted to create the illusion of Hevastes returning alone in defeat after failing his mission. He soon enough reached a proper arch that was blocked with a familiar red barrier.

"Lord Hevastes, is that you?" a hesitant voice emerged from the other side as a werewolf stepped forward, looking at Zac's appearance with shock.

"Get the fuck out of the way," Zac growled, trying to make his voice mimic the gruff timbre of the werewolf leader.

A surge of relief hit Zac a second later as the barrier flickered out, and Zac wasted no time.

"Wh-" the wolf said with wide eyes, but he didn't get any further before Zac's hand snapped forward, gripping the werewolf by the throat and cracking his neck.

A surge of Cosmic Energy confirmed the kill, and **[Verun's Bite]** appeared in his hand as he started to transform back to normal.

"We're under attack!" another guard screamed just before Zac managed to end his life as well.

Zac had never expected to enter the open space unnoticed with his wretched disguise. Cosmic Energy churned through his body as he was primed for an all-out assault.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 596 - Hands**

“Who are you?!” a bulky werewolf roared as he produced a large spear that seemed to be made from the same material as the walls, and a quick estimate by Zac indicated there were around fifty werewolves in the emptied-out storeroom.

It was a bit more than Zac had hoped, but he knew that he couldn't back down now. Zac's only response to the inquiry was unleashing a roar at the top of his lungs, reinforced with his aura and billowing killing-intent. The very air in the room vibrated, and two large screens that displayed some unintelligible data actually cracked pressure the pressure.

The sudden outburst made the werewolves freeze for an instant like they had been faced with a dangerous predator, giving Zac a brief window to scan the large warehouse that had been outfitted into what looked a bit like a campsite. He immediately found what he was looking for; a group of dirty and bloodied humans and one demon huddled in a corner chained to the wall.

All of them carried somewhat serious wounds, with two apparently being unconscious. The pathetic state of his people ignited another surge of fury in his heart, and any hesitation flew out of his head as he threw out over a hundred items while activating **[Nature's Punishment]**.

The werewolves had already regained their bearing after the surprising outburst, and they started to radiate lunar light one by one. The room was over two hundred meters across, but it was still a lot more confined compared to the earlier battles in the forests. More importantly; the walls were reflective, and Zac worried what would happen if they were allowed to completely unleash their Bloodline War Array.

However, the cold moonlight was overpowered before it even had a chance to stabilize as the whole area erupted in an unceasing cascade of elemental eruptions.

Huge flowers wrought from flame bloomed as icicles as long as five meters fell from the sky. Lakes of thunder covered the ground and torrential winds full of hidden blades cut at the flustered werewolves. It was as though an army of elementalists had descended upon Relay Station, intent on ripping it apart.

There obviously were no mages assisting Zac in his rescue attempt though, but the commotion was rather the result of throwing out a full stack of low and medium-grade talismans at the cost of a decent chunk of his Cosmic Energy. These low-quality offensive talismans would normally not be able to kill even a peak F-Grade warrior, let alone these werewolves with powerful constitutions.

But packed together in a confined space like this they could cause some serious harm. More importantly, they emitted almost blinding light while the explosions made any attempts of organization impossible.

A storm of Spatial Tears erupted the next second as Zac's hidden ace, a **[Void Ball]**, detonated right where the most powerful-looking werewolves were fending off blasts from every direction. A few werewolves were immediately cut into ribbons, but

most of them suddenly turned into light, allowing the tears to pass right through their intangible form.

Zac had already learned about this bloodline ability though, so he wasn't surprised to see them materializing almost immediately with various degrees of wounds. There were still a lot of chaotic Spatial Tears around them as well, forcing the werewolves to find another way to protect themselves. Most of them were suddenly enclosed in red barriers as they jumped out of the way.

The shields were obviously of the same source as the ones he had seen in this base before, but the werewolves had managed to construct portable defensive mechanisms.

However, it looked like the barriers shared one inconvenient trait with the barriers of the base itself. The spatial tears seamlessly entered the shields themselves, melding with them into one entity. Zac couldn't be sure, but he felt that it was no way that some portable device would be able to lock in and contain a spatial tear.

As expected, the leaders quickly grabbed small machines hidden in various pockets and threw them far away, and a series of small explosions soon after as the machines erupted into what looked like weakened copies of the **[Void Ball]** itself. The werewolf leaders had managed to save their hides, but Zac had already achieved his purpose.

The chaos caused by the **[Void Ball]** and explosive talismans had caused complete disorder amongst the ranks of the werewolves, and their Lunar War Array had almost completely fallen apart.

Zac knew they would be able to restore order soon enough, but the confusion had given him just enough time to conjure the enormous wooden hand hovering by the ceiling fifty meters up in the air. Zac didn't waste even a second before the large emerald array appeared, and a small branch started to descend the moment it appeared.

"Above!" a werewolf shouted, but it was too late.

The branch rapidly grew as innumerable branches sprouted, each of them shooting for a werewolf. Transcendent lights rose to meet their descent, and smoke rose from Zac's hand as the damage was transmitted from the avatar in the sky. However, the wooden punishment contained an almost boundless vitality, and that effect was only boosted even further thanks to the Fragment of the Bodhi and his newly acquired **[Spiritual Void]**.

His strike was chock-full of Dao, and bark rained down from the sky as it was ripped off and regrew in a rapid cycle of growth and withering. Zac's consumption of energy was enormous to withstand the hastily erected War Array, but their defense had one fatal weakness; it didn't actually provide any physical defenses.

A massive surge of Cosmic Energy filled his body as one werewolf after another was speared through. Over ten branches were aiming for each werewolf, and they could only maintain their intangible form for a short while. Over half the werewolves died from the blitz attack before the War Array finally managed to exhaust **[Nature's Punishment]** to the point that Zac could no longer maintain it.

Just under twenty werewolves remained at this point, some of them maimed or even grievously wounded from fending off the branches of the bloody tree that now stood in the center of the Relay Station like a cursed effigy adorned with carcasses for offerings. Surrounding it was the spectral forest of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, and together they had turned the sci-fi interior into a fey forest.

The attack was a huge success, but Zac still couldn't help but worry as he glanced at the enormous cracks that had appeared on the walls. The powerful Memorysteel

normally wouldn't have been damaged to this point from the battle, but the metal in this section clearly wasn't being provided enough Base Power to recover. He knew that he would have to end this quickly unless he wanted to bring the whole roof down on his head.

"Join together!" one of the leaders desperately screamed, but Zac was relieved to see that six of the remaining warriors completely ignored the call as they fled through the gate on the other side.

But there were still twelve werewolves to deal with, each of them powerful enough to withstand the strike of **[Nature's Punishment]**. Certainly, none of them came out of the clash unscathed, but they still carried a great fighting spirit as they moved together. A radiant silver moon had already appeared behind their backs as they howled toward Zac, causing dense lunar energies to stream out of their bodies.

The moonlight congealed into an enormous Lunar Wolf that immediately lunged at Zac, and he felt a huge pressure bearing down on him. He didn't hesitate to activate the defensive charge of **[Hatchetman's Spirit]**, but the shimmering barrier was quickly whittled down by an extremely piercing radiance that radiated from the spectral wolf's forehead.

Four chains shot out from the coffin that had appeared on Zac's back and they launched forward like black spears full of corrosion as Zac flooded them with the Fragment of the coffin. They pierced into the intangible wolf with enormous momentum, but it was like he was hitting a cloud. However, the radiant luster of the wolf somewhat dimmed from the black gases that spread from the chains, and the invasion caused a slight pause in the beast's advance.

The reprieve was enough for Zac to charge up his next massive skill, and a golden cloud spread out in a wave as a fifty-meter fractal blade swept out. The wave was rapidly diminished by the moonlight, but a second wave came crashing into the first just as the four chains slid out of the way. The two opposites of **[Rapturous Divide]** emerged in the warehouse the next moment, and both gold and black started competing with the silver for dominance.

The collision caused the whole room to shake, and cracks in the wall grew even further as Zac's newly erected corpse tree was cut in half and fell onto the ground with a deep thud. A few pieces of the wall and roof were actually completely dislodged from the shockwave, but they didn't fall down as Zac expected.

They rather were sucked up into the Void, leaving gaping holes just like the ones that were everywhere in the corridors. The scene intensified Zac's worries, but it seemed to have a far more profound impact on the few remaining werewolves as over half of them started running for their lives even if the spectral wolf managed to cancel out most of Zac's attack.

That left just four beastkin who seemed to be in a state of conflict between duty and fear, but Zac felt no such turmoil as he pushed forward. A brutal melee where **[Verun's Bite]** and the chains of **[Love's Bond]** turned into a dizzying blur resulted in the last of the werewolves, including the leader who had spoken up at the start, lying dead on the ground.

Zac sported some minor wounds and a nasty scar across his throat, but he was still in decent shape. His victory was all thanks to his initial blitz this time around. Zac had thought about the battle on the way over here, and he realized something while talking with Levala. These natives had a lot of weird items that Zac didn't understand, but that worked the other way as well.

The fat stack of talismans and the **[Void Ball]** had essentially put them in a reactive position while breaking their Lunar War Array, the greatest threat to Zac's

large-scale attacks. After that it was just a matter of time before Zac was the last man standing. The werewolves weren't even given a chance to launch any of the technological weapons or traps they should have prepared in this place.

This wasn't the time to wallow in self-congratulatory revelry though, and he quickly snatched up the closest corpses of the werewolf leaders before he rushed over to his scouting squad. The walls of the room were all creaking ominously by this point, and Zac got a bad feeling when he remembered the fear in the eyes of the werewolves as they fled.

He had thought the fear was directed at himself in the heat of the battle, but he now had a feeling that he was overestimating his importance.

"Are you guys okay?" Zac panted as he started ripping apart the bindings that held the group in place.

The scouts were bound by Memorysteel chains that were fused with the walls themselves, but they definitely didn't contain the same restraining capabilities as the odd gizmo in his possession. Then again, the material was extremely sturdy by itself, and even Zac had to strain a bit to break the chains.

"We're fine. We knew that you'd come for us," one of the two Valkyries said as she got to her feet.

Zac could only weakly smile in response, too shamefaced to admit that he only found out about their situation by a coincidence. He could only redouble his efforts in freeing everyone, urged on both embarrassment and a mounting fear as the cracks in the walls kept spreading.

"We should hunt the last ones down before they bring back more people!" a man that Zac didn't recognize huffed as Zac broke apart his fetters. "Better yet, we should invade them... right ...back."

The man had begun speaking with surging momentum, but he barely managed to squeeze the last words out as Zac silenced him with a glare. The others looked at Zac with confusion, but there was no time to explain the mounting danger he felt.

"Wha-" the man stuttered.

"Just shut up and run," Zac said as he freed the last scout, the demon warrior. However, it was too late.

A series of odd explosions erupted all along the roof, and Zac guessed it was the remaining Base Power in the wall that had been become unstable as the chamber had lost the last of its structural integrity. The blasts were the straw that broke the camel's back as the roof was ripped clean off and swallowed by the void. The atmosphere was still intact, but Zac didn't care about that as he felt a very familiar dread gripping his heart.

Not only that, but an immense pressure weighed down on him like a restrictive array had been activated.

"Run!" Zac screamed as he grabbed one of the scouts with his free arm while his chains grabbed another four.

Only the demon warrior was able to stand, and he carried the last scout on his back. However, the two only managed to take a few steps before a horrifying scene entered their eyes. Two tentacles reached down from the void, making their way toward Zac and the Demon warrior. The scene was scary enough by itself in conjuncture with the immense aura the appendages emitted, but Zac's terror reached even greater heights when he realized what the vines were made of.

Hands. Thousands of hands stitched together.

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### Chapter 597 - The Collector

Zac felt like his brain was about to short-circuit when he saw what he was dealing with. It was one thing to see the distorting claw of the Void Creature before, but just what kind of eldritch horror would have these kinds of appendages? The sinister aura of this thing was far beyond the earlier creature as well, and Zac believed the only reason he could even stand was that the being was greatly restrained when entering the dimension of the Mystic Realm.

But there was no time to ponder what he was dealing with as the ropes made of hands were extremely quick and nimble. He desperately activated [**Loamwalker**] to flash out of the way of one of the two appendages, but he could immediately see that the demon wouldn't be able to do the same.

The ground cracked under Zac's feet as he hurriedly changed direction, forcibly tackling the demon from behind. The demon coughed up a mouthful of blood and the Valkyrie's wounds seemed to worsen, but the push was enough to throw the two away, allowing them to avoid the first grab.

The demon's face was pallid, but he understood what was at stake. He grit his teeth as he got up to his feet, and Cosmic Energy surged through his body as he sprinted toward the red barrier. This was Zac's only hope; that the Base would block this thing as a security measure. He had already learned from Leviala that the barriers worked just like normal defensive arrays; usually just blocking passage from one direction. But hopefully it would detect the Void Creature passing through the barrier, and move to intercept it.

Zac activated [**Loamwalker**] once more to follow in the demon's footsteps, but horror gripped his heart when his skill was forcibly deactivated mid-step. One of the appendages had managed to grab hold to one of the unconscious scouts hanging from one of [**Love's Bond's**] chains, and Zac shuddered when he realized that the hands could actually move like normal as they grabbed the scout's legs and arms.

Desperation welled in his heart as Zac tried to drag him free only to find himself completely unable to match the power of the being still hidden in the void. He quickly found himself being lifted off the ground, utterly incapable of resisting. Guilt welled up in Zac's heart, but he could only release the scout before it was too late, and dropping toward the ground barely allowed him to dodge the second appendage.

The poor unconscious scout was quickly being hoisted into the darkness as the hands passed him along, but Zac resolutely looked forward as he activated [**Loamwalker**] again. The demon had already managed to escape through the barrier with one of the Valkyries, and the appendages completely ignored him after that.

The scene somewhat confirmed Zac's guess, and not having to worry about the demon gave Zac at least some reprieve. If he only could make it through the barrier he would be safe as well.

However, Zac was gripped by despair when a third rope of hands suddenly descended from the sky, barring Zac's escape. He was forced to immediately stop, as another step with his movement skill would put him right in range of the outreached hands. He frantically ran in a different direction as he started charging up his most powerful remaining skill, [**Deforestation**]. If he couldn't run out, then he would need to fight his way out.

The brief pause caused by the appearance of a third appendage was all that the eldritch horror needed though, and it effortlessly snatched up a second scout. This time it simply yanked him free, causing cracks to spread all over the links of **[Love's Bond]**. The body of the scout obviously couldn't withstand such force either, and just the upper body of the poor man was taken away while his legs fell on the floor.

The only consolation was that the scout was already severely wounded before, and losing both his legs was just too much to endure. The shock immediately killed him, sparing him from being alive for whatever the Void Creature had in store.

Sweat beads streamed down Zac's face as he desperately dodged the lightning-quick vines as he prepared his Hail Mary attempt to get out of the Relay Station. He definitely feared for his life, but now there was yet another reason for him to worry; his training quest still hadn't been completed.

Two people were lost to the horrifying appendages in an instant. Losing a third one meant failure to his quest, and he couldn't let that happen no matter what. He moved the Valkyrie under his arm into one of his chains to free up his movement, and he kept the three scouts tight on his back to avoid another snatching.

But whatever the thing on the other side of the Void still didn't seem satiated as the three vines reached for him as he dodged back and forth in the refitted warehouse in an attempt to find an opening. Zac could even sense a palpable hunger coming from the void even if he couldn't see the main body of the creature.

**[Deforestation]** was finally charged up though, and the woodsman's axe emerged before it released a wave of destruction toward the sky. Zac didn't even pause to see the result as he rushed for the exit, but he immediately found himself blocked again. The vines were only pushed back a bit from the strike as shallow wounds that looked like spatial tears appeared on the hands, but they were still able to move around freely in the room.

An odd undulation rocked Zac's mind for an instant, but he shook his head and immediately followed up with the second swing. The Axe of Felling had not really hurt the creature, but it had at least stopped it for a second. Perhaps an opening would show itself if he kept pushing, so Zac unhesitantly unleashed a fiery wave of Axe-infused destruction toward the void.

The flames were unfortunately restrained as the air was almost non-existent in the chamber by this point, and it didn't seem like this creature was weak to fire either like one could have hoped. The cutting fire glommed onto the vines like napalm, but it was as though the hands absorbed their energy, quickly extinguishing them before they shot out toward Zac again.

However, Zac didn't completely give up hope as he saw that the appendages had started distorting just like the claw from before. It seemed like his attacks had increased the pace at which the Void Creature was expelled from the Mystic Realm, and if he could cause enough damage he might be able to flee. Luckily, there was one final card up Zac's sleeve, and the ominous Axe of Desolation made its entry.

A wave of darkness almost completely filled the Relay Station, engulfing all three appendages in a darkness that seemed a shade blacker than even the Void itself. A series of powerful implosions could be heard within, and Zac's eyes lit up as he started rushing for the exit again. However, a scream of danger made him stop in his tracks, allowing him to barely dodge a badly mangled hand that grabbed for his throat.

An instant later the full tentacle emerged through the desolation, proving that even his strongest strike had failed to take out the tentacles.

The hands on the appendage had turned completely pitch-black from the attack though, and a large number of them had seen their finger turn into ash that drifted

toward the void. Its form was rapidly distorting back and forth as well, and it was clearly about to be booted out of this space. However, a weird rune suddenly lit up on the back of all the hands, and the tentacle flashed forward with unprecedented speed, immediately snatching up Zac by his waist.

A crushing pressure threatened to grind his pelvic bone to dust, but Zac ignored the pain as he desperately cut into the hands with everything he had. The sanguine glow of the first rune on **[Verun's Bite]** had already been activated again, quickly burning through the small amount of E-Grade blood he had managed to gather since the battle with the Lunar Wolves.

Every swing contained enough force to turn a Middle E-Grade Warrior into paste, but the only effect was small scars like the earlier ones appearing across the hands. But the barrage also increased the speed the appendage destabilized, and Zac suddenly found his axe striking air as the appendage disappeared with a pop, just like the Void Bubble from before.

The implosion made Zac helplessly hover in the air for a short moment before a huge force exploded outward, slamming Zac into the Memorysteel wall. However, luck was on Zac's side one final time as he had been thrown right next to the gate. He quickly crawled through the barrier while dragging the chains with him.

It was just in time as well since the last two tentacles finally managed to break through the cloud of desolation just as Zac passed through the red barrier. His whole body was hurting, but he arduously got up to his feet in case the hands tried to force their way through the gate. He didn't want to use it, but he still had the second skill of **[Love's Bond]** to block the path in case that happened.

But the tentacles stopped right outside the barrier before they started to retreat into the void again.

A surge of relief almost made Zac pass out, but his eyes suddenly widened in shock when he saw that none of the three scouts he had carried on his chains was moving. Blood was streaming down his mouth because of internal injuries, but he ignored his own state as he frantically reached for the people on the ground.

Thankfully it turned out that none of them were dead, but they had rather been rendered unconscious some time during the battle. It was no wonder considering the speed Zac had moved around to avoid the grasping hands. Just the g-force alone would probably have been enough to kill a normal human.

Add to that the scout's conditions, the sparse oxygen, and intense pressure from the Void Creature and it was almost a miracle they were still alive. The demon and the Valkyrie he carried outside were sitting just a few meters away, and he was blankly staring at the Void through the barrier like his soul had left his body.

Zac threw a Cosmos Sack full of first-aid items to the demon, dragging him out of his blank state before he quickly fed all the unconscious scouts healing pills himself. Their complexions quickly improved, and a few of them even started stir like they were about to wake up. A prompt appeared the next moment, allowing Zac to breathe out in relief.

He had passed the quest, albeit barely.

It seemed like the Void Creature really didn't dare pass through the red barrier for some reason. Of course, the terrifying tentacles were on their last legs because of the Axe of Desolation, and it was possible that the creature simply didn't want to lose two more appendages and cut its losses.

Seeing that he had escaped death once more Zac simply slumped down on the ground, a wave of exhaustion hitting him like a punch to the face. However, he knew that he still was at the edge of the Wasteland, and a new horror could appear at

moment's notice, quest or no quest. He quickly took out a healing pill and two D-Grade Nexus Crystals to restore his energy as quickly as possible.

The first of the unconscious scouts roused themselves a few minutes later, prompting Zac to open his eyes again. It was the man who had spoken up just before the Void Creature appeared. He blankly looked around like he was surprised to be alive for a few seconds before he spotted Zac seated against the wall.

"I- Ah, I'm Jonas, Jonas Marshall," the man said with a hoarse voice. "Thank you for saving us, from the wolves and that... thing. I didn't mean to order you about earlier, I-"

"It's fine," Zac shrugged, his voice equally hoarse. "I simply sensed something was wrong."

Of course, that was only part of the story. Another reason for the scathing glare was the fear this guy had put him in harm's way. He thought the training quest finished at that point and was afraid that the call for revenge would trigger the third part of his training regimen.

But no prompt had appeared as a result of the man's words, which was a huge relief.

The next logical step would have been to enter the Wastelands, and Zac was in no mood to risk his life against spatial storms and Void Creatures. He knew the System's preferences, and he wouldn't have been surprised if it kept escalating the conflict through quests until he had eradicated the whole Lunar Tribe before it turned him toward the Core Sector.

"And we can't follow those werewolves as we are, even if that monster wasn't around," Zac added as he got to his feet with a grunt. "A place called the Wasteland is in that direction and we don't have the equipment or understanding to cross it. It's apparently full of the things we just encountered."

The others visibly paled at that as they threw a few fearful glances toward the barrier. The horrifying appendages were gone for now, but that didn't mean there were even more of them waiting in the darkness.

"Let's go," Zac said. "We can't stay here any longer. We're returning to our base camp."

The scouts were more than willing to comply and they immediately got themselves ready to travel even in their pitiable states. The demon wordlessly kept carrying one of the unconscious scouts on his back, while Zac carried another two on his chains. The last 2 managed to walk by themselves, albeit barely.

None of them were in any mood to talk, and neither was Zac. This encounter had been much too close for comfort. Worse yet, this was just the second of ten quests. He didn't even dare to think what fresh hell the System would put him through next. So it was in an oppressive silence the group scurried away from the Relay Station, following the same route that Zac took on the way in.

They quickly reached the alcove where Zac had left Leviaia, and the Cartava Scion was still sitting there, fretfully peering around the corner. When she saw Zac's and the others' states her eyes widened in shock as she got up to her feet.

"What happened?" Leviaia hesitantly asked as her eyes peered at the group behind Zac.

"I managed to catch them off-guard and things worked out against the werewolves. A weird Dimensional Creature made from thousands of hands popped up though, and we lost two of our people," Zac sighed as he formed the chain-chair again. "Let's go."

However, Leviaala didn't move, but simply looked at Zac with horror.

"Thousands of hands? You met the Collector?" Leviaala said, her voice barely a whisper.

"What? The Collector? I don't know. It had tentacles made from thousands of hands sewn together. I managed to destroy one of the tentacles, allowing us to escape," Zac said.

"YOU HARMED IT?!" Leviaala shrieked as she scrambled onto the chair. "We need to go! NOW!"

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 598 - The Hero's Burden**

**The Hero's Burden (Training (3/10)): Avoid the Collector while leading your followers to safety. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1)**

**[NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of two random skills and 5 levels.]**

Zac barely had time to take in Leviaala's exaggerated reaction before the prompt in front of him appeared. Zac quickly scanned the quest with some exhaustion. He wasn't completely wrung dry just yet, but he was also far from an optimal condition. But the quest acted as a warning of sorts, and Zac knew there wasn't anything he could do except keep going.

The quest didn't have a timer, and neither didn't have any restrictions. But that might actually not be a good thing, since it might mean that a single death would result in failure. The punishment for failing had decreased once more at least, though the punishment was still far too rich for Zac's tastes.

"Let's keep moving. If you're unable to move any longer, tell me and I'll carry you," Zac said before he turned to Leviaala who was already sitting on her chair. "Is it safe to talk?"

"It can't hear us, but it can sense us," Leviaala whispered with fear in her eyes as she gazed at the cracks in the ceiling. "It'll pounce if we stop for just a moment."

Zac nodded in understanding as he set out, keeping as high a pace as he dared in this chaotic place.

"What do you know about that thing?" Zac asked.

"The Collector is said to be the second greatest source of deaths during the Cataclysm, only lacking compared to the spatial storms themselves. It's not necessarily the strongest Void Creature, but it's definitely one of the weirdest. But more importantly, it's unusually resilient to our dimension. You saw the claw before. It deformed by itself in seconds. But the Collector's hands can stay for hours as long as they're not attacked," Leviaala said.

"The Collector is also extremely crafty, and it's even able to enter the research base through Spatial Tears. There have been reports of people being snatched all over the base, even in sectors thought to be safe," she said as she held her hands against her chest. "But I don't understand. It's been gone for thousands of years. It left a few centuries after the Cataclysm, and there have been no sightings since."

“Well, I guess it came back now that the treasure is maturing,” Zac sighed. “Why do you call it the Collector? Does it actually collect hands?”

“That’s our guess, at least. We think it somehow attaches them to itself to better withstand this dimension. That’s why it’s so dangerous to attack it. It really treasures its collection, and it will hunt you down if you harm the hands,” Leviala said, looking almost ready to cry. “And now we’re in a sector full of breaches.”

“Uh, well,” Zac muttered, but he didn’t get any further before a sense of dread filled him. “RUN!”

The others didn’t hesitate at all as Cosmic Energy surged in their bodies as they rushed down the corridor. It was just in time as well, as a tentacle suddenly rushed out of a crack in the ceiling just behind them.

“It’s really the Collector,” Leviala said ai. “We’re doomed. We’re doomed. It’s either the Collector or getting bisected by Spatial Tears.”

“Shut up or I’ll use you as a shield,” Zac growled as he kept running.

Another sense of danger filled his mind the next moment, and he stopped just in time to avoid running straight into a Spatial Tear. A piece of his robes was cut apart though, telling just how close he had come to getting split open like a melon. The others quickly stopped in their tracks as well, barely avoiding the spatial storm that emerged from the void the next second.

Zac’s nerves were taut as a bowstring, but there was no way to force himself through the storm. But waiting for the spatial storm to pass was obviously not an option either with the Collector in pursuit.

“Left!” Leviala screamed, and Zac immediately turned down another corridor, the others desperately following in tow.

The hands were too close though, and the slower Valkyrie was about to get snatched up.

“Shit!” Zac growled as he stopped in his tracks before he shot forward like a cannonball as his free chains slammed into the memory steel in the opposite direction.

A barrage of five-meter fractal edges slammed into the hands of the Collector the next second, each carrying a tremendous force. Small scars appeared on the hands, but Zac’s normal F-Grade **[Chop]** could barely slow the tentacle down as it grasped for the deathly pale Valkyrie. Zac saw no option but to go in himself, and he appeared right behind his follower just as the hand was about to grasp her neck.

A tremendous shockwave caused cracks to spread across the whole corridor as **[Verun’s Bite]** collided with the palm of the slightly larger hand at the end of the tentacle. A weird scar appeared on the skin as the fingers on the closest hands spasmed and bent in impossible angles, perhaps an indication of pain.

Zac wasn’t much better off though, a weird sinister energy had entered his body the moment the two opposites clashed. Zac felt his vision blur for a second, but a thud from his chest woke him right up, just in time to avoid getting snatched up by a second grab. Whatever energy had entered his body just now, his **[Void Heart]** had swallowed it. If that was a good or a bad thing, only time could tell.

The all-out Axe-Infused swing had only left a flesh wound but Zac didn’t care as he fled, dragged away by two of the chains he had embedded in the wall before rushing back. The collision had fulfilled its purpose as the Valkyrie had already moved a hundred meters away, and Zac sighed in relief when he saw the Collector retracting its appendage.

Those things were only so long, so if Zac could obstruct it a second or two he would be able to keep his people safe.

“Argh!” the demon suddenly screamed from the vanguard, immediately proving Zac wrong.

The group had kept running while Zac stalled the Tentacle, and this time they didn't have Zac's Luck to keep them safe from the spatial tear.

A huge wound had opened up in the Demon's side, and blood already pooled on the floor beneath him.

“Eat this,” Zac said as he threw out one of his top-quality private healing pills.

“Thank you,” the Demon said as he swallowed the pill, but Zac's eyes widened when a flame appeared in his hands.

However, the Demon wasn't targeting him or anyone else, but rather used a fireball spell to quickly cauterize the wound, leaving a nasty burn instead.

“I can keep going,” the demon said with a ragged breath, but Zac saw that his whole body shook.

Zac nodded, but he still took the unconscious Valkyrie the Demon had been carrying. The demon actually stretched out his hand to take her back, but he reluctantly stopped himself after looking down at his wound.

“You can carry her when the pill has restored you a bit more,” Zac said as he started running.

“Thank you... Jana is... my wife,” the demon said. “Save her first if it comes down to that.”

Zac's brows rose, but now wasn't the time to ask for details. The group kept running down the unknown corridor, led by Levia's expertise and guesswork. It was clear their speed wasn't enough to avoid detection though, as the tentacles of the Collector kept appearing through the cracks in the walls or ceilings. It felt like they were one bad turn away from disaster at every moment.

They thankfully weren't all that far from the gate though, and Zac knew that he would only need to keep it up for another 15 minutes if they kept this pace. He could do it.

However, disaster finally struck after they had been forced down yet another unknown corridor by the emergence of another tentacle. What should have been a normal pathway had turned into a dead-end because of a collapsed wall some distance in, with a massive number of spatial anomalies making it impossible to climb across the rubble.

The Collector's tentacle was actually still around as well, like it knew that they were trapped.

“It's over,” Levia said as tears streamed down her face, her eyes slowly turning toward the spatial tears. “Better the tears...”

“I told you to stop talking like that,” Zac muttered as a terrifying aura exploded out from his body, and he felt how a series of black fractals appeared across his face.

He was out of options, so he could only blast his way out. And the only card he had that could deal with this monstrosity was his Annihilation Sphere. A surge of destruction coursed through his body as the energy of Oblivion seeped out of his soul like steam on a cold day. His avatar had stopped fighting as well, and instead stretched out its two hands in front of it as a surging river of Dao was released from it.

The coffin was the same, releasing a small amount of Coffin-Dao that blended with the energy of the Splinter of Oblivion, though the amount it released was somewhat lower because of the infusion of Oblivion. The streams entered his pathways and Zac started to feel his mind blur, but he couldn't let himself go into a trance in a place like this, against an enemy like this.

He desperately held on to his sanity as he pushed his two hands forward meeting the outreached hands of the Collector head-on.

The world froze for an instant before the tip of the tentacle simply disappeared, taking dozens of hands with it. A half-meter sphere of nothingness replaced the tip, and Zac looked at it with wonder as he was thrown back. He didn't know why, but that small ball of Annihilation was infinitely beautiful, like it contained the ultimate truth of the universe.

The sphere only existed for a fraction of a second though before it disappeared, leaving a frozen and maimed tentacle behind. However, the tentacle didn't remain unmoving for long as a series of shudders spread through its hands. One implosion after another erupted next as the whole tentacle seemed to fall apart.

A single Annihilation Sphere had done more harm to the creature than all of **[Deforestation's]** swings combined, and the thing immediately lost its ability to stay in this dimension. Leviala looked at Zac with blank incomprehension, and the others in the group weren't any better. Even the Valkyries looked at Zac with a mix of awe and horror, like Zac suddenly had become even more terrifying than the eldritch horror hunting them.

"Are you okay," one of the Valkyries asked, but she didn't dare to walk over.

"I'm fine," Zac coughed as he got back to his feet with some difficulty.

It wasn't completely true though. Using the Annihilation Sphere so soon after having gone through a heated battle had put an immense strain on his mind, and he was barely holding on to his consciousness. He could also feel that the cracks that ran down his neck had worsened this time around, making Zac feel some helplessness.

The cracks had never really healed since the last time he used his Annihilation sphere. His flesh had mended, but the odd energies had stayed on like hidden tendrils lodged in his body. Not even the lava bath had managed to expel them like the rest of his impurities, and neither was his **[Void Heart]** able to gobble them up.

He had no idea what the long-term ramification was of using the bronze flash over and over, and he could only pray that he would find some solution sooner rather than later. Because it wasn't like he could stop using the remnants even if he wanted to. They were his final card when everything was hopeless, when it was either do or die.

"Wh-" Leviala wheezed, seemingly struggling to form a coherent sentence.

"Looks like I had to go all-out again," Zac wryly smiled in response as he started running back the path they came from now that the tentacle was gone.

"What kind of-" the Cartava scion stuttered, but she was interrupted as a massive earthquake rocked the whole corridor with such force that she fell out of her chair.

Zac's tried to make his mind focus up as he turned around, but he immediately realized that he wouldn't be able to do anything against what was coming, even if he was in perfect condition.

At least twenty tentacles had forced their way out of the rubble of the collapsed corridor, and they madly pushed toward them, destroying everything in their path. The Memorysteel walls were ripped apart and deformed, exposing a series of worn-down tubes and contraptions hidden inside the walls.

It looked like a tide of hands were coming for them, no longer caring about playing it safe.

No orders were needed this time around as the group ran for their lives, not caring about anything but moving as quickly as possible. But the tentacles were too

quick, especially since they didn't bother taking the same winding path as Zac's group. They rather just crushed the walls in the way, forming a new path for themselves.

Zac was out of ideas. He was exhausted and out of aces. He still had [Love's Bond], but he didn't believe for a second that his Spirit Tool's skill would be able to block the Collector's path. It would probably just end with his Spirit Tool getting damaged and Alea's soul getting wounded even further.

But a radiant light suddenly filled the corridor as the decrepit scripts on the walls flared into life. An endless series of clanking sounds echoed from within the walls the next moment, like someone had turned on the machines inside. Dozens of red barriers sprung up next, the closest one right in front of Zac's group.

Zac and the others passed through effortlessly though, allowing them to breathe out in a collective sigh of relief. Of course, one single barrier wasn't enough for Zac to feel safe considering that the sounds of destruction from behind hadn't abated at all. The group kept running through one barrier after another, barely maintaining their footing.

"The Administrator is intervening!" Leviaala suddenly cried with joy.

A huge surge of power made Zac's hair stand on end the next moment, and he quickly looked back to see what was going on. He could quickly determine there was no immediate threat, but what he saw still made him want to run for the hills.

Was this the true form of Collector?

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**Chapter 599 - Horror**

Seeing the scene behind them almost made Zac forget the primal fear the tide of hands had elicited just a few seconds ago. The whole base had simply disappeared just a hundred meters behind them, replaced by a Void that stretched into infinity. It looked like the series of red barriers had been erected to maintain atmospheric pressure to the base.

There were no stars or nebulae in the Void, yet it wasn't completely dark. A thin strand of light stretched across the horizon, like a beam of light that had squeezed through a crack. Zac had no idea what that crack was, but he figured that it perhaps was a path to a real spacetime rather than the void between dimensions.

The scene was pretty shocking, but it was nothing compared to the appearance of the Collector.

The disgusting hand-tentacles were horrifying enough, but its main body easily topped it. Zac had imagined some sort of Lovecraftian horror after seeing the tentacles, but he wasn't sure whether the real Collector was better or worse. It almost looked like an ashy-gray blob of yarn floating in space, but the more he looked the more horrific it became.

Its form was a slightly uneven sphere that spanned thousands of meters across, making it a creature far larger than anything Zac had ever encountered before. He initially thought it was covered with coarse skin or short-haired fur, but a second glance actually revealed that they were just more body-parts sewn onto its real form. However, it wasn't just hands on its main body, but everything from legs to whole torsos and heads.

Worse yet, the bodyparts moved in everything from lackluster swaying to frantic clawing. Zac even spotted a head-and-handless torso desperately clawing at its midriff with its two stumps, probably trying to rip itself off from the Collector's body. The scene made him gape in horror, and an intrusive thought pushed away everything else.

Were the collected bodies still alive?

There weren't only humans attached to the body either, but Zac quickly spotted hundreds of werewolves as well. But that wasn't the extent of it as he could easily discern at least thirty different races in short order. It looked like the Research Base wasn't the Collector's only hunting ground, which would explain why it had disappeared for so long.

As for the tentacles, there were hundreds, most of them randomly swaying about in the void like strands that had come loose from the ball of yarn. Only a few of them actually had bodyparts covering them though, with the rest appearing to be made from something that looked like an oily liquid. In fact, there were large patches of bare parts on the main body as well, meaning that the Collector wasn't done with its horrifying undertaking.

The Collector only had one additional feature, a weird hole in the middle of its body that seemed endless, like it led into a dimension of its own. Just looking into the depths made Zac's soul shudder, immediately forcing him to look away. He had actually felt a pull on his soul, like the maw of the Collector had some sort of spiritual pull.

A clanking sound dragged Zac out of his muddled state though as a series of enormous metal rings floated out in the void. There were over a hundred of them, each covered in dense scripts and thrumming with power. Zac quickly realized that the rings were made out of Memorysteel, and it was likely this 'Administrator' who had chosen to completely transform a section of the base to defend against the Collector's attacks.

The rings were of varying sizes, with the smallest ones being just ten meters in diameter with the largest ones being at least a few hundred meters across. The rings moved themselves to form a series of uneven tubes aimed at the creature before they started spinning with increasing velocity. The rings had turned into a blur in almost an instant, easily having reached tens of thousands of rpm.

Radiant motes of light soon appeared out of nowhere in the center of the tubes, likely somehow generated by the spinning. It was hard to tell whether the lights were made from extremely condensed energy or if they were an actual liquid, and it made Zac think of the experiments on plasma he had read about years ago.

However, this definitely wasn't something that would have been possible to create in some Earth lab, but rather some high-tiered energy that definitely exceeded anything he had seen aboard the Little Bean. Zac knew that he would instantly be turned to ash if he even got close to those things, and he kept backing away as he gazed at the accumulating lights with trepidation.

Suddenly one of the blobs of light turned into a ten-meter wide streak, hitting the Collector's main body like the discharge of a rail gun. Cascading lights illuminated the Void, and Zac felt a series of small wounds appearing on his soul from just looking at the spectacle. The Collector shuddered from the collision, but it clearly wasn't dead as dozens of tentacles shot toward the still-accumulating energy weapons.

"Run! Just being witness to a fight like this is a death sentence," Leviala screamed, blood streaming down her nose.

Zac wordlessly nodded, no longer daring to stay on to watch the result of the clash between Void Creature and the base itself. He snatched up the scouts who had all fallen unconscious as he rushed back where they came from, barely keeping himself upright after a series of shockwaves that meant that the battle had started in earnest.

The base was at least occupying the Collector's attention now, allowing Zac to only worry about the spatial tears as he ran for his life. However, that was easier said than done since the epic struggle was causing serious damage to the already weakened section. It looked like the whole place could collapse at moment's notice, with pieces of wall and ceiling falling all around them.

The spatial tears constantly poured through the cracks, and Zac was forced to jump back and forth like a monkey to avoid getting himself and his people cut into ribbons. On top of that, there was the constant threat that the Collector would return full of vengeance after having been blasted by the base's energy weapons.

Zac's heart was beating like a drum when they finally reached the inconspicuous part of the wall that led back to the forest, and he quickly took out the tablet, his shaky hands barely able to maintain a grip on it.

The gate the was conjured same way as last time, with Levala being much too distracted to even care about how he did it. She kept a constant vigil to their back in case the tentacles returned, and she only turned back when she heard the sound of the gate sliding open. Zac didn't wait for even a second as he rushed out.

Seeing the lush forest felt like a stay of execution, and he unceremoniously fell down in a heap on the grass as he dumped his followers on the ground. He didn't know why, but it felt like the enormous wall would be able to keep the monster at bay, and the System apparently agreed as he suddenly got a prompt that he had completed the third part of his training regimen.

A wave of exhaustion hit him the second he saw the prompt, but he barely managed to keep himself from falling unconscious. His pumping adrenaline had kept him going even after unleashing the power of Oblivion, but his debts had come back to haunt him as a searing pain spread from his head down to his shoulders.

He quickly ate a series of pills, ranging from soul-mending to fasting pills to provide nutrients, and he took out both a Soul Crystal and a D-Grade Nexus Crystal to start restoring his condition. The scouts started to come to one after another as well, and they quickly sat down and focused on recuperation as well after having taken in their surroundings.

Three hours passed before Zac sighed and opened his eyes again, having barely reached a combat-ready state. New flesh had once more covered the cracks formed from unleashing the Annihilation sphere, and his mind didn't feel like it was full of cotton any longer. However, he knew that he was spreading himself too thin at the moment, and he wasn't sure how many more training quests he had in him.

It felt like the difficulty had taken a sharp spike after the first one, but he didn't know if that was just because he was unlucky enough to run into the Collector. It was hard to tell whether the System created its quest as things progressed, or whether it had foreseen everything that would happen. If it was the former, then he could only blame his bad luck and pray that his hardships would be taken into account when he finished the quest chain.

If it was the latter, he could only once chalk it up to the System being a real asshole.

He suddenly heard some shuffling next to him, and he looked over to see Levala getting to her feet to stretch. It looked like she finally had regained some of her strength after using her Taboo Bloodline Skill.

"I don't know whether to call you lucky or unlucky," she muttered as she glanced at Zac with a complicated look. "Getting attacked by two different Void Creatures is some misfortune, they're not *that* common. But we still managed to survive somehow, even being saved by the base itself."

“Well, I often find myself asking that as well. Luck and misfortune seem to be two sides of the same coin in the multiverse,” Zac said with a wry smile.

“What happened there at the end, though?” Leviaia asked with a frown. “Why did the Collector become so angry that it directly attacked the base. Did you do something? I must have blacked out for a second.”

“I just damaged one of its tentacles a bit again,” Zac shrugged. “Perhaps it got angry because it happened for a second time.”

“Hmm,” Leviaia said, suspicion written all over her face.

Actually, Zac wasn’t surprised at her reaction. He had learned something peculiar from talking with Thea some time ago. She was actually unable to remember exactly what Zac did when he killed Harbinger back during the Zhix war. She only remembered him stretching out his arms, then seeing the Zhix lying destroyed on the ground. Everything in between was just a blank.

It turned out that his Annihilation Sphere actually messed with the minds of others, somehow deleting or destroying the memories of witnessing it. He didn’t know if it was because of the System’s meddling, or rather if it was because normal people couldn’t withstand that kind of high-tiered concept.

Zac was actually leaning toward the latter as the oddity reminded him of him seeing the Chaos Pattern during his battle with the dragon. He could still somewhat remember a sense of complete understanding of the universe for an instant, just like how he had felt when seeing his Annihilation Sphere just now.

But any actual understanding had gradually disappeared, and he couldn’t remember a single feature of the Chaos Pattern by the time he left the Tower of Eternity. This weird phenomenon was partly why he dared to use the Annihilation Sphere in front of others. He even believed that the only thing awaiting Leviaia if she used her Bloodline Skill to see what happened would be a shocking backlash, especially considering the Collector was involved as well.

“Well, now what?” Leviaia asked, making Zac freeze in fear.

But it looked like the System was giving him a breather this time around, with no new prompt appearing.

“None of us are in great shape,” Zac eventually said as he took out the backpacks of the werewolves. “Let’s rest a bit longer before we get going.”

He had only managed to snatch one Cosmos Sack and two backpacks back at the Relay Station, but all three belonged to squad leaders, meaning they should hold the best stuff. Now was as good a time as any to see if there actually were any returns from almost getting killed a dozen times over.

However, Zac’s face scrunched up when he noticed the sacks were mostly full of food and first-aid items, along with some gadgets that mostly looked like more of the same as what he had looted off of Hevastes. He noted with interest that there was not a single pill or Nexus Crystal among their possessions, and it was the same with Hevastes’ bag.

Instead, there were a few vials of a milky liquid that had healing properties according to Leviaia, but the effect was a lot worse compared to his healing pills. That wasn’t to say that his mother’s family was unable to create proper remedies. The problem was rather that these vials essentially contained run-off of the real thing, siphoned off the base by the natives.

Seeing there was not much of interest he turned his attention to the gadgets. There were two charges similar to the one he looted from Hevastes, but they both were not only smaller, but they also looked homemade. His best guess was that Hevastes’

charger was looted somewhere on the base while the other two were created in its likeness to the best of the werewolves' abilities.

Still, it was an impressive feat to reverse-engineer a piece of equipment like this, and it proved that the natives weren't simply scavengers in this place.

There were also two tablets identical to the one in his possession, and Zac simply put them aside as he honed in on a tablet that looked a bit different compared to the others.

"What's this?" Zac asked as he turned to the Cartava Scion.

"A mapper," Levala said as she leaned over, and Zac could see some desire in her good eye. "It's used to record safe paths. You can also add comments about security measures, spatial traps in it, creating detailed maps."

Zac's eyes lit up as he looked down at the smaller tablet in his hands. Wasn't this exactly what he needed right now?

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**Chapter 600 - Mapper**

Zac looked down at the rough tablet in his hands like it was a priceless treasure, and he immediately infused it with some Base Energy as he kept Leandra's token hidden in his palm. It hummed a second later as the screen lit up, making Zac feel a surge of success. No matter what the true intentions of his mother were, it was undeniable that she had provided him with a huge advantage by leaving behind the token.

It was starting to look like it was some sort of ghost key in this place, working on almost everything. Of course, the thing was clearly not infallible as the walls held no compunctions about attacking him, and neither did it remove the barriers in the corridors.

"It's unlocked!" Levala said with wide eyes, and it almost looked she would drag the tablet out of his hands. "How could this intelligence be unsecured?! This is top-secret information for a faction. Look, this! It's their route through the Wastelands. And these paths, they're completely new! They're taking advantage of the spatial expansion to find new routes through vents and even some pipes."

Zac let her keep talking as it helped him a lot as well. The maps Levala browsed through almost looked like schematics for circuitry to him, and he had a hard time understanding all of them. His sister or the scientists would probably be able to figure the thing out, but learning from a native would save a lot of time and effort.

"Look at these ones! They're circumventing so many natural blockades. A few of them even might even be able to reach the Inner Labs! Just what is the Lunar Tribe planning?" Levala added with grudging respect mixed with a hint of confusion. "And why are they going in that direction? All the pathways out of here seem to be at the edges of the realm. Aren't they trying to escape?"

Zac was about to ask a few questions, but he froze as the dreaded prompt had appeared once again. He threw Levala an exasperated look even though he knew it wasn't really her fault before he focused on the blue screens that had appeared this time.

**[Man Versus Nature (Training (4/10)): Reach the core of the Wasteland before Dimensional Seed matures. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1)]**

[Man Versus Machine (Training (4/9)): Enter 'Inner Lab 16' before Dimensional Seed matures. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/1)]

[NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of one random skill and 4 levels. Choosing second option will disqualify trainee from highest reward tier.]

It turned out that Zac had been given a branching quest this time, likely based on the large number of maps in his new mapper. Zac was about to immediately discard the one that would lead him into the Wasteland, but he stopped himself. At first glance it felt like the first option was suicidal, but perhaps that wasn't the case.

As long as the Collector had been pushed back from the direct vicinity of the base, then he had everything he needed to succeed. He had the map and a lot of Base power, and the ability to discern Spatial Tears before they appeared. Meanwhile, the second quest indicated that he might come in direct conflict with the base itself, which could complicate things when trying to deal with the Dominators.

It wasn't that Zac wanted to enter a place like the Wasteland, but the note at the end gave him pause. Judging by the difficulty of the training session so far, the reward would probably be at the level of the 8th floor of the Tower of Eternity or even higher. Getting a customized top-tier reward at this stage would be huge, considering that all Zac's greatest assets, from [Love's Bond] to the Creator Shipyard and the Dao Repository, came from these kinds of rewards.

This difference was further exemplified by the fact that the Man Versus Machine-quest decreased the quest chain to 9 total quests. The punishment had decreased as well, and it looked like completing 6 quests essentially was a 'passing grade', with every subsequent quest improving the reward.

Stopping at the 9th quest instead of the 10th might be a massive blow, like how huge Zac's loss would have been if he had stopped at the 7th floor instead of the 8th in the Tower of Eternity.

But Zac also had to think of the big picture. He wasn't here to gain rewards, but to complete a specific task. He wasn't sure whether passing through the Wasteland or heading to these Laboratories was the best course of action to deal with the Dominators.

"What's the inner labs?" Zac asked, turning to the Cartava descendant for guidance.

"What? Well, that's..." Leviala said, hesitation clearly written all over her face.

"I should tell you that Port Atwood controls more than half of the world outside, including almost all top-quality cultivation sites and high-value resources. If Clan Cartava wants a good domain to rebuild your clan on the outside you need to give something in return," Zac said.

Jonas and the other scout that weren't from Port Atwood looked a bit miffed at the domineering proclamation, but they held their tongues. Zac's words were a bit boastful, but they were essentially true if you counted the whole second continent as his own. There were certainly a lot of Nexus Crystal Mines and other resources strewn across the planet, but most of the really valuable deposits received an Incursion next to it, meaning they now belonged to him.

"Well, it's not really secret knowledge among the people in here," Leviala said after some hesitation. "Each faction in here has managed to take control of some laboratories or unique technology in their area, and each of them provides something valuable. For example, Clan Cartava owns a series of unique greenhouses with various valuable fruits for Race Upgrades and even upgrading your constitution."

Zac's eyes lit up when he heard about race upgrades. Perhaps they even had some herb that worked on his undead constitution, allowing him to keep working on his Draugr Race now that he had almost run out of **[Bone-Forging Dust]**.

"The most valuable of the outer laboratories are arguably controlled by the gemplings on the opposite side of the base," Leviaia continued after some thought. "They contain something called bloodline vats. I hear that bathing in that stuff can help forcibly awaken a bloodline. The bloodlines of the gemplings are apparently notoriously hard to awaken naturally, but thanks to these vats they are able to have as many bloodline warriors as the rest of us."

"Then what about the inner laboratories?" Zac asked curiously.

"The outer laboratories contain great things, but they were ultimately used for large-scale experiments. The materials are helpful, but not without limits or side-effects. However, the inner laboratories were made for more valuable experiments. The number of resources that can be found there is much scarcer, but their quality is conversely higher. Quite a few skirmishes have erupted for the things that can be found there over the past millennia," Leviaia sighed.

"Who controls the inner laboratories now then?" Zac asked.

"No one. Or perhaps the Administrator," Leviaia said. "The inner laboratories are normally not accessible, but every few decades a lot of the barriers in this place disappears. We believe it's the base that shuts down some functions for routine maintenance or energy conservation. That always gave us a brief window to rush to the inner areas and loot the valuables.

"However, no one who has chosen to stay behind when the barriers reappeared has ever been found alive again. We think the Administrator kills them when it wakes up," she continued. "But it usually gave us a month of searching for opportunities and trading or fighting with the other factions."

"So the lunar tribe wants to snatch the good things in this base before escaping," Zac muttered. "What can be found in the inner labs that the werewolves have targeted here?"

"I don't know," Leviaia said. "It's actually random. The core of the base is running as though it was never abandoned by the Builders. The Administrator prepares all kinds of experiments and scenarios, completely changing the layouts of the inner labs between gatherings. I... managed to enhance my Bloodline at an inner lab fifteen years ago."

Zac's eyes lit up at the piece of news. His mouth was almost frothing at the mention of bloodline vats and race upgrades, but it sounded like there were even more valuable things waiting in the inner labs. He was first a bit hesitant when the System mentioned better rewards by heading to the Wasteland, but it sounded like these labs provided a different set of opportunities instead.

Of course, he understood that the quest wasn't a complete freebie, and he had just been given a glimpse of the Administrator's powers just a few hours ago. Still, the second quest seemed to take him in the direction he needed to go, whereas going through the Wasteland was a gamble.

"When is the next time the base will enter maintenance mode or whatever?" Zac asked after some thought.

"Not for a few years at least, unless something changes due to the dimensional treasure," Leviaia said. "I guess that's why the Lunar Clan has been working so hard to find an alternative route."

Zac nodded and made his decision, causing the prompt about the Wasteland to disappear. He didn't immediately set out though, but rather stayed and rested with the

others. There was no timer for this quest, and he planned on taking his people back to the glasshouse before setting out again. Judging by the maps he would have a few days to spare even if he returned, and he wanted to use that time to recuperate and deal with any matters waiting back at the base.

The group rested for another two hours, and even Leviala could walk by herself by that point. They didn't enter the forest though out of fear of running into the wolf pack. However, they didn't walk along the wall either, as the walls sometimes malfunctioned according to the Leviala. They could suddenly launch an attack out of nowhere.

That's why they traveled just at the edge of the forest just like the werewolves did, taking the long route back.

"We crossed parts of the forest to save some time," Jonas Marshall ventured, clearly anxious to get back. "The werewolves burned some sort of herb with an acrid smell as we moved. I think it was a beast deterrent."

"This stuff?" Zac asked after rummaging about in one of the backpacks he had looted.

"Exactly," Jonas nodded.

"We'll still go around," Zac muttered. "I don't want to risk running into the wolf pack inside again. I'm not sure I can protect you all if these things don't work."

"Again?" Leviala asked with surprise, turning toward Zac. "You fought the lunar wolves?"

"Yeah," Zac nodded as he stowed away the herbs. "They're pretty tough, they only relented after I killed their alphas."

Leviala looked at Zac for a few seconds, her mouth forming words but no sounds coming out. She eventually just released a resigned sigh and turned away, not prying into the subject any longer. Zac smiled a bit before he turned toward the scouts. It wasn't just a random comment of his, but rather a conscious decision to tell Leviala.

He needed to build up an image of Strength in her mind, which would hopefully result in easier negotiations with the elders of the Cartava Clan down the road. Meanwhile, there were some other things Zac wanted to know.

"Do you know why the werewolves kidnapped you?" Zac asked.

"They took us because they wanted intelligence on how to get out of this place. Apparently, they had visited our biospheres multiple times before, but there were no spatial anomalies back then. They thought we had some sort of tool or technology to open a passage," Jonas added. "I think their plan was to steal that machine and then take it to their town. They didn't believe us when we said that was impossible."

Zac frowned a bit, but he didn't comment on it. Their theory was wrong, but not overly so. Zac guessed that it was the System that cracked open the pathways during the Integration. Before the pathways had been blocked or hidden, either because of the Tsarun Clan or the Dimensional Seed wanting to protect itself.

It was a problem if the werewolves thought that he or the other leaders of his coalition carried a teleporter on their person though. That meant they might get in the way during the battle for the Dimensional Seed.

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## Chapter 601 - Next Step

Zac estimated it would take up to a day before they would reach the glasshouse since his flying treasure wouldn't work inside Mystic Realms. This wasn't a failing of his leaf, but rather how E-Grade flying treasures were created. They generally were dependant on the energy in the ground, which was why Zac's could fly no higher than a few hundred meters into the air.

These methods rarely worked in Mystic Realms because they didn't have World Cores to rely on, and only D-Grade flying treasures who were completely powered by themselves or the user could fly freely. There were apparently specially made E-Grade flying treasures that would work in Mystic Realms as well, but that wasn't something Zac had access to right now.

Moving through an empty forest at least allowed him to learn more about the Research Base, so he walked next to Leviaala most of the time exchanging information about Earth or the latest situation in the Zecia sector for intelligence on the Mystic Realm. He quickly gained a better understanding of the factions and their locations, and he found that the Cartava clan was surprisingly close to his own entrance.

However, their domiciles were on the other side of the Outer Band, making it almost impossible to travel between their bases. The natives split the base into four sectors, each formed like a ring around the core of the base. First was the Outer Rim where Zac's people appeared, and the next ring was called the Living Layer.

All the factions lived in this layer since the energy density there was better than the outer rim, while simultaneously not being actively controlled by the Administrator. These settlements sprawled out over Biospheres like those Zac had set up his base in, to Laboratories and emptied warehouses.

Next was the inner layer, where a lot of the core structures of the Research base were located, including the lab that Zac needed to reach for his quest. This layer was only accessible during the specific windows Leviaala mentioned before. Finally, there was the core. Leviaala wasn't actually sure what went on there, though she might have been holding back.

She said that most natives believed the core to be the residential areas of the Builders, and perhaps where the computers housing The Administrator was located. There were also rumors of peak resources being kept there for the most precious experiments, resources that not even the Tsarun Clan had managed to get their hands on. Of course, now it was also the home of the Dimensional Seed.

The newfound knowledge made Zac a bit hesitant about whether he had done the right thing to not pass through the wasteland. In the opposite direction of the Wasteland was the True Sky Faction and the New World Government, with the government's starting position being very similar to his own.

Zac guessed that either the Dominators or the Church of Everlasting Dao should be somewhere close to the Lunar Clan, with the other faction being close to the Gemlings. Such a spread definitely didn't feel random, but rather something the System had orchestrated when integrating this Mystic Realm. Perhaps that was even the reason Leandra's Clan abandoned this place; it had been discovered by the System, and continuing to perform experiments would bring that terrifying lightning down on their heads.

He also started to get a better understanding of the Tsarun-clan's goals. They had captured Leviaala's clan for their ancestor's ability to harness Time. The Tsarun Patriarch still hadn't reached the end of his lifespan from what Zac had heard, but he wasn't exactly young either. If he could extract time out of the Cartava Clan's eyes he

might be able to increase his lifespan a few times over, allowing him to keep making breakthroughs.

The gemlings on the opposite sides were probably brought in for their ability to make money. They were a weird golemlike clan from Leviala's explanations, and their bloodline was pretty odd. They were able to cut off parts of their souls and imbue it into gems they grew on their bodies, and then use those gems as cores for Spirit Tools.

This practice almost guaranteed that the Spirit Tool would have a great spirituality, which increased their value more than tenfold. The only issue was the bloodline among these gemlings was extremely weak, and they needed a lot of assistance to activate their heritage. But as long as the Tsarun Clan managed to purify their bloodlines, then they would be able to essentially farm those precious crystals and make a fortune.

The Titans were probably brought for their prowess, and cultivating warriors with that bloodline would bolster their armies. As for the Lunar Clan, he wasn't as sure, but perhaps it was because of their lunar ability. Their Leader, Cervantes, was almost immortal according to Leviala, and he could freely swap back and forth between moonlight and flesh. Not even imbuing attacks with Dao had helped bring him down during the wars over the past two thousand years, and he was generally considered the most powerful warrior in the Mystic Realm.

As for the True Sky Faction, it wasn't actually a unique race at all. The Tsarun clan had apparently captured thousands of people with various bloodlines, probably in search of something valuable. These people banded together after the Cataclysm, led by a few cultivators who all carried unique powerful bloodlines.

But the fact that the faction had so many different backgrounds had resulted in the dilution of any inherent bloodlines. On the flip-side that had resulted in them having by far the most Datamancers of the four factions, and they were usually the ones who hosted the various trade meetings when the barriers were lifted.

That was partly because they were the most populous faction though. Thanks to the large number of Datamancers they had managed to secure and take control of dozens of habitable sections in the second layer, essentially turning one side of the base into a small kingdom with a capital and multiple towns.

Even some people from the other three clans had decided to join the True Sky Factions over the years, though generally these people were outcasts of their factions for one reason or another.

The hours passed in this manner until Leviala suddenly stopped. Zac looked around in confusion, first thinking that some Lunar Wolves had appeared. However, Leviala rather walked toward the wall. The section looked the same as the sections that they had passed until now, but Zac understood that there probably was a hidden gate in this area.

"Is this the path to your clan?" Zac asked.

"One of them," Leviala said. "I mentioned it before, but a bit further there is a proper gate, not a hidden service entrance like the ones we have used. That gate leads straight toward the inner sector, but our clan can be found within a few hours' travel. This place is a hidden gate that we haven't managed to unlock yet, but you seem to be able to walk unhindered in this base. I thought it was better to take an unknown route back in case more werewolves are lurking around."

"I'll see what I can do," Zac said as he started placing disks where Leviala indicated.

He had been struggling a bit about what to do with Leviala, but he eventually decided to send her back to allow her people to start preparations. There was a small

risk that she would bring home intelligence on him that would be used to betray Port Atwood, but Zac felt that to be a slim risk. She had seen first-hand how he had dealt with the Werewolves and the Collector, and how freely his people could move through the base.

The Cartava Clan didn't stand to gain anything by going against him, but they could benefit greatly by allying themselves with Port Atwood.

"What's your next step?" Leviala finally asked as Zac's preparations were nearing completion.

"I'm heading to the Inner Circle, following one of the maps I got," Zac eventually said. "I need to find a way to the Core."

"You would need a guide even if you have a map. The inner section presents its own challenges," Leviala slowly said.

"What do you have in mind?" Zac asked with a small smile.

"How about we set a time and place to meet up? Perhaps at the edge of the Living Layer. The way there shouldn't be too dangerous, but after that things might get complicated depending on what security measures we'll encounter," Leviala said.

Zac thought about it for a few seconds, but he eventually agreed. He was already planning on bringing Kenzie since his instincts told him he would need Jeeves' assistance to get to the core, but bringing a native would bring a lot of knowledge to the table. They decided on a location to meet, and the time would be in two days. That would give Zac enough time to deal with everything back at the base and return.

"Be careful on your return. You never told me exactly how you got captured, but it seems a bit odd to me. Can you be sure that no one in your clan is working against you?" Zac said as he connected his tablet to the disks on the wall. "If things get out of hand you can always come to our side. We're always happy to welcome new talent to our ranks."

"No clan members would do something like working with the Lunar Clan at such an integral time," Leviala muttered, though it sounded like she was trying to convince herself as much as she was Zac.

"Step back," Zac said as he turned to the scouts as he took out his axe.

"What are you-“ Leviala said with confusion, but she quickly realized what was going on.

Zac only shrugged in response before he activated the tablet. His axe might be useless in case the wall came alive, but it would work just fine in case there was an army of hostile combatants on the other side, no matter if it was Cartava clan members or werewolves. Thankfully only empty halls met his eyes as the gates slid open.

"I'll see you in a few days then," Leviala said. "I'll bring a talented Datamancer to help out as well. Don't worry, it's my first-degree uncle and he's our family's chief technician."

Zac nodded in understanding. When she talked about family in this case she wasn't talking about the whole Cartava Clan that was comprised of almost 40 000 members. It was rather her actual family in the same sense that he would use the word. Having someone like her uncle there would no doubt help a lot, and the Datamancers seemed more akin to a crafting class than a combat-class, so Zac wasn't worried even if he was E-Grade.

Leviala entered the next moment, her steps still a bit unsteady. However, Zac had gifted her a set of various pills, partly to help her get home in one piece, and partly as some sort of display of the good things that he could provide in return for the natives' cooperation.

There was no point in dawdling around, and the six remaining people of the group immediately set out as the gate merged into the wall behind them.

They were almost half-way to the glass-house by this point, but only one hour passed before Zac sensed something. Zac instantly flashed in front of his group as [Verun's Bite] appeared in his hands, but he relaxed when he saw Thea stepping out from behind a tree a hundred meters away. She turned into a gust the next moment, immediately appearing in front of them.

"Cousin!" Jonas shouted with excitement, but Thea only gave him a small nod of acknowledgment before she turned to Zac.

"You've been busy it looks like," she said with a smile.

"Well, one thing led to another," Zac sighed. "Are you here alone?"

"No, I went ahead of the group when one of your demonkin geomancers sensed some vibrations in the ground," she explained. "We thought it was a wolf pack that had strayed from the center of the forest."

"Well, let's go back. I have made some discoveries," Zac said.

"We still haven't mapped out the whole area. We have found a gate, but it actually attacked us the moment we got close," Thea said.

Zac frowned when he heard that the gate was actively attacking people. Didn't Leviala know about it, or did she hide it?

"That's okay. I've found everything we need for the next step of the plan," Zac said.

"Just like that?" Thea asked before she looked him up and down with a wry smile. "It really seems that the demon is right about one thing. Let you run off for just one day and you'll come back with massive gains."

"I'd be more than happy to be the one staying behind next time," Zac said with a shudder, thinking back to just how close it was for him to be turned into a part of a Void Creature's bodysuit.

They started walking in the direction of the glasshouse, and Zac helped catch Thea up to speed.

"So we're going to those labs next?" Thea asked.

"I'm thinking that's the move," Zac nodded. "We might find useful things there, and it's close to the Core sector where the treasure is. If the barriers really disappear when the Dimensional Seed matures we'll be in a good starting position."

"We'll need to make some preparations then," Thea mused before she added with a low voice. "By the way, I met with your friend, Ogras. Something seems to be wrong with him. He didn't come with us to this place, he's holed up in your compound. He hid his face in a big robe as well."

Zac frowned at that, and the image of shadows repairing the hole in Ogras' chest resurged. The demon had seemed fine until now, but were there complications from his familiar fusing with him after all?

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**Chapter 602 - Crowdfunding**

Zac wasn't particularly worried if the demon's fusion somehow altered his constitution. Danger was always present on the road of cultivation, and getting fused

with a shadow creature couldn't be as bad as getting stuck with two remnants in his head. But the demon's reaction was a cause for concern and something that he needed to investigate.

"I need to go back anyway to prepare a few things," Zac said after some thought. "I'll check in on him. If everything goes according to plan we'll set out from the glasshouse in a day or so."

"If you're going back you might want to speak with the Anointed as well," Thea said. "They're getting impatient, and they are already planning to force their way through the base. I tried to stop them but they don't listen to me."

Zac's eyes at the idea of thousands of war-crazy Zhix attacking the gates and the walls of the Mystic Realm. He had already seen how the base acted from small-scale infractions, and he also knew that it had far more deadly methods available after seeing how it dealt with the Collector. The Zhix might bring a calamity down on their heads if he didn't stop them.

"I'll talk with them," Zac said. "Can you help prepare this place for the arrival of a proper army?"

"What about the wolves?" Thea asked.

"Let's hope they're smart enough to stay away from the Zhix," Zac muttered. "Otherwise I think they'll be used as therapeutic punching bags."

Zac's group soon rejoined Thea's squad of vanguard scouts who all seemed extremely surprised to see the group emerge from the forest. Zac moved forward alone from there on out since there were others who could help the rescued scouts get back. He just took one last look at the group with a sense of accomplishment before he disappeared among the trees.

He knew that he couldn't save everyone and that there would inevitably be losses. But it still felt great to actually succeed in saving his people. So it was with newfound vigor he started to cover as much distance as he could with the help of **[Loamwalker]**. The quest told him to enter the Inner Laboratory before the Dimensional Seed matured, which was around 4 days from now. He didn't want to cut it too close either, so there was no time to waste.

He arrived at the hidden glasshouse and only briefly greeted the researchers there before he set out again. Having been given some reassurance from his travels with Leviala he no longer felt the need to go slow in the stable section of the Outer Ring, and he kept a rapid pace as he flashed forward over and over with the help of his movement skill.

That way it only took him two hours before he stood in front of the gate leading into the inner section. This time there was actually a group waiting on the other side when he opened it, standing behind two nasty-looking cannons that could only come from the Ishiate Tinkerers. Even Zac felt some pressure staring into the two half-meter wide barrels that were no doubt loaded with some energy-dense concoction.

Most of the guards clearly recognized him and quickly moved to push the cannons out of the way, but one of them stepped forward with his sword at the ready.

"Eat this," the guard gruffly said as he threw over a small package, drawing shocked glances from his colleagues.

"What?" Zac asked with confusion as he looked down at the bag.

"It's policy, stupid," the guard said as the other guards slowly started to inch away from him. "Don't want any of those lizard bastards to sneak inside."

"Keep up the good work," Zac said with a small smile as he ate the minty root.

Zac looked at the other guards next as he stepped past the cannons, and left some short parting words before he disappeared.

“Learn from this guy. No one is exempt, not even me.”

A shudder in Zac’s soul reminded him of a pressing issue, but he still hurried over to Biosphere 4 instead of his own compound. It was the place where most of the Zhix stayed, including the Zhix War Council. His arrival was met with bubbling excitement as the Zhix had long associated him with war. He was immediately led to a gathering hall, and one Anointed after another hurried inside.

Zac saw the eagerness in their eyes, and he didn’t waste any time with small talk when everyone was gathered.

“I think I have an idea where the Dominators are,” Zac said as he took out a crude map of the Research base.

He quickly started adding details to the mostly blank map, such as the Living Layer, the Inner Ring, and the Core. He then added the wasteland cutting through half of the base and the four major forces, completing the map.

“We are situated close to Clan Cartava, and we’re the only natives they have encountered. To the east is the wasteland, and no one can live there for weeks, let alone months. Beyond that is the Lunar tribe, beastkin warriors who have been responsible for ambushing our people. The True Sky Faction is to the northwest of Clan Cartava, and they have been in contact with the Human Government.

“That leaves this place,” Zac continued and pointed at the spot on the opposite side of the base compared with their own. “There is a golem-race living here. This should be the most likely location of the Dominators and their armies considering the werewolves have time to send scouting parties all the way here. If they’re not there, they are somewhere close to the Lunar Clan.”

“How do we get to this side, Warmaster?” Rhubat rumbled with a frown. “This place is confusing. It looks like a hive at first glance, but it is built following a completely different logic and philosophy. Our instincts have been proven wrong time and time again.”

“There are two paths,” Zac said. “Either passing the wasteland and making your way through the outer rim. But I’ll tell you right now; if 100 sets out, only 5 will make it to the other side. I only reached the edge of that place when I set out to rescue our missing scouts, and I almost got killed many times over.”

“The Zhix are not afraid of death, but we cannot take such losses. We would be too weakened to complete the crusade,” another Anointed said with a shake of its head.

“The other option is to cut straight through the base,” Zac said. “But that’s currently impossible, but we might get our opportunity in four days. There will still be dangers though.”

“We are ready. What can we do now?” Rhubat said.

“You should have heard about us discovering the large forest half a day from here, right?” Zac said. “That place is our entrance to the inner sectors. From there we can take our armies past the Domestic Zone and enter the inner base.

“I think the core will be too dangerous for the general armies to enter because of the spatial rifts, but if we go along the inner band we can essentially walk a full circle around the base, visiting each faction starting with the True Sky Faction and ending with the Lunar Tribe. That way we’ll find the Dominators sooner or later.”

“What if these natives bar our path?” Rhubat rumbled.

“Nothing is more important than taking down the Dominators,” Zac said without hesitation. “I’ve already told the Cartava Clan of the threat the Dominators represent. If these natives can help us against our common enemy, then great. If they move against us, we’ll take them down.”

“So the Final Crusade starts in four days,” Rhubat said as he closed his eyes, and a dense aura of bloodthirst spread across the hall.

“Will you walk with us, Warmaster?” Vanexis asked next.

“...No, not immediately at least,” Zac said. “I think Void’s Disciple will head for the treasure in the Core, and I can’t let him snatch it. He’s already proven he’s talented with the Dao of Space. Who knows how powerful he will become if he gets his hands on that thing? I’ve seen the destruction the Dimensional Seed has wrought on this base, no one can withstand it.”

Worry flashed in Rhubat’s eyes and he quickly nodded in agreement.

“I’m thinking that a small elite unit will head for the core sector as soon as we find a way to get inside there, and we’ll meet up on the other side of the base after the army has made its way around. I’m heading out tomorrow in hopes of finding out more,” Zac said.

“Do you need our assistance?” Rhubat asked.

“It’s impossible, I’m afraid,” Zac said. “I managed to get my hands on a map to the inner laboratories, but the path goes through pipes and air ducts. You guys are too big to squeeze inside.”

The meeting went on for a bit longer, though making any exact plans was hard when so much was in the air. But the general plan was set. A large part of the army would start the transfer to the Lunar Forest, leaving just a smaller defensive squad in charge of this outer sector. They would be in charge of stopping any attempts of the natives to force their way outside, and if need be trigger the destabilizers that Kenzie had installed.

He left after 20 minutes, heading for Biosphere 1. However, a familiar figure caught up to Zac just as he was about to leave the Zhix’s domiciles.

It was Ibteq, and they threw down an isolation array the moment they arrived next to Zac.

“I did it,” Ibteq said as soon as the Array activated. “I have gathered 8 Billion Nexus Coins. Do the offer still stand?”

“What? EIGHT BILLION?” Zac sputtered, shocked to hear that the Zhix liaison somehow had become even wealthier than himself. “How is that possible?”

“Almost no Zhix has used that currency so far, and they hold it in no regard. Cosmic Energy might not be seen as corruption any longer, but it still isn’t something that the Zhix can embrace in a year or two. When Zhix warriors heard I had a shot at helping the Anointed they immediately donated everything they had accumulated without any further questions, and most Zhix have gathered over a million coins after fighting the unliving and the traitors,” Ibteq explained.

Zac hesitated for a few seconds, but he eventually produced the teleportation token along with the Clan Zethaya VIP Token.

“This token will let you meet the Alchemist. Remember, be careful. I don’t know what world this token will take you to, but there will definitely be D-Grade beings and perhaps even stronger cultivators. Keep your head down, don’t offend anyone,” Zac said, and he added something after some thought. “You can tell the Zethaya Clan that I’m sorry I couldn’t come in person, I am busy stabilizing my foundation after breaking through.”

Zac hoped that small addition would decrease the chance of Ibtep getting double-crossed. There was no such thing as benevolent forces, and the only thing that kept young elites somewhat safe was the risk of future retaliation. However, those that walked the path of the elite were even more likely than normal cultivators to get stuck in bottlenecks.

That's was why so many factions had the guts to go after the Eveningtide Asura even after he had proven his strength in the Tower of Eternity. They figured that someone that had such a heavy foundation might not even make it to D-Grade. Their bet obviously proved to be a huge loss, but most such gambles ended up okay.

But if Zac could spread the fact that he had already evolved to E-Grade, he might plant the seeds of hesitation in the minds of those who were considering going after his secrets or Earth.

"Only the mission matter. I will go straight to the pill store and then return," Ibtep nodded.

"One more thing," Zac added after some thought. "See if you can find out what's going on in the Sector, if there are any news about me or The Great Redeemer. Our planet needs to know what to expect. But your safety comes first."

"Understood," Ibtep said, though he was almost stamping in place out of impatience. "I have to go now before the gate closes."

"Good luck," Zac smiled. "We'll deal with the things on this end."

Ibtep scurried toward Biosphere 1 the next moment, no doubt heading straight for the tunnel leading to the outer world. Zac arrived just a few moments later, instead heading for his cordoned-off sector. The reason he needed to go back from the glasshouse was simple; he really needed a round in his Soul Strengthening Array.

Utilizing the energy of the remnants always came at a cost, and the weird cracks hidden in his body were only part of it. His soul was unsettled, and he needed to stabilize it before setting course for the Inner Sectors. After all, there was a good chance that his next outing would lead him straight from the Inner Lab to the Core, and he needed to be in peak condition for whatever waited there.

However, he only took a step inside his courtyard before he stopped, immediately sensing a familiar presence.

"Where did you run off to?" a dour voice said from a secluded corner of his courtyard. "People were starting to freak out."

"Okay, what's going on with you?" Zac said with a frown, ignoring the question. "Do we need to be worried?"

His question wasn't without merit, as the demon had undergone an almost shocking transformation since they met just a few days ago.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 603 - Monochrome**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

Hey!

The talented Pavi Proczko did a Live Recording of parts of Book 1 today. The live stream has ended by now, but you can still jump over to his [Facebook](#) page to watch it

in case you want to listen in live on how *Defiance of the Fall* will sound on audiobook, or if you're curious about how the process of recording an audiobook looks.

Leviala made her way through the pathways, her mind still in turmoil from the events of the past two days. Of course, the constant pain emanating from her right eye didn't help. She knew there would be a price to meddle with the past, but she hadn't expected it to be that great. There were accounts of her ancestor doing even greater things multiple times over without being afflicted with the same curse.

But not only had she been blinded, but she could even feel how her affinities had worsened. It felt like her future had turned bleaker, and she wasn't even sure if her actions were worth it. The abyssal eyes of Zachary Atwood in his secret form had put such pressure on her that she acted hastily, when 'being captured' by him likely wouldn't have been the worst of fates.

Seeing how he not only cared for her safety but even risked his life for his people, was all that she needed to know about his character. He might be a ruthless pragmatist, but he was definitely good at heart. But such was the problem with her ability. She had a short window of connecting her mind to the past. If she had waited any longer the backlash would have killed her, and she had needed to make a decision.

Then again, knowledge was power. Her knowing his secret might not hold any value right now, but that would definitely change if she managed to lead her clan out of this place. She could set up a series of safeguards for herself and her people, guaranteeing security in return for her silence. It was a shady course of action, but their Clan was currently like a weak candle in the wind, any small shock could be what toppled them.

Now the question was what she should do next.

Her grandfather might have some ideas on how to lessen the backlash, but that wasn't the only problem she was facing. The fact that Zachary Atwood wouldn't let them out would definitely be seen as an act of war by some, but her instincts told her that letting the Second Elder and Yvian assault Port Atwood would result in massive casualties, and most likely end in defeat.

She had seen Zachary's strength all-too-clear, and what she hadn't witnessed weighed even heavier on her mind. Try as she might, but she absolutely couldn't remember what he did against the Collector. But just the thought of trying to peer back at the events with her gaze made her break out in a cold sweat, and all her instincts told her that doing so would cause the collapse of her soul.

The thought of Yvian was also a cause of concern, making her frown as she rounded another corner. The parting words of Zac repeated over and over in her head, and she had to admit they rang true. The beastmen were crafty, but not overly so. They might have realized they could use the vents as points of ingress, but Clan Cartava had done for weeks already. The paths Hevastes took should have triggered newly installed alarms, yet they reached her private gardens without issue.

Not only that, the guard response was a lot slower than what should be expected, allowing the werewolves to leave just like they came. If it wasn't for the traps and automatic defenses her family had set up, then they would have finished the job unscathed.

So it wasn't elation that gripped her heart when she encountered a group of clansmen, but rather suspicion and fear. Because it only took one glance to see that the squad of eight all belonged to the faction of the second elder.

"Young miss!" the middle-aged man in the lead exclaimed as he took a step forward. "You made it back safe. But, your eye-!"

“Velar, how come you’re here?” Leviaala smiled, but she wasn’t as calm as she let on.

“Looking for you, of course,” Velar sighed. “We’ve turned the whole place upside-down in search of you. Those bastards from the Lunar Clan are truly audacious to do something like this when we’re at the cusp of freedom.”

“It was actually the foreigners who saved me in the end,” Leviaala said. “They-“

“You shouldn’t trust those people,” Velar said with a frown. “We have it on good authority that the foreigners are working with the Lunar Clan to pilfer this place before they escape together. We were about to force open a path to them in hopes of rescuing you, but it looks like that won’t be necessary. Come, let’s hurry back. Your fiancé will be elated to hear you are okay.”

“My what?”

-----  
“I don’t know exactly what’s going on either,” Ogras sighed as he touched his horns.

The two horns on his head hadn’t changed shape since they met last, but they no longer looked like liquid fire like the rest of the Torrid Demons. They had turned monochrome, and now rather reminded Zac of dancing shadows. His skin had lost some of its red tint as well, and the scale-like markings almost looked like they were covered in ash.

It looked like the demon was really in the process of turning into a shadow-creature.

“Can’t you stop the transformation?” Zac asked with some wariness in his eyes.

“I’m slowly losing ground to Asshole,” Ogras muttered, and Zac realized that the demon had renamed his contracted beast once more. “It attacked my mind while I learned the new skills. That’s why I’ve been holed up here for a while, to shore up my defenses and stabilize the situation so to speak.”

“It’s attacking your mind?” Zac repeated with a frown.

“Yes, but I think I have found a solution,” Ogras said. “I realized it lost some of its control after I ate race-boosting pills. I need to evolve my race within a month. Strengthening my soul would be for the best as well, but your array doesn’t seem to work on me for some reason.”

“You tried out the array?” Zac said some anger. “You didn’t break anything, did you?”

“How can I break something by sitting down on a mat?” Ogras spat. “It wouldn’t even start up.”

“Well, that’s fine, then,” Zac sighed. “I think it only works if you have some connection to life and death. In either case, I might have a method to help you improve quickly.”

“Really?” Ogras asked, his eyes lighting up. “Or wait, are you talking about pills? I’ve eaten all the pills I had by now over the past few days. I’ve built up immunity by now.”

“No,” Zac said with a shake of his head. “It should be something else. I met someone while exploring the forest.”

He then briefly recounted his experiences over the past days.

“I leave for a few days and all kinds of exciting things happen. You saved the granddaughter of some Clan Elder?” Ogras muttered, and Zac’s mouth curved slightly upward when he saw the signature jealousy. “You keep encountering powerful beauties at every turn, yet you keep your hands to yourself. What a waste. So, you’re saying

that the Clan Cartava has access to these greenhouses full of race-boosting natural treasures?”

“You’re lucky we’re close to the faction that has control over the race-boosting stuff,” Zac nodded.

“I guess your luck is finally starting to rub off, huh?” Ogras muttered. “Well then, let’s go.”

“Wait,” Zac said. “I got a quest to reach the Inner Labs. I’m thinking we should hit that first. If you don’t find anything useful there, we can go to the Cartava Clan. I don’t want to waste time with them unless absolutely necessary.”

“What’s in the Inner Labs?” Ogras asked hesitantly.

“Apparently the good stuff of this place, but it changes every time,” Zac said.

“Okay, new plan. I come with you to mooch off your latest windfall. I’m not going to be stuck in some Technocrat Greenhouse while you’re visiting the treasure vault of this netherblasted place,” Ogras said. “I can fight off Asshole a while longer if it will line my pockets.”

“Well, at least your intentions are pure,” Zac snorted. “I need to use the array here before we set off though.”

“Fine,” Ogras sighed. “I’ll stay here for now. Need to get used to the new skills anyway.”

Zac couldn’t help but worry as he walked out of his courtyard. The demon seemed to be fighting a losing battle at the moment. If this plan to evolve his Race didn’t pan out, then Zac would have to make some difficult decisions. That shadowcreature was a pretty sinister creature from what they had gathered, making Ogras a ticking time bomb.

He was the second most powerful person of his faction, and Zac couldn’t have him running around putting people’s lives at risk if he suddenly turned into a murderous beast. The only relief was that they weren’t exactly fighting against the clock with this new issue. They had ample time to look for treasures in both the Inner Labs and at Clan Cartava. So Zac threw the issue to the back of his mind as he reached the building housing his Life-Death array.

The building was almost as large as a soccer field, with no windows to show what was going on inside. The interiors were surprisingly similar to his cultivation cave back home though, with three circular chambers. The energy density inside was obviously worse though, as the place was powered by Miasma Crystals and Divine Crystals rather than the natural energies of his Nexus Vein and the weird Array he had taken from the Undead Incursion.

Still, his temporary arrangement for his Soul Strengthening Array was probably better than the cultivation environment of almost anyone on Earth.

Zac sat down on his prayer mat, but he didn’t immediately activate the array. He rather stabilized his mind for a while as he went over the events of the past days. His first takeaway was that the Mystic Realm was a lot more dangerous than he had anticipated. He had only considered the leaders of the respective factions and the two remaining Dominators as threats going in, but dangers were lurking around every corner.

He hadn’t even encountered a single one of his targets, but he had already wasted so many of his hidden aces. **[Fate’s Obduracy]** was used up on the Lunar Wolves, and his arduously accumulated energy from the Splinter of Oblivion was expended to deal with the Collector’s ghastly appendage.

The latter, in particular, was a huge blow to his plans. The Bronze Flashes of before had changed since his pathways were rewritten, and he couldn't use them as freely as he did in the Tower any longer. In return, he had gained a semblance of control and a huge boost in destructive power, but he probably wouldn't have time to recharge another blast before the showdown at the core of the Mystic Realm.

The Annihilation Sphere was the ultimate card he had set aside to kill Void's Disciple in one go, where the chaotic powers of Oblivion hopefully rendered the Dominator's odd ability of resurrection unusable.

There was still a decent chunk of Creation energy that had accumulated in his body by now, but he had only used the 'pink flash' once; when tainting the energy source of Little Bean. He still had no idea what effect it would have when used on a cultivator. It might even heal his enemy for all Zac knew.

But as one door closed another door opened. He had lost some things, but he had created new opportunities. Evolving his Fragment of the Axe was a huge and unexpected boost, but it wasn't enough to give him full confidence in the upcoming battles. Because if he could improve, then so could Void's Disciple. The next opportunity would hopefully appear in the Inner Lab, but until then he had other things to work on.

He walked over to the death-attuned side next and activated the Life-Death Array after making sure everything was in order. The familiar suction appeared, and his mental energy steadily started to enter the intricate circuitry that made up half the array.

Zac would normally relax or focus on other things while the array did its thing, but this time was different as Zac kept a constant vigil on his soul. This was the first time he used the array since gaining the three apparitions in the center of his mind, and he had to make sure that there wasn't a clash.

It only took a minute before Zac noticed a very important difference. The deathly energies seeping out from the coffin suddenly split off, with only a thin strand continuing toward his avatar in the middle. The rest joined his mental energy as it entered the array. Zac had no way to tell if this change was good or detrimental, but he decided to keep going for the time being.

The array was going to turn his mental-energy death-attuned before returning it in either case, so adding the energy from the Fragment of the Coffin shouldn't be a bad thing. Actually, incorporating his Daos into the array was one of the first things he had tried to increase the efficiency of the arrays, but until now it had proven impossible.

There was nothing to 'imbue' with his Dao when using the array, which had made it impossible for Zac to do anything except passively letting the array do its thing. One thing was certain though, adding his Dao to the procedure had increased the difficulty manifold, and Zac started to feel a strain as the minutes passed.

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#### **Chapter 604 - Anchor**

Completing a cycle was normally just time-consuming rather than exhausting, but adding his Dao had completely changed the pressure he felt. His brows furrowed in concentration, and his hands were even shaking a bit by the time the siphoning of the first cycle finished. The added difficulty was thankfully rewarded when his mental

energy came surging back. The mental energy was seeped in death, far beyond what a normal cycle usually accomplished. It was almost like he had completed three of the nine cycles in one go.

That wasn't the only thing either as his avatar also received a surge of death-attuned energies that burrowed into his **[Spiritual Void]**. The amount was more than twice what Zac would naturally supply during the same duration, and Zac immediately realized the implication. He could actually use the array to charge his Hidden Node, allowing him to use the node to an even greater degree during battles.

Zac couldn't wait to see the effect of completing a whole session with his Dao so it was with great gusto he started the second cycle. However, sweat was already streaming down his face by the point he had reached the end of the cycle, and it was just barely he managed to complete the rotation without falling unconscious.

The gain was similar to the first round though, but Zac had to actively stop any more of his Dao from escaping the coffin as he started the third of the nine revolutions. There was no way he would be able to complete a third Dao-Empowered rotation, and he needed to finish all nine cycles to gain any benefit from the session.

He tried to understand what caused the additional strain to alleviate it, but he couldn't discern anything. Zac could just chalk it up to there being some mental strain from using 'attuned' mental energy compared to just empty energy like normal. The next cycles were very much the same as normal, allowing Zac to revert to his autopilot cultivation while focusing on other things.

The most important point was fixing his pathways after bursting open the node before setting out toward the core of the Mystic Realm.

He had continuously worked on the pathways both while traveling and harvesting plants, but also during every break while waiting for his wounds to heal. But the fight against the werewolf, the collector, and the subsequent escape had caused his patchwork repairs to worsen a bit, and he couldn't keep it like that if he wanted to go all out in the future.

Zac's progress was slow as he mended his pathways, especially after having exhausted his mind more than usual when infusing the array with his Dao. The exhaustion resulted in mistake after mistake, forcing him to redraw the same fractals over and over before it was correct. **[Primal Polyglot]** did help a bit though, giving him an instinctual sense of how fractals should look to work.

But a sudden spark of inspiration made him think of another skill that he hadn't found a reason to use just yet, one of the E-Grade Ancillary skills he had learned in the Dao Repository. It was called **[Spiritual Anchor]**, and it could tentatively be considered a defensive skill.

However, the skill didn't actually protect against attacks, but it rather allowed you to create an anchor-point for yourself. The anchor was pretty much a back-up point that made an image of your body, your soul, your skill fractals, and pathways. The main use of the skill was to discover if you had been marked, possessed, or otherwise tampered with in some unknown way.

For example, the brands that his lava bath exposed had most likely been hidden as nondescript fractals attached somewhere on his body, and it was hard to spot something like that among the millions of fractals that constituted his pathways. With **[Spiritual Anchor]** he could create an anchor point every time before going off-world in the future, making sure he wasn't inadvertently bringing trouble back home to Earth.

Zac had unhesitantly learned the skill when he saw its use, eager to gain some protection after having seen six different marks getting expelled from his body just minutes earlier. Of course, he had proceeded to make his first anchor-point the moment

his body was back in good condition, creating a baseline before he properly set out into the Mystic Realm.

The skill had a weakness though; if Zac already carried hidden threats when making the anchor-point, then he would pretty much never notice it since it would be part of the stored image in his mind. Still, it was an extremely valuable tool for someone like Zac who didn't have elders who could scan him with their superior mental acuity.

The current situation with his broken pathways made him think of another use for the skill though; it was a proper reference-map for his whole pathway system. His pathways were branded in his mind already, which was what allowed him to redraw them after breaking open a node, but **[Spiritual Anchor]** would perhaps make things even easier for him.

Zac quickly activated the skill, and his eyes lit up when he saw the result. It worked just as he hoped, with the anchor superimposing itself over his pathways, including the broken parts. His progress suddenly sped up significantly as he started redrawing the pathways, and the number of mistakes lessened drastically as well.

Using his new skill significantly decreased the difficulty of his work. It was like he was tracing a series of lines rather than drawing something from memory. He wasn't improving his understanding of fractals when doing things this way, but this wasn't the time to worry about that; he had bigger fish to fry.

The following hours passed without anything else surprising taking place, with one cycle after another being completed as Zac made rapid progress on his pathways. Zac stopped working on the pathways during the ninth cycle though, instead turning his sight to his mind to see the end-result of the first half of his improved Soul Cultivation-method.

There were no two ways about it; the result was far superior. The deathly energies in his mind were extremely dense, and if he quantified it the result was somewhere between 40 to 50% greater compared to before, all thanks to the first two rotations being infused with the Fragment of the Coffin.

Zac's mind was still throbbing even hours later though, but he could only bear with it, knowing he had to do the same thing on his life-attuned side. He would have to empower two revolutions again to bring his soul back to equilibrium after all. So he quickly swapped over to his Draugr side and started the process once more, preparing himself to push through the first two revolutions by hook or crook.

He could quickly confirm that the shimmering golden energies from the bodhi tree joined the mental stream, but the enormous strain he had anticipated never arrived. Certainly, the difficulty was much harder than normal, but it wasn't any worse compared to the first cycle on the Death-attuned side.

Was this a limitation of his Dao-Apparitions, perhaps? Each apparition was limited in the amount of energy it could exude, causing the strain to steadily increase as the drain continued. However, swapping to a different Dao would reset the difficulty since the other Apparition was still full of vigor.

This was great news to Zac since it meant that he would be able to go all out with both the arrays in the future without worrying that he would overextend himself during the first half. A great surge returned half an hour later, causing a series of frantic collisions as life fought with death in his mind.

Zac felt his vision double for a second from the shocks to his soul, but he breathed out in relief after confirming that the increased intensity was still manageable. The second cycle started up a few seconds later, and Zac let the shimmering golden haze join in that time as well. An even greater series of clashes followed when the cycle ended, causing small cracks to spread across his soul.

Blood started running down Zac's nose as his eyes were completely bloodshot, but he ate a soul-mending pill as he kept going, this time stopping any more Dao from entering. He was only able to resume work on his pathways on the fifth revolution because of nausea from the collisions.

The session finally ended after roughly ten hours, confirming that Dao infusion improved the gains of the array, but not how quickly it ran. Still, the results were impressive, especially considering he had only infused two out of the nine revolutions. He felt that a lot more impurities had been expelled from the Life-Death explosions in his mind than normal, almost exactly matching the additional attunement he had measured.

That meant the efficiency of his Soul Strengthening-array had increased almost 40% simply from forming his Dao-Apparitions.

Better yet, Zac was almost certain this wasn't the limits of his gains. For example; what if his Dao Fragments evolved to the next stage? The power of the Dao that entered the Array would become greater, which in turn should result in a bigger boost. And his soul would keep getting stronger over time, which would hopefully increase the number of revolutions that he could empower.

As long as he kept working on it the improvements would be huge, potentially saving him centuries of cultivation down the road. After all, Soul Cultivation was powerful for a variety of reasons, but people still didn't do it because of the huge time investment. But it felt like Zac had found the key to staying ahead of the remnants locked in his mind this time around.

Just like the progress on his soul was great, so was the work on his pathways thanks to **[Spiritual Anchor]**. He couldn't help but curse himself for not thinking of it sooner. To be fair, nothing like this was mentioned in the information missive on the skill, perhaps since Brazla hadn't expected his E-Grade descendants to be mortals.

His pathways were almost completely fixed thanks to the improved speed. Just a few more hours of dedicated redrawing and he would be back to normal. Part of Zac just wanted to stay in this place and swap between sleeping and cultivating, but he knew that was simply impossible.

So he went over his provisions and talismans before he stood up and walked out toward where he left the demon. Ogras was still sitting at the same spot as before, for once in meditation rather than drinking and cajoling.

"You're ready to set out?" Ogras asked as he opened his eyes.

"Let's go," Zac nodded. "We just need to fetch Kenzie."

"What? Why?" Ogras said with a scrunched-up face.

"She's the best when it comes to Technocrat Technology. I don't want to completely rely on that Cartava Clan Member," Zac shrugged. "Besides, there are sometimes opportunities you can't take away in the labs, I don't want her to miss out. Billy and Thea are coming as well."

Ogras grumbled a bit as he got to his feet, and he donned a hooded robe to mask his changing complexion. The two walked over to the buildings that Kenzie controlled, a mix of workshops and warehouses to store everything from gathered Memorysteel to inactive drone swarms.

"I'll wait outside," Ogras said, and Zac shrugged with some confusion before walking inside by himself.

"You're back!" Kenzie exclaimed with relief before her smile turned into a scowl. "What's the matter with you men? I had to find out you set out alone from Thea?"

And that you had returned in one piece, *half a day ago*, from the guards? Do none of you have communication crystals?!”

“Uh,” Zac only said, but his sister was obviously not done.

“Also! You told Thea that I couldn’t go visit that forest, and now I’m essentially on house arrest! You need to be careful with what you say.”

“Well, I guess that’s my bad?” Zac grimaced.

“Well, fine,” Kenzie muttered. “Have you seen Ogras? I can’t contact him either.”

“He’s right outside, we’re ready to set out again,” Zac said and hurriedly added when he saw her scowl deepening. “I’m here to see if you are free to go with us to the inner parts of the base. We could use your skill set.”

“You mean you need Jeeves?” Kenzie muttered, but her mood had clearly turned for the better as she started packing things.

The two updated each other of what was had happened lately while she prepared, but not much had changed on Kenzie’s side. She had tried all sorts of things to interface with the base, but the systems were highly modular according to Jeeves. Connecting to one terminal only provided access to that area and nothing else, which meant that she wouldn’t be able to assist him remotely.

Zac really didn’t want to bring his sister into the depths of the Mystic Realm, especially after seeing just how dangerous the base could be. But he also knew that he couldn’t rely on himself pressing random boxes on the Datamancer tablet either. Neither did he feel comfortable with relying too much on Leviala or her Clan.

He could only pray that the dangers of his Man Versus Technology-quest weren’t as lethal as what he had encountered thus far.

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#### **Chapter 605 - Missive**

Bringing Kenzie to the heart of the base filled Zac with trepidation, but she quickly proved her value as she narrated what she had done while Zac was out exploring. She had managed to get quite a few things done even with the high security of the base, mainly increasing the protection of the gates leading to their bases.

Most notably she had constructed a series of defensive lines leading all the way from the biospheres to the fortified door leading to the Outer Rim, where one press of a button would trigger the base to attack everything within hundreds of meters. It was the same sort of arrangement the Werewolf Datamancer had activated as a last resort against him, though Kenzie’s method could be used remotely.

Also, she had finished boobytrapping the spatial tunnel, making sure that it would close up if anyone without Port Atwood credentials tried to enter it, making it impassable. It would remain closed even after the spatial turbulence abated until Kenzie fixed it again.

Of course, this trap would be possible to trigger remotely as well.

It was a weight off Zac’s shoulders. Having all the elites of his alliance enter the depths of the Mystic Realm would expose not only their temporary bases but even Earth. This way there would be no risk of either the Cartava Clan or the Werewolves sneaking outside while Zac was busy dealing with the Dimensional Seed.

The other exits were still an issue that Zac couldn't affect, but his remote archipelago should be relatively safe even if some of the natives managed to sneak out while he was occupied.

She, or rather Jeeves, had even figured out a way to add certain modules to the base. Most notably, they had finished a prototype communications relay that could be connected to door terminals. The whole base was under some sort of interference that limited the range of cultivator-based communication crystals, and they could barely reach from one side of the base to another.

But what Kenzie had created would allow Port Atwood's people to use their Earth-based technology to communicate throughout the base, as long as there wasn't too-large a distance between the relays that Kenzie would install. It wouldn't even be a problem to communicate with the Glass-house all the way from their base.

This functionality already existed inside the base according to Leviala, but they didn't have time to hack into that system. This seemed like a quick and easy fix that would allow them to set up a private network within the base, further increasing security. Zac also updated Kenzie about what he had encountered while exploring the base, though he downplayed just how close he got to dying.

"It's good that you managed to take our people back. But it looks like those werewolves will be a problem," Kenzie sighed.

"They're pretty damn strong," Zac nodded. "I think only a few of our people and the strongest Anointed can deal with their elite soldiers on a one-on-one. But hopefully, we'll get some help from Clan Cartava after I saved their young miss."

"Oh, that reminds me. I got something for you from Calrin," Kenzie said. "Why did you spend so much money to look up a force full of nuns? Because of Leyara Lioress? The report says she's quite a beauty."

"Oh, it's here?" Zac asked with excitement, ignoring the jab at the end.

He had completely forgotten about his most recent order with the Sky Gnome due to the recent events, but this was perfect. Anything that could help him increase his understanding of his Bloodline would be helpful as he set course for the Inner Lab.

"I read it, there's not too much information," Kenzie said as she handed over a crystal. "They seldom invite outsiders, and they don't leave their monasteries very often. However, their Strength is pretty amazing. The current Void Priestess is a true powerhouse, and she singlehandedly fought off six Monarchs of similar rank two hundred thousand years ago. Since then, she has probably only grown stronger."

Zac's brows rose in shock when he learned about the strength of Leyara's Master. It was no wonder Leyara could stand next to Pretty Peak and the other elite scions right at the center of the Base Town.

Defeating six people of the same rank wasn't anything special for him, but it was a completely different story at the C-Grade. Out of trillions of people only one C-Grade warrior might appear, and who among these elites didn't have their own slew of unique encounters and hidden aces? Everyone was a monster who punched way above their weight class by that point, as even just regular elites had long been weeded out by that point.

Zac quickly scanned the contents of the Crystal, but there was not much else apart from what he had already learned. The only significant clue was that there were rumors of some sort of connection between that reclusive force and the Limitless Empire.

Both the Void Priestess and many of her followers had often been seen trying to acquire remnants of that long-fallen empire, sometimes spending obscene amounts of money on seemingly useless relics. The information suddenly made him remember

something he had almost forgotten. Back during the first action of the Base Town an Urn was sold for an extremely exaggerated price.

The buyer, wasn't it actually Leyara? He had only caught a glimpse of her face when she entered the bidding war on top of the floating platform, but the more he thought about it the more certain he became. He simply hadn't made the connection back when they actually met as his mind was still occupied with his conversation with Catheya.

The huge battle between the Void Priestess and the other C-Grade Monarchs that had caused waves in the whole Zecia sector 200 000 years ago was apparently over a C-Grade Mystic Realm said to contain remnants of the Limitless Empire as well.

That didn't say too much though, as there were quite a few collectors and enthusiasts when it came to the Limitless Empire. It was once the most powerful force in the multi-verse, and Emperor Limitless was generally considered the most powerful being in history. Some simply found it interesting, while others hoped to strike it rich by finding a supreme treasure among the ancient rubble.

But it was also possible that the Void Monastery had some actual relation to that ancient faction? Did that have some implications to his Void Emperor Constitution? He couldn't stop his mind from wandering, and one possibility made his heart beat like a drum.

What if his mother had implanted him with the bloodline of Emperor Limitless?

"If you want to reach that Lab we should get going. We only have a bit over three days," Kenzie reminded. "It will take almost two days even if we keep a high pace based on the maps you gave me, and that's provided we don't run into any issues on the way."

"Do you think you will be able to use these tablets like the native Datamancers?" Zac asked.

"Probably, at least with the help of my clearance. Jeeves might be able to force open some things, but he isn't really built for these kinds of tasks. So if we encounter someplace where neither of our credentials works there might be trouble," Kenzie said after some thought.

"That's good enough. Better than completely relying on outsiders," Zac nodded, knowing that Jeeves was mainly a cultivation tool aimed to make Kenzie stronger. "Do you have an exact estimate of when the Dimensional Seed will mature?"

"Hard to say," Kenzie said hesitantly. "Our estimates are based on when the spatial turbulence reaches a critical level and the portal naturally closes. But the Dimensional Seed might mature sooner or later as well. But it should be close. It's like the treasure is gathering Spatial energies to make a final push."

"Well, better safe than sorry. I want to reach the Lab with one day to spare. Let's go," Zac nodded.

The idea of him having such a vaunted bloodline felt extremely alluring, but he knew it was a long shot. He couldn't be certain, but he didn't believe that the man in his visions was Emperor Limitless at least. The man soaring through the cosmos on a meteor was extremely powerful, but he wasn't anywhere near the godlike being that crushed the Heart of Oblivion or the Spark of Creation. Zac wasn't even sure if he was at the same level as the ancient protector was the source of his Draugr's Dao Vision.

But that didn't mean there wasn't a connection. Perhaps the Void Bloodline came from some other powerful person from the Limitless Empire. After all, the Limitless Emperor didn't create the System alone. He had the assistance of millions of unbelievably powerful warriors, many of them probably even at the A-Grade.

Perhaps the remnants of one of these powerhouses were located in the Zecia sector, which was both the source of his Bloodline and the heritage that the Void Monastery was built upon.

No matter what the truth was, it was worth looking into. The Void Monastery was hard to visit according to the missive, but it wasn't impossible. As a powerful faction they controlled thousands of worlds, and some of them were popular trade hubs the Monastery used to gather cultivation resources. If went there he would probably be able to contact Leyara one way or another.

Kenzie had soon prepared everything she needed, which was apparently half a workshop including a series of technocrat 3D-printers she had cobbled together. The demon was still waiting outside, giving Kenzie a sunny smile as they exited her house.

"So you are in the mystic realm, after all? I guess your communication crystal broke," Kenzie said coolly.

"Enough," Zac sighed, knowing that Ogras had been lying low due to his condition. "No time to lose."

Zac maintained a rapid pace this trip on his way out of the base, but neither his sister nor Orgas had any problems keeping up. Ogras had his shadows and Kenzie utilized some sort of wind-based movement skill to run, each step making her look like she was weightless.

They arrived at the glasshouse just a few hours later, having been only been half an hour delayed by Kenzie installing her new communications modules. Kenzie opened the gate this time to confirm that their different clearance titles didn't mean different access. Zac wasn't very interested in the interiors, but Ogras curiously glanced toward the stalls.

"What is this place..?" Ogras muttered as he looked around.

"I think it's for them," Zac said as he pointed to the caged Lunar Wolves. "Thea said it might be a field lab to study the Lunar Wolves, and I'm inclined to believe. To take a bloodline of a beast and infusing it into a cultivator. Have you heard of anything like it?"

"Anything's possible," Ogras shrugged. "Some beasts can even gain a humanoid form at certain stages, allowing them to essentially become cultivators themselves. The humanoid descendants of such cultivators would carry their bloodline. Of course, this seems to be something else, like a shortcut."

"We'll find out what's going on here sooner or later," Zac said as he started walking, but he stopped when he noticed that his sister hadn't followed them inside. "What are you doing?"

He saw that Kenzie was still standing by the terminal, but she had connected the tablet to it. The screen was rapidly flashing with the language of the base, and Kenzie was seemingly trying to take it all in.

"I'm just checking this thing out," Kenzie said without moving her eyes away from the screen. "I want to see how these main gates work, if you can change the clearance levels required to pass through. I mean, if the natives don't have any clearance levels, then we might be able to lower the clearance to level 1 or something."

"Don't fiddle with that door though," Zac quickly said. "The walls will try to kill us if you trigger the security protocols, and this one has already been triggered once."

"Don't worry, I'm just reading," Kenzie smiled. "Give me a few minutes. There's so much information to go through. This one has ten times the number of protocols compared to the normal doors."

“Fine, I need to talk with Thea anyway. But be careful with that thing,” Zac said as he walked out through the barn door.

He had already spotted Thea standing outside, overseeing the transformation in the area. Two large walls had appeared in the short while Zac had been cultivating, with massive brass cannons mounted at regular intervals. Hundreds of Zhix warriors scurried back and forth working on the defensive perimeter, and groups of human cultivators seemed to be readying themselves for war as well.

Thick barriers rose toward the sky as well, blocking any potential attacks coming from the forest, and Zac could even spot squads of Tal-Eladar roving outside, maintaining an outer perimeter. Zac hadn't given any explicit orders on how to deal with moving the armies forward, but it seemed like they had everything in hand.

He had been worried about leaving these people alone as they traveled toward the inner reaches of the Mystic Realm, but seeing the strength and ingenuity of the elites of Earth filled him with confidence, allowing him to solely focus on his own mission.

#### **A note from TheFirstDefier**

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#### **Chapter 606 - Inner Layer**

“You're back,” Thea said as spotted Zac walking over. “You're looking better.”

“Finally had some time to rest up a bit,” Zac smiled. “Have there been any problems with the wolves?”

“Not really, a few of them appeared in the distance, but a bunch of Anointed scared them away. I think the Zhix were actually a bit disappointed,” Thea said with a shake of her head.

“Wouldn't be surprised,” Zac snorted. “Are you ready to set out?”

“I'm ready, but Billy will be sitting this one out,” Thea said.

“Oh, why?” Zac asked with confusion. “Is he hurt?”

He had already asked about Emily and Joanna from Kenzie, and while neither of them was in critical condition, they weren't ready to set out again either. Emily was still unconscious after overdrafting her Cosmic Energy, but she was being continuously fed healing pills and nurtured by healers. Not having those two available to join the army was already a big loss, and losing an elite like Billy would definitely weaken his army.

It was a shame for Billy as well, considering where they were. If anyone could find something suitable in a place like this, it would probably be Billy, considering he was a descendant of one of the races brought here.

“No, nothing like that. He suddenly fell asleep and a lot of energy is entering his body. I think he has some sort of epiphany,” Thea said as he nodded over at a tent. “I had some people drag him over there.”

“Oh, guess he found an opportunity of his own. Well, he can catch up with the real armies later,” Zac said.

The two headed over to a command tent where the Anointed had already gathered, and they shored up their plans over the next twenty minutes. It wasn't really anything too complicated. The Zhix would set out the moment the treasure matured no matter whether Zac had come back by that point or not, heading for the inner area.

They could technically set out earlier than that, but there were simply too many barriers security checks in the way right now. They were severely lacking in understanding of this place compared to the natives, and Kenzie couldn't be everywhere putting out fires. However, a C-Grade treasure maturing had huge ramifications according to what he had learned, to the point that they could transform whole planets.

This was a risk, but also their chance. Everything pointed to the Dimensional Seed being somehow integrated with the base itself, and the terrifying outburst of power should knock out most security systems. It would both remove the advantage of the natives while simultaneously giving them free passage toward the Inner Layer.

Hopefully, Zac's group would be able to meet up with them there, but if not, then a small group of elite Anointed would enter the core while the rest would start looking for the Dominator's armies. They would be assisted by all the different factions of the Atwood Alliance, but the goal was for them to only deal with the followers of the Dominators, with Zac's group dealing with Inevitability and Void's Disciple themselves.

It was a risk for their army to travel without any real powerhouses to shore up their ranks, but both Zac and Rhubat saw no choice but to take the gamble that at least Void's Disciple wouldn't waste his time in the outer reaches, rather rushing for the treasure in the core. It was most likely the same with all factions that chose to head for the riches in the core, like the cultists and the Lunar Tribe.

That left the natives, but Zac felt that the Anointed with their War Arrays and great ferocity would be able to protect themselves. The natives should be smarter than to enter an all-out war against their armies considering their main goal should be escaping.

But for now, the army would finish setting up this defensive perimeter before creating a final one at the main gate leading toward the inner reaches. It was the gate that the Cartava Clan wanted them to open, making Zac a bit reluctant to use it, but there were no alternatives. It was the only path leading inside that they had found except the Lunar Tribe's maps. But those backdoor pathways were simply too narrow for both an army and the hulking anointed.

The two returned to Ogras and Kenzie who had finished her readings, and just the four of them set out accompanied by a squad of a hundred elites that would set up the initial perimeter by the gate. These elites were the cream of the crop, and they had no problem keeping up with Zac's small group even when he exerted some effort.

Their breakneck pace allowed them to reach the inner gate in just six hours, and even the group of Anointed were panting a bit by that point. The larger Anointed were fine though, as were Ogras and Thea.

"This is the place," Zac said as he nodded at the gate. "We will keep going for a bit longer."

"How about you let me try modifying this door?" Kenzie interjected. "We don't actually know what will happen when the treasure wakes up. What if the door stays the same? Isn't Tier-4 clearance required to enter? Only we have that"

Zac looked up at the towering wall with hesitation for a few seconds until he eventually nodded in agreement.

"You guys stay here," Zac said to the scout. "I'll protect her if the wall goes crazy."

The two walked up to the gate, but neither tried to open it. He felt he had reached an accord with Leviala by this point, but he still didn't want to bet that there was a trap waiting on the other side. Kenzie infused a bit more Base Power into the

tablet as she hooked it up to the gate itself rather than the terminal that was a few meters up in the air. Zac looked at his sister inquisitively, wondering if she really knew what she was doing.

“The frame is directly connected to the terminal,” Kenzie shrugged. “It’s all the same to Jeeves whether he gains access to the gate or the terminal itself.”

“Is... Jeeves actually entering these things, or is it just telling you what to do?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“It’s connected to them like this tablet is connected to the wall. He doesn’t actually enter the wall or whatever. Why? What’s wrong?” Kenzie asked with a slightly distracted voice as most of her focus was reserved for the screen.

“The administrator,” Zac said. “It might be a problem if the Base AI consider Jeeves a threat. Jeeves is probably higher-quality tech, but it’s still just F-Grade. Meanwhile, I saw the Administrator fight with what I think was a C-Grade monstrosity on even footing.”

“I considered that, but these gates are completely isolated from the looks of it. Besides, Jeeves is essentially masquerading as the tablet itself, we shouldn’t be exposed even if that AI was directly looking at what we are doing,” Kenzie said.

“Fine,” Zac slowly nodded. “But you can’t do things like this in the core. The Administrator is actively controlling those parts according to Leviala. No point in risking it unless absolutely necessary.”

“Leviala?” Kenzie said with an impish smile. “First-name basis?”

“Just focus,” Zac said with a roll of his eyes.

“It’s already done,” Kenzie giggled as she retrieved the tablet, leaving one of her communication dongles behind. “This gate will only require Class-3 clearance to open now, while still having the same security protocols as before. Jeeves even activated a dormant anti-tampering protocol to make hacking harder. If the Cartava Clan couldn’t get through before, they definitely shouldn’t be able to now.”

“Good job,” Zac nodded. “I think you might be our biggest ace in this place.”

“It’s good that you finally understand,” Kenzie said with a wink. “Not everything can be solved with an axe.”

“Well, not everything, more than one would expect,” Zac smiled.

Zac’s group left the scouts behind after confirming no wolves were lurking nearby, heading straight for their next target; a nondescript grate almost twenty meters into the air, barely visible on the wall from the ground. It took them almost two hours to get there, even after increasing their pace. The grate was a ‘swarm pipe’ according to Leviala, a small outlet that released swarms of microscopic machines whose job was to kill any unwanted flora and pollinate the wanted species.

However, these gardener-machines had either stopped working or they had been blocked by structural damage further inside the base, as those machines hadn’t been seen for centuries. And now, with the spatial expansion, the pipe was wide enough to allow people to squeeze through, albeit barely.

“Is it really necessary to take this circuitous path?” Kenzie asked as she looked down on the mapper with some hesitation. “I’m sure we could find a path without squeezing through claustrophobic pipes and run-off grates.”

“Might as well, it should only add a few hours’ travel time compared to a more direct route. And the path doesn’t only take into account these kinds of hidden paths, but also spatial anomalies. There should be some reason as to why the werewolves chose these paths rather than the normal corridors,” Zac said. “I want to avoid any spatial tears for as long as we can. I don’t know if that thing in the Void is still angry.”

“Fine,” Kenzie shrugged.

Zac quickly took out a series of daggers with flat handles and quickly infused each of them with a smidgeon of Base Power before he threw them into the wall. As expected, the knives embedded themselves into the Memorysteel without issue, forming a set of steps all the way up to the gate.

Kenzie was about to jump up to open it, but she was stopped by Zac who went up himself with his tablet. His sister seemed to be confident in Jeeves’ abilities, but he wasn’t so certain. Leandra had warned him of the Mystic Realm in their short talk after he evolved, and Zac was worried that his mother’s warning was based on her desire to keep Jeeves rather than her children safe.

Perhaps there were things in this place that could harm Jeeves, and doing so harm Kenzie as well. He had witnessed the power this base still possessed after all these years, and connecting Jeeves to the wrong terminal might cause the AI to overload.

However, Zac quickly realized that opening the lid to a grate was very different from opening a hidden gate with the help of Leviala. A series of weird boxes appeared, but none of them looked like the one he had pressed before. Touching the token against the tablet didn’t help either, so Zac could only jump down in defeat and let his sister deal with it.

The following hours passed without any surprises as they followed the detailed map left behind by the Werewolf scouts. They quickly realized just how much larger the Living Layer was compared to the Outer Ring. They weren’t able to move very quickly due to moving through uncharted pathways, but they had still walked a depth that was twice that of the Outer Ring with most of the map still remaining.

It wasn’t solely due to how the base was constructed either. Part of it definitely came from the spatial expansion that only seemed to be increasing in severity on their way in. When they entered the pipe they were forced to walk hunched-over, but after a few hours the pipes were wide enough for them to walk upright without issue.

The pipe took a circuitous path on its way to the Inner Layer, and with the lack of natural lighting, it quickly became extremely claustrophobic. Ogras repeatedly muttered about blasting a hole in the wall and walking through the normal corridors, and Thea stopped reprimanding him after an hour.

“That’s enough whining,” Kenzie eventually said, the tablet in her hands illuminating her face. “We’ll be exiting this pipe soon. It seems the werewolves created an exit that leads to a warehouse. From there we will take the normal paths for a while.”

Kenzie was the whose mood hadn’t been dampened by the pitch-black and cramped tunnels, probably since she had spent most time holed up in her workshops lately. She was also constantly using the tablet in her hands, and one box after another flashed in an endless cycle. They had stopped now and then as well, allowing Kenzie to keep installing her communication modules in the walls.

They finally reached the marked spot Kenzie mentioned and found clear signs of outside interference. What had once been a small vent had been expanded into a proper grate with hinges and everything. Zac opened it up and peered inside, and found that the warehouse was even bigger than the place where the Lunar Tribe had set up their Relay Station.

The room was almost impossibly large, and their point of ingress was almost fifty meters in the air. This place was different from what they were used to for another reason as well; there were thousands of metallic boxes neatly arranged across the wall

and in aisles across the room. The boxes were each almost thirty meters tall, though that likely meant they were about two meters before the spatial expansion took place.

Zac's eyes lit up with excitement, and he jumped down after getting a go-ahead from his sister. Ogras was right on his heels, and he looked at the massive craters with greed. Thea and Kenzie quickly made their way down as well, and they all walked over to the closest box.

"Do you think it contains those big controllable robots?" Ogras asked before he looked at Kenzie askance. "*Someone* destroyed the ones we had."

"Well, *someone* had to keep the Undead at bay while you were off having fun in the Tower of Eternity," Kenzie shot right back.

Zac didn't mind their bickering as he looked down the aisle that was so long that it almost looked like an illusion. He didn't care if the boxes contained mechas or raw materials. As long as they contained anything of even a little bit of value on the outside, then they had just struck a motherlode.

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**Chapter 607 - Unmarked Boxes**

"I wouldn't say the Tower of Eternity was all fun and games," Zac muttered as his eyes turned back to the box in front of him. "Do complex machines like mechas and drones grow in this place?"

"I am not sure, but I don't think so?" Kenzie said. "I have been keeping watch on my drones, and they are exactly the same as before. I think it's because they have an active energy source and a steady current, and the energy is dense enough to inhibit whatever the Dimensional Seed is doing to this place."

"So the Core Sector might actually be normal-sized?" Thea ventured. "I imagine that the Core if any place would have a lot of this Base Power running through the walls."

"Perhaps," Kenzie said. "But it's also possible that the spatial energies of the Dimensional Seed would just overpower everything around it in such close proximity. I guess we'll find out as we get closer."

"So, can we open these things?" Ogras asked with gleaming eyes. "Or is there a reason the beastmen left them behind?"

"I- Don't think there's a problem?" Kenzie said, but she didn't seem sure as she looked down at her tablet. "I can't see anything out of the norm. It's just a storage box with some environmental maintenance protocols. Is it really worth looting this place now though? We have time, but..."

"Treasures are meant to be taken, girl. Your brother is a walking opportunity-magnet, we need to make use of it. Knowing his luck these boxes might contain exactly what we need to deal with the insect bastards," Ogras said as he turned to Zac. "Go ahead. Conjure something useful."

"I'm not some magician," Zac snorted, but he was tempted.

It felt like a waste to leave these boxes behind. Who knew what would happen in the future? The whole base might start falling apart after the Dimensional Seed was taken away considering how integrated it seemed to be with the base. Anything left behind might be lost forever. Zac had over ten empty top-quality Cosmos Sacks on him,

meant to be stuffed with everything from raw materials to spaceships, and now was as good a time as any to start looting.

So Zac jumped up to press the only button on the box, a small smile spreading across his face.

“Wait stop!” Kenzie shouted with urgency, prompting Zac to immediately push away from the box without opening it, and he landed right behind the group.

“What? What’s going on?” Zac asked.

“There’s something weird going on. Everything is fine according to the readings, but I sensed some sort of energies in the air. I think-“ she muttered, but she didn’t get any further as a series of previously hidden vents suddenly appeared on the closest boxes.

A dense cloud of some unknown gas blasted out the next moment, forcing the group to scramble out of the way. They quickly realized that it was just normal steam released to depressurize the containers, but the fact they suddenly woke up without Zac touching them clearly wasn’t good news.

“Some luck. Forgot you’re a trouble magnet as well,” Ogras muttered as shadows swallowed their group, and they reappeared half across the vast storeroom a second later.

Zac could only roll his eyes in response as they rushed for the only door in the warehouse, an exit on the opposite side where they came from. A barrier had already appeared to block their escape and Zac frowned when he saw how thick it was. It looked like a beefed-up version of the ones they had encountered before, or perhaps it was simply being fed a lot more Base Power compared to the shields in the Outer Ring.

Worse yet, more and more boxes were releasing steam, and the whole room echoed with clanking sounds as they opened by the hundreds.

The ground cracked beneath Zac’s feet as he shot toward the red barrier while a halo appeared behind his back. Inside it was the avatar of the axe-man’s axe, and it caused Zac’s aura to grow deeper as he slammed [**Verun’s Bite**] into the shield.

Popping sounds echoed out across the area as the air exploded from the force generated by [**Conformation of Supremacy**]. A series of crashes quickly followed as both Ogras and Thea appeared to his left and right, each of them releasing an all-out strike at the barrier. But the shield was beyond sturdy. It didn’t even shudder even though the air itself had been ripped apart, forming a series of chaotic spatial tears that were quickly swallowed by the barrier itself.

“Watch out!” Kenzie screamed, but Zac was already moving by that point as his Danger Sense had warned him of an impending attack.

Two bronze blades stabbed into the ground where he just stood a moment ago, both of them attached to thin mechanical arms that stretched over fifty meters into the haze. Zac looked toward the source, spotting a spherical object that was slowly emerging from the steam. It was about three meters across, making the massive container it came out of look almost comically oversized.

Zac’s first guess was that Kenzie was right. The boxes had grown while the contents had not. That by itself felt like a huge lucky break as the force contained in that stab just now had been a bit troubling, powerful enough to leave marks on the sturdy Memorysteel floor. But Kenzie’s theory was quickly proven imperfect at best as more spherical objects came rolling out of the nearby crates, each of them of a different size.

The smallest ones were just about Zac’s height, with the largest ones being tower monstrosities reaching almost fifteen meters in the air. The steam quickly dissipated

as well, giving the group a better look at what they were dealing with. Zac wasn't surprised to see that they were all some sort of landbound drones that looked like enormous brass balls.

The bladed weapons from before were actually a part of the ball's surface, like hidden mantis scythes that were normally protected inside the ball itself. A dozen smaller such appendages suddenly split out from the bottom of the ball as well, creating a series of nimble appendages that allowed the closest machines to rush toward them.

"Can you control it? Or them?" Zac said as he looked across the warehouse with trepidation.

Did all these containers contain a killing machine like this?

The question quickly became apparent as more and more machines scurried out, quickly forming an army inside the warehouse. Thankfully it looked like less than a third of the boxes actually conjured a spider ball. The rest still housed similar machines, but they failed to activate for some reason or another.

There were also quite a few machines that seemed to move about like they were drunk, perhaps lacking some integral parts due to lack of service over the past millennia. Zac quickly realized what was going on. The smaller machines seemed to work flawlessly as they arranged themselves before moving toward his group. The mid-sized ones had various problems affecting their mobility, and the largest balls didn't even seem able to activate.

The Spatial Expansion had worked on these machines, but to varying degrees. The more they had expanded the worse condition they were left in. That wasn't surprising considering they no doubt contained extremely precise technology, like all kinds of chipsets that might have broken down from being forcibly expanded by the Dao of Space.

Still, the functional ones were more than enough to make Zac feel some pressure, and he was quickly beset by a flurry of scythes coming at him from every direction. Each swing contained a fierce momentum, and the blades themselves were barely damaged after Zac blocked them with **[Chop]**. Whatever alloy they were made of was even sturdier than the Memorysteel in the walls.

The one saving grace was that some of the machines were so massive that they blocked out their smaller brethren, making it so they only needed to face a few dozen at a time. Still, Zac knew it would take a huge effort to take them all out, so he looked over at his sister who frantically was typing away at her tablet.

"Nothing I do works!" she said with panic in her eyes. "I- I- can't..."

"Stay calm," Zac said as his arms turned into a blur while keeping the continuous waves of attacks at bay. "If you can't control the robots, work on the shield instead."

"Right!" Kenzie exclaimed as she quickly found her bearing, and she hurried to the wall and directly connected it to her tablet with a cable.

Ogras immediately threw out a series of array disks before he covered her in shadows, but it didn't seem to work as five of the robots immediately targeted Kenzie's position. Their attacks only made it half-way before a blue streak rippled through the air though, and the mantis-like blades fell to the ground cleanly cut off. It was Thea who had targeted the thin arms of the robots rather than the blades themselves, and Zac noticed that scars appeared out of nowhere on a lot of the battlebots.

It was likely Thea's invisible Spirit Tool, which Zac thought she had discarded in favor of the graceful blue sword in her hands. But it looked like Thea had rather added another weapon to her repertoire, with one focusing on large-scale battle and the other one on direct confrontation.

Ogras wasn't to be outdone either, and he melded with the shadows on the ground before he appeared in the middle among the machines, causing chaos among their ranks. It was hard to tell what was real and what was shadows as he flitted around, but every time his new spear struck a battlebot was destroyed. He was using the machines' weaknesses against them; the openings created in their outer shell every time they extended their weapons.

Zac wanted to join in as well, but he found himself in a passive state where he was forced to stay close to Kenzie, blocking an endless series of attacks. It even felt like the machines understood what Kenzie was trying to do, and more and more of the battlebots seemed to be targeting his sister. This wasn't like when they assaulted the Undead IncurSION either; there were no Valkyries to erect a defensive War Array around his sister, and Ogras' array disks were just illusion arrays to hide her.

Part of him wanted to just drop a mountain on these machines, but he was afraid that the commotion would just cause even more trouble. The further they went into the base, the higher the risk was that they would attract attention from the Administrator. Besides, using **[Nature's Punishment]** might actually cause the whole roof to blow off again, providing the Collector with another point of ingress.

"What should we do?" Ogras shouted as he dragged out his spear from a 4-meter battlebot.

The machine tried to swing down one of its massive blades on the demon, but it suddenly shuddered before a storm of shadows emerged from every small crack in its plating. Everything inside was no doubt ripped apart from the demon's shadows.

"Keep destroying these things, but no attacks that might harm the base itself," Zac said as his eyes turned pitch-black. "I'll keep Kenzie safe as she works on the barrier."

A huge Miasmatic Bulwark emerged the next second, effortlessly blocking the barrage of strikes coming Kenzie's way. Zac positioned himself right between the machines, readying himself for a protracted defense. His body grew as he activated **[Vanguard of Undeath]**. He didn't believe that the skill's taunting effect would work on the machines, but his increased size gave him a better reach.

"How does it look?" Zac asked as he cut off a scythe that tried to pass around his bulwark to strike Kenzie.

"It's working, but I need a few minutes," Kenzy said she frantically tapped away at her tablet.

Zac only grunted in response as he kept blocking. The defensive capabilities of his undead class were far beyond what he could manage in his human form, but his Draugr class wasn't all that effective in dealing with machines. **[Deathwish]** didn't seem able to copy the battlebots, perhaps because of the lack of spirituality. Furthermore, both **[Fields of Despair]** and **[Winds of Decay]** would probably harm his own people more than they would the robots.

Thea and Ogras were thankfully doing the work of half an army by themselves. It looked like the two were competing with each other for kills, with the Marshall Scion desperately trying to keep up with Ogras' large-scale destruction. Unfortunately for her, Ogras had already evolved and he had gained almost ten levels since doing so. That was the equivalent of over 80 F-Grade levels in terms of attributes, and Thea simply couldn't compete with that, try as she might.

Still, she showed amazing expertise as she moved back and forth between the machines. The smaller spider balls were extremely nimble and they could send out up to five scythes at a time. They created whole spheres of death around them, with

bronze streaks filling the air. If these machines were dropped into his army they would have singlehandedly caused mass casualties before they were brought down.

But Thea somehow managed to walk right into those zones of death, quickly delivering a single strike with pinpoint precision, destroying the machine in one go. Zac himself had only turned into a glorified guardian, or more like a mobile fortress as he expanded [**Immutable Bulwark**] to its maximum proportions.

He was also being assisted by the small mountain of broken machines that created a half-circle around them, making it harder and harder for the larger machines to get close. The big ones barely worked, but their scythes were simply humongous and they carried a tremendous force that managed to stab some ways into Zac's shield before he managed to shrug them off.

Zac wasn't really comfortable just staying on the passive, but he really had nothing to counter with at a time like this. It was one limitation of [**Love's Bond**]; it was unable to send out any chains while it was in its defensive form. That made it impossible for Zac to start destroying the battlebots with [**Blighted Cut**], even though he was pretty certain he would be able to puncture even these sturdy things with the help of the extremely potent corrosion.

"It's done!" Kenzie finally shouted, and the shield blocking the exit disappeared a second later. "Hurry, it will activate soon again!"

Zac quickly shrunk his bulwark just enough for Thea and Ogras to slip past him, and he brought up the rear as the others fled through the door. Zac was about to deactivate his fractal shield and exit as well, but he changed his mind at the last second as his Danger Sense had suddenly woken up again. A huge explosion rocked whole the area the next moment, causing massive cracks in Zac's fractal bulwark before the force threw him out of the gate.

Ogras was last to exit before Zac, and the demon yelped in surprised as he barely managed to avoid Zac's hulking form as he hurtled through the air. Zac slammed into the wall with enough force to cause a dent in the memory steel, but he just groaned as he got back on his feet, ready for another attack.

However, he was relieved to see that the gate had closed again.

"I just blocked the barrier for a few seconds, it's active again. Those robots shouldn't be able to get out," Kenzie said. "That last blast was the closest ones self-destructing."

"Okay, that might have been my bad. No more messing with unmarked boxes," Ogras muttered with a wry smile.

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**Chapter 608 - Divine Guidance**

"We never even touched the thing. I think it sensed us standing around and activated, causing a chain reaction," Kenzie said as she sighed. "The Werewolves must have known and simply ran straight through."

"Well, they were thankfully not too powerful," Zac said as he turned back to human. "But there might be more powerful machines further in if these things were just left behind here."

"You're full of surprises..." Thea muttered as she gave him Zac an inscrutable look.

Zac could only shrug his shoulders in response, not really in the mood to explain exactly how things worked with his undead side. She already knew some parts of it from back during the hunt though, so him using two new skills shouldn't come as too big a shock.

"We should go in case they can sense us through the wall," Kenzie said as she took out her mapper, seemingly trying to help her brother change the subject. "Let them calm down by themselves. We are just an hour away from where we're supposed to meet your new friend."

"Right, let's go," Zac nodded as he shot one last look at the gate before he started walking again.

"I can't believe you set a time and location," Ogras muttered as he stowed away his spear. "It's like you want to be ambushed."

Thea didn't say anything, but she seemed to be in agreement with the demon's sentiment.

"We could really use their expertise. Kenzie can't be expected to find out every hidden danger in this place, and we might walk into a real deathtrap sooner or later if we keep going like this," Zac said. "Besides, they're a clan with an Ocular Bloodline, how strong can they be?"

"Famous last words," Thea muttered, but she didn't offer any alternative course of action.

The group kept a high pace through the oversized corridors, and the map held true, keeping them out of the way of any barriers or spatial tears. They were forced to pass through a second warehouse, but they had learned their lesson already and relied on Ogras to teleport them through the enormous room with three rapid jumps.

They finally reached their destination 80 minutes later, a nondescript crossing looking like any other. Zac and Leviala had chosen this place since Leviala was certain that she'd be able to get here from Clan Cartava's headquarters. However, no one was there awaiting their arrival, and neither were there any clues left behind.

"Well, the labs are further down this way, though the map becomes incomplete at the end. The werewolves either ran out of time or encountered some difficulties," Kenzie said as she pointed down the path right ahead. "What do you want to do? Wait here or keep going?"

"We're already a bit late, but she's still not here," Zac muttered as he looked around another time. "Something might have changed on their side."

"Well, we should be able to figure it out without her," Ogras said, clearly unwilling on giving up on a chance at the treasure. "We have the map, right? We can just go to the end, and Kenzie should be able to gather clues from there, leading us to this Inner Lab. The Cartava Clan might have become greedy, heading there before us to loot the riches."

"Maybe we should go find those natives instead?" Thea hesitantly said. "Their base is only half a day from here, right? We can head over there and form an alliance, paving the way for our people. Then we can go to the Inner Labs after the seed has matured. Isn't the whole plan that the defenses will be lowered then?"

"... I can't wait that long," Zac sighed.

"What?" Thea asked with confusion. "Is there something you haven't told us?"

Zac hesitated for a bit before he set up an isolation array, and both Ogras and Kenzie added their own methods to obscure the area even further.

"I have a quest telling me I have to get there before the Dimensional Seed matures. It might fail if we take a detour to Clan Cartava. I didn't find a mapper on the

Werewolf squad responsible for heading there, so we don't have any safe paths in that direction."

"It specifically said you had to get there before the Seed Matures?" Ogras asked to confirm, a thoughtful look donning his face. "What else did it say?"

Zac deliberated for a second before he shared the quest screen, including the note at the end.

"What the hell?" Thea muttered, her eyes wide in disbelief. "What kind of quest is this? You've already completed 3 quests and there are 6 more? And there are punishments? Why are there punishments?"

"Just the System being an asshole again," Zac shrugged. "The punishment was a lot worse in the beginning, but I still don't want to risk losing one of my core skills."

"Divine guidance... It has to be," Ogras said with wide eyes.

"Divine guidance? What?" Kenzie said, looking at Ogras skeptically. "Isn't it just a special quest Zac got because he's strong?"

"All those things you described before, were they part of this quest chain?" Ogras asked.

"Yes, starting with rescuing Levala Cartava," Zac nodded, feeling the demon might be on to something.

After all, he only got this chain of quests after he got the **[Pathstrider]**-title, marking him a candidate for training. Divine Guidance sounded like something the demon might call a chain of training quests.

"So, the reason we managed to reach this place was that the System led you to the only native carrying a set of maps?" Ogras asked to confirm.

"I... guess?" Zac asked hesitantly, his suspicions only growing when he saw Ogras' reaction. "You think that the System is leading me to the Core?"

"My grandfather once told me a story, a rumor he heard from his captain on the battlefield. About Lord Lucifer's younger days," Ogras said.

"Lucifer? The Devil?" Thea blurted.

"A C-Grade Demon Monarch," Ogras said with a roll of his eyes. "In either case, my grandpa saved the life of his captain during a war. That's how grandpa gained an opportunity to reach D-Grade. His captain turned out to be a descendant of Lord Lucifer himself, out to gain experience and battle merit as an unnamed soldier of the Horde."

"Larok, the captain, told grandpa some stories about his ancestor after they became friends, tales of bravery and such. It turns out, Lord Lucifer was accidentally sucked into a newly emerged C-Grade Mystic Realm when he was a peak E-Grade warrior, a death sentence if there ever was one. But not only did he survive, but he even emerged with one of the core treasures of that place."

"What was it?" Kenzie asked curiously.

"Some sort of Natural Treasure that helped him form a supreme Cultivator's Core. He used his newfound power to wage a 1000-year campaign, utterly stomping out various threats to the Azh'Kir'Khat Horde," Ogras said. "The contribution points he accumulated from that war set him up for life, and he's now standing tall as one of the supreme Warchiefs of the Horde."

"What's this got to do with us?" Thea asked with an exasperated tone.

"Patience, girl," Ogras snorted. "Apparently, Lord Lucifer was surrounded by terrifying beasts in that Mystic Realm, but he refused to give up. So he hid beneath the ground and cultivated, planning to form a Cultivation Core prematurely before making a mad dash to escape. But he was suddenly given a task by The Ruthless Heavens and he saw a chance at survival even without breaking through with shaky foundations. One

task followed another, unknowingly leading him to the treasure, and then to a hidden exit of the realm.”

“The System guided him through a chain of quests, not only to become stronger but also to help him achieve his goals. You think the same is happening here?” Zac muttered.

“Exactly. The Ruthless Heavens put its fingers on the scales for its chosen few. We already know you are blessed with monstrous Luck, drawing the attention of The Ruthless Heavens over and over. It knows what you need, and the threats you face. If we don’t kill the Dominators, the Great Redeemer will track you down and harvest your soul. It is creating a path of survival for you, a way to beat the odds,” Ogras said.

“We can still do all that even without completing some quests though,” Thea countered.

“Can we? Can we guarantee it?” Ogras said with a sharp glance. “We believe the Dimensional Treasure to be C-Grade Treasure for it to attract the zealots and the Dominators to this extent. A treasure of that level has a spirituality, a sense of self-perseverance. It might knock out the security of this place, but it might also bolster it. What if our only way to reach the Core or the other side is to reach the Inner Lab before it’s too late? And if we stay outside, we’ll be locked out forever?”

“Divine Guidance,” Zac muttered. “And you’re not just saying all this because you want the treasures inside?”

“There are no conflicts of interest here,” Ogras smiled. “We all win if we head for the Inner Lab. This was our plan from the start. Why question it now?”

“Alright let’s just go,” Zac agreed, and the group set out again.

However, they only kept going for another hour before they encountered a bloody sight; Leviaia, lying on the ground in a pool of dried blood, her face haggard and pale. Judging by the trail of blood on the walls she had come here through an air duct, but she had stopped moving after falling down the fifty meters to the ground.

“I’m sorry,” Leviaia weakly said as she looked up at Zac. “I meant to go to our meeting point, but I guess I dozed off.”

“What’s the matter with you?” Zac sighed as he threw a set of healing pills at the girl. “How do you keep ending up in a state like this?”

“Do you think I enjoy this?” Leviaia said with a glare as she ate the healing pills. “You were right. Things are bad back home.”

“Bad how?” Zac said, but there was no time to hear an explanation as he suddenly sensed people to his left.

He quickly swirled as his axe appeared in his hand, and the others quickly prepared themselves as well as over fifty people had appeared out of nowhere a hundred meters away. There was no way for so many people to sneak up on a group like theirs that easily, making Zac believe they had some high-tiered cloaking technology from this base.

They were definitely humans, but their appearance gave Zac some pause. They looked a lot like the Technocrats Zac had fought when closing the incursion as they all carried various energy-weapons while having shields formed from the same red barriers as the base.

There were also hundreds of flying machines that looked a bit like Kenzie’s drones, though their design was fundamentally different. They rather looked like small airplanes, with barrels attached to the wings. They definitely were tools of war rather than scouting judging by the attachments, and even Zac felt some pressure from being the target of that many weapons.

“Technocrats?” Ogras muttered with hesitation.

“Interesting designs,” Kenzie whispered as she looked at the drones with gleaming eyes, and Zac inwardly groaned when he realized that his sister’s Drone Swarm was about to grow in size once more.

Ogras only snickered, clearly having realized what was about to happen as well. He didn’t know about Jeeves, but he did know that this base was built by Zac’s and Kenzie’s ancestors, and their unique advantages had been put on ample display over the past weeks. Trying to use this base’s weaponry against them was foolhardy at best.

“Traitors of my family,” Leviaala sighed, sadness written all over her face. “I’m sorry, I thought I shook them off.”

Zac was a bit surprised that the soldiers of the Cartava Clan had gone in this direction, but on further thought, it was perhaps to be expected. Technology had become an integrated part of their lives over the past millennia, and their bloodlines weren’t that useful for battle from what Leviaala had explained.

Meanwhile, there was the Lunar Tribe with their superior constitutions and the gemplings who could create powerful weapons and armor. The Cartava Clan was at a clear disadvantage there, and it looked like they had turned to technology to bridge that gap and secure their place in the Mystic Realm.

“This is proof. Leviaala Cartava has betrayed her clan, consorting with outsiders to bring doom upon our clan,” a middle-aged man said. “Capture her and leave at least one of the outsiders alive. They know the composition of their armies and the means of escaping this wretched place.”

“Wait! Please don’t hurt them!” Leviaala said, causing the man to sneer disdainfully. However, his face froze when he heard her next sentence. “They’re still people from my clan. Please don’t kill them!”

“Attack!” the man immediately shouted as he reached for his gun, clearly having understood that his numerical advantage was just for show.

The whole corridor lit up in red as the soldiers fired their weapons, but a storm of leaves appeared to block out the first barrage. Zac sighed and turned to his sister.

“Don’t ruin my new toys,” she only said, confirming Zac’s suspicions.

“Men make plans and the Heavens laugh,” Ogras snickered to the side with a bloodthirsty gleam in his eyes. “I guess it’s war.”

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**Chapter 609 - Conflicting Truths**

The group in front of them didn’t exactly cause Zac’s Danger Sense to go haywire, but he still didn’t want to risk his sister getting hurt. So he pushed aside any reluctance over this no-win situation as he stomped down on the ground, pushing himself forward with enough force to cause a dent in the Memorysteel on the ground.

The next moment the whole shielded frontline of the Cartava Clansmen was sent flying as Zac slammed straight into their ranks while using **[Love’s Bond]** as a wallbreaker, the sturdy coffin easily deflecting the beams shooting out from the handheld energy weapons. He had intentionally not used **[Loamwalker]** for that very purpose, to draw the enemies’ attention toward himself.

A few projectiles still shot toward the others as well, but they were all capable of dealing with it. Only Leviaia helplessly scrambled into a side corridor after realizing her attempts at reconciliation were futile. Kenzie had instead conjured what looked like a raincloud, and the beams actually dispersed as they entered it.

“Something’s wrong with the swarm!” a man in the back of the Cartava platoon suddenly shouted.

“Fix it, NOW!” the middle-aged captain roared as he rushed to block Zac along with a group of cultivators.

The man was somewhere between middle and high E-Grade judging by his aura, but Zac still wouldn’t look down on the enemy even if he didn’t emit the aura of an elite like Void’s Disciple. He just barely avoided the restraining tool of the werewolves in his first battle with the natives, and who knew what kind of hidden means the Cartava Clan possessed?

After all, Leviaia had never given him any real details of the strength and means of her clan, to the point that he didn’t even know they fought like Technocrats.

However, it was clear that not everyone in the clan leaned toward the ‘Dao of Technology’ as over half the squad emitted the condensed auras of traditional warriors. The captain and his squad of elites were definitely part of this group as they rushed toward Zac with killing intent seeping out of their bodies.

A massive pressure enveloped Zac as he prepared to meet the incoming cultivators, and it felt like he was ensconced in quicksand. He glanced down at his body and noticed he was covered in blue fractals, their glow mirrored in the eyes of three of the cultivators. The eyes of a few more lit up next, and Zac felt the world turning upside down and bend and distort.

He was initially worried that these cultivators were throwing him into another space-time or something with the help of their bloodlines, but he quickly realized that his warped surroundings were simply illusions. A few of the members of the Cartava elite squad were apparently the same sort of cultivators as Janos, mental support mages.

Those kinds of people were a bit troublesome, but it was a lot better than time-cultivators as far as Zac was concerned, and it somewhat confirmed what Leviaia had said before. Only a select few had that ability in her clan, with the rest having a lower-quality version of the bloodline.

Zac’s soul was thankfully a lot more powerful than the average Strength-based cultivator’s thanks to the **[Nine Reincarnations Manual]** and his lucky encounters. Furthermore, while **[Mental Fortress]** was just an average mental defensive skill, it was enough to help him minimize the effect to the point that he could at least tell fake from real.

The first thing to welcome his escape from the illusions was two sets of shimmering grey eyes and the realization that some sort of stones had started to grow across his body. Two of the cultivators actually had Medusa eyes from the looks of it, their gaze slowly petrifying him.

Zac quickly understood what was going on; the Cartava Cultivators who didn’t rely on Technology all seemed to have classes or at least skills that took advantage of their eyes. He guessed that most eye-related skills would have an increased effect for cultivators with an Ocular Bloodline, even if the actual usage of the Bloodline might be related to something different.

The cultivators seemed to somewhat relax after seeing Zac getting entrapped in layer after layer of restrictions, but they still maintained their gazes on him as they stopped twenty meters away. Only the captain rushed forward, wielding an exquisite

sword in his hands. It wasn't a technocrat energy weapon, but Zac rather assumed it to be a Spirit Tool made from some reddish metal.

There was also a large red gem embedded in the hilt, making it possible for Zac to guess its origins; the gemlings on the other side of the base. A sharp aura that was all too similar to Zac radiated from the sword as the captain suddenly disappeared. The captain possessed a Late-Stage Seed of Sharpness. The swordsman appeared right next to Zac a moment later, the edge already ripping through the air on its way toward Zac's throat.

But the air around Zac suddenly started crackling as he unleashed his aura in full, further empowering it with his **[Spiritual Void]**. The stones on his body crumbled to dust and the blue restraining fractals shattered as Zac finally fought back in earnest. His body turned into a blur next as a coffin lid appeared to intercept the sword-strike.

A series of groans echoed out from the cultivator squad after Zac had forcibly broken their skills, and chaos erupted among the soldiers as Zac's immense aura slammed into them like a hammer. The captain's eyes widened in horror when he realized Zac had been going easy on them until now, and he quickly tried to flash away the moment he realized his execution had failed.

But there was no way Zac would allow that, and **[Love's Bond]** slammed into the captain with the full force of someone with over five thousand effective Strength. A deep thud was followed by the sound of bones breaking. The leader of the Cartava Clan's platoon was shot through his own ranks like a projectile, slamming into the Memorysteel wall with enough force to cause the whole corridor to vibrate.

The captain was still someone well into the E-Grade though, so Zac immediately caught up to him with the help of **[Loamwalker]** and punched him in the side of his head the moment the captain ricocheted off the wall. He slammed down into the ground causing another shudder to spread out across the area, and a mute silence spread among the Clan Cartava warriors as they looked at Zac with mute incomprehension.

Getting trapped earlier wasn't Zac simply getting caught unaware. On the contrary, he could have instantly broken the blue fractals covering his body just by using his superior attributes to force it, and one attack of **[Rapturous Divide]** would have instantly killed the ocular cultivators along with half the platoon. However, he had quickly decided against that, allowing the elite squad to keep going to display more of what kind of classes and tactics they used.

He still held a small hope that things could be salvaged peacefully even after all this, which was why he didn't just cut the captain in two, but he felt there was a real risk that his own army would be embroiled in a large-scale battle with these people in a few days. Any intelligence he gathered right now could be sent back, which hopefully would save some lives.

The momentum of the Cartava Clan had completely been quashed by the combination of their drones failing them and Zac using their leader like a punching bag. A few warriors in the back reacted the quickest, immediately starting running for their lives. However, they only got a few meters before the whole area turned into a hazy gray, like a dense fog late at night.

It was Ogras who had appeared out of nowhere and flooded the whole area with his shadows. The fleeing cultivators immediately found themselves caught by an endless number of shadow tendrils, and they actually sank into the shadows like half their bodies had been sent to another dimension. The Cartava warriors reacted instantaneously as they took out energy-knives that were able to cut straight through the shadows, and they desperately flailed about in an attempt to free themselves.

But shadows were intangible, and cutting them with a blade didn't really do much. They simply reformed and bound the warriors again. A few of the more powerful warriors did manage to free themselves one way or another, but they didn't even get a taste of freedom before they found themselves gored by a black spear hiding among the shadows.

Zac looked at the display with gleaming eyes. It felt like the Cartava warriors were shipwrecked sailors on a sea of shadows, and Ogras was a shark in the depths, striking from the darkness before immediately disappearing again. Zac felt that it was worth learning from the demon in this regard, especially for his second class. Fetters of Desolation was a class focusing on restraining and whittling down the enemy, just like Ogras was doing right now.

It wasn't too surprising that Ogras could so easily capture over a dozen people in an instant. Most of the warriors in the back of the platoon seemed to be responsible for the drones, and their 'weapons' had just been tablets and some weird helmets. Then again, the frontlines weren't doing any better even though they were manned by soldiers armed with proper energy weapons.

Thea had made her move as well, turning into a whirlwind that destroyed every piece of equipment in her path. The floor was already littered with broken components from everything from tablets to guns and even clothes. Everything that could be used as a weapon was either cut by the invisible blades or Thea herself, and any resistance resulted in streaks turning into bleeding wounds.

Less than half a minute had passed, but the Cartava squadron was already utterly crushed. The drones that had been silently hovering in the air until now suddenly started moving, forming an orderly line as they flew toward Kenzie. She simply took out a Cosmos Sack with a wide grin, and the machines flew straight into it one by one while Leviala stared at her with a flabbergasted look.

"Lay down your weapons, or we'll start killing," Zac roared when he saw the battle was over, and everyone immediately followed suit.

The soldiers were seated against the wall a minute later, unarmed and with a dozen of Kenzie's own Drones keeping watch. The others had already gathered again, with Leviala hesitantly standing between Zac's group and her clan members. She already looked a lot better compared to before, and it seemed she had overextended herself, running out of Cosmic Energy in her escape.

"Girl, how is your faction still standing?" Ogras asked with bemusement as he glanced at Leviala. "You better pledge allegiance to this guy fast, otherwise you'll just get eradicated even if you get out of this realm alive."

"These people are not our strongest warriors," Leviala muttered, though she looked a bit shamefaced at the result of the battle even if her clansmen were technically her enemies in this scenario. "We have a lot of powerhouses."

"More importantly," Zac said as he lifted the still-unconscious middle-aged man by his neck. "What's up with the bullshit this guy was spewing? I told you we were looking for an alliance."

Leviala sighed as she started explaining the situation back in her clan. It turned out that the werewolves hadn't just kidnapped Leviala, but also destroyed a few key buildings along with the corridors leading toward the Lunar Forest. The chaos had allowed the werewolves to slink away. Clan Cartava wasn't about to give up Leviala though, and they immediately decided to set out toward the Wasteland. But just as the first groups were about to set out a damning video emerged.

It was without audio, but it clearly displayed two werewolves talking with an unknown human and two demonkin in an abandoned warehouse.

The clan had already learned of Ogras' appearance somehow, and they quickly put two and two together. They believed Port Atwood and the Lunar Clan were working together, targeting Clan Cartava at this critical time.

"What, there's a video of our people conversing with Werewolves?" Zac said with confusion all over his face, and he turned to Ogras.

"Impossible," Ogras said with a shake of his head. "No one would be that stupid."

"It's true," Leviala said, her eyes flickering. "I saw the video myself after I returned."

"There's one simple explanation of how that's possible, apart from betrayal," Thea interjected as she took an all-too-familiar root, holding it so the captives couldn't see it.

"Impossible, our people have been rigorously tested," Zac said with a shake of his head.

"I know, but theirs haven't," Thea said as she looked at the captives.

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**Chapter 610 - Looming Threat**

"What are you talking about?" Leviala asked with confusion.

"Nothing, continue. What happened next?" Zac said, not wanting to make any decisions before hearing the whole story.

Seeing the outsiders conspiring with their old enemies the Lunar Clan had, unsurprisingly, agitated the people of Clan Cartava, especially after they had extended an olive branch through the plaque. It was at moment time a man named Yvian stepped out, saying that he and Leviala were betrothed, but had kept it secret as to not distract from the more important matters at hand. He vowed to get his fiancé back, even if he had to battle both the "insidious outsiders" and the Lunar Tribe.

Apparently, Yvian was the heir of the second branch of the Clan and the second-best candidate for future Clan Leader after Leviala herself. He and his faction quickly turned the clan against Zac's people and immediately rerouted the scouting parties to search in the direction of the Lunar Forest instead. The explosions together with the video made it look like the werewolves kidnapped Leviala before escaping toward the outer world.

As for the fake engagement, it was a way to bridge the gap between the two main branches of the clan now that Leviala was gone. With Leviala gone and the Grand elder being quite old, the Second Branch would eventually become the main branch. Of course, their plans went awry the moment Leviala was accidentally found by one of the scouting parties.

Leviala had returned to her clan with the second-branch scouts even if she had misgivings, but the news she brought back were mostly discarded. They called the news of the Dominators and the Great Redeemer a fabrication meant to trick the clan into staying behind while their enemies got themselves to safety.

Some even insinuated that Leviala had been brainwashed by the enemies.

Even her own grandfather seemed hesitant about what she said, so Leviala eventually saw no other option but to turn to Zac for help. There was no way that she would be able to convince her Datamancer uncle to come along in a situation like this,

so she set out alone. She was quickly discovered and she was forced to fight her way out of an encirclement.

The only reason she was still alive was that most of the clan members were in the dark about the coup, simply thinking that Leviala was under some sort of hypnosis or compulsion. So they were afraid to actually attack her too ruthlessly, which allowed her to 'escape'. Of course, that escape might just have been a ploy, a gambit by the second branch to find a secret pathway to the Lunar Forest.

Frowns adorned Zac and his group as they digested the new information. They didn't really care about the coup, even if Zac felt a bit bad for Leviala, but the implications were clear. Clan Cartava were gearing up for a war against Port Atwood at this very moment, both to get back at their old enemies and to seize a chance to escape.

The second branch already had wide support for the attack even before Leviala returned, and it sounded like that support had only increased when Leviala admitted that Zac wouldn't let them out before the Dimensional Seed matured.

"Please, come with me to Clan Cartava," Leviala entreated. "I couldn't convince the elders, but if you display your might, I'm sure they will understand that there is no point for you to play those games. We can avoid an unnecessary war, and set our sights on our true enemies instead."

Zac didn't immediately respond, but he rather went over his options in his mind.

"One thing at a time," Zac eventually said, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with Leviala's idea. Instead, he threw out a large bag of Springroot on the ground. "Everyone. Eat a piece of this root. Anyone who does will be allowed to return to your clan. Everyone else..."

Hesitation and skepticism were written all over the faces of the cartava soldiers, and many turned their eyes to Leviala who somewhat had taken on the role of an intermediary.

"Please. It's not that I don't trust you, but can you explain what's going on? What's the effect of this Springroot?" Leviala hesitantly asked as she looked down at the bag.

"The outside world is full of dangers," Ogras said loudly enough so that all the captives could hear. "One of those dangers is a race of shapeshifters, cultivators who can make themselves look like any race, masquerading as either a friend or a foe. Those you saw in the videos were not our people. We are already at war with the Lunar Tribe, even having killed off all those scouting units who caused trouble for you."

Ogras gave Zac a look next, but Zac blankly looked back, not sure what the demon wanted him to do.

"Throw out some of the bodies," Ogras voice whispered in his ear, projected by a small shadow.

Zac understood what the demon was looking for, and he threw out a handful of the werewolf corpses he had collected during his fights.

"That's Hevastes!" one of the ocular cultivators exclaimed, drawing a round of murmurs.

"These shapeshifters have caused a lot of trouble on the outside, and we know they entered this realm long before we did," Ogras said as he glanced at Leviala. "These roots are our weapon against them. For most people, including you humans, they are harmless. A tasty snack. For those damn shapeshifters, they are deadly poison."

Zac bent down and ate a root to prove Ogras' words before he turned to the soldiers. Leviala soon followed suit, though a sheen of nervous perspiration covered her

face. She was obviously not taking Ogras' words at face value, but rather stepping forward for her clan members.

"Now, your turn. Come forward, one at a time," Zac said after confirming that Leviala wasn't a shapeshifter.

The soldiers looked at each other hesitantly, until one of the stronger warriors grit his teeth and stepped forward. However, just as he was about to pick a root up, another one stood up with a fierce look.

"This is a trap!" he shouted. "We saw the young miss returning with all kinds of delusions. Fighting the Collector? The Base actively protecting them? I bet the source are these poisonous roots!"

"Force-feed him," Zac said without hesitation, and a storm of shadows immediately trapped the raging man.

He didn't even have a chance to take his life before Ogras appeared right in front of him, cramming a handful of roots down his throat. He struggled for a few seconds before the life left his eyes. His body started to transform a second later, turning into the all-too-familiar lizard-like humanoids. The soldiers around him scrambled out of the way, looking at the transformation with horror.

"Vatos!" one of the soldiers exclaimed with horror.

"Sorry, Vatos is long dead, most likely. Replaced by the shapeshifters. Now eat or you can all join Vatos in the netherworld," Ogras snorted as his and Zac's killing intent drenched the squad.

Soon enough everyone had eaten a piece of Springroot, even the unconscious soldiers had some stuffed down their throat. There weren't any more shapeshifters though, which was a relief to Zac. It hopefully meant that Clan Cartava wasn't too infiltrated already. But it also meant that their gearing for war was an idea mostly of their own making, as Zac doubted the cultists were strong enough to take out all the elders without causing a ruckus.

"Who are these aliens?" a soldier muttered as he looked down at the lizardman corpse.

"Members of the Church of Everlasting Dao. They're an extremely powerful faction, their presence in the Zecia sector is just a small branch. They are religious fanatics, purging planets of all life to appease the Heavens. Their goal was to do that to my home planet, but their goal changed when they learned about the Dimensional Treasure in this place," Zac explained.

"We've really been infiltrated," Leviala sighed. "You were right."

"I'm afraid so," Zac nodded. "You people have nothing to gain from fighting our faction, but our enemy is fanning the flames. After all, I have already agreed to letting your clan out as soon as we've dealt with the threats to our world. The only thing that would happen if you attack us is our guards closing the spatial tunnel permanently, locking us both inside."

"But how haven't we noticed anything?" Leviala muttered. "We're clansmen, we know each other. How can someone just blend in without arousing suspicion? And we haven't seen any other outsiders apart from you. Our neighbors are dealing with Humans as well."

"The werewolves," Ogras said without hesitation. "They must be infiltrated. Shapeshifters came with the scouting parties, some stayed behind to infiltrate you as well."

Zac felt a headache coming on as he tried to figure out what to do. There were thousands of elite Zhix rearing for war just outside the gate leading to Clan Cartava,

and disaster was just around the corner if the Chuch of Everlasting Dao was manipulating things behind the scene. This battle had almost been a joke, but the Zhix wouldn't have his strength nor Kenzie's ability to disable their strongest offensive tools, the Technocrat weaponry.

There was a decent chance both sides would suffer massive casualties, and the only winners would be the Dominators and the cultists.

"I've already sent a warning back to our people," Kenzie said, clearly understanding what was going through Zac's head.

"What do you want to do?" Ogras asked.

Zac's eyes flickered between Leviaala and the soldiers, who all shied away from his gaze.

"You've proved that your words are true," Leviaala added from the side. "Let's go back to the clan and bring the body. We have fifty clan members to testify the veracity of your claims, all of them of the Second Elder's faction. So if we both have our factions take a step back, then we'll-"

"Our people came to this place for an important mission," Zac interjected. "Besides, you clearly don't have the ability to make your clan take a step back. A few infiltrators shouldn't be able to completely turn your clan against us in just a few days. There should already have been some plans on dealing with us, with the cultists simply silencing dissent and urging on the warmongers."

"That's-“ Leviaala muttered, looking down with shame. "Still, if we go back..."

"How much time left?" Zac asked, turning to Kenzie.

"A bit over two days?" Kenzie said after some thought. "We should reach the Inner Lab in around five hours. We can't return the same way we came from, but we should be able to make it back to our people well over a day before the treasure matures. It depends on how long the Cartava Clan is willing to wait if they're aiming to break out."

Zac understood what Kenzie meant. Zac's plans were based on waiting for the seed to mature, but the Cartava Clan was the opposite. They needed to escape before the time was up, and it took around between eight and twelve hours to get from the gate in the Lunar Forest to the Spatial Tunnel for an F-Grade warrior who knew the path.

Add to that civilians and some extra time for safe measure, and Clan Cartava would probably not want to wait until the last minute if they really decided to attack. They might already be ready for battle as they were standing there. Kenzie's defensive measures at the gate could probably buy them some time, but there was no way that a native clan didn't have some last-ditch methods to force their way through the base.

The only consolation was that large-scale destruction seemed to attract the active attention of the defensive AI, and the Cartava Clan probably didn't want to use those last-ditch methods unless everything else had failed already.

"The inner Lab? Are you still talking about that?" Leviaala exclaimed incredulously as she stared at Kenzie. "Our people are about to be tricked into a war, who knows how many casualties that would result in? Let me be clear. This fight was lopsided, but our armies aren't any pushovers, especially not inside this Mystic Realm. We need to turn back right now."

However, no one in Zac's group cared about Leviaala's opinions, all instead turning toward Zac. He turned toward the subdued captain who had already woken up by now with the help of a few zaps from Kenzie's drones. His eyes were a bit glazed over after Zac's punch, but he seemed to have been able to follow what was going on.

“You can all return to your clan. Take that body and these roots with you, it’s the proof of what I’ve said is true. But tell your elders this; We didn’t come to this godforsaken place for fun. We came here to save our planet, and we are willing to lay our lives on the line to do so. Force our hands, and we will walk over the ruins of your clan to get the job done,” Zac said, his killing intent almost dense enough to become corporeal. “I know the allure of the outside world is strong, but don’t lose it all by acting hastily. I’m coming back to get our people soon enough.”

The soldiers looked extremely unwilling, but no one offered any rebuttal, instead looking down with their fists clenched. Zac could only pray that his threat would cause make the elders hesitate about their plans, slowing any plans to break out. He couldn’t turn back now. His instincts told him to push forward, and Ogras’ words of warning about Divine Guidance were the last push he needed to make his decision.

“We’ll keep going,” Zac said as he turned to his group.

“What... What about me?” Leviaala hesitantly asked.

“You’re coming with us,” Zac said as he formed the same chair made out of chains as before. “I know that you’re not happy with how things turned out. But the quicker you help us get where we need to go, the quicker we’ll be able to return and prevent any bloodshed.”

“Fine,” Leviaala sighed as she dragged herself onto the chair, the links quickly turning red from a few wounds reopening.

“Let’s hurry,” Zac said as he left the soldiers where they were, the other three silently following in tow. “We’ll speed up. I’ll deal with any spatial tears.”

“Spatial Tears are the least of our worries where we’re going. If it was just that we’d long have looted the Inner Layer. There are alarms, sentries, mechanized guards, traps, and who knows what else,” Leviaala warned.

“Good thing we brought you then, girl,” Ogras grinned.

“The last stretch is through a long stretch of tubing according to the maps. Surely the base wouldn’t have any alarms there,” Kenzie added.

“You... How did you do that before? You simply took all our drones like they were yours,” Leviaala asked with a slightly fearful look.

“Well, they *are* mine now,” Kenzie smiled, ignoring the question. “Spoils of war and all that.”

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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Please remember to vote on [at least once a week!](#) It helps me a lot!

**Chapter 611 - Lab 16**

The group immediately set out, keeping a rapid pace on their way toward Inner Lab 16. They were making good time thanks to the complementary competencies of Kenzie and Laviaala, but Zac was still filled with anxiety. The only thing giving him some peace of mind was Kenzie’s ability to almost freely contact their forces back at the forest, allowing him to stay up to date on the situation.

The army had finished preparations for the outermost layer of defense around the base, but they doubled down on their preparations after hearing about a possible attack. They also increased the number of scouts keeping watch in all sectors under their control in case the Cartava Clan appeared somewhere other than through the gate.

An evacuation was already underway as well, with almost all non-essential personnel already having been transferred out of the Mystic Realm. Only some non-combat cultivators would stay inside the Research Base after the Dimensional Seed matured, with a skeleton crew to maintain the base while the rest set out to assist the Zhix on their crusade.

Eventually, Zac didn't have time to worry about his people though, as just passing through the corridors on the way to the Inner Layer demanded all his attention. Just as Leviala had warned, the increasingly common Spatial tears was just one of the problems facing them.

"Wait," Kenzie suddenly said, and the group hid against a wall as they activated a series of cloaking methods.

No one still dared as much as breathe loudly as they waited steeped in silence. Half a minute later clattering sounds echoed out through the corridors as a patrol unit consisting of two spider balls and six drones moved past them. This was the sixth squad they had to hide from in just 20 minutes, a stark contrast to the abandoned outer reaches.

It wasn't that Zac didn't want to simply force his way through, and the small squads weren't a threat to his group. But getting discovered or destroying the sentries resulted in a lockdown, which would cause way more of a headache than it was worth.

"Okay, we're good," Kenzie eventually nodded and the group set out again.

"Just how are you discovering these sentries?" Leviala asked with a frown. "We have tried for centuries to discover their signals."

"I told you, we got our hands on some Technocrat technology on the outside. We didn't enter this place blindly," Zac snorted from ahead, getting a bit annoyed at Leviala's attempts to delve into his sister's secrets.

Of course, he knew that his go-to excuse was pretty weak, but Kenzie was forced to display her abilities if they wanted to get back in time. Thea was clearly also curious about what was going on, but she had never asked about it over the past weeks even after Kenzie displayed an uncharacteristic level of competence for a 20-year old without a science background.

They finally reached the spot the Werewolves had marked after slowly and methodically making progress through the minefield of guards and traps. They were getting close to the Inner Layer now, and the Spatial Expansion was getting more and more pronounced. Zac guessed the surroundings had increased around 25 times in size, making him feel like a citizen of Lilliput.

This massive transformation was what provided Zac's group with a new route. The section they had just reached was designed remarkably different compared to the much simpler corridors in the Outer Ring. The walls were still made from Memorysteel, but the design was of a lot higher quality and there were a lot of windows to the rooms inside.

Leviala explained that this section had once been the place of residence of the middle-tier workers of the base. The corridor itself reminded Zac of the living quarters of Little Bean, as it was roughly twice as wide compared to the outer hallways, and filled with lounge areas and what looked like zen gardens. There were a lot more doors as well, each of them leading to an apartment ranging from 50 to hundreds of square meters in size.

Clan Cartava had long looted these quarters of everything that wasn't destroyed during the spatial storms of the Cataclysm, with only the stronger people continuing into the Inner Layers when the base shut down for maintenance. Their group still

headed into one of the larger apartments though, a living quarter that probably once had belonged to some chief scientist.

What set this place apart compared to most other rooms was that it had its own small-scale laboratory, which unsurprisingly had grown enormous along with everything else. This was what provided them with a route to the inner lab, and they reached a wall socket hidden behind a table. The socket was covered by a lid, and a gust of stale air hit their group when Zac pushed it open.

On the other side was a metallic tubing around 180 centimeters in height, just a bit too low to walk upright. Not even Leviaala was sure, but they guessed it was a special tube meant to transport some sort of gas or plasma to this home lab, which was why none of the other apartments had something like this.

“And we are sure this pipe won’t suddenly be filled with some Technocrat poison?” Thea hesitantly muttered as she looked into the vent.

“Uh... No?” Kenzie hesitantly said. “But I think we should at least have noticed some remnants having leaked into this room if that was the case? That lid wasn’t exactly a perfect fit after the expansion.”

“I’ll go first and block up the tunnel as long as I can in case something comes crashing down on us. But hopefully it won’t come to that,” Zac said before he turned to Leviaala. “Can you walk on your own from here?”

“I’ll make do. My wounds are a bit better by now,” Leviaala said. “I should be able to walk the last stretch.”

Zac nodded as he entered the pipe, and the group kept walking for another hour until Kenzie told them to stop. The Werewolf maps stopped soon after the pipe entrance, but Leviaala had provided them with a complimentary map. The spot Kenzie they had reached should be just a few meters from the gate leading to the Lab, and they had decided to cut their way out of the wall instead of trying to break into the Lab.

There were all kinds of alarms in the laboratories according to Leviaala, so if they had to cut their way out, it was better if it was here. A few minutes later they were out, with Zac having done most of the work to get them out. Their activities had drawn the ire of the base though, and they were forced to back away for another twenty minutes before they could approach the gate.

“Let me,” Kenzie said as she floated up to the terminal in the gate, and they all breathed out in relief when the door opened without issue.

They walked inside after confirming no guards were waiting for them, but Zac quickly stopped as the world lurched for an instant. The insides had looked normal before, but Zac was shocked to realize that everything was normal-sized.

“How is this possible?” Ogras muttered as he looked around with wide eyes, confirming that Zac wasn’t the only one whose perception had shifted.

“The space is normal here?” Leviaala exclaimed with surprise. “How weird. Even our outer labs have grown a bit over the past months.”

“It has to be an effect of the Dao of Space,” Thea said with gleaming eyes. “Space has become relative.”

“Well, it should be a good thing. It means the lab is fully functional, right? Our chances of finding something useful has increased,” Zac said as he looked around the beautifully crafted work areas as he walked into the Laboratory, if it could even be called that.

It rather felt like he had entered the headquarters of some IT start-up that had way too much money to spend, with everything from manicured miniature gardens to

what looked like an extremely high-end restaurant where every table was placed on a small moat in an indoor lake. It almost made Zac wonder if they had come to the right place.

“This is a recreational area for the scientists,” Leviala said with a dour expression as she looked at the opulent surroundings. “I guess they needed to relax a bit after experimenting on us like we were beasts.”

“Nevermind that,” Ogras muttered. “Where are the good things stored, girl? We need to get back before your family does something stupid.”

“This way,” the Cartava scion sighed as she led the group through the series of gardens.

Zac was wordlessly following along, but he did shoot an imperceptible glance at his sister who nodded in return as she summoned a couple of drones. They still needed Leviala to save time, but it was undeniable that a divide had been erected between them after learning what her clan was up to. So Zac had his sister and Ogras keeping constant watch over Leviala to make sure she didn’t try something.

After all, no matter what her personal belief about who was right and wrong, there was no way that Leviala would side with Port Atwood if it came down to it, especially if the Zhix started killing her clansmen. They needed to double-check and triple-check everything she said and did, to make sure she wasn’t leading them into a trap of some sort.

Hopefully, Kenzie would be able to spot anything of technological nature, while Ogras was perennially suspicious of everything around him. Any odd movement from the native would immediately be caught by him.

They soon reached a sliding door made from the same reinforced glass as the glasshouse, and it automatically opened up when they approached, letting them enter a small containment chamber. A second sliding door opened a minute later, and the group entered a spotless laboratory. There were around thirty tables in the main hall, a room of about 300 square meters, and each of them was connected to a series of expensive-looking machines.

Most of the tables were empty, but the remaining ones quickly drew their attention. A number of different items were hovering in the air, some of them looking complete and a few others seemingly mid-production with the help of several mechanical arms. More importantly, spatial tears were either hovering next to the machines like they were locked in place, or fused into the machines themselves.

There seemed to be a few adjoining labs as well, the layout reminiscent of the glasshouse’s side-rooms. While the others looked around with curiosity Zac’s attention was drawn by something else; the fact that his old quest had been completed.

It felt like he had caught a lucky break this time as the only threat turned out to be the sentry robots, as the Cartava troupe couldn’t really be considered a formidable enemy. Now the question was why the System wanted to bring him here.

There were no natural treasures in sight, and nothing else that Zac felt was of immediate value. There were these weird machines hovering above the table, but Zac wasn’t so confident that the System wanted him to take a bunch of Technocrat items considering its disdain for the Dao of Technology.

“What is this room?” Zac asked Leviala, hoping to find some clues.

“It seems this place has been turned into a mechanical lab,” Leviala sighed. “It is honestly one of the worse ones.”

“Oh?” Ogras asked, his eyes thinning. “How so?”

“These kinds of labs usually house various sorts of advanced machinery, which isn’t really useful to cultivators. Sometimes we’ve found things that are valuable to Datamancers and our mechanical troops, but neither of those professions will remain in the outer world,” Leviala sighed.

“So there’s nothing?” Ogras muttered as they walked among the tables.

“The side chambers usually contain raw materials and natural treasures stockpiled for experiments. One can still find good items there. Valuable metals, race boosting treasures, pure ener-” Leviala said but stopped in surprise when Ogras turned into a gust of shadows, appearing in front of the closest door leading to a side chamber.

Zac glanced over and wryly smiled, but the smile froze on his face when he was blasted away by a shockwave of tremendous force without warning. He slammed into a table, but his momentum kept him going until he knocked into a wall on the other side of the lab. The shockwave also contained some sort of high-pitch sound that made him nauseated, but he quickly got up to his feet to reorient himself.

Only to see Leviala speeding toward the exit with one of the Spatial Machines in her arms.

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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**Chapter 612 - Betrayal**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

**New Month new plug. Things are heating up, why not read the WHOLE ARC in one go over at my ?**

**The Second Act of Defiance of the Fall is finally starting after just two short years (lol), why not read it ahead of everyone else and gain a well-deserved sense of superiority while also supporting my writing? It has never been a better time to sign up in my completely unbiased opinion.**

Ogras was the one who had reacted quickest thanks to being outside the direct blast zone of the shockwave, and half the room was already drenched in shadows by the time that Zac got back to his feet. However, the laboratory was only so big, and Leviala was already at the door after having released the tremendous pulse.

The ground cracked beneath Zac’s feet as he pushed [Loamwalker] to its limits, but he had to desperately force himself to take a sharp turn at the last moment when an enormous spatial tear appeared right in front of the gate. It completely covered the exit and a few meters next to it, and one more step would have ended with Zac lost in the void.

Zac looked on with a mix of helplessness and fury, but he had no way to make the tear close early. But the base quickly suppressed the tear, and Zac hurriedly rushed toward the closed door on the other side. The containment door didn’t activate by itself this time so Zac immediately reached for the console, but nothing happened even after pushing his mother’s token against it.

Only then did Zac realize that Leviala wasn’t actually gone, but she had rather stopped on the other side of the two doors, looking back at them.

There was no joy or derision on her face, just exhaustion. More importantly, Zac saw how her one good eye was rapidly clouding over, her pupil and iris being replaced

by another ominous fractal. It was similar to the one on her other eye, but there were also clear differences. Something told Zac that the two were still connected like they each were a half of a whole. Blood was running down her eyes and nose, and she even swayed while standing still.

Zac's instincts screamed at him that whatever Leviala had taken was a huge threat to his people, so he grabbed a groove in the sliding door in an attempt to force it open. The door was stuck, but Zac's Strength was a match for most peak E-Grade warriors by this point, and even the reinforced glass started to crack from his efforts.

Leviala's eyes widened in surprise when she saw how even the door frames started to bend, and she flashed away in a frantic escape across the recreational area. She was shockingly quick, using some sort of footwork that she had never displayed in front of Zac before, and she was through the exit in less than a second.

He wasn't too worried though as Zac knew that Leviala wouldn't be able to maintain that pace for long, especially not with the sentries lurking outside. As long as he could force this door open they would be able to catch up.

However, red lights suddenly flooded the Laboratory as previously unseen safety-shutters sprung up to reinforce the sliding doors. Zac barely had the time to witness a shocking transformation take place in the rec area before his vision was blocked by decimeter-thick plating. It looked like the whole lounge had been filled with some sort of liquid electricity or plasma, turning it into a deathly gauntlet.

The exit was blocked as well by a shield even thicker than the one that had kept them at bay with the spider balls, and there were even two series of rings that appeared. They looked just like miniature versions of the terrifying energy turrets the Administrator used to combat the Collector in the void, and Zac's hairs stood on end when he saw that they were trained right at him.

"Stop, stop! She has done something to the security system!" Kenzie screamed as she frantically typed away on the tablet.

The blaring alarm stopped a few seconds later, and the shutters slid back into the floor. Zac could only sheepishly smile in response to the glares he got from his companions before he looked out again. The recreational area had turned back to normal, but it had been eye-opening to see just how many security-measures were hidden among the gardens and restaurants.

It was obvious; even if Zac managed to break down the door with one of his more powerful moves, that was still the least of their problems. And as for Leviala, she was long gone.

"Look at the terminal inside the containment room," Kenzie said after exhaling in relief. "She's left something there, but I can't connect to it."

Zac's eyes turned to the terminal Kenzie pointed at. A dogle Zac hadn't noticed before was attached to it, obviously something left by Leviala on her way out while the spatial tear blocked their vision.

"Good eye," Leviala's voice reached them through the dogle. "I've booby-trapped this exit. Force it open and you'll trigger a series of algorithms that will alert the Administrator, so you'll have to stay put for the time being. I'm sorry things turned out this way. I can't turn my back on my clan, not after how much my people have suffered. Even if I have to marry that bastard and go along with their schemes. Such is the burden of responsibility."

"We can still solve this peacefully," Zac said with grit teeth. "Undo what you've done here, and we'll come with you to your clan to sort everything out."

"I am sorry, I really am," Leviala sighed on the other side before the connection cut off.

A vibration rippled across the door the next moment, making Zac look over at his sister who kept typing away.

“I activated a sound-proofing function,” Kenzie said as she looked down at her tablet. “She shouldn’t be able to hear us any longer. But she’s proven me wrong before, so who knows. I can’t do anything from here. I can open this door, but it will activate the security measures just like when you force it open.”

Zac growled in annoyance, and he contemplated whether he should try forcing the doors open again.

“I’m not sure brute force is the solution this time around,” Ogras sighed, clearly knowing what Zac was thinking. “I don’t think even you would make it out of that gauntlet in one piece. That lass fooled us. She fooled us all. She wouldn’t have acted if she didn’t have some confidence in keeping us here. After all, she’s seen both your and your sister’s means.”

He turned into a puff of shadows that shot toward the door’s hinges next, but he soon appeared again.

“It’s completely sealed. Not even a speck of dust can get through,” the demon added with annoyance.

“I’m sorry,” Kenzie said as she wiped some blood running down her nose. “I scanned her for hidden weapons, but I didn’t find anything. I don’t understand how she accomplished all this.”

Leviala’s sudden shockwave had hit them all without notice, and Kenzie had been thrown into a wall as well. The same went for Thea, except she looked unscathed. She had probably managed to control her body in time thanks to her high Dexterity.

“Don’t blame yourself. We were all on guard for her, but she hid her means too deeply. She never displayed any strength during all the time since I met her, to the point I almost thought she was a non-combat class. My Danger Sense didn’t give me a warning either, like the attack came out of nowhere,” Zac sighed.

“What did she take?” Thea asked with a frown as she looked away from the exit, turning toward the empty table. “I honestly don’t think she planned this until she saw that item. That machine must have been something extremely important if it made her ready to risk her life to betray us all.”

They hurried over to the table where Kenzie plugged her tablet into a control panel as the rest looked for clues. They couldn’t find anything though, forcing them to wait for Kenzie’s findings.

“It’s actually some sort of spatial drill,” Kenzie said with surprise. “Researching its technology was commissioned by some Head Researcher twenty years ago, but it was just finished two weeks ago. It can drill a tunnel through chaotic space, and it seems even better than the array we used to force open the path to the mystic realm.”

“Head Researcher?” Thea repeated with confusion. “Who’s that? The Cartava Clan?”

“I don’t know?” Kenzie said as she hesitantly turned toward Zac. “Did she say anything like that?”

“It’s hard to trust anything she’s said until now, but I doubt it,” Zac said. “If they had the means to order the base to this degree, then they would probably have been able to escape long ago.”

“Then who?”

“Perhaps the base itself?” Ogras muttered. “Didn’t you mention some Administrator before?”

“That’s just the name of the computer system controlling this base. Would it really order itself to research something?” Zac hesitantly said. “If it was able to do that, it could just have done it, right?”

“More importantly, can the natives use that item to force their way outside?” Thea interjected.

“Possibly,” Kenzie nodded. “But I’m not sure how well it would work, it’s an experimental technology. And they would have to use it at least close to our portal. Drilling anywhere else won’t do them any good. They would probably just end up in outer space.”

“So, she has the key to escape this prison?” Ogras spat. “No wonder the lass took the risk. With all of us stuck in this place, our force is severely weakened. If they figure out some way to ambush our people, we’re screwed.”

“Can you warn them?” Zac asked as he turned to Kenzie.

“It looks like we are jammed, we can only pray that they are prepared. I don’t get it... Just how did she figure out how to take this thing?” Kenzie muttered. “If they had any knowledge of an item like this, wouldn’t they have fought harder to come here themselves? Long before we arrived?”

“Her eyes... Time,” Zac muttered, finally putting two and two together. “Her ability doesn’t allow her to peer into the future. It allows her to go back in time. We were probably the ones to tell her in an alternate future. Shit, she’s been misdirecting me with half-truths since the start.”

“That’s heaven-defying if true,” Ogras exclaimed with shock. “The backlash has to be immense.”

“You saw her eyes. Her second eye got a curse as well,” Zac said. “I think she crippled herself to bring that item to her clan. If she can even make it back alive.”

“I don’t think she would have taken the risk if she believed she wouldn’t make it,” Thea said. “She would have had a better chance of saving her people by staying with us if that was the case. She might just have been playing weak, or she has some special method to at least temporarily withstand the backlash.”

“Are there any other exits to this place?” Zac asked.

“I can’t see from this terminal,” Kenzie said with a shake of her head.

“Quickly, look around,” Zac sighed.

The group immediately spread out, entering the side chambers one by one. But it only took them a minute to confirm that they really were trapped. The only exit was the way they came from, and attacking any surface of the lab seemed to trigger the massive security response.

“Well, it looks like we’re stuck. What do we do?” Thea eventually sighed. “Leviala Cartava will be back with her clan in a few hours, and I think they will immediately set out afterward. There’s no way they won’t seize this opportunity. Our people might be attacked in less than ten hours.”

“Can you see if any of these machines can help us out?” Zac asked as he turned to Kenzie. “They were made by the base, so they might not trigger the alarms?”

“I’ll try to figure out some way to escape this place,” Kenzie nodded and immediately walked over to the closest item and started tapping away on her tablet.

“Well, that’s my cue,” Ogras muttered and disappeared, leaving a confused Zac behind.

“If it comes down to it I’ll use my escape skill. I’ll only lose a few levels,” Thea said as she walked over to him.

“Doesn’t it send you in a completely random direction?” Zac asked hesitantly.

“Well, yes,” Thea admitted with a grimace.

“Let’s see what Kenzie can come up with first. No point in you risking your life if there’s a better solution out there,” Zac said. “You’d probably end up in the void around us or some random section where you couldn’t get back. And teleportation in this environment...”

“I guess there’s not much I can change even if I manage to get out of here by myself,” Thea said with a helpless expression.

“I’m sorry about all this,” Zac said with a sigh. “I underestimated her too much. Now both our people might be hurt because of me.”

“It’s not your fault. No one is working harder than you to protect our planet. You simply can’t control everything,” Thea said. “It’s an important lesson for us all. Besides, we all knew that the stakes were high going in. Let’s just see if we can turn things around.”

“I’ll see what Ogras is up to. The look in his eyes made me a bit worried,” Zac wryly smiled before he gave Thea one last look. “Thank you.”

He walked over to the storeroom he saw Ogras slink toward before and a frown spread across his face when he saw what the demon was up to. Ogras was trying to snatch the stored treasure, a vial containing some unknown liquid. The only problem was that it was behind a containment field that looked a lot like the liquid electricity that had flooded the area outside just a minute ago.

“What are you doing?” Zac frowned. “We have bigger fish to fry, and you might trigger the alarms.”

“I’m no help when it comes to taboo technology, I’ll leave that to your sister,” Ogras shrugged without taking his eyes off the vial on the other side of the electricity wall. “I figure that if we’re stuck here for the moment we might as well take the good things left behind. Isn’t that why we came anyway? Besides, I’ve already confirmed that these things aren’t connected to whatever that lass did.”

A dozen shadow spears slammed into the barrier the next moment to prove his point, and Zac only breathed out a few seconds later when there was no retaliation from the Administrator. He was about to retort, but he stopped in his track when a new prompt appeared; the fifth quest in his training chain had been doled out.

**[The Benevolent Ruler (Training (5/9)): Seize at least 2 opportunities for your followers. Reward: Reward based on performance at the end of training regimen. (0/2)]**

**[NOTE: Failure to comply with training regimen will result in loss of 4 levels.]**

**A note from TheFirstDefier**

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